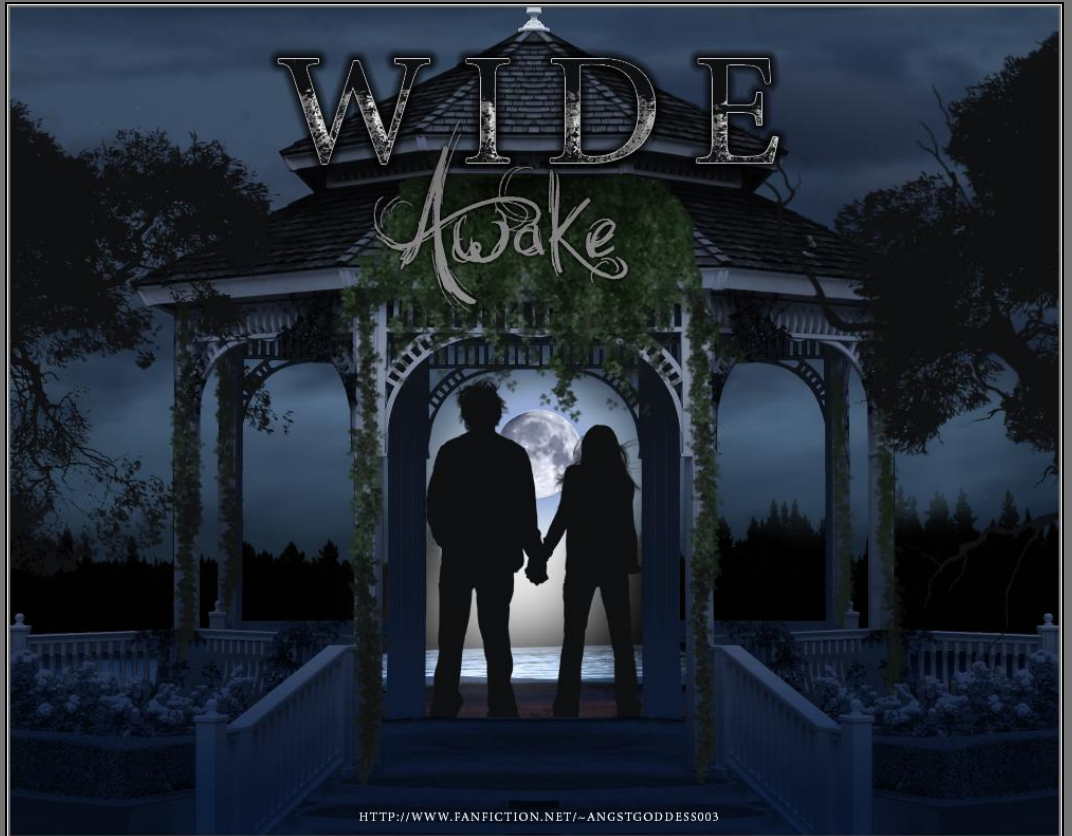


2009

Wide Awake

A Fan Fiction by AngstGoddess003



[HTTP://WWW.FANFICTION.NET/~ANGSTGODDESS003](http://www.fanfiction.net/~angstgoddess003)

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Credit is awesome, you know? Like... baked goods.

Like even if I baked you cookies from a recipe that's not mine,
you still say, "Hey, dude, look! AG made us cookies from
Stephenie Meyer's recipe!"

Then you omnomnom them, and I'm all smiley happy,
because you gave me credit for the baking of the cookies.

It's totally like that.

Except I don't make cookies.

I make FanFiction.

XD

P.S. I'd really appreciate it if you didn't distribute this on your own, and instead just linked
people to my LJ or FFn page? Thanks.

P.S.S. If it matters? I don't support any translations of this story.

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Wide Awake

Chapter 1. Gingerbread Zombies



I hated this room with a deep-seated fiery passion of a million hells. I didn't mean to be melodramatic, really. But it was a fact. In the brighter daylight hours, it could be nearly bearable. But here, near midnight, it was anything but. Dark, desolate, suffocating, with hidden corners and crevices. I could feel the familiar fear and panic creeping up my chest just opening the door. I couldn't even get an ounce of comfort from the full moon tonight, blocked by the clouds so common here and even more so by the Cullens' freakishly large mansion towering outside my window. Aunt Esme and Alice had worked so hard to decorate this room for me. I almost felt a swelling of guilt when I reached in just far enough to snatch my school bag from the floor beside the door. Then I bolted away from the room towards the kitchen.

This was where I had been spending my nights since I moved up here to Forks, Washington a week ago. The kitchen was warm and open. Always bright, and full of good memories. Nothing awful has ever happened to me in a kitchen. I'd been doing all the cooking since I arrived. Esme was slightly peeved at first, surrendering her kitchen duties to a 17 year old girl, but she eventually gave in, seeing how much I enjoyed the tasks. And it was such a rarity to witness me enjoying anything.

So I'd made a careful routine of spending my nights in here: baking, cooking, and doing homework... anything but sleeping in that wretched, dark bedroom. Everyone in Phoenix called it insomnia. I've already had the lectures from physicians and professionals, all specifically trained and formally educated to keep my "well being" their "top priority." I've had the sleeping pills and courses of medication meant to keep me knocked out for the customary eight hours per night. Of course, they'd never really understood. It was not so much that I *can't* sleep, but I *won't*. I caught my sleep in 10 minute bouts during the day, though even

then I would try to fend it off. It was difficult to do, and I spent my days in a cloudy lethargic haze, but it was better than having the dreams. Dreams full of hitting and scratching, screaming and hiding, bruises and tears, and monsters that hide in my closet, biding their time. And those were among the more pleasant ones. The ones of my mom, Renee, were the worst by far. Her cold, limp body slung over the couch in a pool of her own blood. And her eyes...

I snapped out of that line of thinking and began immersing myself in my English paper while waiting for my cookies to bake. It was a new recipe. I'd been baking a new cookie every night for the last week. I'd adopted it as my new habit. When I lived in the group home in Phoenix, I could cook up a lot of things during the night and the boys would always eat it up long before it had the chance to spoil. But Alice and Esme's appetites couldn't accommodate my particular level of nighttime boredom. So I settled for cookies. They always enjoyed my creative recipes and names.

Thankfully, they haven't questioned my weird late night mannerisms. They were only too happy that I finally gave in and moved here with them. They would not chance pushing me away with questions that they knew I had absolutely no desire to answer. Esme begged me to come here a year ago, when Renee died, but I said "no." I had wanted to spare them my dark mood and reclusive behavior, I hated to burden them. *Yet here I am*, I thought bitterly.

I let them think they had a kind of victory in my decision to move here from the group home in Phoenix, but really, I just couldn't stay there anymore. There were too many people. Too many males crammed against me in such a small space. I was in a near-constant state of panic, and it was exhausting, which isn't exactly beneficial to someone who's trying to stay awake. I didn't like boys, and I despised men. They terrified me after Phil. It's irrational, I know. Not all of them are out to get me. Even if I wanted to take the chance, my mind and body had an automatic reaction that I simply couldn't stop. My old psychologist mentioned something about defense mechanisms and anxiety attacks or what not. I didn't care what they called it, I *hated* it. Never being able to get close to anyone of the opposite sex without hyperventilating was a major inconvenience in a co-ed group home. Suddenly, the prospect of living with two women was too appealing. Maybe they did have some kind of victory after all.

But Forks was better. Small and quaint. I wouldn't say I was happy here, because I'd never be happy, no matter the place or company I kept. I had seen too much. But it was a few steps closer to happiness than Phoenix was, so I couldn't regret my decision.

DING

I jumped up, dropping my pencil, startled from the loud sound of the timer signaling that the cookies were done baking.

Get a Grip Bella, Jeez.

I waited for them to cool before I began decorating the little man-shaped cookies.

Once the men had their costumes complete, I produced three Ziplock bags and used my marker to write the name of the cookie on each white rectangle label. *Gingerbread Zombies*. It seemed all too fitting to the fact that I was, in fact, in a zombie state for most of the day today, as I would be tomorrow, as I have been for months.

Five hours, four cups of coffee, and two English papers later, I had breakfast made and was already dressed for school, donning my usual black hoodie and jeans, and wearing my long brown hair down. Esme had already rushed out for work, *Gingerbread Zombies* in hand, sending a wry smile when she saw my newest creations. Alice arrived to breakfast perfectly awake, as usual, and bounced in bright, shiny and bushytailed. She positively radiated refreshed, positive attitude. It made me want to vomit.

Her usual attitude was bubbly and excited. My cousin Alice was slightly shorter than me, with short, spiky black hair. We were born within a month of each other and our mothers were sisters. Still, gene pool aside, we were polar opposites. She was popular at Forks High School and could make friends with anyone. I naturally shied away from everybody. She kept up to date on all the latest fashion trends. I went out of my way to wear nothing attention grabbing. She was excited and graceful. I was introverted and clumsy.

See where I'm going with this?

"Goood Morning! Mmm, Bacon and eggs! Are those Waffles? With Blueberries?!" she chirped and slid into one of the stools. Her little legs were swinging from the stool back and forth like a seventeen year old toddler. "So help me God, Bella, I'm going to gain so much weight while you're here. Is there syrup? Maybe I should pass on that anyways..."

I just rolled my eyes at her and stuffed some eggs into my mouth. I loved Alice like a sister, but there was no getting a word in edgewise with her in the morning. When she looked up from her plate she stopped mid-sentence. Then she got that look that I instantly recognized as "Concerned Alice Face."

Here we go...

“Good grief Bella! You look terrible! Didn’t you get any sleep at all last night?”

I cringed. *I look terrible... Jeez, thanks, Alice for the self image boost.* I simply gave a non committal shrug like I always did when she asked me that question, and kept eating.

With a deep sigh and a disapproving shake of her little head, she let the matter drop.

Alice was like this often when it came to me—concerned but cautious. She was always trying to get me to open up to her. She wanted to understand. I knew she only meddled like this because she cared, but I stayed quiet about my problems. I couldn’t explain it to her right, and she’d just get even more worried if I tried.



Where the fuck did I put that lighter?! I spun around in the middle of my bedroom for the third time, raking my fingers through my hair utterly frustrated. I had just woken up after a whopping twenty minutes of sleep—from a particularly fucked up dream—and I *really* needed a fucking cigarette.

Leave it to me to have a full pack and nothing to light one with. *I really need to clean this shit hole and get organized. Think, Edward! Fuck! Last time I had it... Oh, right!* I flung open the door to my balcony and immediately spotted it lying on the railing. *There you are,* I smirked.

I lit the cigarette and performed a reverent pull. *Ahh, much better.* I never smoked inside my room. Because that shit clings and stinks. Carlisle was having a moment of precognition when he gave me the room with the balcony. Daddy C. sure knows how to put up his orphans. He adopted me four years ago, from a rather unseemly “foster situation.” Dr. Carlisle Cullen was a fundamentally good man and upstanding citizen of the Greater Forks Community. We didn’t usually butt heads much, but then again, the good doctor was rarely home enough to do so. *Fine by me.* He kept me clothed and fed and rarely asked questions.

I supposed to most seventeen year olds, it would be the ideal living situation. I was probably as close to happy as I was ever going to get. Emmett lived with us too. Another one of Carlisle’s acquisitions. Emmett was a year older than me and was here first. He loved throwing that up to

me. *As if I cared.* He was the fucking golden boy of Forks, and a constant kiss ass. When the elders weren't about, he was also crude as hell. We didn't get along. At all. After a year of constant fighting and bitching from Carlisle, we made an unspoken agreement to stay out of each other's hair. *He'll be gone in a year anyways.*

I looked out over the balcony from our rather ambiguously large house to the dark back yard and took another pull from my cigarette. *Fucking nighttime.* I loathed this time of day. Much like a bad piece of Russian literature, it was long as fuck—and boring as hell. I had my hobbies, and sure, I could spend nine hours sketching and listening to music. But if I was being honest with myself—and I very rarely am—there was only one thing I wanted to do in this world more than anything.

Sleep.

The last time I had a good, entire night's sleep, was so many years ago—I don't even remember what it was like. Carlisle was worried at first, probably still is, but there's nothing he can do. It was like this every single night. Barely any sleep at all, if I even made an attempt to do so. It was the dreams... always with the fucking dreams. It literally wasn't even worth it to try to sleep anymore.

I threw my spent cigarette over the edge of the balcony just as the rain drops started to fall in typical Forks fashion. Once back inside the warmth of my spacious, albeit cluttered bedroom, I plopped down on my bed and resumed my sketch from earlier in the evening. It kept me awake almost as well as Daddy C's secret stash of amphetamines, which was in serious threat of total depletion I might add. I'd always limited my drugs to uppers for obvious reasons. Occasionally I'd go get drunk with my friend Jasper—but not often.

Jasper Hale and I have been friends since the first day of freshman year, and I told Mr. Johnson—our horribly undereducated History teacher—to “go fuck himself.”

Jazz loved that shit. He was the only friend I ever had, or needed here in Forks. We often had a rather silent relationship. We could always read each other through looks and body language. It's not a bromance or anything, it was just how we were. But even though Jazz always had my back, and was always there to listen to all my fucked up problems, I couldn't help feeling alone. He tried to understand, but how could he? When he asked why I was always tired, I told him the truth. I'd rather walk around like a fucking zombie than experience the dreams that haunted me.

Of course, he thought I was crazy.

So I never brought it up again.

I finished my sketch and signed my name and date in the bottom right corner, shutting the book with a sigh. *What to do now?*

I drummed my fingers on the hard leather bound cover of the book. *Schoolwork.*

I suppressed a groan.

I had been out of school for the past week due to a minor disciplinary infraction. Suspended five days for smoking on campus. *Wow, what a punishment, five days of freedom—boredom is more like it.* I always got good grades in school. Especially here, where I could probably teach most of the AP classes, even half awake. I mean, I *did* have nine free hours a night to study and work.

With that thought, I began a rather lengthy Trig worksheet. Sleep deprivation makes every task more difficult. Most people would not realize how important it is to your health, both mental and physical. No one knew it better than me. Before the incident eight years ago, I had never realized how much I took a good night's rest for granted. My mother would always hum me to sleep after tucking me in. Of course that was *before* she hated me. Before she sent me away and left me in the hands of underpaid social workers and poorly run institutions.

She couldn't even look at me after what happened—couldn't even bear to be in the same room as me. She never even fucking said goodbye. I wish I could say I blamed her, but I really can't.

I took away the one person she loved more than anything.

More than me, obviously.

Even now, eight years later, I could see the flames clearly in my mind. I could feel the heat and smell the smoke. And if I slept deeply enough, I could watch perfectly as my father lay burning on the floor, screaming for help that would never come. I began shaking my head, unwilling to take that train of thought any further.

Once the sun was beginning to show signs of rising, I closed my textbook and started getting ready for my grand re-appearance at Forks High.

I never really put much thought into what I wore, usually a simple t-shirt and jeans, my favorite black leather jacket, and scuffed boots. I probably looked much less well-to-do than I actually was, but I could hardly find it in me to give a fuck. The only real reason I even went to school anyways was to hang with Jazz and have something to occupy my time. Well, that and the fact that if my GPA dropped below a 3.5 Daddy C. took my Volvo away. All things considered, the

good doctor knew how to bribe effectively.

Once I managed to dodge any and all contact with Emmett, I made my way out to said coveted vehicle and lightly trailed a finger up the hood to the driver's door. *Oh so pretty*. I took note that Brandon, my next door neighbor, had already left for school, as her yellow Porsche was absent from the driveway. *Of course she's already left*. She was all too willing to be up this early. I got in my Volvo and started towards Jasper's house to pick him up.

He was waiting at the curb of his modest middle class home and jumped in before I even had the chance to pull into his driveway.

"It's about fucking time, man. Rose has been up my ass all morning about this party you're throwing tonight," he said while buckling his seat belt.

I scoffed "The party I'm throwing? I never wanted to have the damn thing in the first place. I would have put up more of a fight if Emmett hadn't threatened to tell Carlisle about my suspension." I lazily laid my head back on the seat and started the drive towards school. "You coming?" I asked, lolling my head in his direction.

He snorted. "Yeah, sure. I'm going to a party with a bunch of fucking drunken obnoxious seniors with a combined I.Q. of my mom's credit score."

I chuckled. "Now, now Jazz, you're insulting your future wife, you know. You're not going to bag Brandon by insulting her intelligence."

"Alice is going to be there?" he asked, sounding curiously disappointed.

I nodded and raised an eyebrow at him.

"Well, fuck! I already told my mom I'd stay home this weekend and help her with lesson plans." He frowned and slumped down into his seat defeated. I rolled my eyes.

Jasper had been secretly carrying the torch for my neighbor ever since I've known him. I was starting to wonder if he'd ever get the balls to talk to her. How fucking hard can it be? Every time I see him staring at her across the cafeteria or in the halls, I had to physically resist the urge to call her over and get it over with. *Hey Brandon, this is my friend Jasper. Could you do me a favor and fuck him senseless so he'll stop pining over you like a lost puppy dog?* I suppressed a chuckle at the thought.

When we pulled up to school, I made it a point to park next to Brandon's Porsche. It was the least I could do for the sorry bastard. She was still in her car, arms flailing about, talking animatedly to someone in the passenger seat.

"Oh Shit!" Jasper shot up in his seat and turned to me with a smirk. "You missed all the excitement over the new girl didn't you?"

"New girl?" I asked in a bored tone and closed my eyes. People around here always went ape shit over fresh meat. I could care less.

Jasper rolled his eyes at my obvious indifference. "No way, man. You're going to get a kick out of this. New Girl is Alice's crazy cousin. She moved in with her a week ago."

I frowned. I had a new neighbor and didn't even notice. No. I had a new *crazy* neighbor, and I didn't even notice. Suddenly, I was interested. It's not exactly comforting to be living in such close proximity to someone who's crazy. I waved my hand for him to continue and opened my eyes to look at him. Pleased by my reaction, Jasper settled back down and continued.

"Wednesday, Newton tried to work his 'charm' on her in Bio, and she completely fucking freaked out. Had some kind of weird, random emotional breakdown or some shit. She started crying and shaking then ran out of class. It was quite the event. Usually, I'd figure Mike just finally got a normal reaction from his usual 'ass grab technique,' but when Crowley tried to help her up yesterday after she tripped, she did the same thing," he finished with a shrug.

Just then, Brandon and her passenger exited her car, and began walking towards the building. I couldn't see the passenger's face because it was hidden behind long brown hair peeking out from under her black hoodie. I assumed this was Crazy Cousin, or New Girl. She seemed to drag her feet lazily while she was walking towards the school.

I was about to question Jasper further on New Girl's obvious mental instability, but his attention was entirely fixated on Brandon's retreating rear. I sighed and got out of the car to make my way to class.



Alice just wouldn't shut up about this party tonight. We were in her rather ostentatious screaming yellow Porsche, waiting for the bell to ring to go to class.

"It's going to be so much fun, Bella! Emmett's parties are landmark events! You have to come—everybody's going to be there!" she squealed at me.

That was the exact reason I didn't want to go. The thought of being in a house filled to the brim with drunk guys made me shudder.

"Alice," I pleaded quietly. "Please don't make me go to this thing. I'm really uncomfortable about the whole idea." I didn't want to tell her the real reason why I didn't want to go, it would make her suspicious, and the rumors flying around school were already drawing her attention to my behavior.

It was silent for a moment, and I thought for sure I had finally won this argument, but when I looked up at her, I knew I had lost. She was giving me the classic "Alice pout." No one could deny that look even if they wanted to. And honestly, I wanted to show her that I could try to be normal for an hour or two, hoping maybe it would suppress her worries about me for a while.

"Ugh! Fine! I'll go in with you and chat with Rose for a few minutes, then I'm going back home!" I said, annoyed.

She squealed and started bouncing in her seat. "You'll see, Bella—you'll have fun!" I rolled my eyes and opened the car door just as the bell rang. I had a mantra I had to repeat to myself at times like this, walking across the quad and feeling the eyes of every soul on my head. *Hood up, head down.* I was feeling more tired by the second. The day hours always amplified my drowsiness.

I heard snickers and whispers as I passed the groups of people. I didn't make out what they were saying because I was intently tuning them out. I was focused on returning to the numb state I used to get through the school days. I had three episodes so far with guys touching me, and I assumed I was probably the laughing stock of the entire school by now.

As if reading my mind, Alice leaned up into my ear. "I promise I won't let anyone bother you," she whispered and patted my arm.

But I didn't say anything back. I just continued walking with my head down, and my feet dragged against the wave of exhaustion that was rising in me.

By the time lunch came, I realized I was being avoided like the plague by the entire student body. This fact made me so relieved, I almost smiled. Almost. It made everything so much easier, being avoided. They all still did the snicker-whisper thing, but that I could definitely handle.

I never ate school food, so I produced my bag of *Gingerbread Zombies* and took my seat at the end of the table next to Alice and across from Rosalie, Alice's best friend and Emmett's girlfriend. Emmett and Rose were both seniors, but the two of them and Alice were nearly inseparable. I was told that the three of them were the most popular in school, and I could easily understand why. Rose, with her beauty, Alice, with her unbridled enthusiasm and friendliness, and of course, Emmett, the big quarterback whom everyone was dying to impress.

Emmett and I hadn't really talked much—mostly because he scares the hell out of me, but Rose and I are becoming something akin to friends.

I said a quick "hello" and dug into my bag for the book that I had just checked out from the library. I didn't have my old collection anymore, so I always had to settle. But even though the books were usually bad, they still kept my attention focused and away from the crowded room.

They knew better than to attempt to include me in their conversation—which seemed to center around tonight's party—so I just munched on my cookies and started reading with my head down. This is what I did every day: try to be invisible.

The sound of the bell brought my attention back to the cafeteria, so I quickly put my book away and headed for Biology. I liked this class because I had the lab table all to myself and could sometimes even catch a few minutes of sleep. Mr. Banner never said anything because he knew I had already taken this course in Phoenix.

I kept my head down all the way to the classroom, walking slightly slower than usual. My exhaustion was quickly overwhelming me, making my eyelids droop and my footsteps falter despite my efforts to stay coherent. The only thing keeping me awake at that moment was the freezing cold rain soaking through my hood and hair. *Wake up! Wake up! Wake up!* I chided myself mentally, rubbing my eyes furiously with my fist in an attempt to delay the inevitable.

Once I was in my seat in the warmth of the Biology classroom, I knew I had to catch at least ten

or twenty minutes of rest. I knew I was pushing it when I stayed awake in English, but I had papers to turn in. It was better for me to sleep here, at school, where bells were constantly blaring at regularly timed intervals. I knew I could never get to sleep deep enough to dream. I crossed my arms on the lab table and laid my forehead down on them. Listening to the footsteps around me as people made their way to their seats, and staring into the darkness created by the veil of my arms and hair, I slowly let my eyes flutter closed and welcomed the sweet release of unconsciousness.

Edward

WIDE AWAKE

Crazy New Cousin Girl was passed out at my lab table when I arrived to Bio. So, now I'm sitting here staring daggers at her soaked, black hood in unmasked disdain. *Must be nice...* I thought bitterly, as I started my—no, *our*—lab assignment. I should wake her up like the prick I most definitely am. I should rip that hood right off her head and start shaking her. I should have told Mr. Banner that I wasn't okay with it when he asked me—but I didn't. It almost felt like sacrilege to disturb something as peaceful and unattainable to me as sleep.

So I swallowed my annoyance and envy, did the fucking assignment, and hoped she enjoyed her free A on the assignment. Once I was done, I immediately regretted going so fast. I had absolutely nothing to keep my attention away from the fact I could barely keep my eyes open. I started doing what I always did in these situations: eyes drooping, head dropping, and then snapping back up. I did that five times before I ran a hand over my face nice and hard and shot a look at the sleeping figure to my left. *Fucking Bitch*. I could hear her breathing deeply in the silence of the classroom, and she was emitting the softest snoring sound, I was sure I was the only one that could hear it.

It was quiet, deep, and repetitive, like a lullaby. And it was making me even more tired than I already was. There was still thirty minutes of class left. Shaking my head furiously, I decided I couldn't take any more temptation. I raised my hand and cleared my throat to get Mr. Banner's attention when he didn't look up from his desk.

"Yes, Mr. Cullen?" Mr. Banner asked in a knowing tone. I frequently requested early dismissal from classes at times like these. Mr. Banner was one of my easier subjects when it came to such privileges.

“Excuse me, Mr. Banner, but could I please be excused early today?” I asked as politely as I could in my highly aggravated state. I hoped he missed how my words were slightly slurred. When he got a defiant look on his face, I added “After all, I *am* working for two this afternoon.” I nodded my head in Crazy Sleeping Bitch New Girl Cousin’s direction and smirked.

Mr. Banner let out a long sigh and nodded his head. He allowed her rude behavior, for reasons unknown to me, so he couldn’t chance getting in trouble with the faculty. With a triumphant smile, I gathered my things. Just as I was about to get up from my seat, I heard a quiet whimper from the seat next to me. I looked over and noticed she was shaking lightly in her sleep. I stared at her trembling form for a moment, and considered waking her from what was most likely a nightmare, but decided against it. *That’s what you get.* I inwardly smiled.

With that final thought I rose from my seat and quickly exited the room, shutting the door behind me. I paid no attention to the loud, strangled screams coming from the science building behind me as I made my way to my Volvo.



“I’ll be home Sunday evening. I’m trusting the two of you to not kill each other in my absence.” Carlisle said distractedly as spun around the living room for the second time, patting at his pockets, trying to locate his keys. Sometimes I’d swear we shared DNA.

“Aw, come on Carlisle, me and my buddy here?” Emmett threw his big sweaty arms around my shoulders while I grimaced.

“Sweet Christ, Em. You fucking stink, go take a shower before I have Carlisle lecture you on the benefits of deodorant,” I snapped as I slapped his arm away from me in disgust. He always smelled bad when he came home from practice, and I couldn’t wait to remove myself from his stench. But Carlisle was about to leave for some medical conference on the east coast, so I had to see him off like the good son I wasn’t.

Carlisle shook his head disapprovingly and let out an exasperated sigh. “Please, Edward. Don’t use that kind of language,” he chided as he continued his hunt.

I smirked, “Sure thing, Daddy C.”

He hated it when I called him that. Just as the words left my mouth, he spotted his keys on the couch and retrieved them with a victorious grin. Once he had his suitcase in hand and was

walking past us to the door, he stopped mid stride and turned to Emmett, scrunching his nose up at him. I perked up a bit at his obvious notice of Emmett's foulness.

Please give him the deodorant speech. I pleaded with my eyes when Carlisle met my gaze. But instead he furrowed his brow and frowned at me.

"Edward, when was the last time you slept?" he asked, concern lacing his tone. I had to suppress a groan.

"I slept last night. I just had a long day." It wasn't a lie. He looked skeptical for a moment but eventually nodded.

"Make it an early night, then. You look exhausted," he said then went to turn back towards the door, but stopped and added, "Emmett, *deodorant*. That's all I'm saying." I chuckled darkly while he exited the house, and made my way upstairs to my room to prepare for the long night ahead of me.

Chapter 2. Bloody Newtons



It was the same nightmare I had last week, the one where I hid in the closet. He always found me, no matter how quiet I was being.

I awoke with a start, falling out of my seat and onto a hard, cold floor. I heard the most God awful scream, and instinctively covered my ears to shield myself from the high pitched shriek. It took me a moment to realize the scream was coming from me, and I instantly closed my mouth with a snap. I realized then, to my mortification, that I was still in Biology.

When I looked around the classroom, everyone was staring at me lying on the floor in varying degrees shock. The only sound in the room was my panting. I sat there shaking and silent for a moment, save for my labored breathing, not really knowing what to do. Should I run? Should I ask to be excused? Was there any way possible to get out of this situation with a shred of dignity? I decided the answer to that question was a definite no. So I slowly lifted myself off the floor, and picked up my lab stool, which I had knocked over in my panicked state.

Mike Newton was two lab tables in front of me staring at me, mouth wide open in shock. Everyone else seemed to be mirroring his pose, and I felt compelled to say something...anything. But I was completely and utterly frozen, standing there grasping my lab stool like it was the only thing keeping me in the room, the school, the entire town. By now, I was quite sure my face was flaming red in embarrassment. All I could do was dart my eyes around the room and take in the stares of my astonished classmates.

Finally, Mr. Banner cleared his throat.

I snapped my gaze to his, silently pleading with my eyes—*for what, I don't know*. He opened his mouth like he was about to say something, then snapped it closed again. He did this four times

before finally speaking. “Miss Swan, do you need to be excused?” he asked so quietly I barely made out the words.

Not trusting my voice enough to speak, I nodded vehemently and pried my grasp from the lab stool to pick up my bag. Without waiting for any further confirmation of my dismissal, I hurried out of the room with my eyes fixed on the floor.

Once outside, I collapsed on the grass and took deep, steadying breaths, not caring about the light rain that was falling. I sat there for what seemed like hours, replaying the event in my head. Any hope I once had of attempting to remain unnoticed, even despite my earlier episodes, had just completely flew out the window.

With a groan, I lifted myself off the ground and made my way to Alice’s Porsche. There was no way I was going to gym today.

I wasn’t sure if Alice had caught wind of the Biology incident, but if she did, she made no mention of it when she got in the car at the end of the day. For that, I was grateful. On the way home, she went on and on about this guy in her History class she liked. Jasper was his name. She was dissecting his every glance and deciding on whether he either liked her or was staring at something she had on her face from lunch.

“I mean, we did have pizza today, and that sauce can get all over if you’re not careful. I should have gone to the bathroom before class! If there was something on my face at lunch, you’d tell me right?” She eyed me nervously from her seat as she babbled on. She gave me no chance to answer, of course. “God! He probably thinks I’m a complete spaz!” she groaned. I rolled my eyes.

“He doesn’t think you’re a spaz, Alice. You’re being ridiculous.” I said in a monotone voice. She did this every day, always thinking this guy was either completely in love with her, or completely disgusted by her, and always deciding on the latter. Seeing her skeptical look made me add, “Plus, I saw you after lunch and you looked absolutely perfect,” I lied. I really didn’t pay enough attention at school to take in those kinds of details. She seemed placated somewhat by my comment.

“Okay, maybe you’re right. Still, I hope he’s coming to Emmett’s party tonight. I’m going to make one hundred percent positive I look irresistible. I have this green dress I’ve been dying to wear...” she babbled on, more excited now that she’d changed the conversation to one of her happier topics; wardrobe. I internally groaned at the thought of going to this party. After my

behavior today, there was no way I could achieve my “go in, chat with Rose, leave” plan without having drawing any attention. Still, I pushed it to the back of my mind, knowing there was no way I’d get Alice off my back.

Once we were home, Alice began clawing through her closet, trying desperately to find the coveted “Perfect Green Dress,” while I fixed dinner. Esme was going to be gone tonight, so Alice and I ate alone in the kitchen while she prattled on about accessories. Idly, I wondered how amusing it would be if this Jasper guy didn’t even come to Emmett’s party but didn’t even dream of mentioning the possibility to Alice.

“So...” Alice said slowly while prodding her food with her fork, “What are... uh... you wearing?” she attempted to ask casually while popping a broccoli spear into her mouth. I knew exactly where this conversation was headed and decided to stop it before it went any farther.

“No,” I said firmly, trying to exude a look of defiance. “I’m wearing what I have on now, and I don’t want to hear anything else about it. Period. You’re lucky I’m even going to this thing in the first place,” I mumbled the last part mostly to myself but loud enough so she could hear. I could see her really wanting to object, and I internally praised her self-control when she didn’t. I knew it took a lot. We ate the rest of the meal in companionable conversation. And by that, I mean Alice talked a lot, and I listened... mostly.

By the time ten-o-clock rolled around, Alice was made up like she was going to a photo shoot for Vogue, rather than a high school house party, and I kept to my word of wearing the same outfit from school. I’d probably be in dire need of the hood, I figured.

We left the house, with her two hundred dollar peep toe heels clicking against the cement driveway, and made our way next door. I didn’t know much about the Cullens, except what Alice told me. Carlisle Cullen was some “hunky” doctor who had two adopted sons, Emmett, and some other guy I’ve never met before. Edmund, or Edward or something. She didn’t say much about him, because Jasper was his best friend, and of course the conversation never went any further than that due to her inability to say Jasper’s name without swooning over him. I had half the mind to find this Jasper guy and beg him for mercy. *Would it kill you to just talk to the poor girl?!*

I was broken out of my thoughts by the loud music emanating from the large, white house in front of me. Alice was so excited I thought she might have an aneurysm. She went ahead of me up the walkway and disappeared into the doorway that was left open for the guests.

Not many people were outside, so I took the moment to give myself an inner pep talk before going in behind her. *Hood up, head down.* I chanted in my mind. With a long, martyred sigh, I drew up my hood and walked towards the door.

There seemed to be a fairly heavy crowd, but not quite as bad as I originally feared it would be. I noticed a girl from my Trig class standing in the foyer attached at the lips with some guy I didn't know. I think her name was Jennifer, or Jessica or something. I decided I was really bad at remembering names. I scooted past the make-out session, which appeared to be nearing second base, and made my way deeper into the house to search for Rose. Once I entered the living room, I could hear Emmett's booming voice telling someone not to "hurl" on the carpet. I turned my gaze toward his voice, figuring Rose would be somewhere nearby, when I heard my name being called by a disappointingly familiar voice.

"BELLA!" Mike was across the room near a corner with a small group of people and waving me over frantically with his arms. I groaned and kept my head down, hoping he would think I couldn't hear him over the loud rap music being played, and hopefully give up. I was wrong. He started making his way around the people littering the living room, bumping shoulders with some girl and forcing her to spill her drink. Still, he kept coming. Once he was within ten feet of me, I completely panicked and started looking for an exit. I figured Mike had been drinking and would be even more handsy than usual—a risk I did not want to take. Unfortunately, when I turned around, I noticed a very large group of people blocking the doorway and knew there was no way I could get past them. I looked to my right and noticed a large staircase leading to the second story of the house that was completely clear of partygoers. Deciding I had no other options, I darted up the staircase.

I could still hear Mike behind me calling my name, so I kept running, turning down the hall of the second story. I reached the last door there and attempted to open it, only to find it locked. I then noticed another set of stairs, likely leading to the top floor of the house, so I raced my way up them and kept running until I was met with a wall.

"BELLA! WHERE'D Y'GO?!" Mike called from the bottom of the stairs. His voice was slurred, verifying my suspicions about his drinking. Panicking again at his quickly approaching voice, I located the only door I could see and tried the handle. *Unlocked.* I flung the door open, and slammed it as quietly as I could in my alarmed state, and leaned my forehead against it.

I was panting and lightly shaking by now, and I worked to steady my breaths with my eyes closed, while listening intently to see if I could still hear Mike. My shaking hand was still on the knob, so I took a moment to lock the door, and backed away from it slightly.

When I didn't hear anything on the other side of the door, I let out a deep sigh of relief, and closed my eyes. Just then, someone in the room behind me cleared their throat. I jumped around and hit my back against the door, making a surprised squeaking sound, and instinctively brought my hand up to my mouth. There, sitting Indian style in a large four poster bed was a guy who looked to be around my age. He had the strangest shade of disheveled bronze hair, a pale complexion, much like mine, and startling green eyes that had dark circles under them and were severely bloodshot. He looked almost as tired as I felt, but he was very... *beautiful? Yes, beautiful.* It was one of those moments where I wished I could get closer to someone of the male gender, because he was very good looking, almost inhumanly so.

But he was sitting there looking at me expectantly with his eyebrows raised. I was stunned in silence for a moment before I realized this must be his room, and I was being very intrusive.

"Oh my....I'm s-so sorry... I had n-no idea... I was just t-trying..." I stammered, trying unsuccessfully to explain my presence. I let out a deep breath and shuffled my feet uncomfortably, looking everywhere but in his eyes.

"Oh, no, it's not a problem, really. I have girls busting into my bedroom to have weird random emotional breakdowns all the time." He smirked.

Weird Random Emotional Breakdowns? I thought bitterly. *You have no idea.* I put on my best apologetic face and tried to explain more coherently. My heart was still beating furiously, and I was still slightly shaking from the surprise of finding this stranger here, but I tried my best to explain.

"I was just trying to get away from this guy that was following me, and I ran up the stairs, but the door I tried was locked, so I ran up the stairs more, and he was still coming behind me, so I came in here," I babbled on in a high pitched voice. I paused, trying to decipher his expression, which appeared to be amused. I took in a deep breath to calm myself and let it out slowly.

"Please, excuse me for disturbing you," I finished sincerely.

I turned to leave without his response, but then I heard a voice on the other side of the door that made my hand freeze on the door knob.

"BELLA!" I could hear Mike yelling at the hallway. I stood there for a moment, hearing him repeating my name before I turned around slowly to the guy on the bed who was looking at the door with equal amounts of frustration and amusement.

"You're hiding from Newton," he said as more of statement than a question. I met his deep, tired green eyes and nodded slowly. He chuckled then. It was a soft, musical sound that temporarily distracted me from the rather awkward situation unfolding before me. I was uncomfortable being in a strange guy's bedroom, beautiful or not, but I couldn't go back out in the hall where Mike was waiting. I decided I could leave and confront a very drunk and forward Mike Newton, or stay here until he left, and then take my chances with this stranger. Given a choice between the two, I made up my mind.

"Umm..." I started, begging him with my eyes, "Would you mind... if maybe, if I waited here until Mike leaves?" I asked in a whisper, biting on my bottom lip. His green eyes looked at me, then to the door and back to me with a furrowed brow.

After a moment of indecision, he let out a heavy sigh. "Yeah, fine," he said in a defeated tone. "Just don't fuck with anything," He warned in a harsh voice. I bobbed my head in a quick nodding motion, while he returned his attention to a sketch book, or journal of some sort on his lap. While his gaze was averted, I took in the large space that was his bedroom. The bed he was sitting on was to my right, about halfway in the room. Across the wall to my left sat a large black leather sofa with a bookcase on the other end. The wall across the room in front of me had large windows and a pair of French doors in the middle that led out to a patio. The room was slightly cluttered, with a few articles of clothing hung over the couch and bed, and textbooks on the floor, but not horribly so.

"So what's your name?" His velvety voice broke me out of my visual exploration. I turned to see him, his brow furrowed slightly, concentrating on the book in his lap, pencil moving back and forth in a sweeping motion.

"Bella Swan," I answered quietly. He nodded, but didn't look up from his lap. I waited for him to give me his name, but he didn't. "What's yours?" I asked, fidgeting awkwardly with the sleeves of my hoodie.

"Edward Cullen," he answered distractedly.

Edward

WIDE AWAKE

I looked up from my sketchbook to see her fiddling with her sleeves and looking around awkwardly. I took her momentary distraction to really look at her. She had long brown hair, of course, but I already knew that. She had on the same outfit from school today. Her hood was still up, trying to hide her face. But I could actually see it now. She was... attractive I suppose. At least her face was. But I couldn't really get past her eyes. They had wide, dark circles underneath them, and they looked flat, sad... tired. She looked almost as tired as I felt—which *was not fucking possible*, I thought, remembering her nap in Bio this afternoon.

"You can sit down, you know," I said with raised eyebrows, nodding my head at the sofa. She met my gaze for a moment, and then hesitantly made her way to the wall across from my bed where my couch was located. When she sat, she brought her knees up to her chest and hugged them. I cringed, seeing her dirty, wet shoes on my new leather couch.

"If you're going to get all fucking fetal on my five-thousand dollar couch, at least have the decency to take off your shoes," I snapped. Her eyes widened for a moment before she shot up off the couch and began rubbing frantically at the spot her shoes were touching.

"Oh my God, I'm so sorry! I wasn't even thinking! I'm sorry." She kept apologizing, while still rubbing the seat. *She apologizes way too fucking much.* I almost felt guilty for saying anything in the first place.

"It's fine. Really, don't worry about it," I sighed. She stopped her hands and stood up straight, inspecting the couch. Once she seemed satisfied my Italian leather hadn't been harmed, she sat back down, this time with her feet on the floor.

I returned my attentions back to my sketch for a few minutes. When I looked back up, Bella was still in her spot but seemed to be inspecting the bookcase beside the couch with interest and... longing? *Did she like to read?* "Do you like books?" I asked aloud.

Her head snapped towards me and nodded slowly, a light red creeping up her cheeks, embarrassed I had caught her ogling my literature.

I mentally chuckled. "You can look if you'd like," I said pointing at my bookshelf. Her eyes lit up a little, and she stood up slowly and made her way to the bookshelf, eyes roaming the titles. I had acquired a rather extensive collection since I moved here. Carlisle was never apprehensive about buying me books.

Bella's hand reached out like she wanted to grab one, but she stopped suddenly and turned towards me. "May I?" she asked quietly, pointing to a book. I waved my hand in a gesture that said "By all means..." She took a book from the shelf and opened it, running her hand down the page reverently. *Yes, she does like books*, I decided.

She moved back to her spot on the couch and began reading. I couldn't see which book it was, but she looked very much immersed in it, so I returned to sketching.

It was a comfortable silence for a long while, the only sounds coming from the loud party below us, my pencil moving on the paper, and the pages of Bella's book being turned.

She never looked up from the book she was reading, and I got so caught up in my sketch that I realized almost 2 hours had passed by the time I finished. I looked at her then. She looked peaceful reading the book, and even though it was very large she appeared to already be halfway through it. She also looked so *tired*.

"You know," I started, breaking the silence. When she lifted her gaze to mine I continued, "Twenty bucks says Newton is already passed out in a pile of his own vomit." I smirked.

"Oh," she said, looking distracted by something, then, "Oh, OH!" She shut the book and stood up. "I'm so sorry! I got so lost in the book, I didn't realize. I didn't mean to be so rude, honestly." She made her way to the bookshelf.

"No, I don't mind at all, it's just..." I frowned then, not really knowing why I really *didn't* mind, but continued. "It's just, you look really tired. You should go home and get some sleep," I said sincerely.

She turned then, after replacing the book to its spot on the shelf, and let out a humorless chuckle. "Yeah, I should go home and get some sleep," she said in what sounded like a sarcastic voice. I furrowed my brows and looked at her quizzically. She grimaced and shook her head.

"I don't really sleep," she said, and then at the shocked look I'm sure was written all over my face, added "I mean, I try not to sleep. Bad dreams," she finished lamely.

But now it all made a kind of sense to me. The tired look on her face, the fact she sleeps at school, the nightmare she had in Bio today. She didn't sleep either. Like me.

"You don't sleep either? You try to stay awake?" I asked in an astonished voice. Her eyes got wide then, and her face got paler. Then suddenly she furrowed her brow in confusion.

"Either? You don't sleep?" she asked quietly.

I had never really spoken to anyone about my sleeping problems but figured *why not* since she was in the same situation. I nodded my head slowly, holding her gaze.

"Nightmares?" she whispered quietly. I paused for a second, not really liking the term.

"You could call them that..." I answered with tight eyes.

She got a look of understanding on her face. So she knew what I meant? We stayed there for a few moments, staring at each other in silent mutual respect for all the bullshit the other had to go through, knowing what had to be accomplished in order to do something as difficult as staying awake. Speaking of which...

"How do you do it? Stay awake?" I asked curiously.

"Coffee, cooking, homework..." she trailed off shrugging. "I try to catch a little here and there at school when I can, because it's so hard to sleep there." She paused, and then shook her head.

"At least, until today. I'll probably never be doing that again," she finished, averting her gaze to my gold carpet.

I felt guilty then, figuring she was referring to her nap in Bio today, in which I just let her sleep through. If her 'nightmares' were anything like mine, and I had no way of knowing, she probably woke up in a complete panic. I frowned to myself.

"How do you do it?" she asked, tilting her head slightly.

I leaned back against my headboard. "Carlisle's a doctor. I can score some shit from him sometimes. Uppers, you know?"

She looked slightly taken aback by my casual talk of drug use.

I shrugged. "Or, I can just sketch and it will keep me awake... concentration and all," I added, not wanting her to think I was some kind of drug addict. "I mean, coffee?" I scoffed. *Seriously? All she had was coffee? How the fuck does she do it? And sleeping at school? I'd never make a mistake like that.*

She just shrugged and then looked towards the door and back to me, seeming hesitant. "Umm... I should probably go. I don't want Alice to worry about me—but thanks for letting me hide from Mike." Then one side of her mouth quirked up into a grin.

I nodded and matched her grin with my own. This Bella Swan wasn't so bad after all. When she made her way to the door, I thought for a moment before making my next remark.

"Hey!" I called.

She turned around and gave me a questioning glance.

"You know the gazebo out back?" I asked referring to the covered gazebo Carlisle and Esme, Alice's mom, had built straddling the property lines of the two back yards.

Bella nodded at me, so I continued. "Sometimes at night I like to go out there. The cold helps me stay awake." I paused then, considering how to phrase what I wanted to ask. "Maybe I'll see you there some night," I finished in a casual tone.

Bella's eyes lit up a little at the mention of seeing me again, and she nodded, smiling, before opening the door, and walking out of my room.

I'd be going to the gazebo tomorrow night. The idea of having someone to at least talk to at night was enough to make me go. But I was also very interested in getting to know Bella. It was nice, for once, not to feel alone.



Edward was right. Mike was, in fact, passed out in a pile of his own vomit... lying in the second story bathroom with the door wide opened. *There goes twenty bucks*, I thought. I looked closer and noticed he had a bloody nose. It looked like he hit it on the sink or something when he passed out. I let a dark chuckle slip through my lips. Quietly, I made my way down the stairs, avoiding the remaining conscious people, and slipped into the foyer.

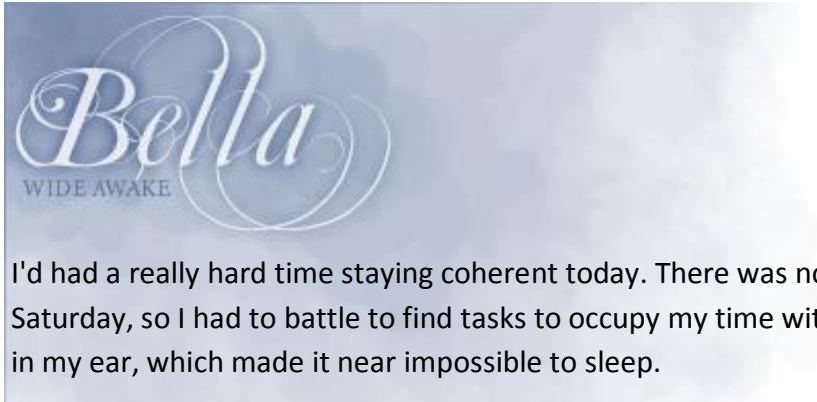
I walked out of the Cullen house in lifted spirits, and strolled back home breathing the misty air in deeply. The night had ended on a surprisingly good note. Edward was harsh at times—and irritable, but I was interested in knowing more about him. I didn't necessarily agree with his drug use, but who was I to say anything? I know how hard it could be to stay awake.

When I got home I noticed Alice was already asleep in her bed, still wearing the green dress. I smiled to myself, hoping she found Jasper tonight and made my way to my room to change my clothes.

I hesitated at the door with my hand hovering over the knob. Deciding to be brave and mentally cursing myself for not setting out my night clothes earlier in the day, I opened the door, and raced to my dresser as fast as possible. I plucked out the first thing I felt and bolted out of the room towards the kitchen without looking back.

Panting with anxiety, I got sudden inspiration for a cookie recipe, so I abandoned my clothes on the kitchen table and began whipping up a batch of *Bloody Newtons*. While I whipped the raspberries and dough, I thought back to Edward Cullen. I'd be going to the gazebo tomorrow night, and I hoped with everything in me, he'd be there.

Chapter 3. Double Fudge Rendezvous



I'd had a really hard time staying coherent today. There was no school, because it was a Saturday, so I had to battle to find tasks to occupy my time with. Alice, gratefully, kept babbling in my ear, which made it near impossible to sleep.

"I mean..." Alice huffed out dramatically, "Everyone in Forks High was at that party, Bella!" she said exasperatedly while I mopped the kitchen floor. "Why the hell wasn't he there! Do you think it was me? No—no, that couldn't be it—maybe he doesn't like Emmett? But Edward was there—and he's his best friend! You'd think he'd go to his best friend's party!" She whined. At the mention of Edward's name, my attention piqued. I halted my mop and slowly turned towards her.

"Hey, Al..." I started cautiously. How to ask her this without drawing undue attention to myself?

She stopped her tirade at the sound of my voice, and looked at me quizzically from her seat at the bar. "Umm, this Edward guy you talk about? What's his deal, anyways?" I asked as nonchalantly as possible. I was worried she'd get suspicious and start questioning my motives, so I added, "I mean, if he's Jasper best friend, I might be more helpful to your predicament if I knew more about the company he kept," I finished craftily.

Curiously, Alice grimaced at my mention of Edward. "Well... Edward is..." she trailed off, cocking her head to the side thoughtfully in an attempt to find the proper word to describe him. I thought I could help with this. Gorgeous? Interesting? Has impressive literature collections and a five thousand dollar black leather sofa? "Trouble," she finished decidedly with a nod.

I frowned. "Trouble?" I hedged. Sure, Edward might have seemed a little... abrasive, but trouble?

She nodded then continued. "He's... well, let's just say Edward doesn't exactly play well with others," she added cryptically.

Figures that the one time I could actually benefit from her over abundance of conversational enthusiasm, and she starts walking on egg shells. “Alice, could you maybe be a little more specific?” I huffed, aggravated that I actually had to ask her to continue. She rolled her eyes.

“He has issues, okay? He’s a trouble maker. Bad seed. He’s mean to everyone but Jasper, he doesn’t like talking to people, he’s been arrested before, he hates Emmett, he has the foulest mouth I’ve ever heard, and freshman year he scratched my BMW by ‘accident’, and didn’t even apologize,” she spat in a harsher tone than I was accustomed to ever hearing Alice use.

I blanched, a bit shocked at her tone and description of Edward. He didn’t seem so bad last night. Again, a little abrasive, but I know how much sleep deprivation can affect moods, so I could easily write it off. Alice, apparently—couldn’t. I felt strongly compelled to defend Edward for some reason, but knew doing so would give me away, so I stuck to my earlier ruse and continued with my false intentions of learning more about Jasper. “Hmm, well is Jasper like that too? Mean to people, I mean?” I asked, not really caring. I decided to store the information on Edward away for later inspection.

Alice shook her head frantically. “No! No, Jasper isn’t like that at all. He parties some, but no more than Emmett. One time when I stayed the night with Rose, I saw him helping his mom with her work—she’s a professor at the college in Port Angeles—and he was really sweet to her...” She trailed off in a whimsical voice.

I just shrugged and continued mopping the floor while Alice pointed out Jasper's stronger points.

Hoping to get a better impression of Edward tonight, I decided not to judge him based solely on Alice’s assumptions. I knew if he was judging me by other’s assumptions, he probably thought I was completely insane. My shoulder slumped a bit when I realized that was probably exactly what he thought of me by now. How could he not, with all the rumors going around school? For some reason I really did want Edward to like me... or at the very least remain on polite speaking terms with me, which as Alice made quite clear, was more of a rarity than I had originally expected.

In a marginally worse mood, I continued cleaning the house for the rest of the day, anticipating another encounter with Edward in equal parts of excitement and dread.

At eleven o’clock, I decided to stick to my strengths in order to win Edward’s approval and came up with a new cookie recipe. Esme told me once that no one could resist my company when

cookies were involved. I was hoping she was being honest as I whipped the fudgy dough and prepared it on the cookie sheet. Alice and Esme—quite tired from her trip to Seattle last night—had already called it a night and were sleeping peacefully in their beds. I usually felt quite envious of them at this time of night, but I was far too anxious about meeting Edward to give it a second thought. Idly, I wondered how stupid I would feel if he didn't even show up at the gazebo. Then I realized I was sounding too much like Alice and mentally slapped myself for being such a teenage girl.

Once my cookies were cooled, I put them in their Ziplock bags and labeled them accordingly as I always did. *Double Fudge Rendezvous*. They looked and tasted delicious, which satisfied me because I was a tough critic when it came to such things. I sat myself at the breakfast bar and drummed my fingers on the granite while sipping a new cup of coffee. I was officially out of things to do, and I could feel my eye lids drooping against my will. I wondered what time Edward usually went out, and deciding to save my sanity, concluded I would make an appearance at exactly midnight. No need to seem so eager. I mentally slapped myself again for being so eager. Although, I took some comfort in the fact there were no green mini dresses involved.

Once the clock on the microwave read midnight, I got up and put my hoodie on. Grasping my bag of *Double Fudge Rendezvous*, I made my way out the back door leading to the yard. It was lightly drizzling outside with just enough moonlight that I could make out the general shape of the gazebo located at the far end of the yard. I looked towards the Cullen house and noticed Edward's bedroom window was illuminated. I exhaled a deep breath and began stumbling my way towards to gazebo through the darkness. It was rather large, with vines running up the sides and spilling onto the shingled roof that covered it. I took the two steps up onto the platform and looked around. I'd never actually been out here before. There was a picnic table in the center with benches on either side. I sat with my back to the houses and looked out toward the little river that extended past the property. My eyes had adjusted enough that I could actually see the reflection of the clouds in the rippling water. All in all it was a very peaceful place.

Edward was partially correct. The slight cold bite of the breeze did keep me coherent, but the soft soothing sounds of the river were lulling me. I rubbed at my eyes with my fists and started eating a cookie, figuring a sugar high wouldn't hurt matters any.

I sat there on the bench for a while eating cookies and watching the river before I heard soft footsteps coming from behind me. I was initially alarmed before I remembered I was waiting for someone. I slowly turned around on the bench and saw Edward approaching the gazebo. He

was wearing a black leather jacket and dark jeans. I couldn't make out his expression as clearly as I would have liked, but he didn't seem to have a "mean" look on his face. He took a seat at the opposite end of the bench I was sitting on without speaking and stared out towards the river.

I allowed myself a moment to do a mental happy dance at the fact he'd come out, before I realized that he had yet to speak. He was just sitting there staring at the river. The light breeze was gently rustling his hair, sending his scent wafting in my direction. Edward smelled divine. Like soap and shampoo and a vague twinge of cigarette smoke that wasn't nearly as repulsive as it should have been.

Uncertain how to proceed, I remembered my secret weapon. "Cookie?" I asked in a whisper and slid the bag down toward Edward's end of the wooden table.

He glanced sideways at the bag and furrowed his brow. Tentatively, he reached in the bag and pulled one out, inspecting it like I was offering him a severed puppy's head rather than a simple cookie.

With an annoyed sigh, I reached in the bag and produced a cookie. I took a bite slowly and dramatically, demonstrating that he wouldn't collapse in a seizure from eating my confections.

He quirked an eyebrow at me, then popped the cookie in his mouth, taking a rather large bite and chewing it bravely. His eyes lit up a little bit when he tasted the cookie, and I resumed my mental happy dance. I knew he'd like it. "These are really good cookies. What kind are they?" His velvety voice finally spoke after he finished chewing.

I lifted one side of my mouth into a grin. "Double Fudge Rendezvous" I answered quietly.

"Hmm..." he hummed while chewing another bite and swallowing. "That's a rather odd name for a cookie," he questioned.

I shrugged. "I always get inspirations from events that happen in my day. Then I name the cookie after it," I stated coolly. "Last night I made Bloody Newtons," I added with a smirk.

Edward was silent for a moment before throwing his head back in laughter, both startling and dazzling me at the same time. Once he composed himself, he turned towards me, amusement lighting up his features and a half grin on his face. "That's fucking priceless. You'll have to make me a batch of those sometime." He winked. Yes, he winked. Good God, he *winked*!

I took a moment to compose the seventeen year-old giggling girl inside of me before agreeing with a nod. We were silent again for a few minutes, just gazing out at the moonlit river through the mist of the rain that was barely falling and eating our *Double Fudge Rendezvous*. My head was swimming with the fact I was so comfortable around this guy when, if it were anyone else, I'd be shaking and looking for escape routes.

"What are your nightmares about?" Edward asked in a whisper, breaking me from my thoughts. I turned towards him. His gaze was fixed on his hands, and I frowned. I didn't really want to relay my sordid past to him. When I didn't answer his green eyes met mine, and he frowned. "You don't have to tell me, I was just curious. I wasn't trying to pry," he said softly with a sincere expression.

"No..." I said quickly. "It's okay, really. I just... I don't really talk about it to anyone," I explained while shifting my gaze to my hands folded on the tabletop. "You probably think I'm crazy enough with all the rumors going around. No need to add more fuel to the fire," I added sourly.

He snorted, but made no attempt to deny my accusations. He sat, silently looking into the distance with a faraway look on his face. After a few minutes he turned towards me with a decisive expression. "I'll show you mine if you show me yours," he said firmly.



She sat with a dumbfounded expression on her face, blinking a few times. I didn't want to spill the beans any more than she did, but I had to know what was up with this girl.

I had spoken to Emmett earlier in the day, which was only one sign I was far more interested in Bella Swan than was necessarily characteristic of my normal behavior. Luckily, Em was suffering from a nasty hangover and was too miserable to fight with me when I approached him. Once the words "Bella Swan" were out of my mouth, though, he got the strangest look on his face.

"Don't fuck with Bella, dude," he rasped with narrowed eyes, attempting a forceful tone and failing quite miserably.

I was highly fucking annoyed by his obvious dismissal of my question. “Stop being so fucking difficult and just tell me what you know, dickhead,” I snapped in a tone loud enough to make him cringe away from the sound. I smiled a bit at having made his headache flare

“She’s just weird, dude,” he groaned, putting his hands over his ears in an attempt to shield himself from any sound. “She had some kind of weird traumatic experience before she moved here, and she doesn’t like being touched. Alice never talks about it, and we aren’t allowed to ask questions.” After saying his piece, he left the kitchen to go vomit some more, and I spent the rest of my day wondering. Wondering what happened to Bella before she moved here that was so fucking bad she couldn’t sleep or be touched. I cringed at all the possibilities. After spending my day and evening completely occupied by worst case scenarios, I vowed before leaving the house I would find out.

So here I was, offering the only thing I could in return and hoping she was somewhat as curious about my past as I was about hers. I could only imagine all the shit Alice had been telling her about me. She never could get past the accident with her BMW. I wasn’t even the one who scratched the damned thing. I just took the blame for Jasper who was freaking out so badly about it I couldn’t help but take the bullet for the sorry bastard.

“You go first,” Bella’s soft voice broke me out of my thoughts.

I snapped my gaze to her deep brown eyes and digested her statement.

Shit. Me first. I let out a frustrated sigh and ran my fingers through my hair. I averted my gaze to the wooden table and tried to decide how much I really wanted to give away in return for her story. Feeling more anxious than I was comfortable with, I reached into my jacket pocket and pulled out my pack of cigarettes and a lighter. Bringing one up to my mouth, I lit the cigarette but sat staring at the flame for a long moment before releasing it and enveloping us once again in darkness. Making my decision, I took a long draw off the cigarette, making the orange ember glow brightly, before exhaling a steady breath of smoke.

“When I was nine, I was in a house fire, and I watched my father burn to death,” I blurted quickly in a tight voice. I decided to leave the exact cause of the fire out of my confession. I didn’t look at her reaction to that statement before I continued. “My mom sent me away after that,” I said in a bitter tone, scratching at the wood tabletop with my fingernail. “That’s what my nightmares are about. Some nights it’s the fire, other nights it’s about her leaving. Sometimes they’re about the fucked up things that happened to me in foster homes,” I finished with a shrug and took another deep drag from my glowing cigarette.

She was quiet for a moment, so I looked up at her to gauge her reaction. Her wide, worn brown eyes were filled with shock, concern, and... pity. I fucking hated seeing people looking at me with pity, so I averted my gaze back towards the river with a sour look on my face.

"I'm sorry..." she whispered in a low pained voice.

I let out one humorless chuckle recalling my earlier assumptions of her apologizing too much. I just shrugged and waved the hand holding my cigarette in a dismissive fashion, and went back to scratching the wooden table. I knew it was her turn to explain, but I sat patiently waiting for her to gather her courage and continued smoking my cigarette. Eventually it was burned thoroughly, so I flicked it out of the gazebo, following the glowing ember with my eyes, making sure it hit the wet ground and nothing else.

The sound of her quietly clearing her throat brought my attention back to her. She was staring down at her hands entwined on the table with a nervous, yet tired expression.

"A year ago, my mom and I were victims of a month-long home invasion," she whispered so quietly I could barely hear.

My eyes widened, not really expecting that particular scenario—which is saying a lot, because I worked through many in my head. I waited patiently for her to continue.

Her eyes were tight, likely recalling her past horrors and never left her hands. "The man... Phil... was one of my mom's old boyfriends. He broke in and held us in the house for almost four weeks." She paused then, darting her eyes around the yard in front of her like someone was going to jump out of the darkness unexpectedly. She licked her lips and started again. "He tortured my mother and me... doing awful things..." She shuddered and closed her eyes tightly.

I wanted to reach out to her and comfort her in some way but knew I couldn't. Emmett told me she didn't like being touched, so I just sat and listened, hoping my mere presence gave her some amount of comfort.

"He killed her in front of me," she added in an emotionless voice, now staring in the direction of the river with a hard look marring her features. Then she crossed her arms on the table in front of her and laid her head down on them, facing me. "That's what my nightmares are about," she finished in a tired, slurred voice and closed her eyes.

I knew instinctively that she was editing the experience, making it seem less bad for reasons I didn't know. But seeing as how I did the same thing, I let the matter drop. I got the general idea

of what happened. It was awful to think of Bella being... tortured. I wanted to ask her what happened to the Phil guy, but when she opened her eyes to meet my gaze again, her expression made it clear the discussion was closed.

And I didn't want to upset her further, so I just nodded and gave her a small smile, showing her I didn't think she was crazy. She attempted to return it, but it came out more like a grimace, so she busied herself by eating another cookie.

I turned forward then and began digesting Bella's story. After a long while, I decided, since her incident happened recently, I could most likely find more information regarding it on the internet.

"So," Bella spoke in a lighter tone, finally breaking the silence. Her head was still lying on her arms. "What's your favorite cookie?" she asked with a small smile, obviously trying to change the course of conversation.

I returned her grin, and laid my head down on my arms facing her and mirroring her pose. "Well.... It used to be peanut butter, but now, I'm thinking *Double Fudge Rendezvous*," I said with a smirk. Bella's cookies were positively divine, possibly the best thing I'd ever eaten. In the Cullen household, when it came to food, it was an "Every Man for Himself" situation, and since none of us had anything resembling good culinary skills, I rarely had the opportunity to eat anything really appealing.

Bella's face lit up a bit at my hidden compliment, and she lightly chuckled. "I know five peanut butter cookie recipes. You'd like them all," she replied smugly, before her face fell a bit. "Maybe..." she paused and looked away biting her lip before she met my eyes again. "Maybe tomorrow I could bring you some." Her statement came out sounding more like a question.

I rolled my eyes at her very unsubtle attempt at questioning whether or not I was returning. "Yeah, yeah, I'll be here tomorrow. Who am I to refuse perfectly good cookies?" I joked.

She grinned, and I could just barely make out the light pink on her cheeks in the moonlight when she blushed. *So fucking cute.*

She freed her left arm to lightly draw patterns in the grains on the wood with her index finger. "So what's life like in Forks?" she asked quietly.

I shrugged. "Boring as fuck mostly. I usually hang with Jazz or something to pass the time on the

weekends,” I snorted. “When he isn’t completely obsessing over your bitch of a cousin.”

Bella shot straight upright then with an angry expression on her face. “Hey! Alice is NOT a bitch!” She sneered.

I sat up slowly with my hands up in the air in a defensive gesture.

Then curiously she furrowed her little brow, “What do you mean obsessing?” she asked cautiously.

I let out a frustrated sigh and swung my leg over the bench so I was straddling it facing her, and leaned with my elbow on the table. “He’s been madly in love with Alice ever since I’ve known him. I have to hear about her every day,” I sighed.

Bella was frozen for a moment and then doubled over in the softest laugh I’ve ever heard.

I held my lips together tightly trying not to smile at her amusement and then quirked an eyebrow at her questioningly.

She composed herself before doing this weird snort-laugh. “I’m sorry, it’s just...” she trailed off with a chuckle.

I sent her a frustrated glare. It was fucking annoying being out of the loop.

She looked at me with apologetic eyes and continued. “Ever since I got here a week ago, I have heard nothing but Jasper this—Jasper that.” She chuckled again and then added in a high pitched tone obviously meant to mock Alice, “Oh my God, Bella! Isn’t Jasper, like sooo dreamy?”

Then we both doubled over laughter.

Fucking figures. Neither one of those two had any balls.

When our laughter finally quieted down, I lifted my head to Bella and shook it. “Well, personally, I think we should keep our mouths shut a bit longer. Serves them right for making us suffer.” I smirked conspiratorially.

Bella chuckled and nodded at me.

We returned to our previous positions with our heads down on the table and sat in silence for a bit longer, just listening to the river and enjoying each other's presence.

I had my eyes closed, enjoying the cold breeze on my face. I was still tired... exhausted actually. But having Bella with me made it easier to stay awake. I was momentarily glad she was so eager for me to return, saving me the embarrassment of asking her to do so, since I so obviously enjoyed her company. It was a definite rarity for me. I was commonly known as social outcast by choice. As a general rule, I had learned years ago that people fucking sucked. It was a rule I lived by. If you don't get close to people, the assholes of the world can't fuck you over, and in return you can't hurt the nicer people who don't deserve it.

"Alice said you were arrested," Bella said in a slurred, accusing voice. I opened my eyes to look at her and she had her eyes closed still.

I snorted. "Yeah, well Alice would know. She was the one who pressed charges," I said lazily and let my eyes close again.

"Oh, really? Is that a story I get to hear?" she half chuckled, half yawned.

I let out a deep sigh and kept my eyes closed. "There was this whole incident with her BMW freshman year. She was fucking bitter. She didn't press charges for it, probably because Jazz begged her not to, but she kept an eye on me, and eventually caught me doing something... less than legal." I shrugged in avoidance and yawned, hoping she'd drop it.

"Well...what was it?" she asked sleepily when I didn't continue.

I opened my eyes then to find her staring at me expectantly. I was by no means proud of my criminal record, so I was somewhat frustrated at her persistence, but I decided to be honest. The past was the past after all. "Possession of a controlled substance," I said carefully while gauging her reaction.

Then, God bless her heart, she just fucking shrugged and closed her eyes again, like it was no big deal. I smiled a little bit, pleasantly surprised by her reaction. "You'll have to excuse Alice. She has a slight tendency to hold grudges. Sometimes I find it admirable, but in other cases it can be a bit of a pain," she replied quietly.

I snorted, and then closed my eyes again. *A bit of a pain? More like a fucking huge inconvenience*. I had other incidents on my rap sheet, but decided not to give it all away in one night. Better to ease her into the fact she's spending her night with a complete fuck up. Once

again, we were silent for a long while, just the sounds of our breathing and the river filling the space.

Eventually the silence was broken by a soft snoring sound I immediately recognized as Bella's. Opening my eyes and looking at her peaceful face, I realized she had fallen asleep. I hesitantly lifted my foot and tapped her leg with my boot. Her eyes flew open and she shot up on the bench, rubbing frantically at her eyes with her fists.

I chuckled, mumbling, "Amateur," under my breath.

She looked momentarily disoriented, but quickly recovered. "Sorry. Thanks," she murmured, slowly putting her head back down but keeping her eyes open.

This was something that was bugging the shit out of me to no end. "Why do you always do that?" At her confused expression I added, "Apologize. You say you're sorry entirely too fucking much," I said with narrowed eyes. She shrugged and looked like she was about to apologize for apologizing before catching my warning glare, then she chuckled.

"I don't know why I do it. I guess it was just a polite habit I got into, and now it's like second nature," she admitted quietly.

I closed my eyes again. "Well, you don't have to apologize to me constantly. So cut that shit out," I replied in a hard voice. Seriously, it was annoying spending time with someone so utterly fucking apologetic. It kind of makes you feel like shit.

I was sitting, comfortable with my head down still, listening to the water again, and being lulled by its soothing sounds. Suddenly I felt a tap on my leg, and my eyes shot open.

Bella was grinning at me. "You fell asleep," she teased in a musical tone. I rolled my eyes at her teasing but kept my eyes wide open.

It was then I noticed the sun was showing signs of rising. Tentatively, I sat up on the bench and rubbed my face with my hands. "Sun's rising soon," I mumbled into my hands, and then glanced into clouds that were becoming lighter. With a deep sigh, I stood up from the bench and began stretching my stiff limbs. Bella slowly followed my lead, picking up her bag of cookies from the middle of the table.

She stood there shuffling her feet in an awkward gesture beside the bench. "Well, I guess I'll see you tomorrow." She looked up at me and bit her lip. *Yeah, that's fucking cute too.*

I nodded. “Tomorrow,” I agreed with a grin.

With that we both sleepily climbed down out of the gazebo and headed back toward our homes, victorious in yet another nightly struggle.

Chapter 4. Peanut Butter Panaceas



When the sun finally rose, I was once again limited to the confines of my room. Emmett had his little whore, Rosalie, over for the day, and I wanted to avoid any and all contact with her. I was half hoping Jazz would come with her to, but he was still on mother duty for the weekend. So, I was alone again, sketching mindlessly on my bed with my ear buds in and a heavy tune playing.

When noon approached, I remembered my earlier observations about the internet. Something as dramatic as what happened to Bella would surely make the local news wherever she was from. I stared at the door with trepidation, knowing a run in with Rose would result in an immediate confrontation. She loathed me. I, for one, hated her boyfriend and made no secret about that fact. Second, she was under the impression I had corrupted her darling twin brother. I mentally snorted at this. If she only knew how much trouble I kept him out of.

With a resigned sigh, I rose from my bed and opened the door slowly, like a fucking bomb was about to go off outside it. Peeking out and down the hall, I slowly made my way to the second story of the house, walking down the stairs in as much silence as possible. I noticed the hallway was empty and all the doors closed, so I slowly made my way to the front of the hall, to Carlisle's office where the computer was located. Once inside, I closed the door and locked it, letting out a breath I didn't realize I was holding.

I walked over to the expensive machine and started it up with a hum, collapsing in the desk chair and running my hand over my face to keep me alert. I performed my search with few results at first, before I realized "Bella" was probably short for something else. I eventually landed success on a search for her last name. A local newspaper in Phoenix, Arizona had an article on the incident. Before clicking the link, I allowed myself a moment of guilt for going behind Bella's back for this information. The feeling was, however, short lived.

Fuck it.

I loaded the page and began reading.

Home Invasion in Quiet Phoenix Suburb Leaves One Dead, One Injured.

PHOENIX - Officials charged Phillip Dwyer (age 30) with the murder of school teacher, Renee Swan (age 34). Other charges include kidnapping, assault and battery with a deadly weapon with intent to kill, and breaking and entering. More charges are pending.

After a distress call, authorities responded to 250 Maple Avenue last week. Officers arrived to find the body of Swan inside the home. Swan's daughter (age 16) was found locked in a bedroom closet, bound and gagged. She suffered numerous broken bones and lacerations. She is in protective custody at Phoenix Medical Center for malnutrition and dehydration. She is in stable condition. Her name is being withheld pending the notification of relatives. According to officials, Dwyer confessed Sunday to breaking into his ex-girlfriend's home 5 weeks ago. He held Swan and her daughter hostage for nearly a month. Dwyer's defense counsel claims that his client is mentally ill. Psychiatric evaluation is pending before the trial...

I stopped reading and shut the computer down, disappointed I didn't get as much information as I had hoped, but relieved to learn the perpetrator was in custody. Deciding my curiosity could only be satiated by Bella herself, I made my way back to my room. I could hear the most repulsive noises coming from Emmett's bedroom door, and both cringed at the fact I was in such close proximity to their... intimacy, and smiled at the fact they were both far too occupied to notice.

I returned to my bedroom and sighed contentedly. This room was my sanctuary. Even if it couldn't supply me with the sleep I so desperately desired, it provided me with much needed privacy. I was a very private person. I didn't even allow Jasper into my bedroom most times. I don't think Bella fully appreciated the gravity of the situation on Friday when she asked my permission to remain in my room. But of course how could she? She didn't know me.

I walked over to my balcony doors with the intention of catching a smoke, but got a sudden rush of dizziness. I stood, swaying in the middle of my room, and instinctively knew my sleep deprivation was reaching its peak. Experience taught me if I didn't try to catch some sleep soon, I'd succumb to the worse symptoms. Since I had no particular desire to hallucinate this afternoon, I swayed over to my bedside table and set my alarm clock for two hours away.

I didn't even remember lying down on the bed, but I must have, because two hours later the screeching of my alarm clock tore me away from the dream I was having. I shot straight up in bed, panting and sweating and smelling like Emmett on a practice day. I raised a trembling hand to my clock to cease the unsettling buzzing noise. It took me a long while to recover, but I didn't

move a muscle, just fucking sat there shaking in bed with tears running down my face like a fucking baby. I was disgusted with myself.



Carlisle returned that evening to an inconspicuously clean house. I sent him a curt greeting on the way to the kitchen to make myself a sandwich, which I ate alone in my room. I figured I'd go out tonight at midnight. I would have to sneak out through my balcony to avoid the notice of Daddy C., but I was rather experienced at this task. I almost considered bringing my sketch pad or a book for Bella, but then decided it would be too dark to enjoy such activities.

So at precisely midnight, I made my way out to the balcony empty-handed. Swinging my legs over the wooden railing with a grace I wasn't sure I'd possess in my sluggish state, I climbed down the lattice covering the south wall of the house. With a quiet thud, I landed lithely on the soft, wet grass of my back yard. *So fucking smooth*, I inwardly gloated as I turned to make my way to gazebo.

Like last night, Bella was already seated on the bench waiting for me, her long, brown hair free from her hood. She turned when she heard me approaching and sent me a small smile which I returned.

"How very juvenile delinquent of you," she quietly goaded as I took a seat at my side of the bench. It took me a moment to understand what she was referring to.

"Oh," I said slightly surprised she was watching me. "You saw that then?" I questioned with a smirk.

She nodded in the darkness, and I just shrugged at her. She rolled her eyes at my nonchalance towards sneaking out and slid a plastic bag down the table. More cookies.

I smiled and reached in the bag to take one. I wasn't hesitant like I was last night, having more confidence in Bella's baking skills. I took a bite of the cookie and immediately recognized it as peanut butter. But not just any peanut butter... fucking delicious peanut butter. My eyes rolled into the back of my head a little. "Mmm..." I hummed. "What's the name of this cookie?" I questioned while consuming the cookie reverently.

"Peanut Butter Panacea," she replied in a smug tone, taking a cookie from the bag and biting into it.

I let out a little chuckle at her use of impressive verbiage. “Panacea...” I said slowly, looking at the cookie in my hand. “A cure all. Appropriate,” I said with a smirk and finished my cookie.

She shrugged modestly. “It’s an older recipe, the best peanut butter in my collection.”

We sat in silence for a while, enjoying the cookie cure all. It wasn’t raining tonight, which is an unusual event for Forks, but there was a wet lingering mist in the air, and since it was mid-November, it was still cold as fuck. This was a good thing however. I took a moment to appreciate Bella’s smell which was wafting over me from the slight breeze. She smelled like cookies and flowers. Very feminine. After a long while, the sound of Bella’s soft voice broke the silence.

“I fell asleep today,” Bella said in sad tone.

I turned towards her to notice she had her head down, her hair shielding her face from my view. *You too huh?*

“Yeah, me too actually.” I frowned. “How long?” I asked, swinging my leg to straddle the bench so I could face her.

Bella shrugged. “Three hours maybe. I was home alone on the couch watching television when I fell asleep. Then I woke up... from a dream...” she trailed off in a low voice and turned to face me then. Her eyes didn’t look quite as tired as last night, though you could still clearly make out the dark circles around them even in the darkness of the gazebo. She licked her lips and darted her eyes around the misty yard before meeting my gaze again. She leaned towards me slightly and continued in a whisper. “I was in my bedroom again...”

I furrowed my brow and leaned towards her to hear her better.

“...in my old house.” She darted her eyes around the yard again and licked her lips, something I was recognizing as a nervous habit of hers. “He was waiting for me... in the closet again... hiding there when I got into bed.” She paused then, with a reluctant look on her face, so I nodded, encouraging her to continue. I was far too curious now. She turned her whole body towards me then and brought her knees up to her chest, hugging them tightly. “He came out when he thought I had fallen asleep... but I didn’t. I saw the closet door opening... but I was... frozen or something. I couldn’t scream or do anything. All I could do was watch it all happen again.” She darted her eyes again and started rocking slowly back and forth.

I was completely mesmerized, and I’m sure my eyes were wide in anticipation.

"He just... *attacked* me while I was still lying in bed, and the next thing I know, I'm tied up in the closet, bleeding." She grimaced and rested her chin on her knees.

"It's the smaller things you remember the best, you know?" she whispered in a thoughtful tone. "Like the way the smell of blood made me nauseous, but when I tried to vomit... I choked because of the gag in my mouth." She had a far away look in her eyes. After a few seconds she seemed to snap back into reality, shaking her head a little, then meeting my gaze again. She shifted her head so her cheek was lying on her knees and she was looking out at the river. "Anyways... that's what my dream was about, and it was worse because I was home alone." She sighed.

I was kind of stunned into silence for a moment, my head swimming with thoughts of closets and blood and vomit, and completely appreciating what Bella meant about remembering the smaller things. Bella's story was definitely, without a doubt, thirteen shades of fucked up. It was nice to know I wasn't the only one. Possibly, Bella handled it better than I did, and she'd only been doing this for a year. I'd been doing it most of my life.

"I'm sorry," Bella's quiet whisper broke me out of my thoughts.

I turned then, slightly fucking annoyed. I was going to snap at her for apologizing before I caught the sad look on her face. "What are you sorry about this time?" I asked, forcing the softest tone my irritability would allow.

She bit her lip and turned her body back around on the bench. "I didn't mean to burden you with all my problems, I shouldn't have," she insisted, likely misunderstanding my thoughtful silence.

"Don't be stupid, Bella." I sighed and snatched another cookie out of the bag on the table. "You keep bringing me cookies, and you can burden me all you want," I replied with a smirk. I mean, I couldn't let her feel bad about telling me her dreams when I was dying to know about them anyways. Unfortunately, I could still see her skepticism, so with another heavy sigh, I put the cookie back in the bag and rubbed my hands together.

"Okay," I said slowly, bracing myself for the bullshit I was willing to go through to put Bella's conscious at ease. "Would it make you feel better if I told you about the dream I woke up from today?" I asked forcing a tight smile.

She turned to me then with a look of unadulterated curiosity on her face and nodded



I mean, it only seemed fair. It was like he said last night, I showed him mine, now he'd show me his--and I'd stop feeling like such a freak.

Still straddling the picnic bench, Edward ran his hands through his hair in a frustrated gesture, looking everywhere but in my eyes. "I was in my room, and I started getting dizzy," he started, and then finally met my gaze. "You know how when you don't sleep for so long you get really fucking dizzy?" he asked.

I nodded. I knew that feeling all too well. It was only that bad for me on weekends, when I don't have classes to sleep in.

"So, I lied down to get some sleep... just enough to make it bearable. You know?" he asked nervously.

Again I nodded. All understandable. *Get to the good stuff.*

Instead he reached in his jacket pocket, took out a cigarette, and began smoking it. It seemed to relax him minutely, and I idly took a moment to appreciate the irony of the fact he smoked to ease his tension over nightmares that likely involved fire. I was partially wrong this time, however.

"I dreamt of my mother," he whispered, blowing out a long puff of smoke. "It was the night after my father's funeral, and I was alone." He paused and frowned a little, before meeting my eyes with a look of slight embarrassment on his face. "See, my mom used to hum to me every night before bed. It was this song... 'All the Pretty Little Horses.'" He sighed and shook his head while rolling his eyes.

I knew what song he was talking about. When I was in chorus in grade school, we used to sing it. That was before I found out I had absolutely no singing talent, but I didn't tell Edward this--I just nodded for him to continue.

"Anyways, she didn't come that night." He looked down at the table and continued smoking his cigarette. "And I couldn't sleep without hearing it, so I went to find her," he continued with his shoulders hunching in a bit. "She was in the kitchen... drinking." He turned to look at me then. "A *lot*--like totally fucking wasted." He shook his head and took another puff of smoke in. "She was crying, and she wouldn't even fucking look at me. Just told me that I was going away. Told me she didn't want me there anymore..." he said the last part in a whisper so low I could barely hear it. After a moment, he finished his cigarette, flicking it off the gazebo, staring at its retreating ember without meeting my gaze again, and then he shrugged, dismissing the conversation, and grabbed another cookie without looking at me again.

My heart broke a little. Why would his mother be so cruel to him? I know how losing someone so close to you can change your personality, but surely that was no excuse to shun your own child. I wanted to tell him I was sorry, to tell him his mother seemed like an awful person, to ask him why she would be so heartless, but knew those were all the wrong words. So instead, I nodded, even though he wasn't looking at me to see it, and took a cookie and began eating it myself.

We didn't say anything else for hours. We just sat there staring out at what was visible of the river through the dark, misty yard. It was a comfortable, thoughtful silence. Not awkward in the least. My mind was going over Edward's dream, and the story he had told me the night before. I'm sure he was doing the same of me.

Eventually I could see the clouds lightening slightly and with a glance of the watch I had stashed in my pocket, realized we had been in the gazebo for nearly six hours.

I sighed regretfully, breaking the silence. "I have to go get ready for school." Spending time with Edward, even in silence, gave me the strangest sense of comfort and security.

He turned towards me then, looking almost as regretful as I did and nodded. Tentatively, I stood up and stretched my arms over my head, while Edward followed suit, re-pocketing his pack of cigarettes and lighter. With a small smile, I grabbed the remnants of *Peanut Butter Panaceas*, and we made our way back to our homes.



I felt embarrassingly forlorn about leaving Edward until I realized we went to the same school, and I could see him all day long. I almost smiled to myself in the mirror as I was brushing my teeth, before mentally slapping myself for the thousandth time in three days.

Alice was unusually quiet this morning, likely still disappointed in Jasper's absence from the party Friday night. The ride to school was uneventful until we arrived, and she spotted Jasper getting out of a silver car. She was trying to look uninterested and failing miserably, when I realized Edward was getting out of the same car. He looked even more glorious in daylight...er... what little of it Forks weather could muster up.

Now I was the one trying to look uninterested. Yet another mental slap.

Hood up, head down, I mentally chanted while getting out of the Porsche.

Alice and I were cunningly trailing behind Edward and Jasper across the quad on our way into the school. Far enough to not be in hearing distance of their conversation, but close enough to notice the way Edward's bronze hair glistened in the meager amount of sunlight. I rolled my eyes at myself.

I spent the first two classes wondering if it was okay to talk to Edward in school, wondering whether or not he would like that. On my way to third period, I got my answer.

He was walking toward me across the quad. The whole school was milling around changing classes and avoiding me the way I liked. Edward was wearing that leather jacket, and black pants and boots. He had his book bag sagging down off one shoulder, and just generally looking like the poster boy for indifference. When he finally locked gazes with me, I sent him a tiny smile and slowed my steps a near halt.

It was a question.

Is this okay?

It wasn't.

He openly glared at me with narrowed eyes and sped up his pace, whizzing past me and sending his wonderful scent swirling around me. I stood frozen in the middle of the quad for a moment, half because of the way his smell effectively blocked out all my senses and half because I wasn't sure what just happened.

I frowned and lowered my gaze to my feet, like usual. I kept walking to class, trying to push away all the hurt I was feeling and scolding myself for expecting anything different.



When I entered the lunchroom, I had to battle with my will to not search the room for Edward Cullen. Instead, I just went to my table, ate my cookies, and read my book like always. I didn't even look up when the bell rang signaling the end of lunch. I just put my things away and walked out of the room, feeling a little accomplished at the fact I spent the whole hour not looking for him. I could deal with this.

Or at least that's what I thought until I walked into Biology and saw none other than Edward Cullen sitting at *my* Biology table. Deciding that the universe hated me, I made my way to the lab table with my head down. *What is he doing here?!* My mind was screaming on the inside-- on the outside, I kept my face completely blank and void of all emotion. It was something I had grown to be good at.

I took my seat without looking over at Edward. It was official that Biology was by far the worst hour in my entire day. I would say this because everyone in the room was staring at me like I had a time bomb attached to my hood. I would also say this because I could smell Edward. It was soap, mint, and cigarette smoke, and... warmth. Definitely warmth. I chanced a peek at him through my hair, because I couldn't *not* look at him.

He was glaring at the front of the room, and completely avoiding looking anywhere in my direction, which was the complete opposite of what the rest of the class, including Mr. Banner, was doing. His clear and obvious avoidance of me was making me so upset. I couldn't even properly enjoy Mike's grotesquely bruised nose.

Thankfully, class eventually started, taking all eyes off me for the moment and giving me some time to frown without being seen.

Of course Edward wouldn't want to be seen with me at school.

I was the campus freak after all.

But did he have to be so *mean* about it? I spent the rest of the hour trying to concentrate on the teacher through the haze of my sleepiness and the lure of Edward's scent.

When the bell finally rang, Edward shot up out of his seat and was out of the room faster than my tired brain could comprehend.

I turned and frowned at the empty stool beside me before gathering my things and heading out of the room.

And, because the universe hated me, Mike was standing outside the door waiting for me. “Hey, Bella!” he called, leaning against the wall.

I cringed before slowly turning to face him.

He was a comfortable ten feet away from me. At least, comfortable for me. Not for Mike. He started coming towards me, weaving around the people coming out of the classroom. His big blue nose just kept coming closer.

Immediately anticipating the coming events, my breathing started picking up. Adrenaline began coursing through my veins, making me tremble slightly. I wanted to run away, to scream, to tell Mike to leave me the hell alone already. But my feet were frozen to the floor as he loped up to my shaking form... and threw an arm around my shoulder.

Immediately images and flashes started coming at me. Phil grabbing my shoulder and throwing me against the wall. Phil whispering in my ear. Phil grabbing my hair and tearing it out of my scalp. Phil’s cold, wet tongue running down my cheek...

“GET OFF ME!” I screeched, pushing Mike’s arm off my trembling shoulder. The force of my push propelled me backwards into the lockers lining the wall with a loud bang. I rested my back against them panting and shaking, with tears streaming down my cheeks. Everyone in the hall was completely still, staring at me incredulously. My head was throbbing with the swooshing sounds in my ears as I stood there against the cold metal lockers, balling my fists so hard I thought my fingernails might draw blood.

Mike just looked amused by my reaction, and was the first to break the frozen stillness of the hallway by chuckling and sending me a wave and a smile before he continued his lope down the hall to his next class. *Are you serious?!*

After a moment, everyone else slowly resumed their activities, though now with more whispers and snickering than I had noticed before. I put my head down and scrambled my way to the nearest bathroom.

I was feeling claustrophobic and suffocated in the hall with all these people just staring at me. I threw the restroom door open and flew to a stall, locking it tightly behind me. I sat, bringing my knees up to my chest and hugging them, gulping in large amounts of stale disgusting bathroom

air. I stayed in the stall for the rest of the day trying to compose myself enough to face the very public eye I was going into.

It was very possible, at this rate, I'd never go to gym again.

Chapter 5. Maniacal Mints



I was standing at my kitchen door at midnight, biting my nails nervously with a bag of cookies in hand. Part of me wanted to just stay inside. *That'll show him.* I thought bitterly.

...until my mind got the better of me and started panicking at whether or not he, himself, would even show up to notice my absence. I probably shouldn't care given the way he treated me... cold and icy. Even Tyler Crowley could muster up a strained smile when he saw me. It would be better if I just stayed inside. Just let this whole thing go now before I get myself in even deeper. I knew if I went out there and saw that tiny half smile he gives me and those deep gorgeous eyes... I would forget that I was completely furious at him. It would be the lowest kind of stupid to turn that door knob.

I had spent my entire afternoon and evening half-pining, half-fuming at Edward for his actions today. I couldn't really figure out why he could hurt me so much. Wasn't I happy with being avoided? Yes. I was. Perfectly content with being avoided. By everyone. The entire population of this town. Except. Edward. Cullen.

I glowered at the doorknob in contempt, staring daggers at it like somehow Edward would feel it where he was—whether that was in his bedroom or at the gazebo, it didn't matter. The smart thing would be to stay here, in the kitchen. Nice, warm, inviting kitchen. It was completely characteristic of me to stay here where it was safe. If I went out that door, it would mean I was officially pathetic, and Edward Cullen had the sickest kind of power over me.

I let out some kind of agitated half groan-half sigh, full of annoyance and self-loathing. Then I turned the stupid doorknob and walked out the door. Because I was pathetic.

It was cold tonight. Colder than usual—which seemed to fit the occasion rather appropriately. There was a mild mist in the air, a lot like last night, but it felt like the rain was coming. Clutching my bag of *Maniacal Mints* for dear life, I began the walk of shame to the gazebo with

my head hanging low. I tried telling myself that it was okay coming out here, because I was going to put him in place. I'd make him apologize. That was, of course, before I saw him and felt a reflexive twinge of happiness at the thought that he'd come tonight.

He was sitting atop the table inside the gazebo with his feet resting on the bench and his head in his hands.

And, of course, because I was completely and utterly pathetic, my first thought was concern... for him. I berated myself for wanting to offer him even the least amount of comfort.

When he heard me approaching he looked up. He looked so much more tired than last night, but he also looked...concerned? I was even more frustrated now. He changed moods like underwear. He hopped down from the table gracefully and ran his hands through his hair nervously.

Good, I thought. I tried with every ounce of my self control to keep the anger in my tired eyes as I threw the cookies down on the table and plopped unceremoniously into my spot on the bench, crossing my arms in front of me on the table top.

I could feel his stare boring holes into the side of my face, but I refused to look at him or speak.

"You're mad at me, huh?" He said in a sad tone.

I snorted, not trusting my voice not to betray all the hurt I had felt earlier in the day. I shouldn't let him see how much it affected me.

He let out a deep, regretful sigh and slipped into his spot on the bench. "I didn't mean to come off like such a prick today. We just can't do this—" he waved a hand from me to him "—at school. I really can't handle all of the attention." He huffed.

I stayed quiet. I mean, obviously he didn't want to see me at school, but I heard no apology in that speech. So I just sat glaring at the table top, in complete silence, waiting for the apology that would probably never come.

"Hey, look at me," he ordered softly.

And because I was still pathetic, I did. I was so stupid.

He was staring at me with those hard, tired green eyes and a pleading look on his face. And as if the mere sight of him looking at me that way wasn't enough to completely crumble all my resolve, a breeze came by and sent his smell my way.

"Forgive me?" he asked softly in his velvety smooth voice.

My breath hitched a little. *PATHETIC!* My mind was sneering at me. It wasn't completely lost to me that he never technically apologized. But the way he was looking at me....

I let out a deep internal groan that was so close to coming out of my lips I had to press them together tightly, and nodded in self disgust while sliding the cookies down the table.

One side of his mouth twitched up into the little half grin that I daydreamed about sometimes, and then he grabbed a cookie.

I figured... if I was going to let Edward Cullen have this sick power over my will, I might as well enjoy it. So, I laid my head on my arms, turning my face towards him to watch him eat my cookies. I vaguely recall hearing him say something regarding the mint chocolate confections he was reverently consuming, but all I could focus on was the line of his jaw as he chewed. The way it flexed and relaxed with every bite. I mumbled the name of the mint cookies distractedly, completely fixated on the workings of his mouth and the faint look of stubble lining his jaw and chin. Fearing that I was headed even deeper into pathetic than I would willingly allow myself to go, I turned my head downwards to glare at the table beneath my arms.

"Tired?" he asked softly in a concerned voice. I sat up then to look at him. The physical need to touch his hair as it rustled in the breeze was so overwhelming my fingers *twitched*.

This needed to stop. Now.

I couldn't even touch Edward Cullen without being sent into hysterics... and even if I could, he wanted nothing to do with me. He made that much clear in the quad today. So I made a silent pledge to myself in that moment. I would push all this... whatever it was... away, and use Edward for what he was. A somewhat friendly, nightly, confidant. Nothing more.

Steeling my resolve with a newfound confidence, I gave him the best smile I could muster and shrugged, reached for a cookie, and struggled to find out what "normal" would be for us. I would make this work. I'd give Edward the half almost friendship he seemed to want. I'd do it, and I'd be a little pathetic for it. But in return I'd gain plenty myself. Someone to spend my long dark nights with. Someone who made me feel comforted and safe. Pathetic had nothing on that.



The rain came shortly after my silent pledge to myself, and Edward and I entered into a comfortable conversation about his book collection. He was a fan of the classics much like me. He tried to talk to me about music, but I was completely lost as to what he was talking about.

“I don’t really keep up with music much.” I admitted apologetically.

“Holy shit, Swan! You can’t be serious.” His eyes widened, and he wore a mock horrified expression.

I cringed a bit at his casual use of my last name. I liked hearing him say my name. Bella. Calling me by my last name felt so... formal. He called people like Alice and Mike by their last names, and openly despised them. I wanted to tell him not to call me that, but that was venturing into the all too familiar pathetic zone, so I let it slide and shrugged at his question.

“Oh, my...” He sighed. “I have so much to teach you.” He smirked deviously with an unfamiliar sparkle in his eye. Music was obviously something he was passionate about.

So he spent the rest of the night ‘schooling’ me in the subject of all things modern music. Most of the bands he told me about had the weirdest names. Some even made me chuckle, which was a real credit to their hilarity given my particular mood. We didn’t talk about our dreams anymore, thankfully. And I never told him about the incident earlier in the day with Mike. I felt like we were doing a carefully crafted dance of avoidance of all unseemly subjects. We were talking together like... friends, I suppose, which was a bit different from the usual atmosphere we spent our nights in. Again, I was left struggling to find what normal was for us.

When the sun was finally beginning to rise, Edward parted with a promise to return tomorrow with his iPod.

“Later, Bella!” he called, sending me his signature half smile over his shoulder as he retreated back into his yard. I sent up a silent prayer of thanks for the joyous reappearance of my first name.

I sighed dreamily as I watched him scale the back wall of his house up to his balcony.

Pathetic. With a groan and a shake of my head, I went back inside my house, and got ready for the school day.



I made breakfast for Alice and Esme this morning: eggs and bacon with a heaping side of Bella's angst.

Esme usually choked hers down while rushing out the door, so she surprised me when she actually sat down at the table.

Showing obvious reluctance at this new turn of events, I slowly sat myself in the seat opposite her and began picking at my food nervously. Something was up.

As soon as the thought entered my head, her eyes met mine, and she frowned, putting down her fork and wiping her mouth daintily with a napkin. "Bella," she started softly in a tone of concern.

Oh. No.

"I got a call yesterday from one of your teachers. Mr. Banner?" She cocked her head to the side a bit, her wavy caramel hair brushing her elbow.

I frowned. *Traitor*. I kept my eyes locked on a greasy slice of bacon.

"He was telling me you sleep sometimes in class and that..." She paused then, hesitating.

I grimaced and dropped my bacon. My appetite had gone away faster than Edward spotting me in the quad.

"And that... you had a bit of a... breakdown in the hall yesterday?" she questioned, pity lacing her tone.

Great. So Banner was there too? I cringed away from my plate and took a deep breath. Without meeting her eyes, I put on my careful façade of calm. "I did fall asleep once or twice, but the class is just so boring. I did all that stuff in Phoenix. But it won't happen again, I promise." I finally met her eyes then and gave her what I hoped resembled an assuring smile.

"And in the hall?" she whispered, still looking at me with that same pity I hated. She pitied me because she already knew what I was going to say. Because she was my legal guardian, the doctors in Phoenix had conversations with her regarding my aversion to touching. She tried to get me to resume therapy here in Forks for that particular issue, but I shrugged it off, knowing it never helped anything. No point in wasting money.

I huffed out a large breath. “There’s this guy in school that won’t leave me alone.” I said in an annoyed tone, shaking my head.

Anger briefly flashed in Esme’s eyes, and I was shocked for a second. It was so rare to see her get angry at anything. “What’s this boy’s name?! Do I need to go to that school? I can call his parents.” she asked forcing a frighteningly calm expression.

I was stunned at her silent fury. It just wasn’t an emotion I was used to seeing from Esme. I loved her even more in that moment. She wanted to protect me from Mike Newton of all people. It was the sweetest gesture I’ve received in so long. I smiled at her, genuinely this time, and her face relaxed a bit.

“It’s okay Esme, I can handle Mike.” At the return of her furious calm look, I added, “If it happens again, I’ll let you know.” I smirked a little, happy at this newfound discovery of Esme’s maternal side.

“Bella, you know you can come to me with anything, right?” she asked with a soft, motherly expression. “I know Renee was your mother, and I’ll never want to replace her, but I like to think of myself as your mother too,” she said with tears in her eyes as she spoke of her sister, and my mother.

My eyes watered up a bit before I blinked them back and nodded at her with yet another genuine smile on my face.

Reluctantly, she nodded and finished her breakfast hastily before rushing out of the door, clutching tissues in her hands as she tried to hide her tears from me.



Alice, once again, never mentioned my incident in the hall, which made me feel like everyone was walking on egg shells around me. It was a feeling I both despised and loved in equal amounts. I must be a terribly uncomfortable person to be around. Always having to dodge touchy subjects. It must be an exhausting task.

Fortunately, Alice never got exhausted, so she had no problem engaging me in a conversation over the necessity and function of sleeveless turtlenecks on the way to school. Things were as normal as normal could possibly be in my life. If that made any sense.

Edward and Jasper were in the silver car when we pulled up, but Alice insisted on walking out ahead of them this time. She was convinced the pants she was wearing made her butt look like “sex,” and she just had to show Jasper the “goods.”

I rolled my eyes but went along with her, snickering in my head at the fact Jasper probably was staring right at her at that very second. I shook my head, hoping Edward could appreciate the silent joke as he (hopefully) watched my retreating form as well.

When we passed in the quad again on the way to third period, he thankfully didn’t glare at me, just casually ignored any sign of my existence. I easily swallowed the small feeling of hurt, telling myself it was a definite improvement from yesterday’s behavior.

But when I entered the lunchroom, I allowed myself a small reward for doing so well with the quad avoidance situation. It would make me feel a little less pathetic, so I looked for him.

It didn’t take long to spot his mop of bronze hair. He was sitting across from Jasper on the opposite side of the room. He didn’t seem to be speaking to Jasper, just eating and staring at his tray with his usual expression of total indifference.

I had to tear my eyes away from his face, feeling slightly more pathetic—but not terribly so—and took my seat next to Alice, continuing my usual ritual of reading and ignoring.

He was in Biology again but not glaring at me, or the front of the room. Curiously, he was glaring at Mike.

I took my seat slowly trying to understand the silent exchange they were having without much success. Mike was just leering at me as per usual. This was nothing new, but Edward was obviously glaring daggers at his head. This went on for most of the period, and I made a mental note to ask Edward what his problem was with Mike. At least I wasn’t the only one who hated his guts.

The bell eventually rang, breaking my thoughts. Edward shot out of his seat and went to the door, like yesterday. I was prepared this time though. *Less pathetic*. I inwardly smiled. I was among the last out of the room. Thankfully, Mike had left before me, so I could easily avoid an awkward confrontation over yesterday’s events.

As I made my way into the quad, I noticed Edward and Mike walking towards the woods past the parking lot.

Hmm. Weird.

One second he's glaring at him, the next he's walking with him?

That was Edward...constantly confusing.



I was at lunch when Jasper told me about what that douche bag Newton did to Bella yesterday. Jasper kept talking about her like she was some crazed escaped mental patient. It pissed me off.

"I swear, man, people like that—" He nodded at Bella who sat beside Brandon across the room, reading a book "—are why some small town school ends up on CNN while the campus goes running and screaming from fucking bullets." He chuckled and shook his head.

It took everything in my being to beat down all my anger at Jasper. Who the fuck was he to say shit like that anyways? He didn't even know Bella. I glared at my disgusting slice of pizza and took deep breaths, slowly letting that thought abate my anger. *He doesn't know her.* This allowed me to maintain my mask of calm and boredom I used when I was in school.

Still, I took measures—because there's only so much shit my temper can take. "I don't think Brandon would like you talking shit about her cousin like that," I said craftily, using his weakness against him, and cocking an eyebrow. He immediately looked down at his tray remorseful. *Fuck, you're so easy.*

While his head was down, I took the moment to glance at Bella where she was sitting. She looked the same as always, with that black hood over her head, reading and eating her fucking delicious cookies. I could almost feel myself drooling at the thought of them. Highly disenchanted, I ate my slice of pizza unenthusiastic-like.

I was worried yesterday, seeing Bella in public after our conversations. When I picked Jazz up before school, I almost blurted to him about the whole thing. But something in me made me snap my mouth shut and ask him about his boring ass weekend instead. Something in my mind wanted to keep my nightly sessions with Bella all to myself. And effectively, keep Bella all to myself. *My girl.*

Not in a weird possessive, romantic, fucked up stalker kind of way. I didn't let myself see Bella like that. Occasionally I would slip up when she did something cute as fuck like blush, but I beat that shit back, because I was not about to fuck this up over something stupid like teenage hormones. Bella was more than that to me. It was some cheesy Kindred Spirit kind of shit—and I wanted to keep that fact between Bella and me. I'd told her things about me that no one knew. I wanted to keep that comfort between us. In an effort to keep that friendly bond, I flipped the switch that made me react that way. End of story. I could get my rocks off elsewhere.

Still, Bella was my girl. My secret. The thought made me sigh. Then I saw her in the quad yesterday, and completely fucking panicked when she smiled at me and stopped. I admit... I may have overreacted a bit at the possibility everyone would know the secret. Attempting to not appear friendly towards her, I overcorrected, and probably hurt her feelings. She forgave me though.

But last night was different. She was acting strange. So I'd kept things light, in hopes I hadn't scared her away with my fucked up story yet. I had just begun to realize how amazingly dependent I was becoming on Bella's company. And now, after hearing Jasper recount the events of what is now being referred to as "Weird Random Emotional Breakdown Number Four," I was seeing another surprising side effect of my bond with Bella. It took me a second to understand it, but I was being protective of her. Jasper was really pissing me off with the way he talked about her. I could only hope my comment about Brandon would squash that shit. Alas, even I had faith in his undying love for the little bitch pixie.

Once I settled in to my Bio lab seat, I began to feel that protective feeling all over again when Bella walked in. Newton was two seats ahead of our table, staring at Bella; though to call it staring would be an understatement. He was fucking undressing her with his eyes, salivating like a golden retriever tied down in front of a pork chop.

I glowered at him as she took her seat, willing him to meet my gaze. But he never did, so I spent the entire class trying to sort out this... this *need* to fuck Newton up for what he did to Bella yesterday. And what he would do to her again given the opportunity. Because Newton was an idiot like that. Fucker never could take a hint... even when it was shaking and crying in front of him. My anger just grew during the hour.

When the bell finally rang, I darted out of the classroom, staying close to the door to make sure Newton was exiting behind me. And he was. His nose was still bruised from the bathroom incident, but it gave me little enjoyment. I wanted to bruise that fucker's face.

Once he met my gaze, I smiled crookedly at him, drawing him in with a friendly façade. Mike was always trying to get into mine and Jasper's good graces. He'd take the bait.

He did.

"Hey Cullen! How's it hangin', Bro?" he asked, swaggering over to me like he was God's gift to the entire planet.

I allowed myself an inward grimace. However, I kept my smile in place as I put my plan into action.

"I was just heading out for a smoke, wanna join?" I asked casually, knowing that Mike was a total pothead, and most likely thought I was referring to weed instead of cigarettes. His face lit up, and he followed me out the doors into the quad like the fucking douche bag he was. I made every attempt to keep a distance between us. Partly because my sight was going red with anger at the imbecile and partly because I didn't want to be seen with him.

Ever. Even if it was to beat the shit out of him.

Once we were in the thick canvas of the trees past the parking lot, I turned to him. "So, why do you keep fucking with Bella Swan?" I asked, finally letting my voice harden with the anger I was feeling.

His eyes glazed over for a second at the mention of her. "Holy fuck, bro. You see that whole coy, shy chick thing's she's got goin' on? Even the crazy isn't enough to tame the monster." He snickered and crudely grabbed his crotch.

That was it.

I flew at him and grabbed him by the neck, slamming him against one of the mossy covered trees. His eyes grew wide as he realized the gravity of the situation. I glared at him through narrowed eyes, my breath picking up through the rare adrenaline rush I was getting.

"Listen the *fuck* up, Newton." I hissed inches from his shocked face. I tightened my grip on his neck to punctuate my order, and his eyes squinted. "Stay the *fuck* away from her. Don't touch her, don't look at her, don't even fucking think about her." I growled, lacing my voice with venom.

I knew Newton well enough to know that he was terrified of me. Has been ever since the last day of freshman year when he saw me fuck up his best friend Josh. And right about now, Newton looked like he was going to piss his pants. *What a pussy. I hadn't even hit him yet.*

But I couldn't leave the asshole completely unscathed, so I drew my fist back and punched him in the stomach with as much force as I could without internally injuring him. I let go of his neck as he slumped down on his knees holding his stomach and gasping for breath. He looked so fucking pathetic, shaking and gasping.

How does it feel, Asshole?

Knowing I had to do some damage control, I kneeled down close to his face. "Tell anyone about this, and I will fuck you up. Got it?" I asked in my scary calm voice. At his nervous head bob, I stood up, wiping my hands against each other in a loud clapping motion. Satisfied that he wouldn't touch my girl again, I turned on my heel, leaving him panting on the wet forest floor, wearing a smirk.



The adrenaline rush was good for my condition. It kept me completely alert for the rest of the school day and even the car ride home—which was a good thing, because Jasper could not shut the fuck up about the pants Brandon was wearing today, and it was boring the shit out of me.

"So, she drops her pencil, right? Then she fucking bends over right in front of my desk." Jasper groaned.

I rolled my eyes. *What a dirty little slut, Brandon.* But whatever I might say about her, the Girl's got skills. Those pants of hers would be starring in Jasper's every fantasy. It was so amusing watching those two do their sick mating dances. Amusing—and slightly nauseating.

Jasper was in a hurry to get out of my car and into his house. Probably into his shower.

I chuckled into the silence of my Volvo as I made my way home.

When I arrived at home, the house was quiet since Emmett was at practice today. By the time I was making my way to my room, the adrenaline had completely left my system, and sadly, had just made me even more exhausted. I swayed on the stairs a bit, grasping the railing for support. I trudged my way up the last stair with heavy feet and tired eyes.

“Shit,” I muttered under my breath when I saw my bed. All warm and inviting and asking me to lay in it and completely fucking ruin my quasi-good day. With a groan, I set my alarm clock for two hours and glared at the pillows. *Please, just this one time...*

As soon as I hit the mattress my eyes fluttered closed, and I drifted into a deep sleep.



This time it was the fire. Red, hot, smoldering, blurring and scorching everything in its wake. Really, I couldn't blame fire. Fire is something to be feared and respected. If only I had known that then. Instead, I sit crouched in a corner of the living room, watching as the flames lapped at my father's skin, fire surrounding me, suffocating me. I could detect the scent. That fucking smell of burned flesh as he screamed for me to run and get out. But I couldn't leave him there alone. So I sat, watching in horror as he tried to drag himself across the burning floor.

I woke up to the screeching of my alarm clock. I let out a frustrated, agonized scream and pounded my hands into my teary eyes before finally shutting the sound off. I felt some sick sense of karma, lying in my bed, sweating, shaking, crying, and panting.

It took me longer to recover than last time. I was so tired of doing this every other day. It was always the same result. I lifted up my shirt and fingered the scarred flesh across my stomach. A demented souvenir of the night that ruined my life.

Finally, I shot up out of bed and lunged for the patio, desperate for something to calm my nerves. It was nearly six now, Carlisle would be home soon. I stood, enjoying the cold air against my sticky skin and peered out towards the gazebo. It looked so much brighter in the day, but so much more inviting at night, when I knew someone was waiting there for me. Thinking of my girl soothed my nerves enough to extinguish the cigarette before it was even gone.

With that thought, I grabbed my iPod and began filling it with only the best songs I could think of. *Can't let my girl have bad taste in music.*

Chapter 6. Caramel Comforts



The rest of that week went by in an amazing blur of gazebos, cookies, and damp brown hair. The nights were always the best. It was kind of fucked up how night used to be my least favorite time of day, and now it had completely changed.

I had taken time to set some ground rules for myself regarding this entire arrangement. First and foremost, I could *not* make Bella uncomfortable in any way. With her strong aversion to men, I knew even the slightest mistake would upset her. The second was that I couldn't acknowledge Bella at school. This was a given, but it was a rule I had to set regardless. The third was—where I could protect Bella without inadvertently giving this whole thing away and facing the wrath of Alice and tons of other people—I would.

That Tuesday night, I had ushered Bella into the twisted symphony that was my world of music. She would take an ear bud, and so would I. Then I would show her my favorite tunes while staying a ~~very~~ careful distance away from her, as to not be the reason for “Weird Random Emotional Breakdown Number Five.”

I started out with the lighter stuff, of course. A little bit of classical before easing her into more heavy genres. She seemed oddly curious about everything I showed her, like she had never fucking ventured into the outside world before. She always surprised me by her reactions to songs. Sometimes I'd play something and hold my breath, waiting for her to grimace in disgust, when instead she would turn one side of her mouth up and bob her head along to the tune playing. *My girl had good taste.*

Eventually she turned to me with a cautious expression. “Did I see you with Mike today?” she asked in a tone insinuating disapproval.

I panicked a bit, not knowing she had seen us together, and as such never coming up with an appropriate cover story. I grimaced. “I just needed to speak with him about something that happened at the party Friday.” It wasn't a lie. Technically he'd approached Bella at the party, and technically, I did speak to him.

Bella looked like she was going to question me further about the Newton situation, so I conveniently changed songs to something hard and loud—which to my extreme surprise, Bella seemed to almost enjoy.

As far Mike... she never brought it up again.

And the next day at school, Newton kept his devious eyes trained on the blackboard when Bella entered Bio, so I was thankful one day had gone by without me receiving any news of “Weird Random Emotional Breakdown Number Five.” And thankfully, Jazz kept his fucking mouth shut about Bella, instead focusing all his attentions on what Brandon was doing. *Good boy.*

Wednesday night greeted me with a slightly distraught Bella. It was something I was starting to notice, though.

Bella fell asleep.

When she woke, I could tell. There was the way she darted her eyes around the yard with an air of tension around her. Instinctively, though I had been trying to keep things light, I knew she needed to get it off her chest. So I just cut the shit. I put on my best concerned and soft Edward look and hoped it was comforting to her as I took my seat at the bench.

“What was it about?” I asked softly while grabbing a cookie.

She looked slightly taken aback at my question, likely not expecting it to be so noticeable. And to others, it probably wasn’t. But she let me see the Real Bella, like I let her see the Real Edward. Reluctantly she began recalling the events of her latest dream. It was much like the last. *Exactly like the last* as a matter of a fact. But this time she didn’t edit. She went into excruciating detail. Noting the sound of her finger breaking when she tried to resist, and how much blood came from her lip when he punched her. She told me about how she could hear the screams of her mother through the walls in the dark silence of her closet. And then at the mention of her mother, Bella did something that completely fucking stunned me. She cried. Not hard sobs or anything, just trails of tears soundlessly pouring down her pale cheeks.

It fucking broke my heart to see her cry. I was itching to comfort her, to do something other than just sitting there on that bench like a statue. But I knew better. The best I could do was listen. So I did.

When she got the remorseful look on her face at “burdening” me with her dreams, I automatically told her about my dream from the day before—I showed her mine. Tit for tat. Blood for Fire. And after we were done spilling the horrors of our dreams, we just sat and

listened to more music while eating cookies. Attempting, and succeeding at regaining our previous, lighter atmosphere. Both silently refusing to let those goddamn dreams ruin yet another second of our lives that wasn't completely fucking necessary.

That's what Thursday night was like too. Just me and my girl sitting around a bag of cookies snickering quietly at stupid band names. She told me a little about her life back in Phoenix, leaving out everything that was directly related to her mother.

Then I found out Bella and I shared one more thing in common.

"You were in a group home?" I asked incredulously. I had been in a few group homes before Carlisle adopted me. They fucking sucked.

"Yeah," she sighed. "I didn't want to burden Esme and all." She mumbled and shrugged. It sounded just like Bella to be selfless like that. "But... eventually I had to get out of that place. There were just too many... people." She mumbled looking down at the iPod intently.

I knew when she said "people," she meant men. Boys. Whatever. I felt amazingly sympathetic. She risked all that bullshit and Weird Random Emotional Breakdowns just to spare Esme her presence. She had a look of regret on her face as she put the iPod back on the table with hunching shoulders, likely at the thought of her failing plan to stay put in Phoenix. And because we were tit for tat, I showed her mine.

"I was in a few group homes before Daddy C—" I pointed over my shoulder at the house with a thumb, and grabbed the iPod up. "—over there adopted me." I continued distractedly while flipping through the music. "It was all pretty fucked up. People always wanting to test you and shit, like some territorial pissing contest." I snorted and shrugged remembering all the fights I got into at group homes in Chicago.

Bella had a thoughtful silence before she spoke again. "How did you and Dr. Cullen meet?" she asked quietly.

Ahh. This was a better memory for me, and automatically I smiled. "I was sick in the hospital with the flu. Carlisle was my doctor there, back in Chicago. We were kind of close while I was there. My foster bitch came in one day completely fucking irate because someone stole something from her—" I paused and looked over at Bella, shaking my head. "Stupid fucking foster home drama. Too many kids crammed into one building tend to do that." I rolled my eyes and continued, "Anyways, so Daddy C. walks in and sees this crazy woman yelling at me, lying in the hospital bed all sickly and disgusting, and he—" I paused then chuckling and smiling

brightly at the memory which I recalled with perfect clarity. "He told her to get the fuck out of his hospital and come back when she found whatever shriveled organ it was she had sitting in for her heart." I openly laughed now, full and hearty. That was a defining moment of my existence. Lying sick and sweaty on the hospital bed, near death, and the look on my face when I heard cool and composed Daddy C. say "fuck" was probably a Kodak moment.

Bella was laughing with me, soft and musical with her head thrown back and her dampened hair swaying in the misty breeze.

Once my laughter died down, I continued shaking my head. "So, when he fixed me up and I was better, he just brought me home with him one night, did all the legal shit, and brought me and Emmett here a month later," I said with a shrug.

"He seems like a wonderful man to take you in like that. You must love him very much," she said softly with a small smile gracing her lips.

"I do love Carlisle in my own way. He tries not to be so fatherly with me mostly... because of my past... but he's pretty fucking cool," I said sincerely.

We spent a good portion of the night sharing group home horror stories. I had some pretty good ones. But so did Bella. Some were sad, some were hilarious. I was enjoying the fact we had something else in common.

Eventually the conversation drifted back to school and the awful people who frequented it. At Bella's mention of Jessica Stanley, I reflexively grimaced in disgust.

"What?" she asked with a small amused smile, popping a cookie into her mouth.

I put my cookie down, because the sound of that name made me nauseous. I was slightly reluctant at discussing my romantic history with Bella because I was afraid it would make her uncomfortable.

"What? You have to tell me!" she said chuckling, still amused.

And because my girl had that kind of power over me, I knew I had to spill my guts about the Stanley bitch. I shook my head and sighed. "It's nothing. Just Jessica and I had a sort of..." I paused and furrowed my brow, cocking my head to the side a bit, trying to find the right word for what we had, and failing. "...thing," I finished lamely.

Something momentarily flashed in Bella's eyes, though I couldn't quite place it. Immediately she put on the emotionless mask she used at school. I didn't like that shit. She was supposed to be Bella around me, and now I had said something to fuck that up, and broken rule number one.

"Oh," she said quietly. "What kind of thing?" She asked still wearing that emotionless mask I fucking hated. Immediately I knew there was no way I was going to tell her about my one night fling with Stanley. Instead I back tracked, not wanting to lie, but knowing I might need to in order to get that goddamn mask off her face.

I snorted casually in a mocking sense. "She's got crazy stalker tendencies that briefly included yours truly."

There. That was *not* a lie. I prayed it was enough and I didn't have to full out create a story. Thankfully, it was.

She just shook her head and muttered something about "slutty blondes" which made me laugh. After a few jokes at the expense of Newton, the mask was gone again, and the night salvaged.

We were tired. Immensely so. And when Bella walked into Bio the following Friday afternoon, I knew she had to catch some sleep. Her eyes were completely unfocused, slightly rolling around in her head. I could get an hour or two at home after school every day, but it looked like Bella was just roughing it out. Nervous that she might be heading into dangerous territory and taking notice of the substitute teacher we had, I decided to break one of my rules. Shredding off a piece of paper from the sketchbook I was drawing in, I wrote her a short note.

I'll wake you up. It said everything that needed to be said. She would understand what I meant.

I folded it, and when no one was looking, slid it onto her side of the lab table.

She opened it slowly, squinting to read the words, before crumpling it up with a heavy nod, and then hesitantly laid her hooded head down on the table.

I took my job very seriously, knowing exactly how much Bella didn't want to dream. So I listened intently as her breathing immediately slowed into a soft steady rhythm. After a few moments I began hearing the soft almost-snoring sound that my girl always made when she slept. It was the most peaceful, lulling sound. It made me even drowsier than I already was, but I fought to stay alert, hanging on to her every breath... waiting for the dream to begin, and hoping like hell it never would.

But it did. Forty-five minutes later, I heard it. It was a faint difference really--the way her breathing got grainier... grittier, and sped up minutely.

I took it as my cue, and lifted my boot from the ground and tapped her on the leg lightly without looking up from my sketch book. Nothing. Harder this time, right on the shin.

She shot up, darting her bloodshot eyes around the classroom. Luckily the room was loud in conversation and no one noticed the disturbance. She rubbed at her eyes furiously and sent me a fleetingly grateful look, before she dove into her bag to pull out a book, which she read intently.

I had been feeling shitty all day long and figured I was coming down with a cold when I then sneezed for the hundredth time that day. Jamming my hand into my bag, I searched for tissues. I blew loudly, not really giving a shit that people were turning around to look at me. I just gave them a look that clearly said *Fuck. You. All.*

Bella glanced at me from under her veil of hair for a moment with a look of concern on her face, but I just kept sketching. Just a cold, no big deal. That's what happens when you spend five hours a night in November outside in the cold misty rain. It was worth it.

When the bell rang, I dragged my tired, feverish, snotty ass out of the class and decided I really did feel shitty enough to go home early. I spotted Jazz in the hall on his way to class and told him to ride home with Rose. He looked like he was about to bitch at me before really taking in my appearance. He let that shit slide. Sick Edward is a fucking pissy Edward.

I went by the hospital first to tell Daddy C. what the deal was, and maybe get some good drugs. Passing all the nurses who knew me by name, I made my way to Carlisle's office, sniffing and feeling like ass, and deciding maybe I had better stay in tonight. My shoulders hunched in a bit at the thought.

Carlisle took one glance at my red nose and bloodshot eyes and got a knowing look on his face. "You're sick," he said with a frown as I plopped into the lush leather chair across from his desk.

I just nodded at him and blew my nose, groaning in disgust.

He smiled reassuringly but proceeded to run a shit load of tests on me, worrying about me getting the flu again. After much poking and prodding and resistance from me, he concluded what I had already known. Common fucking cold. *Thanks a lot for the needles Daddy C.* He sent me home with some medication and I spent the entire night feeling miserable. Because I was

sick, because there was no fucking way I was going to go out in that cold wet shit all night, and for the first night in a week, I wasn't going to see my girl.



I was alone in the kitchen again on a Saturday night, like I used to do before Edward came along. I kept a careful eye out the window every now and then, making sure he was really staying in again tonight as I stirred the batch of vegetable soup. I knew he was sick. Rose had told Alice after school when she sent a questioning glance to Jasper's hunched form in Emmett's Jeep. So I wasn't surprised when he didn't show up at the gazebo last night. In fact, I was glad. I didn't want him getting any more sick because of our nightly sessions.

This last week had been divine. Edward came every night with his iPod, showing me a ~~very~~ private side of his world. I adored every part of it. I adored how he liked classical music even though you'd never guess just by talking to him. I adored how much he loved my cookies and always made it a point to tell me so. I adored the way he politely kept his distance from me when we were listening to music without me even having to ask. I adored the way he could tell when I had a dream and needed to talk about it. I adored how he always showed me his so I wouldn't feel like such a freak.

He had his flaws, of course. I wasn't completely blind. Sometimes I got the feeling he was not telling me the complete truth--carefully editing his answers so as not to lie to me, but keeping things from me at the same time. The Mike thing for instance...I knew there was more to that whole story. I would never pry though. Because he would never do it to me. I wanted to, so badly it nearly choked me, when he told me about Jessica. I got a brief flaring of jealousy for a moment before I could put my mask up. I prayed he couldn't see it, but was afraid he did when he tip toed around the subject. The thought of him being with that... brainless slut made me want to wretch. It wasn't fair. That someone like Jessica Stanley could be with Edward, but I was forced to sit four feet away from him every night so I wouldn't go into hysterics at his

touch. I could never pursue something like that with him. In the words of Edward... *it pissed me off*.

But I bit back the snarky and bitter comment I wanted to make about how he could do so much better, and just let it go. Because even if I didn't have this crazy aversion, who's to say he'd even be interested anyway? Where Edward was concerned, I would have to take what I could get. And I'm fairly certain Edward was being more open and honest with me than he ever was with Jessica Stanley. That's the only thought that kept me sane that night as he poked fun at Mike.

Then at school Friday, he broke his own rule and slipped me a note in a class full of people. It wasn't much really. But it made me feel good knowing he was watching me close enough in school to see how exhausted I was. Probably not as much I watched him, but... again... taking what I can get.

But now he was sick, and I couldn't help but feel slightly responsible. Sure, I didn't force him outside every night to spend time with me, but for some reason I just felt badly. And as I stalked my way across the darkness of the Cullens' back yard to the lattice covered wall of his mansion wearing an old book bag on my back full of *Caramel Comfort* cookies and hot soup, hoodie drawn up stealthily, I told myself that's why I was doing this. I felt badly... responsible even. It had nothing to do with the fact that I had been shamelessly nursing the raw need to see him for the past thirty two hours. *Not that I'm keeping count or anything*. To make sure he was okay, at the very least. I mean, sure Carlisle was a doctor, but sometimes you need more than medicine to get better. And Edward's household sorely lacked that particular type of caring presence.

So I was standing below his balcony staring at his lit windows with nervous anxiety and excitement at seeing him again. I could do this. *I can do this*. I had seen Edward do it many times before, so I just had to follow his example. Nervously, I stepped my foot up onto the lattice, testing it's strength against the whole one hundred and five pounds of Bella it was about to acquire, and I began to slowly climb, feeling more and more pathetic with each step that brought me closer to the third floor balcony. *Who the hell am I kidding?* We left pathetic days ago.

I climbed higher, nearing the balcony and feeling even more nervous as my heart thudded loudly against my chest. I was afraid to look down--so I didn't--I just kept on climbing. It seemed like it was higher than it looked when I was on the ground.

Finally, I reached his balcony and climbed a little higher to save me some space to climb over. Lifting my leg over the railing as quietly as I could, my foot gently reached the footing of the

balcony floor. I let out a deep breath when I shifted all my weight to that foot. Slowly I guided my left leg over the railing, and eventually I was standing on Edward Cullen's balcony. I spun to face the French doors leading into his room. They were quite heavily curtained, so I couldn't make out anything inside.

Suddenly I began to panic. Edward's words rang loud in my head, choosing a frustratingly inconvenient time to come to surface in my memory. *Crazy stalker tendencies*. I grimaced at myself as I lifted a fist to the glass doors. Cursing myself and my crazy stalker tendencies, I lightly tapped at the glass with my knuckles, and stood back, holding my breath. I took a moment to contemplate how bad it would be if I jumped off this thing. Then I realized the mortification I would feel if the fall didn't kill me, and I was found injured by Dr. Cullen tomorrow morning as he looked out the kitchen window. Suddenly it felt much darker outside. I could feel the darkness suffocating me as I waited for Edward to answer the door.

Suddenly, one of the glass doors flung open, startling me. I stared with my mouth slightly hung open in shock as I stared unabashedly at Edward in the doorway. His eyes were a mix of confusion and shock, and he looked awful. His perfect straight nose was red and shiny, and he had a blanket wrapped around himself tightly. His hair was even more unkempt than usual, and he was unusually pale.

Standing there on his balcony in the cold wet air, wringing my hands nervously, I realized I had to do something, and quick. He was just staring at me with an unreadable look on his face.

"Bella?" he rasped out. I winced at the sound of his thick, nasally voice. Not really trusting myself to speak, I just swung my bag over to my front and unzipped it quickly, bringing out the large covered bowl of soup that was still steaming hot. I held it out to him with my head down, feeling like a four year old giving their daddy a dirty picture they drew, staring at my wet boots.

After a moment, I felt the bowl being removed from my hand, so I chanced a look up. And I almost collapsed in on myself in relief when Edward turned one side of his mouth into his half smile and quirked an eyebrow up at me. Letting out a baited breath, I decided I should take the opportunity to explain my being here. But looking into the intensely deep green eyes of the person before me, I said the worst possible thing.

"I promise I don't have crazy stalker tendencies," I blurted before I could gain enough control to stop myself. Immediately my face grew hot. *Oh, you have got to be kidding me...*

Edward stood still for a moment before throwing his head back in a raspy laughter.

I was debating if that was a good sign or not, so I just stood still, waiting for him to compose himself from his laughter. Hopefully at Jessica Stanley's expense, and not mine.

Eventually he quieted and looked down at me, eyes filled with quiet mirth and amusement. "Fuck, Bella. That's the first time I've laughed in two days," he said through a scratchy throat before moving into the room and calling over his shoulder. "Get your ass in here before you get sick too."

With a smile so wide I thought my face might break in half, I walked into the warmth of Edward's bright bedroom, shutting the glass door on the darkness behind me.

Chapter 7. Bittersweet Butterscotch



Edward liked vegetable soup. A lot. I sat on his black leather couch watching utter fascination as he greedily consumed the steaming bowl of soup in the middle of his large bed, still wrapped in the blanket. It was as if he hadn't eaten in days. The thought made me frown. I inspected his room once again from my spot, noting the towering heap of tissues spilling over the wastebasket beside the bed. The room was slightly more cluttered than last time I was here. More clothing and papers and books strewn about carelessly. I felt ridiculously intrusive, just climbing up to his room like it wasn't an extreme invasion of privacy.

Feeling forlorn about my behavior, I decided to do something that would probably just annoy him further. "I'm sorry about just barging up here." I apologized quietly. "I was just worried about you being sick and all."

Edward's head snapped up from his steaming bowl of soup and he narrowed his bloodshot eyes at me. "What did I say about that shit?" He rasped out, trying to sound annoyed and angry, but coming out extremely nasal. The edges of my lips twitched in response to the hilarity of hard core Edward Cullen sounding a lot like a twelve year old girl. He softened his face and rolled his eyes at my amusement while diving back into the bowl of soup. "I don't mind. The soup is fucking delicious. Plus, I felt bad about leaving you out there all alone last night." He frowned.

I proceeded to tell him about how I knew he wasn't coming, and stayed inside the house, which seemed to console him a bit. So I continued watching him devour the soup, and couldn't get past the irrational fear that Edward wasn't being cared for properly.

"Doesn't Carlisle ever make you soup or anything?" I asked, prying more than I probably should, but trying to squash the irrational concern I was feeling.

Edward snorted at his spoon and shrugged. "He brought me some hospital food, but it tasted like ass." I nodded in understanding. Me and hospital food had a long history as well. "Carlisle is a shitty cook. And I'm probably the only person on the planet that can completely fuck up toast." He chuckled thickly, and then began a mild coughing fit that made me cringe.

But my spirits were mildly lifted. Edward didn't have anyone in his life to make him good food, or bring him soup when he was sick. Until now. I smiled a little. That was one thing I could

happily do for Edward... and well. When he was done with his soup, I produced the bag of cookies and tossed them on his bed. His eyes lit up a little bit at the sight of them, and it made me smile. He loved my cookies.

We settled into a revised version of our routine, being in his room instead of the gazebo, rather comfortably. He tossed me the iPod, alerting me to a new album he got. I loved it, of course, nodding along to the heavy drum beats and slightly industrial sound of the music with a smile.

I didn't realize exactly how much I missed my night with Edward until that moment, sitting on the black leather couch and watching him sketch away in his book comfortably while talking to me about his newly acquired album. It was only the second time ever I had seen him without his signature black leather jacket, and even though he looked miserable with his red nose and gruff stubble, he was still gorgeous. There was one lock of hair that kept falling into his eyes, and my fingers were still doing the pathetically annoying twitching thing, wanting to smooth it back.

We spent the entire night like that. I never moved from my spot on the sofa, still feeling slightly uneasy about invading his privacy, while he sketched and talked to me in his pitiful nasal tone.

I eventually alerted myself to the alarm clock on Edward's bedside table, and realized five hours had gone by. It was amazing how time always flew by when I was with him at night chatting so comfortably. With a sigh, I zipped my bag back up and lifted myself off the sofa, slinging it onto my back and drawing up my hood. Edward looked almost as disappointed as I did about my departure when he looked up from his sketch book.

"I have to go now before Esme wakes up, but... I'll come back tomorrow with more soup?" I said nervously as more of a question than a statement, fiddling with the sleeves of my hoodie.

He smiled a bit before his face fell. "I don't know how I feel about the idea of you scaling three stories." At what was probably the blatant look of disappointment on my face, he added, "I mean, I'd never fucking forgive myself if you got hurt doing it."

The thought of Edward being protective of my safety made me near giddy, but I contained my excitement by rolling my eyes at him. "You don't have to worry about me." I scoffed waving my sleeved hand in a dismissive fashion. "You should have seen me, I was like a pro." I added proudly, clasping my hands behind my back and rocking on my heels.

Edward chuckled darkly, shaking his head. "Well, as long as my juvenile delinquent ways are corrupting you safely, I wouldn't mind."

I smiled at him, happy he wanted me to return, and crossed the room to the door, before something occurred to me.

“Hey,” I said, turning around to face him. “What’s Jasper’s favorite color?” I asked cryptically with a smirk on my face. Edward raised his eyebrows at me questioningly, but I just stood waiting with my hand on the doorknob.

“Green.” He said slowly narrowing his eyes. I nodded and turned back around, waving behind me.

“Thanks, see you tomorrow!” I chuckled menacingly as I slipped out of the French doors and back to the balcony. I climbed down rather skillfully to my surprise, landing with a quiet ‘thump’ on the soft ground. It was really quite thrilling, stalking around in the darkness, doing something so... bad. I shook my head at myself, and returned home in lifted spirits, knowing Edward was okay.



Esme had been subtly dropping hints to me all week about Thanksgiving. At first I didn’t understand, but this morning it all came together.

“So,” Esme started casually while flipping through an interior design magazine on the couch next to me. “Did you want to cook for Thanksgiving, dear?” She asked. I nodded enthusiastically when she glanced up from her lap. I’ve never had the chance to do something so big. And a holiday with Alice was sure to be somewhat extravagant. I was already getting ideas for all kinds of new recipes.

“That’s good.” She said distractedly while still flipping. “I cooked last year.” She continued in a bored tone. Too bored. “We invited the Cullens over.” she shrugged. Of course the sound of that name piqued my full attention.

“Really?” I mused quietly, trying to imagine Edward sitting at the dining room table we never used, sitting across from Alice and hating every second of it.

“Yes, it was quite lovely.” She smiled and got a wistful gleam in her brown eyes.

“Okay...” I said slowly, not really understanding the point.

She resumed flipping after shaking off whatever she was remembering that made her smile.

“Would you be terribly opposed if we invited them again?” She looked over at me with a cautious expression. “I wouldn’t want to make you uncomfortable.” She finished with tight eyes crinkling at the edges.

Oh. OH! She was worried about the men being in the house. “Oh, Esme.” I breathed, closed my eyes and shook my head. “Please don’t change any holiday traditions on account of me.” I pleaded in a whisper.

She took my hand in hers, looking down at it with pity. *This again?* “Don’t be ridiculous, dear. You are far more important to me than any stupid tradition.” She whispered sweetly. It always made me smile when she showed me this kind of affection. It was so rare for me to get any affection at all.

“It’s fine, Esme. It won’t bother me.” I said with a confident smile. I wouldn’t let my issues affect Esme like that. She wanted the Cullens over for Thanksgiving. And Edward might come. That was plenty incentive for me. She looked skeptical, so I added with as much enthusiasm as my tired brain could muster, “Plus, think of *all* the food I’ll be able to make with Emmett being here.” I chuckled, imagining him eating two turkeys all to himself.

With a long sigh, she patted my hand lovingly and nodded, resuming to her lazy Sunday activity.

That afternoon, Alice was subjecting me to her favorite brand of hedonistic torture. Shopping. I wouldn’t have gone at all, but there were still plenty of essentials that I had yet to purchase since my move to Forks. So I spent most of the afternoon following her around the mall in Port Angeles, dragging my tired feet behind me. I was beginning to do the swaying thing again, and was afraid I’d have to get some sleep when we got home. At least an hour or so.

I was walking with my hood up, and my head down, avoiding everyone in the vicinity, and silently thanking Alice for choosing the least busy day of the week for making me do this, when she stopped in front of a store and let out a little squealing noise. I knew that sound well enough. It was the perfect coat, or the perfect halter top, or the perfect peep toe heels. I looked up into the window and saw it was actually the perfect skirt. So I sat in the dressing room with her, happy at least for the isolation, when she came out of the stall and asked me the question I had been waiting for all day.

“Which color looks best, Bella?” She asked, wearing the short, trumpy pleated skirt, and holding two identical style sweaters out towards me to inspect. I automatically smirked when one was green.

“Green. Definitely Green.” I answered smugly with a nod. She looked a little taken aback by my newfound interest in her shopping choices when I would usually just shrug her question off, but she threw the red one on the seat behind her and put the green sweater on. I had to physically force my lips together to stop the chuckle that wanted to escape once she got that sweater on. It was *tight*. Really, *really* tight. And she had every bit of her B cup cleavage carefully mashed, coming out the top of the deep v-neck. I was sure the look on Jasper’s face when he caught one look at that would be priceless.

Pleased with her choices, she added some green tights to go along with the sweater, which just made me smile more. But on the way out of the dressing room, the sight of myself in the mirror made me stop dead in my tracks. I had on the same plain black jeans, and black hoodie like always. Hiding myself. A necessity I was always fine with. But for the first time ever, I wished I didn’t have to. I wished I could be like Alice for once; watching her spinning in the mirror, trying

to find just the right thing to get her noticed by some boy. And knowing that all her careful planning and primping would work, and Jasper would be swooning over her at first sight. The familiar bitterness at the fact it could never be me seeped into my mood, alongside an unfamiliar jealousy of Alice for being able to behave like a normal teenage girl.



My bitter mood hadn't lessened much by the time I found myself below Edward's balcony that night. I had my old book bag packed with more hot soup and cookies, though this time I added a thermos of hot herbal tea for Edward's sore throat and an extravagantly large grilled sandwich... just in case the soup wasn't enough to fill him up. This was the only thing I had. I couldn't dress up and impress him with my body or flirting abilities, but I could definitely make him good food. And if it even got a smile out of him, it would be enough for me.

So I climbed the lattice again, as quietly as possible, thankful I had an hour and a half of sleep today and I wasn't doing the swaying thing anymore. I mimicked last night's moves perfectly, and found myself safely on the balcony at exactly midnight.

When Edward answered his door, he looked a little better than last night. His hair was still a mess, and he still hadn't shaved, but his nose was pink instead of red, and his eyes less bloodshot, though still had the familiar black circles around them. He gave me my half smile and moved out of the way so I could enter.

Once the door was closed, I made my way to my spot on the sofa and began unloading my care package, standing up and placing each item on the end of Edward's bed where I assumed he'd be eating again before settling back into the lush leather.

"Holy shit, Bella. Did you bring the whole kitchen?" He chuckled while he plopped down into the center of his bed and began going through all the items. He had lost most of the nasal sound, but his voice was still scratchy.

I rolled my eyes, though I was admittedly slightly embarrassed. "I like to cook at night when I'm bored. It keeps me busy. Better to bring it to you than let it spoil." I shrugged, trying to make it seem like I had nothing better to do with my time. Which was completely true.

But Edward's attention was already gone as he began to eat the soup and sandwich with an unbridled enthusiasm that completely erased all the bitterness I had been harboring earlier in the day. He started humming in contentment, telling me how delicious everything was... and adding in his own choice of rather colorful expletives to emphasize that fact. So I just watched him eat with a small smile, letting the pleasure of his enjoyment of something I made for him wash over me. *Take that, Stanley.*

Edward

WIDE AWAKE

She was watching me eat. Normally that shit would make me uneasy, but my girl liked watching me eat her food. That much I could tell. And I sure as fuck enjoyed eating it. I had been hungry, feeling too shitty to expend the effort necessary to make myself anything. And, *fuck*, Bella could cook. So I just started wolfing it all down, not hiding how much I was enjoying it, and throwing the occasional 'Holy fuck' out there.

I felt terrible all day Saturday. I was afraid Bella had been waiting for me out in the gazebo, but when I went out on the balcony Friday night it looked empty. I didn't want her to think I just blew her off or anything. But the truth was... I was just feeling like shit.

So when I heard the tap on my balcony door, I had no clue what to think. I answered it half expecting to have to beat someone's ass, and dreading having to do something so physically demanding in my current condition. But when I opened the door, there she was. All cookie smells, and brown hair, and fucking adorable blushes. She looked so nervous and embarrassed; I couldn't help it when I asked her in without much hesitation. She had already been in my bedroom before, so I was marginally more comfortable with it. She surprised the shit out of me, the way she was concerned about my health and well being. Bella had this whole caring maternal side to her that I would have never known existed. My girl wanted to take care of me. The thought made me smile. We really were tit for tat.

And because we were, I was scared shitless she was going to break her neck climbing up at that lattice tonight. In fact, it kept me awake just thinking about it. Which was both a good and bad thing. But here she sits, completely unscathed, surprising me yet again with her talent for scaling three story mansions.

"So, were you going to tell me why you asked about Jasper's favorite color?" I asked before filling my mouth with another spoonful of soup. I was really curious. I know it had to have something to do with Alice. Bella was sitting on the sofa again, across from my bed as I ate.

"If you're going to school tomorrow, you'll see." She smirked conspiratorially. I got the feeling she wasn't going to explain any further, so I figured I'd let it drop and wait patiently. I nodded, indicating I was going to school tomorrow. I wasn't feeling completely up to it, but staying in this house all day was boring as fuck.

Once I was done with my midnight meal, I felt fully satiated, and the herbal tea soothed my throat more than I'd expected. We settled into easy conversation after that, much like we did

last night. MY room was more comfortable than the gazebo. It was also warmer, and dryer, and bright enough for me to sketch while I was talking... which I was hoping wasn't rude of me; if it was, she never made any acknowledgment of it. Bella looked like she was slowly becoming more comfortable in her little niche on my sofa. She was tense at first, I assume at being in a teenage boy's bedroom alone with him in the middle of the night. That was why I made sure to stay put in the middle of my bed. I wouldn't be fucking up this week. The rules were in full effect.

Bella was the only girl that I had *ever* let into my bedroom. Even the couple of times I fucked around with girls, it was always in the Volvo. Both experiences the result of two different, very weird nights hanging out with Jazz.

Bella's humming pulled me from my memories. When I looked up from my sketch book, she had her head rested on the back of the couch, eyes closed, with a tiny smile flirting at the corner of her lips. She looked almost as peaceful in that moment as she did sleeping; one hand playing with a long strand of her hair that was almost long enough to touch her lap, the other holding onto my iPod, resting on the leather beside her, while the long white ear bud wire climbed up her lap, disappearing behind her hair. Her humming was soft and soothing. More so than her snoring. But I didn't say anything, just smiled and kept sketching.

"I think Esme might ask Dr. Cullen over for Thanksgiving." Bella said in a soft voice. Her eyes were open now, but her head was still resting on the back of the couch. I was pretty sure her Aunt had a little crush on Daddy C., but that seemed to happen a lot with women his age. In fact, the reason he hates the name Daddy C. is because it's what one of his stalker nurses used to call him. All I had to was hear it once. I'd never let him live that shit down.

"She did the same thing last year. He'll do it. Fucker can't resist good poultry." I shrugged and continued my sketch. Emmett went with Carlisle last year, but I stayed put in my room. No fucking way I was stepping into the Brandon House of Pain.

"Will you come?" she asked in a hopeful tone. I stopped my pencil mid stroke. Would I come? Three hours sitting across the table from Brandon glaring at me. Three hours watching Em stuff his face like a grizzly coming out of hibernation. Three hours avoiding Bella even more so than I would at school. Three hours probably eating the best goddamn turkey in Washington... if Bella was cooking. And she probably was.

"Yeah, I can't resist good poultry either." I mumbled rolling my eyes. She lifted one corner of her mouth up into a wry smile and closed her eyes again. *This girl is going to be the death of me.*



Bella left that morning at the same time as usual, sending me a smile and wave as she slipped out to balcony. I hadn't slept much over the weekend. Daddy C. only gave me the cold medicine

for the daytime, so I was able to stay awake easier. I knew I'd pay for it. Experience told me that when I did get to sleep, it would be long and hard... and vivid.

After a ridiculously hot shower, I left for school with the bag of cookies my girl made me. A glance at the bag on the way out the door showed me they were *Bittersweet Butterscotch*. I smiled as I walked towards the Volvo. I always loved those crazy names she gave her cookies. It was so fucking quirky.

Jazz was waiting as patient as ever on his curb when I pulled up. I was still doing the sniffing deal, but without all the projectile sneezing.

"Get my ass sick, and I'm calling Stanley to tell her you need a sponge bath, fucker." Jasper exclaimed as he entered the car, slamming the door behind him. I shuddered and sent him a very pointed look. *Not fucking cool.*

He laughed and put his hands in the air. "Just sayin', man."

I kept driving with a sour look on my face. Jazz was the whole reason that *The Ghosts of Bad Fucks Past* even existed in the first place.

He was trying to 'break me out of my shell' last year. That entire eight month stretch gave me most of the awful reputation I have in this town. He would find the craziest party possible and drag me to it, offering me up to the local brainless skanks, while they shoved their cleavage, and every drug possible into my face. I did plenty of stupid shit thanks to Jazz and his party runs. Like coke... and Stanley... and coke off of Stanley. I was new, and impulsive, and looking for a good drug to keep me awake. So they happily obliged.

As a result, I lost my virginity to Lauren Mallory in the very seat Jasper was currently occupying the first day of sophomore year. It wasn't so bad. Mallory understood it for what it was. Just a fuck. She never spoke to me again, which was good... because she had nothing interesting to say anyways. The whole ease of that situation gave me a very false sense of security when I ended up fucking that sick Stanley bitch in the back seat five months later. Needless to say, that entire experience sobered me the fuck up. I never touched the powder again. Or Stanley. And after convincing Jazz that Brandon wouldn't go for the druggie type, he stopped making me go out, opting instead to stay home weekends, praying Rose would have a sleepover.

And that was fine by me. I was far more content sitting in my bedroom talking to Bella about nothing and everything all at the same time. She was definitely my new drug of choice. Only this drug wouldn't get me arrested if Brandon found out about it. *Hopefully...*

"Holy fucking shit..." Jasper breathed in a dazed voice while I pulled into my usual parking space. I followed his gaze to Brandon's Porsche, where she was just closing the door after climbing out. My jaw dropped open. Bella was good. Fucking master orchestrator. There Brandon stood in the parking lot, all black cropped hair, skimpy jean skirt, and shameless

cleavage, wearing Jazz's favorite color all over her legs and chest. Fuck, it was *almost* enough to get *me* hard. And that was saying an awful fucking lot.

I chuckled and stepped out of the Volvo, leaving Jazz sitting in the car with a book covering his lap.



By the time lunch came, Jazz was wearing the tensest look I've ever seen on his usually calm face. I took my seat at the table with a smirk. Why didn't he just do it already? What the fuck was he waiting for? Death by hard on?

He noticed the exasperated eye roll I gave him, and sent me a pointed look. We had conversations like this often, both too afraid of saying too much about something that the other had no business knowing. The look he was sending me said, *Don't you fucking start with me*. So I didn't. It would happen eventually. There's only so much shit his libido could take.

I fished my bag of *Bittersweet Butterscotch* cookies out, remembering the feeling I got when I had to eat that disgusting excuse for pizza while I watched Bella enjoy her cookies, and started eating them with a contented sigh.

But that was where I fucked up, because Jazz was eyeing my Ziploc bag with an unacceptable amount of curiosity. He quirked an eyebrow at me, and I stopped chewing. I figured I could lie to him and tell him Esme gave me the cookies, but he'd never believe that shit. So I returned the look he had just given me.

Let it go.

And reluctantly, he did. Because that's how we worked. So I kept eating the fucking wonderful cookies, occasionally swiping the crumbs off my leather jacket, glad that Jazz knew when to keep his mouth shut. He learned his lesson last year.

Chapter 8. Triple Toffee Twilight



Esme wasted no time. When Carlisle arrived home from work he called both Emmett and I into his office. I wasn't surprised when he asked us if we wanted to go over for Thanksgiving dinner the next day. But they were both *very* surprised to learn I was accepting the invitation. Luckily, they both kept their mouths shut.

Right as I was about to lift my sleepy, sniffing ass off the chair across from Carlisle's desk, he made us both sit back down. I slumped back into the leather and quirked an eyebrow at him. His eyes got tense around the edges for a moment as he removed his glasses.

"Esme's niece just moved here from Phoenix." He started, for some reason only looking at me. "You probably don't know her as well as Emmett does, Edward. But... you must be very careful around her." I nearly snorted. Don't know her as well as Emmett? *If you only knew*. But I had to keep up the charade, so I put on an innocent look of curiosity. "She's very uncomfortable around people, and she doesn't like being touched." He frowned. I almost snorted again. But I could appreciate his compassion for her... situation, so I just nodded in understanding and went back to my room to wait for the very girl that 'I didn't know as well as Emmett'.

I took more of the cold medicine, even though I probably didn't need it anymore. It kept me alert enough to just barely function. I probably had a total of four hours of sleep since I got sick. It was really wearing me down. I even tried going back to sleep Saturday after I woke up from another dream. But I just couldn't do it. I could feel my brain turning to mush. Things were getting harder to remember, and I even forgot an entire Trigonometry class today. I had only had that happen a few other times before. I was pushing my limits. It was fucked up, and stupid, and there was absolutely nothing I could do about it.

I was tired. And not just sleepy tired. Tired of being tired. Tired of constantly straddling the line between reality and unconsciousness and never being able to fully experience either one. I would give *anything* to just feel normal again. To be able to walk somewhere and have the ability to actually fucking register everything that was going on around me. I was tired. And completely fucking terrified that I'd never get the chance to know anything different.



I cleaned my room tonight. It kept me busy and hopefully would assure Bella I wasn't a complete fucking pig. Even though I probably was. She came at exactly midnight like always. I never heard her coming up the house. She would make an excellent juvenile delinquent. She certainly dressed the part in her usual black jeans and hoodie.

But the clothes were always the last thing I noticed about Bella. I could see it wearing her down too. She didn't just have circles under eyes. They were bags. She was pushing it too, I could tell. Her eyelids were in a constant state of half closed. She was straddling the line right along with me. I almost wanted to offer her some cold medicine, and then noticed she brought her own thermos tonight. Coffee, I assumed. For the third time today I had to bite back a snort.

She emptied her bag like last night and settled into her spot, reaching for my iPod which I left on the sofa for her. I like to think I got her hooked on music. It was something that was essential to my existence. I noticed she didn't bring soup this time. Taking my spot in bed, I opened a large container of what appeared to be pasta. The smell of it almost knocked me over. Exquisite was an understatement. I ate with no inhibitions, just the way my girl liked me to. She'd let out the occasional lethargic chuckle, amused by my appetite.

"Hey..." I chided with a mouth full of noodles. "Don't fucking laugh at me, I'm a growing teenager." I glared, feigning offense at her amusement, which made her chuckle even louder. Then she leaned down and started unlacing her shoes to remove them. I cocked my head to the side, wondering if that bothered me, and finding no reason as to why it should.

Once she had her shoes off, she placed them neatly at her feet, and brought her knees up to her chest and hugged them. "So what's your favorite thing to eat at Thanksgiving?" she asked quietly. Thanksgiving was only tomorrow... or today technically, so I could just imagine my girl putting together a whole menu.

"Hmm..." I mused, thinking over her question and twirling a lump of pasta around my fork. I hadn't really had a real Thanksgiving in so long, and I was so tired I couldn't remember all the traditional dishes. But I didn't feel like burdening my girl with either one of those disturbing facts, so I decided to stroke her ego instead. "Doesn't really matter. Anything you make will be better than all that other shit." I shrugged and popped the fork full of pasta into my mouth.

That comment made her smile. A real smile that reached her eyes. Which was rare to see from Bella. Usually it'd be a half smile, or a little grin, or a tense almost-smile that she put too much effort behind. I suppose we were alike in that way too. But all too soon her smile turned into a yawn so big and deep it made her eyes tear up a bit. She snatched the coffee off the floor and began drinking it greedily. And because yawns were weirdly infectious, I had to yawn too, which just amplified my drowsiness.

I plunged us into a deep conversation after that, desperate to engage our minds in anything else but sleep. I asked her about what happened in Trig today. We had the same curriculum, just different hours. She proceeded to reach into the depths of her own failing memory for

something that she learned. Which, sadly, wasn't much. Then we talked about a Bio project that was coming up next month. We joked about the stripper uniform Brandon was wearing that day. She told me about her old truck in Phoenix, and I told her about my Volvo... omitting the parts about Mallory and Stanley of course. Bella told me about all the things she was making for dinner that day, and I would ask her specifics to keep her mind occupied.

When five thirty finally rolled around, Bella was out of coffee, and my packet of cold medicine was gone. I was worried about staying awake today because we had no school due to the holiday. I knew Bella would make it though. Cooking always kept her awake.

I watched her closely as she trudged out the glass door wearing her bag on her back, inspecting her steps for any sway that might make the climb down too dangerous, but her steps never faltered, so I let her do her thing. I still peeked out the curtains though to make sure she made it next door safely. Which she did.

So I made my way to the bathroom connected to my room, and took a very cold shower. As soon as the ice cold water hit my skin, every cell in me woke up. I tensed against the frigid temperature, but didn't flinch or move away from it. It was something I was used to doing when it got bad like this. And I had to stay awake today. When I was satisfied I was clean and completely alert, I stepped out of the shower door with my teeth chattering, and praying it didn't make my cold flare back up.

I figured Daddy C. would want me to be 'presentable', so I shaved off all the thick stubble that had accumulated over the weekend. I wasn't dressing up or any stupid shit. He could kiss my ass if he was expecting that.

In the end, the whole bathroom shebang only took me two hours. Which fucking sucked. Because I was already back inside the inviting warmth of my bedroom, glaring at my bed. I let out a frustrated growl and snatched my sketch book off my bed. I knew if I even touched it I'd be dead to the world. So instead I took Bella's spot on the sofa, which still smelled like her. Flowers and cookies. I breathed deeply, letting the scent soothe my nerves, and started sketching, willing the clock to move faster.



It was possibly the hardest day I've ever experienced in all my years of staying awake. I took two more cold showers that afternoon, and came out with the most detailed sketch in the history of Edward Cullen artwork.

I dragged my feet down the stairs, nearly tripping twice, at precisely five-o'clock. Daddy C., always the punctual food moocher, was already waiting by the door. He narrowed his eyes at my usual casual attire, and I just narrowed mine right back, daring him to say something about it. I knew he got off on the whole 'family bonding' shit that we *never* did, so he backed off and said nothing.

It was like having tunnel vision when I was this tired. My brain was only absorbing what was directly in front of me. I was like a machine, going through all the motions, when there just wasn't enough electricity to make it work one hundred percent.

I don't even remember Emmett coming up beside me, or us walking out the door, or us walking across the yard. It was just another block of time completely lost where my legs moved and my eyes blinked, but nothing registered. And suddenly we were walking in the Brandon house. I furrowed my brows and shook my head, looking around disoriented, wondering where the fuck the last five minutes went, when Esme came up and engulfed me in a big hug that startled me into the here and now. Reluctantly, I returned the hug, wrapping my arms around her and squeezing her gently.

Esme was a kind and caring soul full of compassion. She reminded me a lot of Carlisle, which was just proven more by her taking Bella in. She also reminded me a little of my own mother, which made me both enjoy this hug, and resent it, all at the same time.

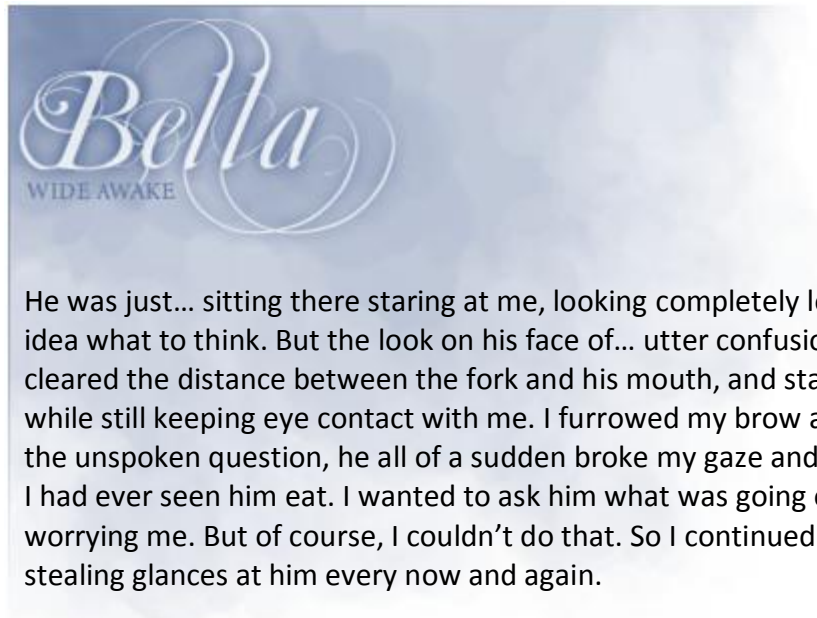
"Thank you for inviting us, Esme." I slurred out politely while she released me. Even I couldn't be a dick to Esme. She made it impossible. She smiled warmly at me before Emmett pulled her into his own bear hug, which left her slightly breathless. I looked around the small living room she led us into and noticed Brandon on the couch at the far end of the room. I took some amusement in the fact she glared at me when I entered. I just smiled at her, because it pissed her off, and also because I couldn't find the energy to be annoyed.

Suddenly, I was in the dining room in front of a chair and a ridiculously long table standing next to Emmett. I rubbed my forehead and furrowed my brow again. *What the fuck?* It was like I skipped the delusion stages of sleep deprivation and was just heading right into memory loss. Idly, I was wondering if this whole dinner wasn't a hallucination. I was completely disoriented. I slowly lowered myself into the seat next to Emmett's, wary of the events happening, and scared shitless I was going to do something that would make me look insane.

But then my girl walked in. And the sight of her woke me up minutely. It was the first time I had ever seen her without her hoodie on. She was just in a plain white t-shirt, not baggy, but not tight either. And I could see her arms for the first time. They were skinny and pale, which I probably expected, but I just wasn't accustomed to seeing so *much* of her. The sight of it almost felt obscene to me. She nodded a timid hello at Carlisle and took her seat across from me, beside Alice; leaving Esme and Carlisle at the two opposite ends of the table.

She looked almost as tired as I was. Her eyelids were still drooping and purple while she lazily licked her lips. She peeked up at me for a second before looking away, back to the large steaming turkey I was only just now taking time to notice. I was praying she would take and hold my attention by saying something to someone so I wouldn't space out again, but she remained completely quiet while everyone filled their plates.

Suddenly, I was bringing a fork with a piece of turkey on it up to my closed mouth. I froze, my fork lingering in mid air, while I furrowed my brow again and looked around. *Was I eating?* Alice was completely ignoring me, and Esme was having a conversation with Carlisle. And Emmett... well Emmett was doing what Emmett does best and just stuffing his fucking face. But Bella was staring right into my eyes.



He was just... sitting there staring at me, looking completely lost with his fork in the air. I had no idea what to think. But the look on his face of... utter confusion was alarming. Then he just cleared the distance between the fork and his mouth, and started eating the turkey slowly while still keeping eye contact with me. I furrowed my brow at him, but instead of answering the unspoken question, he all of a sudden broke my gaze and started eating quickly. Faster than I had ever seen him eat. I wanted to ask him what was going on, because his behavior was worrying me. But of course, I couldn't do that. So I continued eating my turkey and stuffing, stealing glances at him every now and again.

He kept eating like that for twenty minutes. Just cramming food into his mouth as fast as possible, and not saying a word to anyone. No one else really seemed to notice. Of course, no one else pays attention to Edward quite as much as I do. When his plate was clean, he turned his body and let out a few coughs. Slowly, he turned around and shifted towards Dr. Cullen.

"Carlisle?" Edward called quietly, halting Dr. Cullen's conversation with Esme. "I...I don't mean to be rude, honestly, but I'm... really not feeling that well." He looked pleadingly at Dr. Cullen.

"You're cold again, Edward?" Dr. Cullen frowned. Edward nodded heavily returning his frown. "Of course, I'm sure Esme wouldn't mind if you wanted to go home and get some rest." Dr. Cullen then glanced sideways at Esme.

"Oh no, Dear! You go ahead and get home so you can get better." Esme smiled warmly at Edward while Alice muttered something under her breath I couldn't quite make out. Unable to stop myself and my protective side when it came to Edward, I lifted my foot and kicked her in the leg. She flinched a little, but didn't say anything, instead glaring at her mashed potatoes.

Edward stood up then, and swayed a bit, grasping the back of his seat for support. It was a small sway that no one else would have ever noticed, but I knew it all too well. He was tired. Too tired.

“Thank you for the dinner Ms. Brandon. It was delicious.” He said politely, sparing a pointed sideways glance at me, forcing a tight smile, and then exiting the dining room. Now I was really worried. Edward was confused, possibly disoriented, swaying when he stood, and the most alarming change in his behavior by far, he was being *polite*.

I ate the rest of my dinner feeling more anxious by the minute. No one really talked to me. Alice had plenty of things to discuss with Emmett, and Esme and Carlisle were enjoying their conversation about local politicians and property laws.

I eventually served everyone dessert, wishing that the clock would move faster so I could go see Edward and make sure he was okay. Emmett ate an entire pie all by himself, to which I just had to smile at him. He shrugged at me and gave me a big grin while Dr. Cullen and Esme stared open mouthed in shock at the fact he still had room for anything.

Esme sent Alice and the men into the living room to watch some sports program while we cleared the table.

“How are you doing, dear?” Esme whispered in my ear while glancing towards the living room.

I rolled my eyes at her. “I told you Esme, I’m fine stop worrying so much.” I sighed exasperated. She smiled sweetly at me while we took the dishes into the kitchen to wash.

“So, what do you think of Dr. Cullen, Bella?” She asked while I dried the dishes and she washed.

“He’s...” I paused, trying to come up with a term suitable for someone like Dr. Cullen. “He seems very compassionate and caring. I like him.” I said sincerely with a smile. She looked a little surprised that I surmised such a dramatic opinion after only spending an hour with him. But I knew more about him than she could comprehend. He gave Edward a good home. Took him away from mean people, and gave him a better life. That says a lot about a person. It was impossible for me not to like Dr. Cullen.

My approval seemed to please Esme quite a bit. I was wondering if there wasn’t more to her relationship with him than she was letting on, but I didn’t pry. It wasn’t my business. But I secretly hoped there was. They deserved each other.

Once everything from the evening was cleaned and put away, I had nothing left to keep me occupied except the anxiety over Edward’s unusual behavior. Dr. Cullen and Emmett left at six thirty, thanking me, Alice, and Esme profusely for the dinner. I lounged on the couch with Alice for a while after that. She never questioned me about what happened at the dinner table when I kicked her. I was hoping she just assumed I was doing it because she was being rude.

I started a batch of cookies to keep me busy. I made *Triple Toffee Twilights*. Alice's favorite. It was a bit of an apology for the kick. When they were done, I snuck Edward's bag in the sack I always took with me, anticipating getting to him.

At nine-o'clock, both Esme and Alice turned in just as a thunderstorm rolled in, citing drowsiness by turkey as their excuses. But I just paced around the kitchen, glancing at the clock on the microwave and willing it to move faster to midnight. The rain was pounding furiously at the roof of the house, and the thunder rattled the windows every few minutes. By ten, I couldn't take it anymore. I *had* to go see Edward. So I threw my hoodie on, and didn't even bother bringing my bag or any cookies. I just walked out the door into the thunderstorm.

Drawing up my hood to shield me from the rain, I glanced over at Edward's window and noticed the lights were off. His lights were *never* off at night. I got a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. Something was wrong. So I quickly stalked with my head down to the back wall of the house, careful not to pass any windows on the first floor in fear Dr. Cullen might still be awake. The wall was illuminated momentarily by a flash of lightning, so I found a good spot on the lattice and began climbing my way up to the balcony. Water was dripping down my face, making it difficult to see, and I had to use my hands more than my eyes, but I eventually reached the railing and slung my leg over it, nearly slipping off the wet lattice too soon, but catching myself and lowering my soaked body onto the balcony safely.

I spun around, lifting a dripping fist to knock on the dark glass French door, when I heard it. An alarm clock. I stood frozen in the rain with my fist suspended in the air. It never went off. Finally, I knocked. Louder than I usually did, hoping it would be heard over the thunder and the alarm clock inside. Edward never came.

Dozens of scenarios went through my head. Most of them ending with Edward dead somewhere in his room. So in a completely irrational panic, I threw all logic out the window, grabbed the doorknob, and pushed the door open.

The alarm clock was screeching the most offensive sound I'd ever heard. But the room was completely black. I walked in, cringing at each electronic screech and dripping all over the gold carpet, and closed the door behind me. I squinted into the room but couldn't make anything out.

"Edward?" I choked out, my voice cracking with anxiety. I stood waiting for a few moments, but I got no answer. I was debating if I should go into the room further.

Then I heard a sob coming from the direction of Edward's bed. It was a deep, agonized sob. I had two conflicting emotions at hearing it. The first was relief that Edward was alive. The second was fear that something was wrong. Making up my mind, I slowly and carefully felt my way to his bedside table where both a lamp was, and the source of the awful screeching sound, thankful he had cleaned his room and I wasn't going to trip over anything. When I finally

reached the vicinity, I had the help of both the glow from the clock and a random flash of lighting to help me spot the lamp. I felt my way up the shade to the switch, and turned it on.

I gasped when I spotted Edward on the bed. He was sleeping. If you could even call it that. One of his hands was fisted into his messy hair, and he had tears streaming down his cheeks, lying on his side above the covers still clothed, facing me. But none of that was the worst part. His face was twisted in agony and his body was trembling and shuddering. He was dreaming.

He let out another choked sob, and I could feel my eyes starting to water. I couldn't bear seeing him like this. It was the second most heartbreaking sight I've ever witnessed; second only to finding my mother's body.

"Edward." I called him again, louder. But he didn't wake up. It was almost as if whatever dream he was in had him trapped. "Edward, wake up!" I cried again. But I still got no response. I balled my fists up at my sides while my tears spilled over.

His pain was my pain. "Edward, please!" I begged through a sob that was tearing through my chest. But I still got no response from him. He was still crying and shuddering, and he was gripping his hair so tightly his knuckles were white. My hands involuntary shot up to my own hair and grabbed two fistfuls while I let out a loud, frustrated growl. "Goddamnit, Edward! Wake the fuck up!" I pleaded again through my own sobs. But I still couldn't reach him where he was. Frustrated, I let my hair go and brought my hands down to the alarm clock and fumbled to turn the screeching off.

Once the room was silent again, with only the sound of the rain coming down outside and my quiet sobs, I realized I was going to have to touch him. Shake him. Slap him. Anything to get him out of that dream.

I heaved out a deep breath to relax my nerves, which was nearly impossible when Edward was crying like that. Slowly, I walked closer to the bed, wringing my hands nervously. He wasn't within arms reach, his bed was too big. So I lifted a knee to the mattress, and then the other, and crawled over to his shaking body. The reality of what touching him could possibly do to me just made my cry harder. But I had to stop his pain.

I lifted a shaking hand tentatively to the fist he had grasping his hair, and tested myself with a small poke to his white knuckle. I got a small shock when I touched him, like a spark. It made me snap my hand back. But I was okay. No flashes. So I pushed myself further, and slowly eased my palm on top of his entire fist. I could still feel a strange electricity. It was different from any other touch. But in a good way. I worked to pry his long pale fingers from his hair with that hand. He had a good grip on it, but I eventually got all of them loose and lowered his hand to the bed, somewhat in awe of my ability to accomplish this sanely. Feeling a little more confident, and afraid I might lose whatever was making this possible, I indulged myself in something I had been dying to do for days now. I smoothed that lock of hair away from his face. And I didn't lift my hand away. I caressed his soft, messy hair gingerly. And to my surprise, he

relaxed marginally. So I kept doing that. Caressing his hair with my hand, and he relaxed further with every stroke.

I was ecstatic. I was *touching* him. He was liking it. Drunk on the excitement and confidence these revelations gave me, I eased myself down beside him on my side, laying my cheek on the hand that hadn't touched him yet, gazing at his face, and kept stroking his hair with my fingers. It was soothing him, but not completely. That's when Edward's words came to me. That first night, out in the gazebo, he told me his mother used to hum to him every night, and he couldn't sleep without it. All the Pretty Little Horses.

So I started humming the song quietly, still stroking his hair. Edward let out a deep breath and stilled. That was it. That was what Edward needed. I kept humming and stroking his hair, and eventually all his tears dried up, and his face relaxed completely. He was breathing deep and steady. He looked peaceful. I'm sure I had a goofy smile on my face, feeling his silky hair beneath my fingertips and humming that little song I learned in fourth grade music class.

Suddenly, without warning, the hand I pried from his hair lifted up and he put his arm around my waist. I froze.

But I got no flashes. No hyperventilating, no crying, no shaking. Just Edward with his arm around my waist and that odd electricity he gave off. So I resumed humming, stroking his hair, and bravely, scooted closer to him until I was close enough to feel his breath on my face. I smiled wider. I hadn't been this close to anyone in so long, and never anywhere *near* this close to Edward. He tightened his grip on my waist, pulling me to him. I didn't freeze up this time. Instead, I hugged him back with the arm that was stroking his hair, and rested my head on his chest.

Being in Edwards arms felt so safe and warm... and right, I let my eyes flutter closed as I let out a contented sigh. I kept humming to him until I fell asleep. And for the first night in over a year, I slept all night. No dreams, no memories, no closets. Just the safety of Edward's arms.

Chapter 9. Shockolate Chip



I was so fucking warm. I was hugging warm. Warm was hugging me. Definitely warm. I took a long, deep breath. Something smelled really good. Familiar. I moved closer to the warm and nuzzled something soft and silky. The warm smelled really fucking good. Like cookies. And flowers. And the warm made the softest little snoring sound...

I gasped, and moved as quickly as I could away from the warm until I was falling, and hitting my head against the floor with a very loud thud. I opened one eye, squinting against a very offensive bright light, and looked up at my ceiling. Warm. I scrambled up onto my knees and came face to face with a very wide eyed Bella. Her hair looked like a haystack, and she was wearing that same hoodie. In my bed. *Holy Fuck.*

“Holy fuck.” I croaked. My brain filter wasn’t working yet. There was Bella, sitting up in my bed, mouth forming a surprised ‘o’, and looking a lot like a little kid that just caught sneaking a peek at the Christmas present stash. *What the fuck is she doing in my bed?*

“What the fuck are you doing in my bed?” I croaked again. That goddamn brain filter, still M.I.A.

Her face grew bright red, and then her eyes brimmed with tears. She was blinking against them, but I was frozen. Utterly fucking confused and lost as to how Bella got into my bed. Without warning, Bella shot up out of the bed and began scrambling her way to the balcony door. *What the fuck is she doing?*

“What the fuck are you doing?” I croaked, wishing that brain filter would kick in. But she was already out the door. I ran my fingers through my hair, and tried to make sense of what the fuck was going on. But my body was stiff. Fucking hard core stiff. And for some reason, I was also a little damp. So I dragged my stiff, damp body off the floor and walked into my bathroom. Deciding showers were really very warm.

I shed off my wrinkled, damp clothes and stepped into the steaming hot shower. *Warm.* Right. What was that? I began searching my mind, trying to remember any significant event. I remember turkey at the Brandon’s. It was fucking good as hell too. But I was tired. Too tired to make it. So I came home. Then I tried sketching for a few hours, but it was too much, so I set my alarm...

The shampoo bottle I was holding hit the bottom of the shower with a resounding clank. I shut the water off and got out, moving to the bathroom door and opening it a crack so I could read my alarm clock. Eleven twenty two a.m.. I slowly closed the door, and then jerked it back open, just to double check. Yep. I slept for fifteen hours.

No. I slept with *Bella* for fifteen hours. What the fuck happened? But I felt... good. Awake. Alert. Not tired. I spun around to my mirror. My eyes were still dark, but not nearly as much as they usually are. *Huh.*

“Huh.” Apparently long amounts of sleep affect brain filters. Who knew? I smiled at myself in the mirror. Then my smile completely fell. I touched Bella. What the fuck was I thinking? She seemed fine though. In fact, I vaguely recall the warm hugging me back. But how is that even possible? I ran my fingers through my hair again, and started getting dressed. I was so fucking refreshed it was amazing. It was a feeling I haven’t had in so long, I wasn’t even sure it actually existed. And I was thankful for the ability to utilize my full brain capacity for once, because I was going to need it.



School was out again today for the holiday. So I spent my afternoon thinking very hard, and came up with a few facts. The first was, something about last night was different that allowed me to sleep. The second was, Bella let me touch her, and she didn’t have any Weird Random Emotional Breakdowns. The third was, I had no idea how to explain any of it. And the fourth was, that the only person who could, left this morning upset with me.

So, basically, the only thing I could do was hope my girl would still come tonight.

I went down to the kitchen to pilfer some of the leftovers the guys brought home with them last night. Carlisle walked into the kitchen while I was heating up the coveted poultry and gave me a big smile.

“Edward!” He exclaimed, clapping me on the back. “You look like you’re feeling better today.” He smiled while joining in the pilfering activities. I smirked at him and shrugged one shoulder. *Goddamn right I’m feeling better.* I thought smugly. *I slept. Fifteen hours.*

Even with all the unanswered questions looming over my head, I was in a pretty fucking good mood. So I hopped onto the counter top and chatted with Daddy C. while we both praised Bella’s stellar cooking skills with moans and hums. I was in such a good mood, I didn’t even bitch at Emmett when he walked in and joined us. I felt like I was living someone else’s life. I could actually concentrate on every little thing. It was divine.

The whole day was spent like that. Just me being in a good fucking mood. But by the time ten rolled around, I was already tired again. I mean I did have nine years to make up for. It was a tired I could fight off easily. But at the same time, I knew there was a possibility I didn’t have to.

So I paced my room anxiously waiting for Bella when midnight was approaching. I figured I was going to have to pull out my secret weapon when the time came. I probably acted like a total dick. Once I was tired of pacing, I decided to wait out on the balcony for her. It was an unusually clear night out, the full moon illuminating the back yard and the gazebo. I could see the Brandon house from my balcony. All of the windows were dark except for one. The kitchen.

I waited out there in the cold until half past twelve. She wasn't coming. I figured I could wait until school tomorrow and risk speaking to her in Bio or something. But that was too late for me. I'd be damned if I was going to wait for her to come around. Bella's only been doing this a year to my nine. I had to see her now. So I went back inside my room and grabbed my leather jacket. I was going to have to be super fucking stealthy about this... it was risky.

I climbed down the lattice more efficiently than ever and crept over to the Brandon house. I stayed half crouched until I reached the kitchen window. Slowly, I raised my head up and peeked in. Bella was sitting at the table in the center of the room doing what appeared to be homework of some sort. I raised my hand to the glass and lightly tapped with 2 knuckles. Bella shot up out of her chair, bringing her hand up to her mouth and spun around to face me. She looked absolutely terrified. Then I realized my mistake. *Real fucking genius.* I stood up straight with a grimace and held my hands up in the air. Once she realized it was just me, she lowered her hand to her heart and took a moment to steady her breathing. *So much for utilizing your full brain capacity dipshit.*

She left the kitchen for a moment, only to return with her hoodie, which she threw on the way out the back door. She looked better too. Not in a good mood sort of way like I was all day, but her eyes looked so much fucking better.

"Hi." She whispered timidly, looking down at her boots. When she looked up again, I pointed to the gazebo and tilted my head towards it, indicating for her to follow me. She did. We walked silently across the yard and took our seats on either side of the bench. It was like our middle ground or some shit. Neutral territory. When the silence got too heavy for me, I knew it was time for my secret weapon. Something I *never* used. Ever.

"I'm sorry." We both blurted at the exact same time. I let out an exasperated sigh and swung my leg over the bench to straddle it. She was looking down at her hands. And she had that fucking hood up. I wanted to yank it off.

"What the fuck are you apologizing for?" I snapped. My sorry no longer held the massive amount of significance it was originally intended.

"I just... was completely out of line getting into your bed like that. It was uncalled for, and I'm sorry." She answered quietly, playing with her fingers nervously.

I let out another deep sigh. This was going to be harder than I thought. "I'm not upset, Bella." I said softly, ridding my mood of any and all annoyance I had been feeling. "Honestly, I was trying

to apologize for being such a dick this morning.” Then I chuckled darkly. “You should feel privileged. It’s something I rarely do. Though...” I paused, thinking of the best way to ask without upsetting her further. “Though, an explanation would be rather nice.” I said as more of a question than a statement.

She turned towards me then on the bench and brought her knees up to her chest, hugging them like she does sometimes. “It’s really embarrassing.” She grimaced, biting her lip. She even blushed a little. I wanted to laugh at her, but knew that would be counter productive, so I waited patiently.

With an exhale of a gusty breath, she began to recount the events of the night before. How she was worried about me, so she came early. The alarm clock that was going off. Her coming into my room fearing I was dead. When she got to the part where she saw me sleeping, her face got tense and hard. She told me I was dreaming and she couldn’t wake me up. I was a little embarrassed that my girl saw me like that, but could hardly regret it now. Then she told me about how she climbed onto my bed to wake me up. And that’s how she discovered she could touch me. I didn’t understand what she was talking about when she described my touch, but filed it away for later contemplation.

She continued her explanation with how her actions were soothing me, so she laid down and got comfortable, humming me the lullaby my mom used to sing me. Bella was right. This was really fucking embarrassing. For me. Especially when she told me I put my arm around her.

“So,” she concluded, “I just fell asleep. I didn’t mean to honestly. I was just going to stay until you woke up. But I was just so tired...” she trailed off looking at me pleadingly.

“And you did?” I asked, and then shook my head. “Fall asleep, I mean. With no dreams?” She nodded at me biting her lip. I turned to face the river then, soaking up all this new information.

It didn’t take a fucking rocket scientist to see it. Bella was my key to sleep, and in some way, I was hers. It was some pseudo-Freudian bullshit, sure. And I’m certain plenty of psychiatrists would be lining up to uncover all the reasons it worked. But I didn’t really give a fuck why. To be honest, I had bigger things to worry about. Like how the fuck I was going to ask Bella if she could do it again.

I turned back to straddling the bench again, rubbing my hands over my face, and terrified I was going to do this all wrong. “Bella,” I sighed, clasping my hand in front of me. “I have to ask you something, but I don’t want to freak you out.” I told her cautiously. I figured it was best to give some sort of disclaimer. ‘Caution: Edward Cullen is really good at fucking shit up. Continue at your own risk’.

She nodded at me hesitantly, still hugging her knees facing me. I was itching to take that goddamn hood off her head. Something about it just annoyed the shit out of me. I shook my head, trying to stay on track.

“How... uncomfortable... would you be, if I asked you if you could do it again?” I asked very slowly, maintaining eye contact with her the whole time. I held my breath, hoping for the best, but expecting the worst. She kept her face carefully blank, and didn’t speak for a few moments. My fucking face was turning blue.

Eventually, her stone mask transformed and she bit her lip. “I... wouldn’t be opposed to... trying.” She whispered.

I let the gust of breath out and smiled at her, relieved she didn’t go running from my suggestion. But I had to know, had to make sure that whatever it was that allowed me to touch Bella hadn’t gone away. So I tentatively raised my hand out to her palm up, silently asking her to take it... if she could. She looked at my hand dubiously, still biting her lip. Reluctantly she unclasped one hand from around her knees and brought it out towards mine. With a slightly shaky index finger, she poked at my hand. There really was a slight spark there. I knit my brows together looking at my hand, but didn’t say anything about it, and I kept my hand extended, lingering in mid air between us over the bench.

Obviously Bella was satisfied with what she felt with her experimental poke, because she inched her arm back towards me, and slowly slipped her small, soft hand into mine, closing around it comfortably with a small smile flirting at her lips and a brief flash of excitement in her eyes. I smiled back at her and stood up from the bench, bringing her with me. We crossed the yard back to my house hand in hand. My girl was fine. She seemed completely calm. No Random Emotion Breakdowns.

Before I let her climb up the lattice, I stopped her, unclasping my hand from hers, and glaring daggers at that fucking hood. I lifted my hand cautiously, but confidently, and grabbed the back of it bringing it down and freeing her long brown hair. She quirked a questioning eyebrow at me, but I just nodded in approval and watched her climb up. I waited until she was safely on the balcony before I made my own way up.

Once we were in the warmth of my bedroom, I began getting a little nervous. It felt fucking awkward, trying to find an easy way to get Bella into my bed without freaking her out or offending her. But I’ll be damned if my girl didn’t just climb right up into the bed, hoodie, shoes and all. She turned back to me when I didn’t follow and blushed a little. Of course it would be more comfortable for her. She remembers doing it the first time. I took off my jacket and shoes, not wanting to get dirt on my bed, but not wanting to ask her to do anything that made her uneasy. She looked at me apologetically and began unlacing hers.

I set the alarm clock for five thirty. It would only give us five hours of sleep, but that was far more than I was used to getting. I let out a deep breath, turned off the lamp, and climbed into bed next to Bella, who was lying on her side facing me. It seemed like this whole thing was pretty fucking dependent on physical contact, so I inched towards her carefully on my back, trying to not upset her, and when I was close enough for her to do it, she lifted her little hand and started stroking my hair softly. And it felt fucking good. So I relaxed and turned my body

towards her, unsure of what to do next. And almost like she was reading my mind, Bella took the reins and scooted even closer to me in the bed until her little warm body was pressed completely against mine. My head was completely clouded with her scent and her warmth as she slowly laid her head against my chest, leaving her hair tickling my chin.

Then she started humming that song. It had been so long since I heard it; it almost made me cry like a fucking baby. But instead I just put my arm around my girl, and pressed her closer to me, burying my nose into her hair, and breathing her in. I was asleep within seconds.



I smiled against his chest and took in a deep lungful of his unique scent, never ceasing my strokes of his hair or my humming. I got him to sleep rather quickly. I forced myself to stay awake a little longer; relishing in the intimacy of his arm pressing me against him. Every now and then, he would nuzzle my hair in the sweetest way. It was heavenly. I tilted my head up a little so I could take a peek at his sleeping face. Edward looked so beautiful when he was sleeping. The moonlight filtered in through the window and made his face the softest shade of pale, emphasizing his peaceful expression. I wanted to bring my hand down and caress his cheeks, his stubby jaw, and his full, pouty lips. But I was afraid that would wake him up. So eventually I pressed myself impossibly closer to his chest and closed my eyes, falling into a deep, dreamless slumber.



The high pitched screeching of an alarm clock woke me. But I was so comfortable I didn't want to get up. Without my permission, my head nuzzled into the warm chest in front of me. Then the chest let out a thick groan and pulled away. I opened my eyes to a better sight than yesterday. Edward was still beside me, lying on his back with his eyes closed, grabbing at his alarm clock blindly. It was quite the sight, the sour look on his face. It made me chuckle. I rolled over on my back and stretched my arms above my head with a yawn. Best sleep ever, hands down. Edward finally got the alarm clock off. I loathed that thing. I grudgingly sat up on the bed, while Edward rubbed at his eyes. When he finally met my gaze, he gave me a timid half smile, and sat up against the headboard, running his fingers through his hair lazily. It was messier than normal. *All my fault.* I mentally smiled.

We were both quiet for a few moments, and then I realized I should get home before Esme woke up. I got up out of the bed and put my shoes back on in silence. It wasn't awkward. At least not for me.

“So... are you coming back tonight?” Edward asked quietly from his spot against the headboard. I turned to face him and rolled my eyes.

“Where else would I be?” I joked with a small grin. He seemed relieved by my reassurance, so I walked over to his bedside table and removed the bag of cookies I had stashed in my pocket, *Shockolate Chip*, and deposited them beside the alarm clock. With a wave over my shoulder, I exited the French doors and climbed down the lattice. I nearly skipped the whole way home across the still dark yard. It was a good day.

I made Esme breakfast again this morning after I showered and got dressed. I felt horrible about yesterday when I ended up lying to her about my whereabouts when I came in the back door at eleven thirty in the morning. She thought I had just woken up early and left the house. I hated lying to Esme.

When I sat down at the table across from her, I started eating hastily. All that sleep really gave me an appetite. Esme looked up at me from her plate and smiled warmly.

“Sleep well?” She asked, excited and amused at my refreshed mood. I nodded at her enthusiastically with a wide grin. *You have no idea...*

And when Alice came skipping into the kitchen, whistling and smiling in her own exuberant way, I didn’t want to vomit. In fact, I had to resist the urge to whistle along with her. It was the most normal I had felt since before the incident.

School was so much different when I was completely awake. Some aspects were good, some were bad. Everything was much more clear and vivid. It was harder to block out all the people around me, and it made me tense. But the bad still didn’t outweigh the good. I paid close attention in every class, taking notes meticulously, making up for every day I was too out of it to put my best effort forward.

I could hear more of the hushed whispers as I made my way across the quad with my hood up and head down, but even that couldn’t spoil my mood. I was in my own little world, in a bedroom a few miles away; an unlikely sanctuary.

When I saw Edward on my way to third period I gasped. His dark circles were nearly gone now, loping towards me in the quad in his leather jacket with that same indifferent expression as always, except now he was practically glowing with rejuvenation. It was nearly better than watching him sleep. He ignored me like usual, just passing me by without a glance. But I couldn’t find it in myself to be bitter about that today. I did spend the last two nights in his bed after all. And to make my good mood even better, when Mike spotted me, he turned and walked the other way, avoiding me just like everyone else did.

Lunch was slightly more difficult. I was tense weaving through the crowd, trying to stay a careful distance away from everyone around me as I made my way to Alice’s table, wrapping

my arms around my torso protectively. Everyone just seemed so much *closer* than usual. It was going to take some getting used to.

I resumed my normal lunch routine, sparing the occasional glance at Edward and Jasper's table where they were eating in silence. But I couldn't drown out the conversation at my own table like I was able to when I was tired. Alice was trying to cunningly con Rose into a sleepover at the Hale house. Rose had no clue about Alice's fixation on her wayward brother.

"Come on, Rose!" Alice pouted at her from across the table. "It'll be fun. I'll let you borrow my red Manolo's." Alice coaxed, bribing Rosalie with designer footwear.

But Rose was staring at her nails leisurely, while Emmett fingered a lock of her long blonde hair. "I don't see what the big deal is, Alice. My house is boring." Rose huffed.

Emmett leaned towards Alice then. "Yeah, plus, Rose already has plans with the sexiest man in Forks this weekend. Isn't that right Rosie?" He wiggled his eyebrows suggestively.

I snorted. "That's a little pretentious, don't you think?" I chuckled, smiling at their exchange.

Suddenly, they all froze and turned towards me with shocked expressions. I let my chuckle die away quietly. *What?* Alice's mouth was slightly parted, and her brown eyes were so big I thought they might pop out of their sockets. Rose and Emmett had similar expressions.

My smile fell. "I'm s-sorry, I was just joking, honestly." I stammered, blushing and dropping my head back down to the book that had lost my attention.

The table was quiet for a few moments, and then Emmett erupted in a loud, booming guffaw that made me jump. "Well, whadya' know? She really does talk!" He laughed louder before Rosalie smacked him in the back of his head. I knit my eyebrows together. *Had I never once spoken in front of Emmett?*

"Sorry." He mumbled while rubbing the back of his curly head. I attempted a small smile for him, but it was rather disturbing. Aside from Edward, Emmett was the closest guy in my life, and I had never even spoken in front of him before. The truth was Emmett was a large man. He was no guy, and he certainly wasn't a boy. He was loud and big, and he made me nervous. But I just spoke to him for the first time.

Secretly, a part of me was hoping whatever breakthrough I had with Edward would somehow carry over to other people. Maybe he wasn't so special after all. Perhaps I was getting better. Emmett was a nice guy. He wouldn't hurt me. I closed my book with a loud thud and slammed it on the table. Alice, Emmett, and Rosalie were still looking at me warily. I forced a smile at Emmett, trying to not over think what I was about to do, and raised my chin determinedly, rounding my shoulders back. *I can do this.*

"Please forgive me, Emmett." I said sincerely. His eyes widened at my rare confident voice and posture. "Let's start over properly. Shall we?" I asked politely with a tight smile, and then raised my hand out over the table. I was trying to ignore the way my hand slightly trembled and my breathing was picking up. "I'm Bella." I forced out through clenched teeth, my heart thudding in my chest violently. He was staring at my hand in complete shock.

Alice leaned over close to my ear, keeping her gaze on my hand hovering over the table, slightly shaking. "You don't have to do this, Bella." She whispered. But I just shook my head. I had to know. I had to try. I was going to do this. I drowned out everything else around me, keeping my gaze locked on Emmett's wide brown eyes, waiting for him to take my hand, still clenching my teeth in a tense smile.

Nervously, he removed his hand from Rosalie's hair, and brought it over the table until it was inches away from mine. After a brief moment of hesitation, his large, rough hand surrounded mine in a light grip.

But it was no use. My smile transformed into a twisted expression of horror while flashes began bombarding my mind.

Phil taking my hand and dragging me down the hallway kicking and screaming after I almost escaped. Phil grabbing my hands and clutching them over my head so rough my wrist snapped. Phil breaking my pinky when I tried biting him.

I let out a deep whimper and snatched my shaking hand away from Emmett. I could feel my chest tightening in the familiar panic, but refused to let it happen here. I could hear Alice trying to come after me as I ran from the cafeteria sobbing and panting, but I couldn't face her.

I ran through blurry vision until I was behind the school. Satisfied that it was private enough to have my "Weird Random Emotional Breakdown", I slammed my back against the rough red brick wall, and slid down it until I was sitting. I buried my head in my knees, snatching off my hood and grabbing two thick fistfuls of my hair tightly while growling in frustration.

I couldn't *breathe*. It felt like suffocation when my chest was so tight. It was torn between gasping for much needed air, and letting out the deep sobs that wanted to escape. I started rocking back and forth, trying to calm myself while gasping for air against my tear soaked knees.

After a few seconds, I felt a presence standing before me. Edward. I could tell because I was feeling that strange electricity he gave off.

"Fuck." He muttered under his breath. I just shook my head furiously and gripped my hair tighter. I didn't want Edward to see me like this. But he didn't leave. Instead he leaned down and gingerly took the fists that were pulling my hair and pried them loose, exactly like I did for him two nights prior. I lifted my head from my knees and struggled to see him through my

watery vision while gulping in air. He was crouched down inches in front of me, studying me carefully with his penetrating green eyes.

“What the fuck were you thinking, Bella?” he snapped, still holding my fists in his hands. I let out another loud, deep sob and shook my head again. His face softened, and he pulled me to him. I didn’t hesitate. I threw my arms around his shoulders and sobbed into his cold leather jacket. He stiffened for a moment, but eventually relaxed. Snaking his arms around me, he began rocking me back and forth slowly on the ground, running his fingers through my hair and shushing me.

I breathed in his scent greedily, letting it relax me along with his gentle caresses and embrace. He would alternate between caressing my hair and rubbing my back in soothing circular motions. He sat with me in his arms all through lunch and Biology.

Once my breathing finally returned to normal and I had no more tears in me, I gave Edward a final tight squeeze and stood up, wiping the remaining tears from my cheeks.

He looked like he was afraid I was going to breakdown on him again, so I smiled at him. A real smile, big and full of teeth. I was okay now.

He smiled back at me and stood up, wiping the grass off his jeans. “Don’t feel so bad.” He shrugged. “Emmett has that effect on women.” He smirked. I couldn’t help the loud laugh that escaped me.

For the first time, I actually made it to gym after my Weird Random Emotional Breakdown.

Chapter 10. Wrathful Walnut Fudge



I left Bella to go to English class with a heavy sigh. I've broken all of my fucking rules. I can't exactly regret doing it. I watched the whole thing play out from my table. My brave girl with her chin up and her back straight, looking all grown up and staring down the monster. Using poor, unsuspecting Emmett as her guinea pig. I was proud. Then I was hopeful. Then I was scared. Then I was pissed.

Admittedly, though I'd take the fact to my grave, a tiny part of my brain was contemplating whether or not this aversion of Bella's was as bad as she made it out to be. I'd never witnessed it first hand. And she had not only allowed me to touch her, but hold her against my body. It just seemed a little far fetched that I was really that different from everyone else.

But when I saw the whole thing happen, I felt like shit for even thinking something like that. Because obviously, it was exactly as bad as she made it out to be. That primary emotion of complete guilt is what compelled me to leave the lunchroom. Thankfully, Jazz hadn't noticed the Weird Emotional Breakdown unfolding behind him. So I gave him some bullshit story about how I had to go smoke a cigarette, and I ran after my girl.

When I found her at the back of the school, all fucking curled up and shaking, it was the complete opposite of the Bella I saw in the lunchroom, ready to face the monster. She looked just like a lost little girl, crying and gasping, and just needing someone to fucking be there. So I broke the rules. Because her monster won, and nothing I ever did could be worse than that.

Still, more than ever I needed to stick to the rules. Because if anyone *ever* found out I had Bella sleeping in my bed every night, they'd get it all wrong. They'd assume all the wrong shit. She'd be the victim, and I'd be the asshole manipulator. And Brandon would *definitely* have me arrested for some sick and twisted shit like that. And I wouldn't blame her one bit.



For the next week, Bella and I began to perfect a new routine. She came over earlier, at ten instead of midnight, and she still brought me dinner, and I still loved every fucking bite of it. She listened to music on her spot on the sofa and watched me eat. If we weren't really tired, she'd read one of my books while I sketched on the bed and we'd just fucking talk about all the bullshit that happened that day. When one of us decided we were too tired to make it any

longer, the other would stop what they were doing to get ready for bed. It was a very dependant situation. Always tit for tat.

My girl started feeling more comfortable being in my room. She told me that first night it was like her sanctuary, and as such, I happily granted her unrestricted access to my bathroom, which she used gratefully. She brought another, smaller bag with her, and would always spend at least ten minutes in the bathroom getting cleaned up at night.

When both of us were ready for bed, we would lay down fully clothed over the covers. Bella never removed her hoodie, and I never changed out of my school clothes. I figured we were both more comfortable with multiple layers between us. For the first few nights, there was still a distinct awkwardness that permeated the atmosphere as we climbed into bed. But it never lasted long once I turned the lamp off. It was like instinct or some shit. Turning towards each other and without hesitation, bringing the other into our arms. The feeling of Bella running her tiny fingers through my hair always made me sigh. That shit felt so fucking good. Then after a few moments she'd start humming to me, and I'd hug her to me even tighter, which she always seemed to like. I think that's what Bella's trigger was for sleep. She liked being held, feeling safe. And for some fucked up reason, I made her feel that way. So I never hesitated in holding her closer. And I could never help myself from gulping in the scent of her silky hair. Flowers and cookies. It was like a lullaby itself.

I'd always get to sleep first, but I never doubted that my girl was too far behind me. Somewhere during the night, our legs would become tangled in each other. But we slept hard. I mean, really fucking hard. Even the worst of Forks thunderstorms couldn't faze us. We never had a dream, and I never remembered anything from the night of sleep after that song.

In the mornings, the alarm clock would go off at exactly five thirty, even on the weekend. Bella hated that fucking clock. She'd always hug me tighter, willing the offensive screeching noise to go away, but I'd always pull away with a groan. Because I hated that fucking thing too, and I couldn't wait to make it stop.

She had a perfunctory ten minutes in the bathroom every morning. Doing whatever the fuck it is girls do in the mornings. Brushing her teeth or hair, or plotting to save baby seals or some shit. Fuck if I know. The bathroom would always be clear of any evidence of her when she came out, and she'd always pack her stuff up in her bag and sling it on her back. On the way out the door, she'd smile at me and drop off a bag of cookies on my night table. And I'd always smile back because those fucking cookies made my day.

Once she was safely down from the lattice – sometimes, when it was still really dark, I would peek out the curtains to make sure – I'd begin my own morning routine with a shower and shaving and just generally being a fucking normal person for once.

Jazz would still be waiting for me on his curb, but I'd usually make it to his house earlier than usual. Now that I slept, I felt safe speeding, which was something I found I got much enjoyment

out of. School was the same as always. I'd still avoid everyone, including Bella. I'd still cross her in the quad, but I didn't let myself look at her, because if I did, I'd probably smile at her. And everyone would be asking why Edward Cullen was smiling at the new girl. Fuck that. She never seemed to mind. And she really shouldn't considering I was closer to her than anyone else, including Jazz.

I could tell she was still tense at school. She'd make every effort necessary to distance herself from everyone. Always wearing her hood up and her head down, and never really talking to anyone except for Brandon. But she didn't have anymore breakdowns, thankfully.

I'd always spend lunch eating her delicious cookies. Jazz would always stare at the bag curiously, fucking dying to ask me where I got them, but knowing he couldn't. Then he'd go back to eating and daydreaming of fucking Brandon probably. I didn't care. Every now and then I would allow myself a glance at my girl's table where she was reading. She told me Emmett never mentioned the hand shaking incident again. I was glad about that, because I really didn't want to have to beat his ass. I was fairly confident it wasn't a fight I'd come out of unscathed. He's a big motherfucker. And Carlisle would be pissed. Not to mention, it wasn't really his fault to begin with.

We'd spend Bio casually ignoring each other. In the rare event we had to work together on an assignment, we'd talk as little as possible under the circumstances. Newton always kept his eyes conveniently away from us.

After school, I'd just drop Jazz off and go home. I'd wait in my room for Daddy C. to get home, and then sometimes I'd drag my ass down the stairs and talk to him a little. He liked that shit. He'd always prattle on about some new state of the art equipment or some new book he'd read. But I always avoided contact with Em. He still annoyed the shit out of me.

Then at ten, my girl would come climbing up to my balcony, and we'd start the routine all over again. All in all, the routine was perfect. After having it for only a week, I couldn't imagine ever living without it. It only made me further determined to stick firmly to my rules. Bella seemed happier than I'd ever seen her. And that shit made me happy too. She was even looking healthier. The circles were completely gone from her eyes after seven days, and I imagine mine were too. It was like being human for the first time.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I knew we were both becoming too dependent on the routine. That it couldn't last like this forever. So I resolved to just enjoy the shit out of it while I could.



One whole week. Seven nights of complete bliss with Edward. It was unlike anything I had ever experienced. I'd wait anxiously all day for ten-o'clock. I began coming over earlier. I told him it was because I wanted the extra sleep, but really I was just impatient to see him. To touch him. I found myself unconsciously making Alice, Esme, and I Edward's favorite dishes, and then packing all the leftovers away in my bag. I'd always start a fresh batch of cookies at precisely nine-o'clock, and instead of three Ziploc bags, there were now four.

I'd have to physically battle with myself not to walk out the door any earlier than ten. And I never saw the clock on the microwave read ten-oh-one. And if I thought I was a pro at climbing the lattice before, I could probably write an entire instruction manual now (Always start on fifth rung, avoid the twelfth from the left – it scratches the siding, when reaching the balcony, climb an extra six rungs to the railing, avoid the second from the right – it has a fracture, if you press the railing inward, it creaks).

Edward would always be waiting for me when I knocked on the door, and he'd always pull my hood off my head once I was in the room. For some reason he didn't like it. He'd eat in the middle of his bed, just like before, and I'd watch him eat, basking in his every moan and hum. I'd act like I was listening to music, but I'd really have one ear bud out just so I could hear him better.

A few days, we weren't really tired enough to go straight to bed. Well... he wasn't tired enough, I'd always be buzzing with impatience to get into the bed with him, no matter if I was tired or not. But regardless of my impatience, I still liked his company, and I loved talking to him. So I'd get one of his books and try reading it while he sketched. I never got far along in the book before we fell into an easy conversation.

I'd try to wait until he was tired enough to go to sleep, but there were a couple times I couldn't wait anymore, and I'd close my book to indicate I was ready. He didn't seem to mind cutting his sketching short. He let me use his bathroom to brush my teeth and hair, and wash my face. I couldn't bear the horror of going to bed next to Edward with bad breath. He never took a shower while I was there, so I assumed he was a morning showerer, like me. But he did spend a small amount of time in the bathroom while I waited in bed for him.

We never changed out of our school clothes. It was slightly uncomfortable, sleeping in jeans and a hoodie, but I felt too awkward to bring the subject up. And because we were fully clothed, and never got cold, we never slept under the blankets. The whole thing was intimate,

yet strangely business-like. But I couldn't bring myself to care. I was taking what I could get. And it was an awful lot.

Once the light was off, Edward wouldn't hesitate to turn toward me and scoop me up. I loved it. I lived for it. My head automatically went straight to its spot on his chest. Every night he would hold me progressively tighter, and being in the safety of his arms would always relax me. He loved it when I stroked his hair; he would always sigh into mine when I did it. And once I started humming his song, he would doze off quickly. I would stay up a little afterwards, just enjoying the moment and breathing him in. Pressing myself so close to him that our legs would get tangled up.

It was always dreamless, and I'd wake up to that stupid freaking alarm clock. I'd hold him tighter willing him not to pull away from me, but he always did. It was okay though, because I always told myself we could do it again in seventeen hours. *Not that I was counting or anything.*

I'd run to the bathroom as fast I could. My hair was always a mess. I think Edward really liked nuzzling his face into it. Which, of course, I didn't mind one bit. I'd be sure to pack all of my things up, before leaving him his bag of cookies on the bed side table. I'd always glare a dagger or two at the alarm clock as I was doing it.

I always got home and showered before Esme woke up, and usually had breakfast made for both her and Alice by the time they came into the kitchen. With the exception of a certain alarm clock, I found that I was a morning person. Who knew?

School usually soured my mood infinitesimally. I was so alert that everyone's presence seemed to invade my calm. I worked harder than ever to maintain my numb state. I figured it was working though, because I didn't have anymore breakdowns.

Edward still ignored me, but I was never expecting any different. He comforted me that day after my breakdown and broke the rules. It meant the world to me. But I didn't expect anything else out of it. By the time I see him in the quad, I only have twelve more hours to go. *Again, not that I'm counting or anything.* He always had the same bored look on his face, sparing the occasional glare at someone who walked too closely to him.

And lunch was always tense. Poor Emmett never tried talking to me again after I apologized on Friday, the day after the hand shaking incident. And as thus, I kept all my attention on my book and cookies. Though I'd spare myself a glance or two at Edward across the room, where he was always eating the cookies I left him that morning. It always made me smile. And I didn't mind one bit when he ignored me in Biology. I could smell him from my seat, and it always soothed my nerves.

Alice and I would go home and hang out after school. She would beg and plead with me to let her dress me up, and I would vehemently refuse. When she'd get pouty, all I'd have to do is make a comment on what Jasper was wearing that day. Then I'd spend hours listening about

him on her bed. It was something that made me feel like a normal girl. The only downfall being I couldn't get her back by droning on about Edward.

I wasn't ignoring my feelings for Edward. I knew I liked him as more than a friend, that I'd love for him to see me that way too. But it was obvious to me that it wasn't entirely like that for him. And I was nowhere near ready to put our whole arrangement on the line by making those feelings known. One part of me was hoping that eventually he would come to see me as more than just a friend and a means to an end. And another, larger part of me was feeling selfish for wanting more, when I was already getting so much as it was.



It was Friday again, and I was in gym, loving the fact it was my last class of the weekend. We had to dress out in those ugly gym uniforms, but the teacher let me keep my hoodie on. We were playing basketball, and thankfully the boys' and girls' teams were split up, so I wasn't in risk of being touched. Unfortunately, my good mood didn't last long because Jessica Stanley was on my team.

She was two seats down from me on the bleachers, her disgustingly curly hair all over the place, and she was leaning into Samantha who sat beside her as they both crudely smacked on bubble gum.

Jessica and Samantha were discussing their conquests while the girl teams were on the bleachers waiting for the guys to finish their game. And I wrestled and struggled not to listen to them and what they were saying. I was trying to focus on anything else; the texture of the basketball I was holding, the absurdity of wearing my hoodie sweater with gym shorts, the squeaks on the shiny wooden floor as the guys across the room skirmished for control over their ball, I even tried to discreetly put my hands over my ears. I was wishing I had my own iPod, and then distracting myself with ways I would hint to Alice to buy me one. But once his name was said, my mind automatically reacted against my will and everything else around me dissolved except the sound of her high, annoyingly nasal voice.

"Edward Cullen." Jessica said with a nod. I had no clue what was said before that, and I had no chance of blocking her out now. "Definitely best lay ever. Hands down. No competition."

My vision turned red and my blood boiled. I figured they had sex, but this was the first time I had any direct confirmation of it. Her ugly hair was just inches from my foot below me on the bleacher. I fantasized about lifting it just so, and kicking the crap out of her.

Samantha erupted into a fit of giggles. "Yeah, I totally should have known you'd say Cullen. Even if it was a back seat fuck." She shook her head in disapproval while Jessica just shrugged.

Now I had two conflicting emotions. I was beyond relieved that it wasn't in his bed. The same bed we slept together in. Knowing something like that would just completely ruin the sanctuary

for me. But now I had even more details that I *didn't* want to know. Now I had a visual in my head, and I *didn't* want it.

They both leaned back into the bleachers and placed their feet on the seats in front of them.

"So, Jess..." Samantha began in scandalous voice, "Give me the skinny on Cullen." She smirked.

I held my breath and fought with myself further to block out that annoying voice. *Ugly green shorts... Funny mascot... Freakishly shiny floor...*

"Fucking fantastic kisser..." Jessica smacked and twirled a lock of her hair.

I shook my head and tried to concentrate more on shielding myself, clenching my hands around the basketball I was holding. *Deflated gym equipment... Underfunded Washington school system... Grilled chicken pitas with vegetables...*

"And, sweet fucking Christ, Those hands..." she breathed dreamily.

I ground my teeth, bore down on the ball fiercely, and tried harder to distance my mind. *Pythagorean Theorem... Theory of Relativity... For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction...*

"Not to mention, he's the quiet type, so of course, he liked talking dirty." She snickered blowing a bubble.

I clenched my eyes closed and shook my head frantically, pressing my fingertips into the ball so hard they hurt, and willed myself not to hear her voice. *Bloody Newtons... Gold Carpet... Green eyes...*

Jessica licked her lips. "And the sounds he made when I sucked his-"

I shoved the ball hard into Jessica's ugly curly head, making her lurch forward and cutting her off mid sentence.

She grabbed the back of her head and spun around to face me. "Hey! What the fuck is your problem, freak!" She screeched

The gym immediately stilled at her incredibly loud and high pitched scream, and everyone turned to face me. My jaw was still clenched so hard my teeth hurt. I darted my eyes around the gym to take in all the confused stares. But I was used to people looking at me like I was a freak, and there was no way in hell I was apologizing to Jessica for what I did.

Just as I was about to stand up and walk away from this entire situation, the coach blew his whistle, signaling us to get to the locker rooms. Everyone put their balls down and began

walking out of the main gym, sparing glances in our direction. Jessica was still standing there glowering at me with a furious expression. I wasn't apologizing. I stood up, taller than her from the higher bleacher I was in, and stalked off toward the locker room with my hood up and my head down.



Ten-o'clock couldn't come soon enough. I had been in possibly the worse mood ever since gym class, and I knew only one person would be able to make it better. Every time I closed my eyes I could see it, and I didn't want to. I wanted to pour bleach into my brain to get the visuals out. I wanted to find some way to erase my memory of all the things she said. But no matter what I did, it was always there, in the forefront, driving me insane.

Really it was irrational for me to be so jealous of Jessica. Sure, she had Edward in ways that I probably never would. But I had Edward in ways she *definitely* never would. Still, it provided me with little comfort.

So when the time came, I packed up the *Wrathful Walnut Fudge* cookies I had just made, adding them to my already filled back sack of food for Edward, and bolted out the door.

I knocked rapidly on his glass French door, tapping my foot impatiently. Finally he came, standing before me in his black shirt and dark jeans, hair falling into his green eyes, and a calm expression on his face. He moved so I could enter, and as soon as the door was closed, he reached up, like always, and brought my hood down. *With those hands*. I cringed a bit, and went to unloading his meal for him.

He ate happily. Too happily. All those moans and hums just made my visuals clearer. *And the sounds he made...* Jessica's voiced cooed in my mind. I cringed again.

I was tense on his couch, bouncing one leg up and down rapidly, tapping my knee with my hand. I had to erase it. I had to do something to get those pictures out of my head.

"What's up with you?" Edward's silky voice asked from the bed after he finished eating.

I just shook my head at him and attempted a smile that was probably tight, and not the least bit believable. "Not a thing." I replied sweetly.

"Bullshit." Edward said simply, cocking an eyebrow expectantly.

I let out a deep sigh. He could always tell when something was wrong. I should have known. I leaned down and untied my shoes to hug my knees. He was still staring at me, waiting for an answer when I got settled. There was no way I could tell Edward what was really bothering me. It would be too obvious. So, instead I decided to do the same thing he did to me often.

"I just had a really crappy day." It wasn't a lie. He looked like he was waiting for me to expand on that comment, but there was no way I would.

"Okay." He said slowly, eyeing me cautiously. "You want to talk about it?" he asked concerned. I shook my head slowly and closed my eyes, praying he wouldn't push this. The room was silent for a long while, and I kept my eyes closed.

"Hey." Edward whispered softly. I opened my eyes slowly, pleading with my gaze to just *please drop it*.

He stared at me like that for a few minutes. Then slowly he raised his arms out in front him, as if offering to hug me. I didn't hesitate. I got off the sofa and tried to walk as slowly as I could to his bed. It was still a sprint. I climbed up and flew into his arms, almost knocking him over with the force of it. I buried my head into the crook of his neck, breathing in his scent and letting it relax me while he hugged me to him tightly.

He never said anything. Just reached behind him and turned the light off before laying us down into our usual position. After a long while of him caressing my hair and rubbing my back, I was tired. So I began stroking his hair and humming his song, lulling him to sleep. It didn't take long.

I could feel his hands on my back, tangled in my hair, and I let the feel of it erase the visions of his hands on Jessica. After all, I was the one in his bed at night.

Chapter 11. Scooby Snacks



I spent my Saturday cleaning, doing schoolwork, and two hours of grocery shopping. I was in desperate need of an ingredient restock. My mood over the whole Jessica situation was somewhat lessened. I still fantasized about strangling her, maybe finding a nice secluded pond to dump the body, but that was a feeling that would never go away. Alice was spending the weekend at Rose's house, probably spying on Jasper for all I knew, so I was left home alone, and utterly bored for the day.

So when ten arrived, I happily skipped out the door and made my way over to Edward's house. I had made him his favorite dinner. Chicken Alfredo. A silent thank you for the night before, and a little something to butter him up for what was coming tonight. I also made him his favorite peanut butter cookie, *Peanut Butter Panacea*, just for safe measure tomorrow.

When I arrived, he was waiting, looking really very hungry.

"Hungry are we?" I smirked while unloading my bag. He was eyeing it like Emmett sometimes eyes Rosalie.

"Fucking starving." He breathed while taking the container off the bed. I smiled and made my way to the sofa, plopping down quite comfortably.

"Holy fuck." Edward groaned from the bed. "My favorite." He took a deep lungful of the steaming container in reverently and smiled dreamily. I chuckled at him. He was so cute when he was hungry like this.

He began eating hastily like always, spinning the noodles around the fork and savoring the taste with 'Mmm's'.

My bag was a little heavier tonight. I was about to do something very awkward and possibly make Edward ridiculously uncomfortable. I watched him closely, not even bothering with the iPod, because I was nervous as to what his reaction would be. I took a steadying breath, and tried to keep the inevitable color from flooding my cheeks.

"Edward?" I called quietly, watching him gulp down the noodles.

All I got was a distracted “Hmmm?”. It was actually one half “Hmm” and one half “Mmm”. That was okay though, because I was pretty confident the next sentence out of my mouth would get me his undivided attention.

“I brought pajamas.” I blurted quickly. His fork stopped mid twirl, and he snapped his head up to meet my gaze. And then... because I was Bella, I blushed furiously.

“Oh.” He said, keeping his mouth in the ‘o’ part for a beat longer than necessary. He cleared his throat, and slowly resumed his twirling. “Okay.”

For some reason I felt the need to explain. “I mean, it’s just uncomfortable sleeping in jeans, you know?” I asked, my face still burning.

He bobbed his head. “Yeah, I don’t mind.” He shrugged one shoulder and popped the fork into his mouth.

“I wouldn’t mind if you wanted to... wear something more comfortable.” I said nervously, my face getting impossibly hotter. He took a very large gulp of the alfredo, and blindly reached back to his night stand to get his drink.

After a few thoughtful gulps, he lowered the can of soda. “Umm...” He began raking his fingers through his hair nervously. “Yeah. Okay.” He answered lamely, putting the soda back down and resuming the twirling of the pasta once again.

I relaxed infinitesimally. Edward ate the rest of the alfredo with a slightly furrowed brow, like he was struggling to remember something. The moans and hums lessened, but didn’t go away entirely. I must not have made him *that* uncomfortable.

“Thanks for the Alfredo. It was fucking delicious.” He smiled while putting his containers away beside the bed. I smiled back; because I loved it that he always told me how delicious my food was. And somehow I don’t think it would have been the same without the expletives.

He got his sketch book out then, and relaxed in the center of the bed. *Ahh, not tired yet.* I walked over to his bookcase and selected the book I had begun reading a week ago. A chapter a night was all I usually got.

Tonight it was 4. We were stalling.

Eventually, I decided to just get it over with. I shut my book. He looked up from his sketch book and slowly closed it. I nearly regretted doing this at all. All the former awkwardness was returning, and my face was flaming red, I was sure. But I soldiered on. And by soldiered, I mean I grabbed my bag up off the floor and shuffled my way to the bathroom nervously with my head down.

Once I was inside and had the door shut I turned to look in the mirror. *Yep. Flaming red.* I rolled my eyes at my reflection, and started undressing. It wasn't a skimpy pajama set or anything. Just some long flannel bottoms and a light t-shirt. It was comfortable. *And awkward.*

Once I had brushed my teeth and hair, I packed my things away into my bag, and stared at the door nervously. With one last glare at my red face in the mirror, I opened the door and stepped out. White cotton shirt, blue flannel pajamas bottoms and all. *Red, White, and Blue. So patriotic.* I thought sarcastically.

Edward's head shot up from the dresser drawer when he heard the door open. He seemed to be staring at my arms, which was weird. But he eventually closed the drawer and strolled into the bathroom behind me, holding a lump of clothing in his hands. *Stupid, stupid, stupid!* I was screaming on the inside.

I made my way to the bed and climbed on to it. I briefly wondered if I should crawl under the covers, but decided I'd leave that up to Edward. I'd already plunged him into quite enough for one night. I settled down on my back to wait for him, like I always did. I could faintly hear when he turned the water on, likely brushing his teeth.

When I finally heard the bathroom door open, I lifted my head. And there Edward stood, looking as awkward as I'd ever seen him, raking his hands through his hair with a grimace on his face. In an almost tight white t-shirt like the one I was wearing. I could make out nearly every curve of his chest and stomach. In fact, all too late I realized I was staring, and I looked away quickly. Still blushing. But then I caught a glance at the pants he had on. They were flannel, a lot like mine, but they had the cutest little cartoon Scooby Doo print all over them. I couldn't help myself. I had to laugh. I shot my hand up to my mouth to stifle my giggles, but Edward was just standing there glaring at me with narrowed eyes.

"Don't fucking laugh at me." He growled. This just made me laugh louder, because he was trying so hard to sound intimidating wearing little cartoon Scoobies all over his legs. He glowered harder and stalked over to the bed. "I mean it, cut that shit out. These were bought as joke." I was still giggling, because it was funny, I couldn't help it. He rolled his eyes up to the ceiling and held them there, shaking his head. "Fucking Jazz...." He muttered quietly.

I let my giggling die down, happy that at least the tension in the room was gone. And I smiled at him. He just rolled his eyes again and began climbing into bed. But then he stopped, and pulled the covers down, glancing at me uncertainly. I answered his silent question by arching my back off the bed and reaching behind me to slide the covers down and slipped under them.

Edward got under the covers with me and reached over to the bedside lamp to turn it off. Once the room was dark, we turned towards each other like we always did and scooted as close as we could. Edward wrapped his arms around me and brought me to him tightly. I put my arm around his shoulder and up his back to stroke his hair gently while resting my head on his chest.

He sighed into my hair, and it made me shiver slightly, so he held me closer. I started humming his song, but his voice stopped me.

“You tell anyone about the fucking pants, and so help me god, Bella, you’ll be sorry.” Edward said in a hard voice against the top of my head. I let another giggle slip out, and I could practically hear him rolling his eyes at me. I nodded and resumed humming to him. After he was asleep, I allowed myself to move closer to his body. I could feel all of his warmth, and nearly every curve of his body. No more jeans or sweaters in between us. Just Scooby Doos. I smiled into his chest and drifted off to sleep.

Edward

WIDE AWAKE

Fucking Jazz and his stupid fucking Scooby Doo pants. Prick. But they were all I had. I had never had the use for pajamas before Bella. And then there were Bella’s pajamas, which were modest to anyone else, but on Bella, it just didn’t seem right to me. Her arms were showing again, and I got that same feeling of obscenity looking at them. And I could feel so much more of her too without that hoodie sweater on. She was so much softer, which was both comfortable and awkward all at the same time.

When we woke up that morning, I didn’t get out from under the covers. I didn’t think I could stand all the goddamn giggles anymore. Although, I must admit, I had never seen my girl laugh like that. The humiliation was definitely worth it. Sort of. Maybe.

Something was definitely wrong with Bella Friday night. It was more than just ‘a really crappy day’ too. Once she was out the door to get home that morning, I reached over the bedside table and plucked up the bag of cookies. *Wrathful Walnut Fudge*. I knew how my girl worked. The names of her new recipes were always related to some significant event in her day. And something made my girl Wrathful. That is one fucking random emotion.

When Bella was dressed and packed up, she deposited a bag of cookies on the table like always, and slipped out. She made my favorite. *Peanut Butter Panaceas*. The bag was gone by noon.

I ended up going to town that afternoon. Because I *had* to buy some new fucking pajamas.



By the time Bella came at ten that night, I was better prepared for the whole pajama scenario, and also fucking starving. She brought me steak tonight, which I felt was a little extravagant, but who the fuck was I to question good beef?

She took her seat at my sofa and began listening to the iPod while I resumed my spot on the bed and began eating the steak. Fucking, Delicious. I know I say it to her a lot, but I mean it every time. She watched me eat like always, occasionally humming along to the song that was playing, which, of course made me even more tired than I already was.

I didn't stall like I did last night, having more confidence in my sleeping attire and hers. When she returned from the bathroom in the same clothes she wore last night, she was still blushing. It was so fucking cute. And completely uncalled for. I got dressed for bed... a new part of the routine... and exited the bathroom comfortably. Even though I was wearing new, and much more manly, plain black pants, she still fucking snickered. Likely remembering the Scooby Doo. She'd never let me live that shit down. I cursed Jasper and his stupid fucking jokes.

We climbed under the covers comfortably. After I turned out the light, I scooped her little soft body up and pressed it to me. She was always so warm. I sighed into her hair again when she began stroking mine. And like last night, a delicate little shiver went through her, so I held her tighter. Once she started humming, I was gone. Dreamless. Warm. Soft.

Chapter 12. Fudge You Alls

Edward WIDE AWAKE

It was the very first day in well over a week I didn't eat my cookies at lunch. No fucking way was I letting Jazz see the name of the cookies. He came strutting into the lunchroom in his holey jeans and grubby band shirt, peeking sideways at Brandon's table. And I just had to roll my fucking eyes. I was giving it a month. If he didn't man up by then, I was taking the situation into my own hands. My girl would give me a hand.

He took his seat in front of me without a word, searching the table in front of me for something. Probably the absent bag of cookies I'd just eat on the way home or some shit. After eating half of his disgustingly greasy school burger, he turned in his seat to glance back at my girl's table where she was reading and eating her fucking Scooby Snacks.

Jasper turned back around with a wide smile. "So, word has it that new girl over there?" He pointed with his thumb back toward Bella. "Has added violence and bodily injury to her repertoire." He smirked and took a drink of milk.

I furrowed my brow. *What the fuck is he talking about?* "How so?" I asked casually, as to not raise any suspicions.

He chuckled then, trying to hold it in long enough to spit the words out. "I heard that she assaulted Stanley with a basketball in gym Friday." He snickered shaking his head.

This was certainly a new development. Why the fuck would Bella assault Stanley? Not that the thought of it didn't make me want to laugh too. Because, sincerely, it did.

Jazz continued on after his chuckling fit calmed down. "Just fucking took the ball and chucked it at her head." He started laughing harder. "I know, I know right?" He snickered. "Balls flying at Stanley's head. Just sounds like another day to me." He chuckled harder at his own joke.

My stomach sank. Friday was Bella's 'really crappy day'. And somehow, that fucking bitch Stanley was involved. My fists clenched. No wonder Bella wouldn't tell me about what was bothering her. I offered Jazz a devious smirk; because that's what he'd expect out of me from that story. And if it were anyone else doing it, I probably would without effort.

We were silent the rest of lunch. And I really fucking tried to just let it go, and make up my mind to not pry. But I couldn't. Because I had to know just how badly I was going to have fuck that Stanley bitch up. Whoever invented the term 'It's not polite to hit a girl' has clearly never fucked Jessica Stanley. It took me *months* to get her off my back after that one night. Phone calls, letters in my locker, she even told her fucking friends about my scars. And *that* wasn't enough to make me want to hit her. But I couldn't let her spread her venom to my girl.

When I walked into Bio, Bella was already in her seat, with that fucking hood up. I had never felt the urge so strongly to yank it off her head. She was hiding. She was hiding shit from *me*. I didn't like it.

Once I got settled into my seat and Mr. Banner started his lecture on DNA, I ripped a piece of paper from my notebook, and began writing Bella a note. It was against the rules. But I could give a fuck less at that moment.

What the fuck did Stanley do to you?

I folded the paper up nice and small and slid it to her side of the lab table. She looked at it incredulously. She wasn't expecting me to break the rules either. Hesitantly, she picked up the note and began unfolding it.

I watched her reaction closely. I didn't give a fuck who saw me looking at her. Her eyes widened and she stiffened. She sat there for a while, just staring at the note, before she slumped into her seat and frowned, and then lifted her pencil to the paper and scribbled a reply. It was too fucking quick. She folded it carefully and slid it back to me slowly. I opened it; kind of pissed I knew I wasn't going to get a sufficient explanation right now.

Tonight.

Was all it said. I balled my fist with the paper still in it, and threw the crumpled ball into my bag. I sent a very pointed glance into her big brown eyes. *Yes. Tonight.* No fucking way was she weaseling out of this one. She slumped further into her seat and dropped her head even lower. Shame. That's what the look was. And I didn't know why she felt ashamed, but I was going to find out.

When the bell rang, I left the classroom first, but I didn't go to my class just yet. I waited until Bella walked out, hood up and head down, traveling towards gym. I followed behind her a few feet. Everyone seemed to swerve around her. It was like parting the red sea or some shit. They didn't even look at her anymore; they just got out of the fucking way. It was kind of shitty, and it was kind of good, all at the same time.

As we approached the gym, I could see Stanley and her bunch of rabid skank hyenas gathering near the entrance. I stopped so I wouldn't be seen, and casually leaned against the brick wall.

When Bella walked up to the doors, Stanley glowered at her, following her with an evil eye. If looks could kill, I'd be scraping up my girl's corpse from that gym entrance.

Stanley never said anything to her, just fucking followed her in. And then I was even more pissed, because I knew that all those dirty skanks were going to go into that locker room and fuck with my girl. And there wasn't a goddamn thing I could do about it.



When the last bell rang, I rushed to the parking lot. I had to get one look at Bella, just to make sure she was okay. I stood against the door of my Volvo, watching the gym entrance anxiously. The guys filtered out first, looking sweaty and gross, and a whole lot like Emmett on a practice day. After all the guys were gone, the girls began filtering out. I straightened my back to get a better view through the crowd. Stanley and her skanks walked out looking as slutty as ever, smacking on bubble gum and snickering. Of course that just made me worry even more. Finally, the last out of the gym, Bella came shuffling out. But she had that goddamn hood up and her head down. Still fucking hiding. Brandon was already in her car, waiting to get home. And when Bella turned to open the door, she lifted her head just enough so that I could get one glance at her face as she got in.

Her eyes were red, and puffy, and I knew my girl well enough to know she had been crying. She climbed into Brandon's Porsche and closed the door quietly. Not an angry slam, not a wrathly slam, but a quiet, timid click. My stomach clenched even tighter as I watched them drive away.

I drove Jazz home feeling pretty fucking somber. He didn't say shit to me. He knew my moods well enough to know if I was conversational. He got out with a quick wave when I pulled up to his house. I sped home faster than usual. It was stupid to do. It's not like it would make the clock move any closer to ten.

I waited in my room. Pacing and running my fingers through my hair and just trying to stay occupied until ten came. I sketched some more, I even read a little of Bella's book. When Carlisle came home, I went downstairs and talked to him, just to pass the time. He didn't have anything ridiculously interesting to say. But, he was going to another medical conference this weekend, and I was pretty fucking positive that meant another house party, but I kept my mouth shut. Because honestly, I wouldn't be entirely opposed to spending a night getting fucked up.

When it was almost ten, I opened the balcony door and stood out there waiting in the cold. I could see Bella coming from the Brandon house as she walked out the door to the kitchen with her bag on her back like always. I watched her stalk across the yard, slowly, like she was delaying the inevitable. And she still had that hood on her head. I peered over the railing, leaning on my forearms, watching her climb up the lattice like a 'pro'.

When she reached the railing, I went to help her over, but she was so good at doing it, she hopped onto the balcony before I even got the chance. As soon as her feet were firmly planted, I reached up and snatched that fucking hood off her head. *No more hiding*. She never looked me in the eye; just walked into my room and started unpacking her bag like it was any other night.

I stood, leaning against the balcony door after I closed it, with my arms crossed over my chest. I was *not* fucking hungry. For my girl's cooking. "I want my cookies." I stated simply. It would tell me exactly how Bella felt today.

She paused, but proceeded to reach into the sack and brought out a bag of cookies, laying it on the bed next to the food.

She shuffled her way to her spot on the sofa and sunk into it, looking like a little girl who just got in trouble with daddy. I stood, waiting, expectant. But she just sat there on the sofa, staring at her hands in her lap that were picking at her sleeves. I cleared my throat. Loudly. *Spit it the fuck out*.

She closed her eyes and shook her head slowly. "You're not going to let this go are you?" she whispered.

I snorted. "Fucking right I'm not going to let this go. Talk." I ordered, not moving from my spot, still crossing my arms over my chest.

She let out a deep sigh. "You eat. I'll talk." She whispered, and bent down to untie her shoes. So she could go fetal on my couch.

Food was really the last thing I was interested in, but I humored her. Sitting down in the middle of my bed and taking a peek at the bag of cookies before I did anything. *Fudge you all*. I shook my head at the bag. That shit didn't help me. I set it on my bedside table and took the container of... enchiladas into my lap. I picked up the fork she brought for me and sliced off a bite and ate it.

When I looked up from the enchiladas, she was watching me eat. Like always. Her eyes were tired, and held some kind of sadness I couldn't quite comprehend.

I quirked an eyebrow at her. "Don't assume that I don't find it deeply fucking amusing, but could you please tell me why you hit Stanley?" I asked taking another bite of the food, but keeping all of attention on her.

She grimaced and hugged her knees tighter. She cast her eyes down to my carpet. "She was in front of me on the bleachers Friday." She started, and paused to knit her eyebrows together and shake her head. "Her and Samantha were talking about..." She paused again and grimaced. "About... all the guys they had slept with." I wanted to joke with her and say something like

'Wow, I'll bet that was one long fucking conversation... literally.' But I couldn't, because this was going somewhere very unfunny. "And I tried to just block them out, because I didn't really want to hear it... but then..." She paused yet again and let out a huff. "Then Jessica said your name." she said in a tiny voice.

I completely froze mid chew. I hadn't told Bella about the Stanley situation. At least not entirely. And now she knew.

She looked up at me carefully. I'm sure I looked stunned. "And then... I tried even harder to block it all out, because I really didn't want to hear what they were saying about you." She whispered.

I swallowed the bite that had frozen in my mouth with a heavy gulp. "What were they saying about me?" I hedged carefully. Imagine the first party, hearing it coming from a fourth party.

She shrugged and began picking at her sleeve cuffs again. "Jessica was giving Samantha... details." She croaked.

Then my heart sank. Because the only detail I knew Stanley loved giving and I could really imagine Bella hearing and getting protective of me over were my scars. She was staring at the carpet again, still picking at her sleeves.

"Were they talking about my..." I paused and closed my eyes. "About my scars." I asked through clenched teeth.

Bella's head shot up and she looked at me blankly. "What scars?" she asked incredulously.

Holy fucking Christ.

I groaned and dropped my fork into my container of enchiladas. "I take that as a no." I covered the container and placed it beside my bed. My appetite was gone.

She furrowed her brows and frowned. "No, I didn't hear anything about that. You have scars?" She asked quietly. Then her face fell completely as understanding lit her face. "From the fire?" she whispered. I grimaced and nodded my head. I should have never taken my shirt off in front of that fucking skank.

"I'm sorry, I didn't know." She frowned. I wanted to bitch at her for doing the sorry thing again, but the more important matter still wasn't answered.

"So..." I tried to get us back on track after I accidentally confessed something very personal. "If that wasn't it, then why did you do it?" I asked, grabbing my sketchbook out from under my bed.

She grimaced yet again and hugged her knees tighter. "Jessica was being very.... Graphic. Descriptive." She whispered. Then added, "About you. And the things you..." she trailed off, shaking her head fiercely.

But I got it. I wouldn't want to hear anyone talking about Bella like that either.

I sighed and softened my face. "You didn't like hearing them talk about me like that?" It was more of a statement than a question.

She bit her lip, hugging her knees, and fiddling with the fabric of her jeans. Then she nodded. "Yes. I didn't like hearing them talk about you like that." She concluded decisively, still nodding.

I smiled in understanding. That wasn't so bad. I'd hate to think of what I would do to some guy giving details about being with Bella. I'd probably have to stab the motherfucker. I'd probably enjoy it quite thoroughly. A basketball isn't much. Which brings me to the next topic...

I began a new sketch, just to keep myself occupied in case Jessica did something really fucked up to my girl. "So what did that skank do to you today in gym?" I asked while moving my pencil over the page.

I could almost hear Bella's grimace. "What do you mean?" She asked shakily. *Ahh... pay dirt.*

I huffed, slightly annoyed that she was still being so goddamn evasive. "Don't pull that bullshit with me, Bella. I saw you come out of the gym. You were crying. What did they say to you?" I looked up from the page then, and she looked really fucking sad. And I knew, in the very depths of my soul, that it was Stanley's fucking fault. I gripped my pencil tighter waiting for her to answer me.

"They didn't say anything that wasn't true, Edward." She smiled. But it wasn't a smile at all. It was full of bitterness and pain, and it made me want to hunt Stanley down and stab her a little too.

I gripped my pencil even tighter. "Why don't you just fucking tell me what they said, and let me decide for myself?" I snapped.

Bella's jaw tensed, and she clenched her fists into tight little balls on top of her knees, so hard her knuckles were white and taught. And she had the most heartbreaking look in her eyes of just complete and utter frustration and bitterness. "They told me I was a freak, and that I was only pissed off at Jessica because I was a prude. And they said I was only a prude because no one would ever fucking touch me." She spat venomously... bitterly.

I blanched. I blanched and fucking flinched away from her voice. Because of all the nights I had spent talking to Bella about the most awful things in our lives, I had *never* once heard her loose her cool so fucking completely. And I had *never* heard her curse.

I sat there on my bed staring wide eyed at my girl. “That’s bullshit.” I breathed. I was pissed at them for even saying it to her, but I was too stunned by Bella’s complete change in behavior to inject any of the anger necessary into my voice.

She let out a loud, humorless chuckle, and gave me that same bitter smile. “Is it, Edward?” She croaked, sounding on the verge of tears. “Is it really bullshit? I don’t think it is. I think that I’m always going to be this way.” One lone tear slid down her cheek, and her eyes flashed with an anger I didn’t even think Bella capable of as she swatted it away violently. “I’ll never be able to touch a man. I’ll never have a first kiss, I’ll never get married, and I’ll always hate bitches like Jessica fucking Stanley who can and take it all for granted.” She spat, letting the sobs take her over.

And I was fucking done. Done hearing Bella be so goddamn bitter. Done watching her cry over something that fucking bitch told her. I threw my sketchbook down and jumped off the bed, sprinting over to my girl across the room, sitting on the couch, all fucking fetal and sobbing into her knees. I bent down and grabbed her by the shoulders and pried her apart, lifting her until she was standing, and I crushed her to me. Hugging her as tight as I could without just completely fucking suffocating her. She was sobbing so hard and loud she couldn’t even stand up, but I was holding her too tight to let her fall. She fisted her little hands into my shirt, burying her face into my chest, soaking me with all her tears. And I didn’t give a shit. I wanted her to get all that bitterness and frustration out. I couldn’t bear to see it poison her.

I turned us around and sat us down on the couch slowly, letting her little body fall into my lap. She was still sobbing so hard it made her whole body shake. I rocked her slowly, and I stroked her hair and rubbed her back, just like that day behind the school almost two weeks ago. That day she tried to be brave and all grown up and face down the monster that was creating all of this bitterness in the first place. The monster always fucking beat her. And it was the only monster in this whole fucked up situation I couldn’t physically harm.

I sat there on that cold leather couch rocking her for what seemed like hours. Just fucking letting her cry it all out. It eventually subsided to whimpers. And then it became sniffles. And then it became steady calming breaths. And eventually, she was all cried out. All of her bitterness and anger spilled all over my shirt.

She didn’t let go after the tears stopped coming and she calmed down. She had her eyes open, staring off into space with her cheek pressed against my chest. She didn’t look tired, and she didn’t look pissed off. She just looked fucking numb.

“Bella?” I whispered, still stroking her hair down her back, while I lazily laid my head against the back of the sofa, looking down my nose at her face.

“Hmm?” She hummed, never moving her eyes.

"I think you should know... you've got one dirty fucking mouth." I said, attempting to make her smile. Even a little bit.

And it worked. One side of her mouth twitched up, and slowly, it turned into a little smile. Then after a moment it turned into a chuckle. And I thanked whatever fucking god there was out there looking out for me that I could make my girl laugh again, and I didn't have to resort to the Scooby pants to make it happen.

"I learned from the best." She shrugged inside my arms with a small smirk on her face. Then I had to chuckle. Because I did have a pretty fucking dirty mouth.

With a deep sigh, Bella reluctantly lifted herself off of my lap, gave me a little smile, and silently walked to the bathroom with her bag to get ready for bed.

My shirt really was fucking soaked. It was kind of gross. But I still didn't give a shit. It was completely worth it. When she walked back out of the bathroom ten minutes later in her pajamas, she didn't blush. Something told me I just saw a lot more of her than just her arms. A part she never let me see before. I got ready for bed after that. I almost considered wearing the Scooby pants anyways, just to hear that giggle again. But decided I had plenty more 'dirty mouth' jokes to keep me in good supply for the night.

When I walked back out of the bathroom in my pajamas, Bella was sitting on the sofa again, which was weird, because she usually waited for me in bed. I cocked an eyebrow at her.

"If you don't mind, I just want to sit for a while." She whispered, pleading with her swollen red eyes. I nodded. I didn't mind staying up. I got back on my bed and went to resume the sketch I had started earlier. But it was tainted with Bella's bitterness, so I tore the page out and balled it up, throwing it into the trash, and starting a new one.

It was really fucking eating at me though, that Bella really thought like that.

"Did you really mean all that stuff you said before?" I asked in a quiet voice, not looking up from my sketch.

I heard one of Bella's residual snuffles. "About not being able to do stuff?" She said in a simple voice, like she just fucking accepted it for what it was.

I nodded and furrowed my brows in concentration. "Yeah. You don't ever hope it will get better? That it will just fucking go away?" I asked incredulously while shading my paper with my pencil.

She sniffled again. "Nope. I'll never have a first kiss, and you'll always be the only man I can touch." I could almost hear her shrugging, like it was no big fucking deal.

I scoffed. I wanted to make her laugh again; I wanted to hear that chuckle, not the bitterness, and definitely not the acceptance. I snorted in a chuckle myself while shading harder on the paper. "You sound like you want me to kiss you." I snickered with a smirk.

I was expecting to hear her snort, or laugh, or scoff, or maybe even fucking slap the shit out of it for suggesting something so ludicrous, but I was met with complete and total fucking silence. My pencil in my hand froze, leaving the dark area of my drawing only half shaded, and my smirk vanished from my face.

Slowly, I lifted my head from the sketchbook to see her. And she was looking down at her book fucking blushing,

Holy fucking Christ.

She really fucking did. She really wanted me to give her her first kiss. But I couldn't just do that. Not with Bella. Not unless she came out and asked.

She glanced up at me from her book, as I'm sure I was staring at her looking a little fucking stunned. Then she blushed harder, and looked away quickly.

All the air left my lungs. "Bella..." I started cautiously. "If you want something like that, you're going to have to ask me. No bullshit beating around the bush." I said bluntly. I couldn't assume she wanted something like that and then just fucking do it. Then I really would look like the asshole manipulator.

She kept her flaming red face downward, still having a few residual snuffles. "Would you say yes?" She whispered.

Then I really had to fucking think. It would be awkward as hell. It might cost us the whole routine. That's a whole fucking lot to put on the line. But, on the other hand, it was an experience Bella really wanted... needed. It was something that would help rid her of some of that ugly bitterness I hated.

I took a deep breath. She still hadn't lifted her gaze away from the carpet. "Would it make shit weird?" I asked, grasping for some reassurance that the routine wouldn't go away.

She shook her head slowly, never looking up. "Not for me." She whispered softly, fingering the pages of her book.

I closed my sketchbook in my lap softly and set my pencil down, never taking my eyes off of her. If it wouldn't make shit weird for her, then I wouldn't let it make shit weird for me. "Okay." I said conclusively. Her head snapped up and her eyes widened slightly. And just when I thought she couldn't get a deeper shade of red, she did. I had to hold back a chuckle.

“Come on.” I said, patting the bed in front of me. She eyed the spot in front of me dubiously for a moment, but eventually closed her book, and laid it on the couch beside her. Slowly, she rose up off the sofa and shuffled her way over to the bed.

Once she reached the edge, she pressed her palms down on the mattress and climbed up, crawling over to the piece of bed in front of me. She was looking at me skeptically as she mirrored my position on the bed, sitting Indian style with her legs crossed, so close our knees were touching. I wanted to snicker at her again, I couldn’t help it. She looked so much like a little girl about to learn something new, wide eyed and nervous as fuck. But I couldn’t laugh at my girl. It was something new to her. A kiss to her was probably pretty fucking scandalous.

I scooted closer to her, so that her knees were overlapping mine and took in a deep breath. Her face was flushed and she was nervous, but I could see the flash of excitement in her eyes. It only made her look cuter. I fought the urge to chuckle yet again.

“Close your eyes.” I ordered softly. When she let them flutter closed I added, “And relax.” She did infinitesimally. I leaned into her and put my hands on either side of her hips on the mattress so I could hold myself closer. She looked fucking tense still, but there wasn’t anything I could do about it now. I leaned in until my nose was nearly touching hers, and I could feel her breathing pick up against my face.

Easily, to test her a bit, I tilted my head and gently grazed her lips with mine. She was completely fucking frozen. I rolled my eyes and lifted one of my hands and cupped her cheek to relax her face, rubbing her cheek with my thumb. It did the trick. She finally eased up and her lips slightly parted.

I tried it again, leaning my head to the side and grazing her lips. This time she responded. Softly pouting her lips to me. I gently took her top lip in between mine, and she took my bottom in hers. It was soft, and warm, just like my girl always was. I pulled away gently, but went back again, to give her something firmer. She seemed to get the gist of the whole thing, taking my bottom lip with slightly more vigor. I pulled her face to mine harder with my hand, and tangled it into her hair, gently sucking on her top lip, then pulled away slightly again. We did that a couple more times, just soft and easy. It was all I was expecting. But suddenly on the last one, I felt Bella’s soft warm tongue touch my lip.

I was debating if I should really do all that. Then I reminded myself I was doing this for Bella, and if she wanted the full kissing experience, fuck it... I would give it to her. So I darted my tongue out to meet hers. And when they touched she parted her lips more and took my tongue into her mouth. It was so fucking warm and soft, and it was getting progressively more difficult to keep that switch in the off position. Then I felt her soft little hand slide up my arm and around my neck, until she had it tangled into the back of my head pulling me closer. And then she was kissing me like a pro. Pressing her soft little tongue into mine, gently at first, then harder, then she was in *my mouth*. And we were both breathing pretty fucking hard by then, and I didn’t even have to press her head closer, because her little fist was pressing my face as

close as it would go. But when she began pressing her body against mine, that switched just fucking flipped. And before I could stop it, my entire body was reacting to the kiss. I brought my other hand up and pulled her neck closer. I felt her warm body against me, almost in my lap. I groaned, loudly into her mouth, and I froze.

I used my hands to gently push myself from her grasp, and leaned back into my spot panting. Feeling really fucking thankful I had that sketchbook in my lap. Bella didn't move from her spot or even open her eyes for a few moments. Just sat there with her hands on her lap catching her breath and licking my taste off her lips.

When she finally caught her breath and opened her eyes, she smiled at me. Big and fucking goofy as hell. And I rolled my eyes at her and smiled back. She looked like someone just told her Santa was real or some shit, and she chuckled a little bit at me for the eye roll, but I didn't care.

She didn't say anything or make it awkward, just hopped under the covers on her side of the bed. Ready to go to sleep. My... situation... was abated by then, so I discarded the sketch book and got under the covers right along with her. I turned the lamp off and scooped up my girl, shoving my face into her hair, and showing her that someone could touch her. And I could almost hear her smile when she started humming me to sleep. No more angry, no more sad, and no more bitter.

Chapter 13. Black Leather Ladyfingers



Edward kissed me. And not just a little peck either. Full out, tongues and panting, and even a groan at the end. And even though I have no basis for comparison, I'm inclined to agree with Jessica... *Fucking fantastic kisser.*

I know it was a pity kiss. And I'd be lying more than a little bit if I said I wasn't steering him in that direction. Maybe it was wrong of me to do it, but I can't seem to care. When he agreed, I was still kind of shocked. He just had a look of determination on his face. He was going to give me something that no one else probably could. It was the sweetest thing he's ever done.

I was nervous, walking over to bed and climbing to him. I was wondering if I would be bad at it, and I really didn't want the humiliation of Edward thinking I was a bad kisser. But once he touched me, I was completely relaxed, and it all felt natural. Just instinct and his electricity. The little kisses were amazing, but I couldn't help myself, I wanted more. I broke the rule of taking what I could get. He didn't seem to mind. And his tongue was divine against mine. I felt parts of my body tingle that I didn't even know existed. I wanted him to feel the same way I was feeling, if just for one moment. So I broke the rule again, and pressed my body to him. And I felt it; I felt the excitement, and brief flash of lust in his kiss. And then I heard it. That groan would be echoing in the deepest recesses of my memory for years to come.

It didn't matter that he pulled away before he could feel more. It gave me hope. Hope that maybe some day Edward could feel that about me for more than just a few seconds. I went to bed with the stupidest smile on my face, and I didn't even try to hide it from Edward. Because I couldn't. I'd show him every part of me that loved that kiss. And when he was finally under the covers and pressed up against me, all the lust was gone, but my smile never went away.



I didn't even have it in me to hate the alarm clock when it went off the next morning, but I gave Edward the usual squeeze, because I was still tired, and I didn't want to leave his arms. He still pulled away with a groan that was very unlike the one during the kiss, but it still stirred the memory and made me lick my lips by instinct.

I went through my morning routine as normal as possible. I didn't want to make it weird for Edward by acting any differently. But once I closed the door to the bathroom, I let my face break out into the goofy grin again as I got dressed.

Once I was packed, I felt the need to leave the cookies on the table, and then realized I had already given them to him the night before. *Fudge You Alls*. It really didn't sum my day up. I really wanted to name them "*I Hate Jessica Stanley And All Her Slutty Friends For Making Me Feel So Crappy In An Underfunded Gym Locker Room Cookies*", but something told me the Ziploc bag wasn't big enough. I was very happy that I never let her see me cry yesterday. I waited for her to stop fuming and walk out of the locker room with a huff before I let the tears take me. Jessica Stanley would never get the satisfaction of seeing it.

Edward was still lying in bed with his eyes closed, running his fingers through his messy hair drowsily just like he did every morning, as I drew my hood up and slung the bag on my back. I had my back to him, walking to the door, in silence just like we always did when his voice stopped me.

"Hey!" He called thickly through his morning sleep voice that I rarely heard. I turned my head to see him propped up on one forearm, running his other hand through his hair still.

His droopy green eyes narrowed at me. "Don't you ever let that bitch get to you, Bella." He said in a hard voice. I nodded at him once and smiled a little. I didn't care what she or her friends thought of me. And then his face broke out into a wry smirk. "Plus," He shrugged. "Stanley doesn't have shit on you when it comes to kissing." Then he flopped back down onto the bed and rolled over.

And that morning, I really did skip across the yard on the way home.



Nothing could ruin my mood. Not even Alice and her pouting about the Cullen house party this weekend. In fact, it just made my mood even better. Because I was going to tell Edward to make sure Jasper came this time around, and I was going to make sure she wore green. I spent the whole ride to school trying to fight off my grin at the thought of it.

It really was quite ridiculous, this whole disturbing dance they were doing. Of course, I'd be a complete hypocrite to say anything, seeing as how I was head over heels for Edward, and much like Alice, just couldn't tell him. Albeit for much different reasons.

Alice was always waiting on Jasper. Just sitting by and waiting for him to make some indication that he noticed her. They were in polar opposite cliques... if you could even call Jasper and Edward a 'clique'. Our situations were so similar, and yet so different at the same time. At least for Alice and Jasper, the only things holding them back were themselves. It wasn't unrequited like I was with Edward. But at the same time, Edward and I were far closer than Alice and Jasper

had ever been. It was all very confusing. And all the confusion just solidified the fact that I was finally feeling like a real teenage girl for once.

When we got to school, I didn't look at Edward getting out of his Volvo. No way would I be able to hide my smile. And really, I couldn't stand looking at the Volvo at all, in fear of a much different reaction. Likely, vomit would be involved.

Once we were out of the car and walking across the quad, I heard a very distinct snicker coming from a group in front of us. I lifted my hooded head just enough to see the legs of Jessica and her slut posse. And instead of just walking by with my hood up and my head down like I always did, I took Edward's advice. I wasn't going to let that bitch get to me. So I lifted my chin and rounded my shoulders, and sent her the cheekiest smile I could muster.

She glared, and she glowered, and she shot more daggers at me than was entirely necessary, but she kept her mouth shut. I had to battle with the urge to stick my tongue out at her like a four year old as I passed. I heard a very familiar quiet chuckle from far behind me. Edward. It just made me smile wider at her. He was watching. He was amused. He liked *me* better.

My entire day was good like that. By lunch, Jessica and her group had ceased all acknowledgment of my existence. I suppose I had lost my luster. Which suited me just fine. Edward was fine in Biology. No more notes, no glares, just sketching and looking bored as always. I couldn't wait for ten-o'clock. So I spent gym working to distance myself like always, hood up, head down. Jessica never passed me the basketball.



Alice was planning another "Make Jasper Drool" outfit when we got home. I, of course, pointed her towards every green number in her closet. And then she found 'it'. I was sitting on her bed, laying on my back and staring at the ceiling, wishing I was in a very different bedroom.

"So." Alice bounced out of her closet with a smirk. "I figure, I've been going about this all wrong." She shook her little head vehemently with her hands on her hips. I turned my head towards her and quirked an eyebrow. *You think?*

She rolled her eyes. "I mean..." She hopped on the bed beside me, making me jump a bit. "Jasper's a bad boy. Maybe I need to indulge in the naughtier side of my wardrobe." She wiggled her eyebrows. I looked at her mischievous grin closely, and then slowly sat up on the bed with a skeptical look on my face. Could she get any naughtier?

She could. She would. She did.

Five minutes later, Alice came sashaying out of her walk in closet in the outfit I *knew* was going to break Jasper. It would probably break every male in Forks high. And possibly a few females too. My jaw was in serious danger of unhinging if it got any lower to the ground.

Because there Alice stood, in black leather pants, so tight they looked like they were painted on, and hanging so low on her hips I was surprised there wasn't pubic hair showing. I watched her while she did a little spin for me, and even I felt like I was molesting her seeing it.

"Alice." I choked, gaping at the black leather incredulously. "You *can't* be serious." I shook my head with my mouth still hanging open.

"Please." She scoffed and waved her little had. "This..." She raised her eyebrows and pointed at her leg. "Is nothing my dear sweet virginal Bella." She sang, doing another little spin in the mirror with a triumphant smile.

I was still gaping unabashedly. How she managed to put her body out there like that was beyond me. I couldn't stand next to Edward in a baggy t-shirt without blushing. "Alice, I am *not* walking through the quad with you looking that!" I said, a bit higher than was necessary. She just snorted and rolled her eyes at me while trying to find the perfect top to go with it. *Like anyone will be looking at her top.*

After Alice set her outfit out for the next day, I made the three of us dinner. I almost wanted to show Esme what her sweet innocent daughter was going to wear to school tomorrow. But I didn't think I could bear the look on Esme's face when she saw it.

At precisely nine, I began my batch of cookies. *Black Leather Ladyfingers*. Admittedly, though I'd never fail to be shocked when I saw her do it, I admired Alice's exhibitionist tendencies. It was just something I could never do. She thrived on having attention drawn to her, putting herself and her body out there for all to see. She was so comfortable in her skin and so confident that it just made me feel even mousier when I was standing next to her. I was plain at best. At worst, invisible.

Invisible was my comfortable skin.



I wasn't nervous when I climbed my way up to Edward's balcony that night. I wouldn't 'make shit weird'. He answered enthusiastically, snatching my hood off my head as soon as I walked in the room, and looking really hungry again. I felt bad that my mood last night ruined his meal.

I unpacked his dinner onto his bed. Edward got messy the last time he ate lasagna, so I brought extra napkins with me, setting them beside the container. He had the container opened, smelling it before I even finished unpacking. So I had to chuckle at him.

I took my spot on the sofa again, scooping up the iPod, and watching him eat. It was all very domestic, the nights I spent with Edward. Me making him dinner after a long day, and us getting into the same bed. I shook my head to rid it of those thoughts. It was a friendship. I think. I couldn't really find a word for what we had, and there's no way I would ever ask him.

Edward got my attention when he began cursing. I looked up from the iPod, and sure enough, he had made a mess. Tomato sauce all over his lips, chin, and shirt. I chuckled at him and shook my head.

"It's not fucking funny!" He chewed. Though his mouth was full, so it came out muffled. He began swiping at his shirt with the napkins and licking all the sauce off his lips. And I couldn't help myself. I stared shamelessly at his tongue as he darted it out across his lips. It was like everything else in the room disappeared into black, and all that existed was his tongue and those lips. I was dazed, completely mesmerized by the motion. And the only thing that broke the spell was the napkin coming over his lips.

I quickly diverted my attention to the iPod, praying my face wasn't red and I wasn't completely transparent. Luckily, nothing in that moment could distract Edward from his food. I didn't look at him again until the moans and hums were gone.

By the time he was finished eating, I was fairly certain he killed the shirt. I told him so.

"It's not dead." He frowned, looking down at the huge red stains and pulling his shirt out to inspect his victim more closely. "It's just..." He shrugged one shoulder, looking at the shirt morosely. "... sleeping." And I chuckled at him. Because, really, there was no saving that poor thing, and he sounded rather attached to it.

After declaring the shirt a goner, we decided to call it an early night. We were both pretty spent, not getting as much sleep the night before. So we got ready for bed in our usual fashion. No awkwardness after the lip licking incident on my side.

Once we were under the covers and the light was out, Edward scooped me up like always and held me tight. I breathed in the scent of his chest, allowing myself a little grin, and stroking his hair and humming. He was asleep in minutes.



I don't know what time it was that Edward woke me up, but I could feel him gripping my side so tightly with his arm that I was certain there'd be bruises. He was breathing heavily, almost raspy. I opened my eyes and tried to lift my head up to see his face in the meager amount of light the moon outside the window provided.

His jaw was clenched so tight I could see the straining muscles rippling with every grind of his teeth. And he was still holding me to him so tightly it hurt. My arm was still around his back, so I began stroking his hair, hoping it would loosen his grip on me.

His eyelids shot open and his breathing was still heavy, heavy enough I could feel it on my face. He darted his green eyes down to meet mine. He looked so odd, scared almost.

“Edward?” I whispered groggily, still stroking his hair. His grip on my side hadn’t loosed any, and he was just staring into my eyes with an unreadable expression on his face. “What’s wrong? Were you dreaming?” I asked quietly, trying not to panic.

He didn’t move or say anything for a few moments. He just stared into my eyes, breathing raspy and clutching me to him. Just as I was beginning to panic, he relaxed his arm and let out a deep breath that blew over my face.

Then, without speaking, he grabbed the back of my head in his palm and crushed it into the crook of his neck, plunging his face into my hair at the crook of my mine. “Don’t fucking leave me.” He growled against my shoulder.

I was so confused and tired, and I had no idea what Edward was talking about. “I’m not leaving, Edward. I promise.” I whispered against his neck, still stroking his hair with my fingers. He was silent, just taking deep breaths of my hair, so I began humming to him. Eventually he was asleep again, so I extracted my head from his big palm and put it back on his chest in my spot, too sleepy to question what just happened.

Edward

WIDE AWAKE

It was a dream, but it wasn’t. It was more of an impression. An impression that my girl wasn’t there. A sense of dread and fucking loneliness, a lot like how I felt before Bella came along. It scared the shit out of me.

When the alarm went off, I took longer to pull away. It was screeching that same fucking annoying sound, but when Bella squeezed, I squeezed back, and stayed for just a few more fucking seconds. She got of bed looking confused, but didn’t ask me about what happened last night. Which is good, because I doubted if I could even explain it.

She left me my cookies on the table and left out the door like always. I was thankful she didn’t want to dwell on that shit.



I was feeling tense and fucking high-strung. I couldn’t quite place why; the dream, all the drama that’s been lingering around, I don’t fucking know, but I felt like I was buzzing with it. Jazz got in the car that morning and got a knowing look on his face. He could always tell my emotions.

He slumped down into the passenger seat and looked straight ahead while I drove. We had been drifting apart since all the bullshit that happened last year; never seeing each other

outside of school or hanging out on weekends. And Em had that party coming up, and I really just wanted to fucking enjoy being normal for a change, and hopefully ease some of the tension I was feeling.

“Hey, Jazz. Party at the Cullen mansion Friday. You in?” I turned my head towards him and quirked an eyebrow. He pursed his lips thoughtfully for a few moments.

“Fuck it, why not.” He shrugged laying his head on the seat and closing his eyes.

I smirked. Jazz always had a hard time turning down a party. Though this particular one would be far more legal than usual shit he’s used to.

And I was fucking thankful Jazz still had his eyes closed when I pulled into the school parking lot. Because the sorry fucking excuse for pants that Brandon had on would have given him a heart attack... since she was bending over to get something from the floor of her car. My gaze probably lingered on her ass a little longer than was entirely appropriate. That was obviously the intended reaction though. I got out of the car before Jazz opened his eyes. I couldn’t bear to see him suffer that hard on.



By lunch, most of my tension had subsided. I could see my girl giving me worried sideway glances when I passed her in the quad, but I was fine. Just need to let loose a little is all.

Jazz was at the table when I got to the cafeteria. And I knew the look he had on his face. It was getting to be too much for me to watch this bullshit. I sat down in my seat fucking loudly, and sent him a pointed glance. *Do it, fucker!*

He was bouncing his leg up and down so fast, it made the whole table vibrate. I rolled my fucking eyes. I went to get my bag of cookies out to eat, before I realized I left them on my table this morning. I glared into its empty spot. *Fucking Shit.*

I straightened back up and began eating the disgusting school food Jazz had on his tray. When he glowered at me I shrugged and smirked. Couldn’t get that fucker any more stressed than he already was.

He leaned back into seat and let out a deep breath, rubbing his face with his hands and calming himself sufficiently. We sat there in silence for a long while, eating and drinking, with all the sounds of the cafeteria surrounding us.

Suddenly, Jazz pounded his fist on the table with a loud ‘slam’ that shook the food tray and nearly spilled his milk. I snapped my head up from the tray, slightly fucking shocked and confused. He was staring behind me, so I slowly turned and followed his gaze.

Brandon was at the entrance of the cafeteria with her back to us ten feet away. Newton was behind her acting like he was smacking her ass and chuckling at his friends.

“HEY! BRANDON!” Jazz yelled from his seat. I spun around to face him. And he looked fucking determined. *He’s going to fucking do it.*

I was sitting with my mouth hanging open in utter fucking disbelief. Then slowly it turned into a big fucking smirk, because I’ve been waiting for this shit for four years now. I leaned back in my chair and waited for Brandon to walk over. I knew she would.

I could tell when she was close because the look on Jaspers face got calmer, and he just smiled at her all fucking goofy and in love like the stupid prick he is. My smirk was so big my cheek hurt. When she finally reached our table, she was standing there, all black leather pants, and a comically modest amount of cleavage, with the same fucking goofy grin that Jazz had plastered on her face. She didn’t even notice I was at the table.

“Hey, Jasper!” She chirped, looking a whole lot like she was trying with everything in her not to look as excited as she actually fucking was. My smirk grew, and I glanced at my girl’s table where she was sitting staring at the exchange with the same smirk I was wearing. Tit for tat.

“Hey, have a seat, I wanted to ask you something.” Jazz said coolly, swiping at his shirt like he was mildly bored. Which we all know is a fucking lie. Alice sashayed over to the seat next to him, and I had to suppress the snicker that was dying to come out, because they were just so fucking obvious and oblivious at the same time.

She took her seat next to him, not even sparing me a glance, and leaned forward with her arms on the table, doing the same shit as Jazz; trying to look bored. I rolled my eyes.

“What’s up?” Alice asked, playing with a lock of her short black hair. Jazz was fixated on what her finger was doing before he snapped himself out of it.

“Umm...” He stammered uncharacteristically, shaking his head. “You goin’ to that party Friday at the Cullens’?” He asked, like there wasn’t a Cullen sitting *right fucking here*. Alice bobbed her little so fast I thought it might fall off and smiled widely at him. He smiled back. *Fucking pathetic*. “Yeah, me too.” He shrugged nonchalantly.

And with that, they were both lost again. Looking around nervously, not taking it any fucking further. I fought the urge to groan. Alice got a flash of something in her eye and smiled, reaching down into her book bag for something.

And when she came back up she was holding a fucking Ziploc bag of *Black Leather Ladyfingers*. And suddenly I froze. Everything froze. Because Jazz would notice that bag, and the black sharpie on it. He had been looking at bags just fucking like it for almost two weeks now.

She tossed the bag on the table. "Cookie?" She asked seductively. Jazz turned towards her then, and glanced down at that fucking bag and stared at it wide eyed. *Fuck. Me.*

Slowly he lifted his gaze to my eyes. And I was sending him every fucking silent message I could think of. *Leave it the fuck alone. Don't fucking ask her shit. Drop it. Let it fucking go.* I shook my head at him just to emphasize the look.

But he wasn't having any of that shit. "So, Alice..." He reached in the bag and plucked out a cookie not breaking my gaze. "You make cookies?" He asked, looking pissed. Holy fuck. And I wanted to laugh at him for even fucking thinking I was getting those cookies from Brandon, but I couldn't, because I knew what she was about to say. And I was fucked. Royally.

"Nope." She chirped, eating a cookie along with him. "My cousin, Bella does." She smiled widely at him, before he coughed on a piece of cookie.

Chapter 14. Victorious Vanilla Vixens



After Jazz successfully dislodged the ladyfinger from his esophagus he gaped at me. Fucking gaped. This is exactly why I didn't tell him a fucking thing. And because I knew Jazz so well, I knew he wouldn't say shit to Brandon about it, but I couldn't sit there and be fucking gaped at. So I stood up.

Brandon didn't notice anything going on around her. She was too nervous to even focus on breathing right, so I walked out. I walked out and left Jazz there, and prayed that Brandon would distract him long enough for me to prepare myself for the fucked up conversation we were going to have.



I debated with myself in Bio if I should tell Bella what was going on. I didn't see any reason why I should or shouldn't, and when the bell rang I still hadn't come to any conclusion, so I just let her walk out. I figured I could relay the whole fucked up story to her tonight, when we were alone.

But, because Jazz knew my last class, he was standing there beside the door, fucking waiting for me. And the look of pure curiosity on his face when he saw me walking towards him was really unacceptable. It made me uncomfortable. I could feel him scrutinizing me, and I didn't fucking like it. I walked up to him, keeping my same bored mask I always used in this fucking dump.

Jazz quirked an eyebrow. "I think we need to ditch today." He said simply. Like he wasn't giving me an option. I almost snorted at him. Standing there in another pair of holey jeans and another grubby band shirt acting like I fucking owed him something.

But I knew better. If it were Jazz, he'd fucking tell me. And that thought made me feel kind of shitty. I was being a shitty friend. And I'd have to get the conversation over with eventually. Better sooner than later. So I nodded and started towards the parking lot while he followed, sprinting to keep up with me.

Once we made it to the car and were both inside, the silence was heavy, and thick, and I wasn't going to be the first one to fucking break it. So I put my key in the ignition, and drove towards home.

I could feel his eyes on me the whole way. Boring holes into my head. But he didn't say anything. I don't know what the fuck he was waiting for. It's not like I was Brandon or some shit. But he just kept his mouth shut the whole way to my house. I pulled in and got out, really fucking ready to just be in that house, and wishing it was ten already, and my girl was waiting for me on that couch.

He followed me into the house without a word. Never saying a thing, just fucking staring still. No one was home, so I went to the living room, and flopped heavily onto the couch. Jasper just stood there in front of me, never sitting down.

"Okay..." Jazz started slowly, narrowing his eyes at me. "What the fuck are you doing with the crazy girl?" He asked. And that shit pissed me off for the final time.

"She's. Not. Fucking. Crazy." I growled through clenched teeth, glaring at him. "Her name is *Bella*." I snapped, glad that I could finally tell him that since I had been waiting to since day one. His eyes grew wide, and he looked stunned. To think that I would defend Bella Swan. After the initial shock from that comment wore off, he slid into the chair he was closest to.

"Okay. Not crazy. I get it." He said, looking rather fucking apologetic. Jazz knows me well enough to know that I rarely defend people. "So, what's going on with you and *Bella*." He emphasized her name, like he deserved a gold fucking star or some shit.

I huffed, and it was probably a little fucking childish to do so, but I huffed nonetheless. Because this was one long fucking story, and there was no way out of it. "Remember that shitty party you skipped?" I asked defeated. Jazz furrowed his brows and nodded, so I continued. "Well, she came with Brandon." He looked surprised to hear this, of course. "But, Newton was fucking with her, so she ran upstairs to hide from him, and she just so fucking happened to choose my room to run into." He pursed his lips, thoughtful. Then nodded for me to continue.

I let out a deep breath and sank into the couch. Then I told him everything. I told him about the first meeting, about her not sleeping, about my not sleeping. I left out the parts private for Bella. I wouldn't fuck my girl over like that. Her story is hers to tell. Jazz understood. I told him about the gazebo, and the fucking delicious cookies she'd bring me. I'd tell him how we'd talk because we were both so fucked up and just clicked. I told him about my cold, and about how my girl took care of me, and I told him about Thanksgiving. And Thanksgiving night.

"Wait." He held his hand up after I got to the part about her touching me. "So, she can touch you, but no one else?" He asked incredulous.

I let out a frustrated sigh. "Yes, okay. Now shut the fuck up. Save your questions for the end." I snapped. He was going to read too fucking much into this as it was. I could already see it on his face.

So I told him about how we slept together all night. And yes. Of course, his jaw hit the fucking floor, because he was getting it all wrong. But I just kept going. I told him about how we kept doing it. The dinners. The holding. I left out some things. The humming for instance, no fucking way would he let me live that shit down. I left out the pajamas, and tried with everything in me to make it seem a whole hell of a lot less intimate than it actually fucking was.

By the end of the whole story, he was back to fucking gaping at me. So I sat, picked at my nails a little bit, just waited for him to soak it in.

“So.” He cleared his throat, got up and started walking around inspecting the pictures on the walls of the living room with his thumbs locked into his belt loops. “Let me see if I understand this...” He furrowed his brows and cocked his head to the side. “You and Bella Swan sleep together.” I nodded. It was true. “But you don’t... sleep together?”

I narrowed my eyes. “That’s why we keep our fucking mouths shut. You know Jazz, contrary to popular belief; it is possible to have a female in your bed without fucking her.” I spat. Because I saw it coming.

He eyed me skeptically, but eventually took it for what it was worth. Just fucking sleep. I never told him about the kiss. No reason to fuel the fire.

“Brandon...” He trailed off, turning to face me, looking cautious. “Will fucking kill you.” He said simply. Like it was a fact. And it probably was.

“Yeah, no shit.” I scoffed. “That’s why you’re going to keep your fucking mouth shut too.” I raised my eyebrows at him. I knew him better than to think he wouldn’t, but I had to get the words out there anyways. He nodded at me and flopped back into the chair.

We were silent a while. The whole house was as a matter of fact. School was probably already out, but it was a practice day, and Em wouldn’t be home until Carlisle was.

“Can I meet her?” Jazz asked from the chair.

I snapped my head up to meet his gaze. “Absolutely fucking not.” I said as calmly as possible narrowing my eyes. My girl was not some novelty to be fucking gaped at.

He quirked an eyebrow. “Why is that?” he asked. *Because you’re a prick.*

I let out a deep sigh and slumped further into the couch, propping one of my boots on the coffee table in front of me. “Because, I fucking told you, she doesn’t like guys.” Then after a pause. “And because you’re a prick.” I smirked. Because he was. He knew it. He tried to look all fucking mock offended, but we both knew it was true.

We were silent again for a while before something pretty fucking important occurred to me.

“What happened with Brandon?” I asked, genuinely curious. I was praying that they just went into the janitor closet and humped each other for an hour. Brandon didn’t exactly strike me as the prude type, after all.

Jazz got that fucking goofy grin on his face again. “She’s coming to the party.” He snickered. And I rolled my fucking eyes, because of *course* Brandon was coming to the party. Then he tilted his head and pursed his lips. “She told me her cousin was coming, too.” He said with a raised eyebrow.

I snorted. “She’ll probably just spend the whole fucking night hiding in my room.” I smirked shaking my head. My girl wasn’t a party person. Jazz looked pretty fucking taken aback at my casual talk of having a girl waiting for me in my room at night. And so I had to roll my eyes again, because no one would ever understand it just *wasn’t* fucking like that.

Yes, Bella and I had a great kiss. I wasn’t lying when I told her she was better than Stanley. I liked it. Possibly more than I should. Definitely more than I should. It was more important than ever that I keep that fucking flip switched off, because it would be too easy to fuck it up. She had been through more shit in the last year than anyone should ever have to experience. She was delicate. Fragile.

In some ways she was very maternal; taking care of me all the time. But in so many other ways my girl was so lost and child-like. I couldn’t bear to be that asshole. To risk wanting to treat my girl the same way assholes like Newton did. And it would be so fucking easy to do it with her warm little body pressed against mine every night. But I was where she felt safe from assholes like that. There’s no fucking way I would let her lose that comfort. And I knew that fucking switch was the only thing keeping me from acting like the hormonal teenage mothefucker I was, and losing it all. And I couldn’t lose the routine. I couldn’t lose my girl.



He did it. Jasper actually talked to Alice. And now I was barricaded in her room listening to her go a million miles a minute and scrutinizing every last detail of the exchange.

“The hair...” Alice sighed dreamily while sitting on the floor against her bedroom door. She had come in and closed it and slid back against it, and she hadn’t moved for an entire hour. She had a look of victory on her face ever since lunch. “It was like...” She breathed with a wide smile on her face. “No.” She shook her head, bouncing her black spiky hair all over the place. “No words. No words for that hair.” She giggled. And I giggled right along with her as I lay on her bed, because I knew exactly how she felt.

"Oh!" She squealed, clapping her hands together. "And he loved your cookies." She winked and rubbed her hands together. "They were kind of my secret weapon." She snickered. And I chuckled at her, because they were my secret weapon too. Of course I didn't have black leather pants.

She heaved another dreamy sigh and rested her head back against the door, closing her eyes, and still grinning like an idiot. "Two more days." She said with a victorious nod, then lifted her head up and looked at me with a determined expression. "Two more days... and Jasper Hale will be mine." She smirked. And I had to giggle at her, because, she didn't know it yet, but he already was.



I had been mildly concerned all day about Edward's dream the previous night. It was the first time either of us had a dream at all while we were sleeping together. And honestly, it scared me. Because if his dreams came back, I would be useless. I could still bring him food and talk to him, and I'd stay awake with him all night if he'd let me just to keep him company, but I couldn't lose the one thing I had over anyone else. The ability to make him sleep. It was the only hold I had on him at all.

So when I packed up his dinner that night and got ready to leave, I reasoned with myself not to bring it up. I'd lived in the land of denial where Edward was concerned long enough to add one more thing to that list.

Edward seemed different tonight when he came to the door. And I was scared because I was thinking the dream was worse than I thought. But what he said as he pulled the hood off my head shocked me.

"Jazz knows everything." He muttered, and then took his seat on the bed with a heavy flop, relaying the events of his afternoon to me. I stood stunned, battling with the part of myself that was happy that someone else knew, and the other part that was scared Edward wasn't.

I began unloading his meal, glancing at him warily, wondering if this changed anything, and praying it didn't. He didn't seem any more distant than he usually was.

"Don't worry; Jazz will keep his fucking mouth shut. No one will ever know." Edward shrugged after I got settled on the sofa. I frowned at him. I suppose a part of me was hoping that it would all come out, and we wouldn't have to hide anymore. Would it really be the worst thing ever? I grimaced and dropped my head down.

Edward sighed heavily and raked his fingers through his hair, staring into the container. "Don't fucking look at me like that, Bella." He sighed, and then looked up to meet my eyes when I lifted my head. "I'm not fucking ashamed of you. I just don't want everybody getting the wrong

fucking impression.” He plunged the fork into his mouth and began chewing while staring at me. I don’t know what I looked like. Maybe a little hurt. Possibly a little skeptical.

He rolled his eyes. “Do you have any idea what your cousin would do to me if she found out about this.” He chewed, motioning at the bed he was sitting on. And I cringed. Because the thought of all the screeching Alice would do when she found out I was sleeping next to Edward Cullen every night was horrifying.

Edward chuckled. “See?” he asked, eating his food with a smirk. “She’ll cut my fucking balls off.” He snickered. And I cringed again because it was rather likely her real reaction wouldn’t be far from it. She would never believe that Edward wasn’t somehow taking advantage of me in ways that didn’t involve sleep. *Not that he ever would.* My mind echoed bitterly. I mentally slapped myself for the bitterness. *Take what you can get, Bella.*

I nodded at Edward in understanding, and watched him eat the rest of his meal in silence, plugging the iPod ear buds into my ears while listening to his usual moans and hums. When he was done, he put the containers away and told me how good the meal was, which made me smile. Then he got out his sketchbook and started drawing, so I walked over to the bookcase to select the book I had been reading and relaxed on the sofa. It was silent for a long while, just Edward and I enjoying each other’s presence like we always did.

“Fuck.” Edward’s low curse alerted me to the bed. “Here.” He mumbled, reaching over to his bed side table to get something while his sketchbook was still in his lap. He slid something off the table and into his palm. “Before I forget.” He added turning back towards me.

He held his hand out over the mattress and I furrowed my brows, closing my book and getting off the sofa. I walked closer to the bed to inspect the contents of his palm. A key. I raised an eyebrow at him questioningly.

“To the room.” He shrugged, holding it out further so I would take it. Slowly, I lifted my hand and plucked the key from his palm, staring at it with a confused expression. Edward was giving me the key to his room? I grinned a little despite myself, and still quirked an eyebrow at him, wondering why I would need it.

He rolled his eyes. “I assume Brandon is dragging you to this party on Friday?” he raised his eyebrows. I nodded with a grimace. I already agreed, pre-Jasper committal, and she’d never let me get out of it. “And I assume you don’t want to stay down there with all those fucking drunk guys?” I nodded again. I had planned to come up to Edward’s room to read and talk to him again. Like the last party. I grinned again despite myself.

“Well, I’m locking the room up. I’m going to be hanging with Jazz while he’s here.” He continued sketching. My grin turned into a frown.

“You’re going to the party?” I asked quietly, still standing in front of his bed holding the key. He looked up from his sketch with a cautious expression and nodded at me once. I bit my lip and looked back down at the key. I was a little disappointed that I wouldn’t be spending the party with Edward, but after staring at the key for a moment, I realized I’d be here waiting here for him when Jasper left. And I couldn’t really feel upset that he wanted to spend time with his friend. I closed my fist around the key and slipped it into my pocket, looking up and giving Edward a smile to show him it was okay. He sent me a little half smile back and continued sketching.

We got ready for bed not long after that. Changing into our pajamas and sliding under the covers comfortably.

Once the light was off, he turned towards me and wrapped me protectively in his arms with a sigh. I returned the gesture, resting my head on his chest and bringing my arm up to stroke his hair like always. I started humming quietly, praying he wouldn’t have another dream tonight, while he tightened his grip on my waist.

It was the first morning I was glad to wake up to that stupid alarm clock. I was glad it woke me up and not Edward. He didn’t dream last night. I smiled into his chest and gave him my usual squeeze. Yesterday he squeezed me back, but this morning he pulled away with his usual groan.

I let out a sleepy sigh and rolled out of the bed while he fumbled with the screeching clock sleepily. I drowsily stumbled my way through the dark to the sofa to get my bag, snatching it up and heading into the bathroom. I flicked on the light and hissed at the intrusion, squinting my eyes and glaring at my reflection. My hair looked awful.

I began removing my pajamas, which always smelled like Edward in the mornings. I folded them neatly and slid them into my bag, removing my day clothes and hoodie and putting them on. I stood in front of the mirror for a moment, grimacing at the hay stack hair I was sporting before I pulled it up into a ponytail to wash my face. When I was done, I reached into my bag and produced my toothbrush, attacking my morning breath with vigor. While I was brushing, I took a glance at the toothbrush holder on Edward’s counter. He had a green toothbrush. I kept brushing, cocking my head to the side at it. It was just sitting there in that holder all alone.

I spit into the sink and rinsed out my mouth before running the water over my toothbrush. I went to put it back in my bag like always, but I stopped. Slowly, I straightened up and glanced at the toothbrush holder. I looked at it and back to the toothbrush in my hand a few times. Hesitantly, I lifted the brush and slid it into the hole beside Edward’s.

I stood back and cocked my head to the side staring at it curiously, biting my lip. *I mean, it’s only practical. I never brush my teeth at home. I always do it Edward’s every night and every morning. Surely it only makes sense to keep it here.* I was ignoring the little voice in my head that was squealing over the fact there was some evidence of me in his room at all. Usually I

would be careful not to leave anything, packing it all away diligently. But I was going to leave the toothbrush. It looked right next to Edward's. Green and blue.

With a nod, and a triumphant smile at the toothbrush holder, I walked back into Edward's room and packed up the rest of my things. I knew he was still awake because he was running his fingers through his hair like always. Otherwise his eyes were closed. Drawing up my hood and slinging the bag onto my back, I produced the bag of cookies I had made the night before and deposited them on his bed side table. *Victorious Vanilla Vixens*. Made in tribute to Alice and her leather pants. She would love them.

I sent a smile and a small wave to Edward's grumbling sleepy form, wrapped up in the blankets, and walked out the door. A little victorious myself.

Chapter 15. Sourly Cinnamon



Edward never mentioned the toothbrush Thursday.

When I climbed up to his room, he was waiting there for me, like always. Hungry, bored and sketching. I was on his couch watching him eat, when I began struggling to imagine Edward at the party tomorrow. In my head I was putting together the perfect hangover remedy. But I didn't want to pry, so when he was done we just talked about a new album he got. Anything but the party.

I almost felt resentful that I couldn't be downstairs with him enjoying it. But I pushed that bitterness aside, because once the night was over, I would be the one he'd come to. When Edward closed his sketchbook at the end of the night, he looked really very tired, so I made my way to the bathroom, hoping to find my toothbrush still nestled in beside his.

I'm not exactly sure what I was expecting him to do with it, but I was happy when it was still there, just sitting next to his looking happy as a clam. I smiled at it before I plucked it up and finished my nightly routine.

We crawled into bed like always, turning off the light and scooping each other up. I didn't get past the first verse of the song before Edward was asleep.

Friday started badly. When the alarm clock went off and Edward pulled away, I rolled out of bed and stumbled to the couch like always. But I stubbed my toe on the bed frame. I hopped the rest of the way to the sofa to get my bag, muttering low profanities that made Edward drowsily snicker from the bed. I glowered at him.

It was like the omen for my entire day. I slipped off the lattice 4 steps too early and landed on my back. It didn't hurt me. Physically. Though my pride surely took a hit. I burned my wrist making bacon for Esme after I got home. Stupid splattering grease. I felt so betrayed.

On the way out the door to school with Alice, I hit my hip on the doorknob. Hard. I glowered at it sourly, and got into the yellow Porsche, just knowing. This was going to be one of those days. I couldn't enjoy Alice's enthusiasm over the whole Jasper situation on the way to school. And that just made me even more sour.

I failed my Trigonometry quiz rather thoroughly. It was my very first fail, and I shot daggers at the mocking red 'F' all first period. It was pouring all day, making my boots slippery, and my footing horrible. I nearly tripped twice in second period, which is saying a lot because I only stood up once. When I passed Edward out in the quad, he was entirely drenched, slippery black leather jacket and hair that I was dying to smooth back out of his eyes. And looking anywhere but at me.

I slopped into lunch with my hoodie weighing three times what it was meant to, and dripping like a wet cat over to Alice's table. I flopped in my seat with a disgusting 'splat'. I could almost hear her quirk an eyebrow at me, but I didn't look up, just got out my book and opened it, my hair dripping little wet circles into the white pages. I really just wanted this day to be over. To be in Edward's bed warm and dry and smelling him.

But when I walked into Biology, I found the universe really did hate me. Because Edward was already in his lab stool, and I slipped right in front of him. One second I was slopping towards the lab table, the next I was landing face first on the cold floor with another disgusting 'splat'. I didn't move at first. I just closed my eyes and laid there in my own self-induced puddle, sparing myself a few seconds to loathe my existence. Everyone else in the room was chuckling and snickering, but I didn't care.

I slowly dragged myself off the cold – now wet – floor, and swatted the wet tendrils from my face furiously. I chanced a peek at Edward and he was glaring at everyone else in the room with his fists clenched tight at his sides. I felt my face soften when I realized he was mad that they were laughing at me. It made the rest of the class bearable.

But then there was gym. Gym was awful. I got hit with five different basketballs. I don't even know how or where they came from, and I didn't even flinch away. I just took it, thinking eventually the universe would see I've taken as much as I could possibly handle and leave me be.

When I was finally home, I slopped all the way to Alice's bedroom, glowering at the floor the entire way, and watched her model twelve different outfits for the party tonight.

"Bella!" She screeched, making me cringe. "Are you even looking?!" I lifted my head enough to see her black skirt and halter top that was likely to make her freeze all night and nodded. She huffed, and walked back into her closet to change again. When she asked me again, I suggested she wear the green dress from the last party. She left me alone after that.

I was afraid to make dinner. Terrified. I stood in the kitchen, glancing at the stovetop warily for twenty minutes. I really didn't need anymore burns. I made sandwiches while Alice bounced around the house in another skimpy outfit. I didn't have it in me to mention the green. She was on her own. No way was I spreading my cursed luck to her for the day.

When the time came to make cookies, I let out a hysterical laugh at the empty mixing bowl. Wondering what kind of vile recipe could possibly sum this particular brand of crappy day up. I decided it involved cinnamon, and a sickening amount of sugar, so I went to work. Beating all the ingredients a little harder than was really necessary. When they were done, I made five Ziploc bags. I added Jasper in the mix, because cookies were Alice's secret weapon, and I wanted him to like me. He was Edward's best friend and now he knew about me. I labeled the cookies *Sourly Cinnamon*.

When ten finally came, Alice and I made our way over to the Cullens'. I brought my old book bag, and filled it with my pajamas and food for Edward. But I told Alice I just wanted to do homework while I was there. That earned me a very cold glare. She didn't like the idea of me doing schoolwork in place of partying. I nearly snorted at her. Alice was gone and in the house before I even made it to the walkway. I glared at the cold wet soggy ground and stopped further towards the booming house. I rolled my eyes at the loud rap music they were playing. *Because the Forks suburbs were so gangsta...*

There were people everywhere. More people than last time. I don't where Emmett found everybody, but there were clearly more people attending than the usual Forks crowd. I kept my head down when I finally cleared the threshold. There was a small group of people in the foyer making their way outside, laughing boisterously, as I passed. I hugged the walls, figuring an emotional breakdown would be just the kind of thing to top this day off.

I made my way to the staircase not even looking up. I bobbed and weaved, and hugged the wall of the living room with a grimace. But as I hit the first step, I decided to use the empty space to get a layout of the room, and maybe see Edward, or Alice. So I lifted my head and began scouring the crowd.

Emmett was standing on the couch with a very bored Rosalie at his side. He was chugging a large bottle of something likely alcoholic, while a small group that had gathered was chanting for him to chug. I grimaced again. I looked around some more, hoping to spot that bronze mop of hair.

I spotted Alice's little black head first, hopping over to a large table at the far end of the room. She had heels so high; she was nearly the same height as the people she was passing. I followed her with my gaze until eventually she met up with Jasper. He had on grubby jeans and a shirt. He never looked like he cared much about his appearance. Alice is sure to ruin that.

He smiled at her big and wide, offering her a red plastic cup, which she took indifferently. I wanted to snort at her. Trying to look like she *didn't* come to this party just to see him. I shook my soaked, hooded head and moved my gaze over the crowd some more.

Not too far from Jasper, I found the mop of hair I had been looking for. Edward was sitting in a chair close to the table, leaning it back with his feet and teetering with a drink in one hand and

the other in his jacket pocket. He was watching the Jasper/Alice exchange with a smirk. I smiled automatically. He was getting some amusement out of it.

I bit my lip and stood there; holding on to the banister, wishing I could be with him, or hoping Edward would meet my gaze. He never did. Instead another girl came into my view. Strawberry blonde hair, teased and curled, winding down all her cleavage. And she flopped onto his lap. Making the chair he was leaning back in hit the floor with a thump I could almost hear from where I was standing across the room.


I clenched down on the banister and tried to force my eyes away, but I couldn't. I just stood there watching, while my vision went red. Her big stupid blonde hair was blocking Edwards face, but I could see her running her ugly pale fingers through his hair. My hair. And that was it. I tuned my head and ran up the staircase, tripping on the last step, but not feeling it all. I kept running through the second story, trying to keep the tears back.

I darted up the next set of stairs onto the third floor, panting and still dripping wet. I fumbled through my hoodie pocket for the key to Edward's room, and forced it into the lock roughly, flinging the door open and slamming it behind me.

I balled my fists into my eyes and let out a frustrated growl, keeping them there for a few minutes while I stewed and seethed. I took my fists off my eyes and looked around the room. It looked just the same as always. Nothing out of place. Except for me.

I flung my bag off and threw it on the black leather sofa, hitting the cushion with yet another disgusting 'splat'. After my initial anger died down, I felt another emotion. It wasn't bitterness. It was defeat. The strawberry blonde was exactly something Edward should go for. She was beautiful, sexy, confident. My complete opposite.

I sunk into the sofa and leaned my head back, closing my eyes. Just waiting for Edward to come so I could take what I could get. And trying with all my might not to imagine what he was giving her.



Fucking Emmett and his stupid fucking parties. I sat, beside the rather large table of alcohol and leaned back. All I wanted to do was get fucked up for one night. That's it. I had never had the chance to really get drunk. Always having to stay awake, always too afraid of drinking too much to fully enjoy it. Of course I still couldn't enjoy it. Because people were fucking *everywhere*.

I wanted to be in my room, just fucking relaxed. But Brandon was coming tonight, and Jazz needed a wingman. And unfortunately, I was that motherfucker. I glanced over at him from

where I was sitting and saw him staring intently at the entryway. I followed his gaze and took notice that Brandon had finally arrived. I smirked. She was looking slutty as ever. Black mini skirt and a red halter top. She looked like sin. She weaved her way through the crowd and finally made it to Jasper, taking a drink from his hands, looking bored. I smirked bigger and forced back a snicker.

I watched the unfolding exchange in mild curiosity as Jazz coolly leaned back on the table. Just as I was about to make some snarky fucking comment to him for the sole purpose of seeing him embarrassed in front of Brandon, something large and heavy dropped into my lap and knocked my chair back to the floor.

I blinked a few times, stunned, and focused on a very wide smile of a strawberry blonde. Sitting on my fucking lap. I darted my eyes down to her very obvious cleavage, and stared a beat longer than was entirely necessary, enjoying the view. She brought her hand up and began running it through my hair.

“Hey there.” She purred, leaning in closer to me. “My name is Tanya.” She smiled seductively. Her words weren’t slurred, but I could smell the Jäger all over her breath.

I put on my signature crooked smile, and watched as her eyes lit up. “Hello, Tanya. What a nice name.” I said sweetly, grabbing her hip. She smiled wider and leaned into me even further. I let my smile fall and I glared at her. “Now, get the fuck off of me.” I spat.

I was expecting her face to fall, or maybe for her to run off crying or some shit, but she just smiled wider and kept stroking my hair, which just pissed me off even more. Don’t get me wrong, the Tanya bitch was sexy, fucking hard core sexy. All cleavage and legs and legs that I followed with my eyes down my thighs. But I knew what this girl wanted. They were all the same. Come to a party, looking for the nearest cute single guy to sink their teeth into after they were drunk enough to let their inhibitions wear off. I wasn’t fucking interested.

It probably would have been smart to just fuck her in some bathroom or something. Maybe get a blow job just to ease my tension a bit. Let the switch on for an hour or two. But all I could smell while I was sitting there with her in my lap was cotton fucking candy. And it made me fucking nauseous.

I roughly shoved her off my lap by her bony hip. Probably a little too fucking roughly, but I didn’t give a shit. She stumbled off my lap glaring at me, and clicked away in her heels without another word. I let out a frustrated sigh and ran my fingers through my hair, hating that she even fucking touched it.

I chanced a peek over towards where I last saw Jasper, and he was gone. And that shit pissed me off. I was thinking if Brandon was already here, my girl was up stairs waiting for me. And with that thought, I grabbed the nearest bottle of clear liquor and two shot glasses, and made my way through the crowd to the staircase. There was only one person in this house I wanted

to get drunk with. Anyone could see my girl was having a shitty day. She fell in Bio today, and I had to fight with my every instinct not to get up and pick her up off that floor.

I knew Bella had never gotten drunk before. And I cringed to think off all the possibilities of her first time doing it in some fucking frat house or some shit when she went to college. Better to quench her curiosity now while I was around to look after her.

I trudged my way up the stairs, passing all the doors I had locked up carefully so no one would enter. I could just imagine the look on Daddy C.'s face when he went into his office and found a used condom on his floor. I snickered into the empty hall.

I reached my door and tried the doorknob, but it was locked. I smirked. Smart fucking girl. I knocked on it, and followed with a perfunctory "It's me.", balancing the bottle and glasses in my hands. When Bella finally opened the door, the look on her face confirmed what I had earlier thought. Shitty fucking day. She shuffled her way to the sofa while I closed the door. When she flopped down, water splattered out of her hoodie, and I couldn't help it. I fucking chuckled.

"Fuck, Bella." I shook my head while heading to the bed. "Go fucking change into something dry." I saw her bag on the sofa, I knew she brought pajamas. I set the bottle and glasses down and turned to her with a wry smile. "We're getting drunk." I smirked.

Her eyes got wide behind all the brown hair that was shielding it. "I've never..." She trailed off quietly and began picking at her sleeves nervously. She was so fucking cute when she was nervous.

I rolled my eyes. "No shit, Bella." I shook my head. "I got your first kiss, I'm getting your first drunk too." I smirked, peeling off my leather jacket and slinging it over the bed. I turned around again to glance at her on the sofa, and she was fucking blushing. I rolled my eyes again. Even saying the word kiss around Bella made her blush.

She hesitantly lifted herself off the sofa and grabbed her bag, shuffling her way to my bathroom to change into her pajamas. As soon as the door closed I peeled off my clothes and slid into my pajamas too, because the shit I was wearing still smelled like cotton fucking candy.

I could hear the water turn on in the bathroom and figured Bella was brushing her teeth, which made me roll my eyes, because all that minty shit was just going to make the vodka taste even worse. But it brought me back to yesterday morning when I walked into the bathroom and spotted a new occupant in my toothbrush holder. I stared at it for quite a while, wondering why she left it there. I figured it was intentional. I mean, you don't accidentally drop your toothbrush into a fucking toothbrush holder. Right? I wanted to give it back to her because it made me uncomfortable having her shit in my room, but I kept my mouth shut. Because it looked right sitting there next to my green one. All fucking little and blue. Even our toothbrushes were tit for tat.

I shook my head and flopped onto my bed, making the shot glasses clink together slightly. I suppose in the end, I was glad it was just a toothbrush. The first sign of a tampon and I'm squashing this shit.

Bella opened the door finally, shuffling out in her blue pajama pants and baggy white t-shirt. Her hair was still wet and dripping and she looked fucking glum.

"Put your hair back or some shit, you're dripping water everywhere." I said, arranging the bottle and glasses on the bed for us. She stopped in front of the sofa, and looked at me blankly for a moment, then reached into her bathroom bag and pulled out something to put her hair back with. She used her little hands and fingers to gather up all her hair on the top of her into a little bun.

I stared for a moment, because I had never seen Bella with all her hair out of her face and off her neck. Fucking pale. My girl was always fucking pale. I shook my head and patted the bed in front of me, motioning for her to come sit on it with me. It was very reminiscent of the first kiss, and as she climbed up onto the bed and crawled over, I could see a faint blush tint her little cheeks. It made me chuckle.

She sat Indian style, mirroring me, exactly like the first kiss, but farther away. I opened the bottle and picked up a shot glass, filling it to the top and handing it to her, then filling the second one for myself. She stared at the glass of clear liquid dubiously, taking a sniff of it and crinkling up her little nose in a way that made me chuckle even more.

"Yes, it's fucking gross." I smirked, lifting the shot glass to my lips, and waiting for her to do the same. Hesitantly, she lifted the glass up to her lips with me. "Breathe out of your mouth, it'll help." I ordered softly, knowing that toothpaste was going to amplify the shittyness. She brought a little hand to her nose and pinched it between her thumb and index finger. And I fucking laughed into my shot glass, but finally tilted it back, drinking the vodka in a quick motion.

Bella copied me, throwing it back into her mouth, still holding her nose, and swallowing in one movement. Once it was all in, her eyes got wide, then they clenched together and she let out a little fucking half shudder, half cringe with her little face all puckered up. And I had to chuckle again, because she never let go of her nose. Once the tremors wore off, she dropped her hand from her nose and stared at me blankly.

"Felling warm?" I asked, knowing she probably would be. She nodded, and set the glass down on the bed beside mine.

She put her little hands in her lap. "Why do people even drink this stuff?" She grimaced, staring at the bottle of vodka between us. "It's disgusting." She cringed a little, probably remembering the taste.

I snickered at her. "You'll find out in about ten minutes." I smirked, and began filling her glass again. I wouldn't let my girl get too fucked up. Just fucked up enough to scare her away from any future experiences.

She threw down another shot, easier than last time, but still holding her nose, and the puckering growing more pronounced, opening her mouth and smacking her tongue against the shitty taste. I poured her a few more shots, but stopped her when I noticed her eyes getting the familiar glaze over them. It didn't take much for her. I took twice as much, and my girl just sat there in front of me, fucking watching, smacking her lips still.

Once I was satisfied we had enough alcohol in our systems to enjoy a very good buzz, I closed the bottle and set it on the bed side table with the shot glasses. When I turned back around to Bella she was staring at me blankly, eyes a little glazed over, still looking fucking glum.

"Now what?" She asked, playing with the fabric of her blue flannel pajama pants.

I scooted back to lean against my headboard. "Now, we fucking sit back and enjoy it." I shrugged. Bella pursed her lips and nodded, looking down at the hand that was picking at her pants. I leaned my head back against the headboard and closed my eyes, enjoying the relaxing tingling feelings from the liquor.

I heard Bella make some sort of movement on the bed. "Do you do this often?" She whispered. I opened one eye to see she had gone fucking fetal on me again. I rolled my one opened eye.

"Every now and then when Jazz fucking ropes me into it." I shrugged one shoulder and closed my eye again, feeling warm and heavy.

We were silent for a while, just enjoying the effects. You could still hear the loud bass of the music below us, nearly rattling the windows of the mansion. I was deciding in my head that there was no fucking way I was helping Em clean up tomorrow. I saw Crowley vomit in that houseplant. Fucking lightweight.

"I saw you with that girl down there." Bella's soft whisper broke me from my thoughts. I slid my eyes open and she had gone back to sitting Indian style, staring at her hands in her lap intertwined. Her eyelids looked heavy as fuck, and I nearly smirked that my girl was quiet drunk before her comment sunk in.

"Oh." I said, surprised she stayed down there long enough to see. Then I fucking grimaced remembering the cotton candy bitch. "Yeah. Umm..." I stammered, furrowing my brows. "Tori." I said, and then realized that wasn't her name. "No. Tara?" I pursed my lips and looked towards the window, then decided it didn't really fucking matter what her name was. So I fucking shrugged at Bella.

She looked up at me and licked her lips lazily. I could tell it was really starting to hit her. “She was very pretty.” She said in a soft voice that was nearly slurred, but not quite yet.

I snorted. “You don’t call girls like that pretty.” I slurred lightly arching a brow. I was feeling it pretty fucking good myself.

Bella pursed her lips and looked back down at her hands. “What would you call them?” She asked quietly, picking at her pajama pants once again.

I rubbed my hand over my face lazily, remembering the strawberry blonde and all her cleavage. “Sexy, Voluptuous, Seductive... Easy.” I shrugged, remembering that the view really was rather nice. “Not pretty.” I concluded.

Bella glanced up at me from under her eyelashes, and my breath nearly hitched, because she looked so fucking different when she did shit like that. “What would you call pretty?” She asked, her words slurring a little more.

I pursed my lips and furrowed my brow. What would I call pretty? What kind of fucking random ass question was that? “Why does it matter?” I asked, being appropriately evasive, feeling uncomfortable discussing my particular type of girl to Bella.

She shrugged and darted her eyes back to her hands. I leaned my head back to its previous position and closed my eyes again, just fucking enjoying the feeling.

“Would you call me pretty?” Bella whispered in a light slur. I opened my eyes and looked at her, sitting in the same position staring at her hands. Surprisingly she wasn’t blushing. She just looked fucking glum. Then I had to think over her question. Would I call Bella pretty? I tried not to see her like that, but I couldn’t deny she was attractive. I suppose ‘pretty’ would suffice. Sometimes, when she didn’t work so goddamn hard to hide herself, she was downright beautiful.

“Yeah, you’re pretty.” I concluded decisively with a drunken nod. She snapped her head up to meet my gaze and her eyes were glazed over more, and heavy lidded.

“You’re not just saying that to make me feel better?” She slurred skeptically, halting the movement of her hands picking at her pant fabric.

I quirked an eyebrow at her. “Do I ever say shit just to make people feel better?” I scoffed. It was true. I never said shit just to make people feel better, and I sure as fuck wasn’t starting now. Bella’s eyes lit up a bit that I called her pretty and I wanted to snort at her for being such a fucking girl, all fucking insecure and shit. It was ridiculous. I rolled my eyes at her and leaned back on the headboard but kept my eyes opened, staring at my little insecure girl down my nose.

Then she fucking smiled. All fucking big and goofy and it lit her whole face up. I smiled back at her automatically because I fucking loved seeing my girl smile like that. Then finally, her whole face broke out into a bright red blush.

I snickered. “Don’t freak out or anything.” I rolled my eyes then finally slid them closed. “I try not to see you like that.” I sighed truthfully, closing my eyes. The room was silent and I felt so fucking good and tingly that it was making me drowsy. I smirked when I realized it didn’t fucking matter. I had my girl here to keep the dreams away.

When I opened my heavy lids again, Bella was staring at me with a furrowed brow, still sitting with her legs crossed, and all her brown hair piled up on top of her head. I quirked an eyebrow at her, wondering what the fuck she was staring at. But she just looked away, back into her lap with her little lips pursed.

I closed my eyes again, feeling really fucking good, straightening out my legs and slumping back further onto the pillows below me drunkenly. I heard a quiet gasp and opened my eyes. Bella was staring at my stomach wide eyed where my shirt had ridden up when I slouched down. I furrowed my brows and glanced at my stomach. She had seen my fucking scars. I hastily pulled my shirt down to my waist and grimaced. Because I didn’t like anyone seeing that shit.

I glanced warily at Bella where she was still sitting staring wide eyed at my now covered stomach. I snatched the pillow beside me and set it on top of it, kind of fucking embarrassed she had seen. She met my slightly blurred gaze again looking really fucking apologetic.

“I didn’t mean to stare.” She slurred out, darting her eyes back to her lap, and I fucking grimaced again, feeling like a fucking freak for the first time in quite a while. I clenched my eyes closed and held the pillow tighter, wishing she hadn’t seen shit. The room was silent again for a few moments, and the alcohol was numbing the dread I was feeling, but not nearly fucking enough.

Bella cleared her throat and I opened my eyes. She was staring at her hands again. “I have scars too.” She slurred in a whisper, playing with her pajama pants again. I furrowed my brow and sat up all the way.

“From Phil?” I asked cautiously, trying not to upset my girl. She pursed her lips and nodded heavily into her lap, sparing me a glance from under her eyelashes for a split second. I was about to ask more, but she sat up on her knees and turned around so her back was facing me, leaning back on her ankles. I wondered what the fuck she was doing, but then she reached over her head and grabbed the back of her shirt, sliding it up her back.

My eyes widened and I briefly panicked, wondering what the fuck she was doing. But then I finally understood when the shirt stopped across her ribs. Because across Bella’s lower back was a long jagged scar, reaching from her right hip, and disappearing behind her shirt across her spine.

I sat there for a moment fucking gaping at it like a hypocrite before she put her shirt back down and swayed back around to face me, flopping back onto the bed and crossing her legs. I was debating if I should ask her exactly how Phil did it, but then decided I didn't want to bring all that shit up tonight. So I laid back down and gave her a little smile. My girl was trying to make me feel better by showing me that. I showed her mine and she showed me hers.

And I was fucking drowsier than hell, and ready to go to bed. "Sleep?" I slurred out, swaying lightly against the headboard, and praying that the room wouldn't start spinning. Bella looked up at me and nodded, so I stood up and pulled the covers back, slipping underneath them with a sigh.

"No alarm." Bella slurred while climbing in next to me. I quirked an eyebrow at her. *Pretty fucking risky.* She settled into her pillow, lying facing me and rolled her eyes. "Esme's in Seattle." She slurred, sliding her eyelids closed. I nodded and turned the lamp off, not touching the alarm, and glad we could sleep the fuck in, because I was dreading the hangover I was going to have.

I scooped my girl up, rather uncoordinated, but successfully, and pressed her to me without hesitation. She brought her little hand up and lazily began stroking my hair. I buried my face into the little bun on the top of her head and took a deep breath. *So much better than cotton candy.* I smiled into her hair and brought my hand down to her lower back, over where her scar was, and rubbed it lightly before pressing her to me more firmly. Tit for tat.

Chapter 16. Oatmeal Determination



I woke up at ten, swearing to myself I would never drink again. My head was pulsating. It wasn't quite as bad as Alice always made it out to be, but then again, I didn't get drunk enough to vomit in the hedges like Alice usually did. I think that probably had something to do with it.

I opened one eye cautiously, squinting against the bright sun that I had only seen once in this room. I was still all wrapped up around Edward and he was sleeping peacefully. In fact, as I lifted my head to look at him better, I realized it was the first time I had ever woken up first and had the chance to watch him sleep.

I took a moment laying there to think over the previous night. Edward had quite obviously blown off the strawberry blonde. I couldn't, for the life of me figure out why he would rather spend time up here getting drunk with me, but it made me happy nonetheless. I was a little dubious regarding the vodka, not really having drunk before, but Edward always made things comfortable for me. And as I previously promised to myself, I was never doing it again. Once was it for me.

I glanced down under the covers to notice his big arm still wrapped around me. It made me smile. All wrapped around my waist just like it belonged. Like we belonged. Then Edward's words came into my pulsing head. He said I was pretty. I buried my face into his chest and smiled. Then my smile fell. Because he also said he tried not see me that way. *Tried.*

He said 'tried'. Not didn't. My head nuzzle spurred Edward in consciousness. His eyes fluttered open, squinting much like me against the sunlight, and he darted them down to meet my gaze. And I blushed. Because we had never really woken up like this before. He stared at me for a few moments before clenching his eyes shut and groaning.

I chuckled thickly. "You too, huh?" I asked in a raspy voice. He slowly extracted his arms from around me, and rolled over like usual.

"Fucking vodka." He muttered, running his fingers through his hair. I chuckled again, rolling out of bed and making my way to the bathroom while he worked through his usual morning haze. I got dressed groggily, holding my head on occasion from the pulsing that I really didn't care for. I was really glad there was no vomit involved.

I packed up at a slower pace than usual, sparing the occasional glance at the bed to make sure Edward didn't drift back into unconsciousness. I pulled my cookies out of my bag and another bag of a special mix of herbs I looked up on the internet for hangover remedies. Ginseng, green tea, chamomile, nothing too exotic. I put them on the table and gave Edwards curled up form instructions on the remedy and a sympathetic glance before leaving out the balcony.

It was bright out. The sun was shining. And odd event for Forks. I sneaked out and peeked over the backyard, feeling more exposed without the usual darkness I was used to shielding me, and climbed down the lattice when I was sure the coast was clear. I walked into the back door of the house and was met with silence. Alice probably figured I went straight home after she met up with Jasper, so she most likely expected me to lock myself in my bedroom all night.

I walked down the hall to her bedroom to be certain she made it home okay, but her door was locked. I furrowed my brow at the knob, cocking my head to the side. Alice never locked her door before. It was just the three of us here, so she was always comfortable having it wide open. I knocked on the door loudly, panicking that something might be wrong.

I heard muffled groans coming from the other side.

"Alice?" I called at the closed door, not really needing her to come out, but needing to know she was okay. The door opened a crack and Alice's little head poked out, squinting and looking a lot like she had a worse hangover than Edward and I combined.

"You okay?" I asked, concerned there was something wrong still. She smiled at me, but it looked more like a grimace.

"Feel shitty." She grunted... or as much of a grunt as Alice could possibly make. Then I heard movement in the room behind her. I furrowed my brows, wondering what could be in Alice's room, and then my mouth fell open in shock.

"Alice!" I hissed incredulously, not even believing the situation was real. Then she huffed, looked behind her shoulder into the room, and squeezed out the door wearing nothing but her pink silk bathrobe. My mouth hung open even wider in shock.

I moved back in the hall to make way for her. Just pretty much gaping. I knew Alice was in love with Jasper, but I mean, come on. One night? And it was hardly even a date.

She took in my shocked appearance and held her hands up. "No, Bella, we didn't have sex. I swear." She rasped, still squinting, then groaned, putting a hand up to her forehead. I let out a sigh of relief, nodded, and walked towards the kitchen, peeking over my shoulder to make sure she was following. She flopped onto the stool as graceful as possible and held her head in her hands. I began making her the hangover remedy I made Edward.

“So.” I started, pursing my lips, and glancing sideways at my poor pathetic lump of a cousin. “What exactly happened last night?” I asked cautiously. It wasn’t really any of my business, but I couldn’t help the curiosity. Plus I had kind of already resigned to living vicariously through her. It was a big deal.

She groaned again. “A lot of making out. A lot of alcohol. Possibly a little vomit in the hedges.” She rasped, dropping her forehead onto the granite counter in front of her. I chuckled, because Alice always puked in the hedges after she got drunk. I’m surprised they haven’t completely died yet.

I put the hot steaming cup in front of her and took the seat across from her on the island. “And Jasper stayed?” I hedged, as more of a comment than a question. She lifted her head up and took a peek at the cup and nodded, picking it up and sipping it gingerly, still squinting.

As if he heard me, Jasper came stumbling into the kitchen, looking a lot better than Alice, but a lot worse than me. I tensed up by instinct, but remained in my spot when he entered, still wearing the grubby outfit from the previous evening, and hair all over the place.

He glanced up at me, sitting in front of Alice in my black hoodie still, though I had put the hood part down after I walked in the door. His eyes got wide for a moment before he offered me a tight smile. I could tell he was feeling bad too. So I got up off the stool without a word and began making poor Jasper a cup of the remedy as well.

Alice glanced over at him and patted the stool beside her, which he walked over to hesitantly, stealing glances at me the whole way. I smiled back at him, showing him I was okay with it. No breakdowns this morning.

“Jasper,” Alice rasped out, still holding her poor little head. “This is my cousin, Bella.” She smiled, holding a hand out towards me. I nodded at him, while he nodded back, offering me a more genuine smile.

I walked to him slowly, setting the cup on the far side of the counter, and sliding it towards him in his seat. He glanced down at it and quirked an eyebrow.

“It’ll help the hangover.” I said quietly, walking backwards away from him, and sliding back into my stool. He hesitantly took the cup and began drinking it, grimacing at the taste, but not complaining. I never said it was good. Just that it would help.

The three of us sat there in silence for a few moments, them sipping their remedies, and me just looking down at my lap and swinging my feet from the stool slowly.

“I looked for you last night.” Alice rasped from her seat. I lifted my head to meet her gaze and she narrowed her eyes at me.

I bit my lip. “I came home early.” I shrugged, hoping she bought it, which she should, seeing as how it was very characteristic of me.

“Yeah.” Jasper rasped. I flinched slightly, surprised to hear him speak up, but he was just staring into his cup. “I saw her leaving. You should have asked me.” He said to Alice, smiling at her in a way that softened her face. She shrugged and went back to drinking.

But I was slightly shocked. Jasper was covering for me. When he met my gaze again, I flashed him the biggest grin I could muster, silently thanking him, to which he returned. It seemed a lot like an acceptance. He wasn’t going to tell Alice, and he didn’t mind whatever it was I had with Edward. I moved Emmett down a notch on my list of favorite guys and slid Jasper into his spot.

I was going to offer to make them breakfast, but Alice sent me a very pointed glance that told me she wanted privacy. So I lifted myself off the stool and said a curt goodbye to them both, and went to take a shower.



I spent the rest of my morning going over the evening with Edward since my earlier musings were cut short. He said ‘tried’. And I really hated to scrutinize his every word and tone just like Alice would with Jasper, but I had to. Because somehow, the whole night for me revolved around that one comment. It was echoing in my head all morning long. *I try not to see you that way.*

Why? Why was he trying not to? I attempted not to put too much thought into the fact that he even had to try in the first place. The thought of it gave me too much hope. But it didn’t still didn’t explain why.

I threw my hoodie into the wash at noon. It was soaked all day yesterday, and it was like my second skin. While the washing machine was going, I hopped onto it, and began pondering over the other things he said, praying for some kind of clue. He said I was pretty. He said he had to try. Try. I furrowed my brows. That’s when his previous statement came to me. *Don’t freak out or anything.*

Did he think it would freak me out if he saw me that way? I kept pondering over the whole thing while the washing machine was vibrating below me. By the time it was done, I decided it didn’t really matter why he tried. The important thing was that he was. So how do I break that? How do I break him? I groaned and scratched my head. Guys were so damned confusing. It was times like this I really wished I could just ask Alice for her advice.

With that stroke of genius, I jumped off the washing machine and headed to her room, praying she was alone. When I entered the hallway I saw her door was opened, but I knocked on the wall of the hall, just for safe measure.

"I'm *alone*." Alice huffed from her bedroom. I smiled and continued down the hallway and into her room, where she was sitting in front of her vanity mirror fixing her hair. I took my usual seat on the bed and laid down.

I watched her fixing her hair for a while, wondering how to voice the question without being suspicious. It was a very slippery slope. I figured I could get anything out of her related to Jasper, so I started there.

"So," I asked casually, swinging my leg from the end of the bed. "How did you end up breaking Jasper?" I asked, using my earlier mental words. Obviously they had come quite a long way since the few days before.

She turned around and smiled widely at me, looking like her hangover was nearly gone. "It was all a matter of a little bit of flirting, and a hell of a lot of liquor." She snickered mischievously. And I kicked myself, because Edward had liquor in him last night, and I didn't flirt at all. Not that I even knew how, which made me ask my next question.

"How did you flirt?" I asked furrowing my brows. I had never even seen anyone flirt, let alone harbor the knowledge involved to do such a thing.

She perked up and turned her whole body towards me, almost vibrating with excitement. "Well," she smiled wider and chuckled. "I used all my eye moves." She smirked. I furrowed my brows. Eye moves? What the hell was that supposed to mean. Alice seemed to notice my confusion and let out a frustrated sigh. "You know?! Eye moves!" She rolled her eyes after I shook my head at her. She straightened up, like she was preparing for something, so I sat up on the bed fully to face her, relatively interested in this whole eye move thing. I mean, I had eyes.

She put her head down, like she was looking at the floor then looked up at me through her eyelashes with a little smile while batting them. Then she straightened up and snickered.

"*That* is flirting?" I asked incredulous. That was barely anything. And it looked so... cliché.

Alice's brown eyes grew wide. "Geez , Bella, haven't you ever flirted before?" she asked, even more incredulous than I was. I slowly shook my head, fighting back a grimace. She gaped for a few seconds before rolling her eyes and reaching onto her vanity for one of her magazines, which she tossed at me from across the room.

"Page forty three." She nodded decisively, and turned back around to apply lipstick in the mirror of the vanity. I looked at the magazine dubiously. It was one of those stupid teenage girl magazines that I always rolled my eyes at. I opened it and went to the infamous page forty three.

It was all a bit overwhelming. The eye thing was definitely in there. But there was more. Things like casual touching, and laughing more often than you usually would, which just sounded

stupid to me. Of course the next things on the list had to do with dressing... or the lack thereof. Showing off skin and looking your best. Then there were other things dealing with body language, like leaning in and whispering to the boy you're flirting with. I felt so ridiculous even considering this stuff with Edward. I tossed the magazine aside unceremoniously and left Alice to do her primping.



By dinner time, I had decided that flirting was just plain stupid. There's no way I would ever be able to get through it without blushing madly and looking completely transparent. I did decide, however, that I had to do something. I couldn't just sit around and expect Edward to realize I liked him without making at least a minimal effort. I became mildly determined. I wanted to start small, nothing too big and obvious, just test the waters. I chose hair. Edward liked my hair. He was always smelling it and nuzzling it in his sleep. Hair was safe. Unfortunately, I didn't know the first thing about doing hair. So I went to the only person I knew who could.

Alice squealed and jumped up and down clapping her hands in the middle of her room when I asked. And I cringed. I felt like I was selling my soul to the devil.

"This is going to be so great, Bella!" She squealed, making me cringe again. Then she took my hand and led me over to the cursed vanity. I glowered at all the hair products, wishing there was another way. She plopped me down into the seat with another squeal, and began brushing and pulling my hair.

"So, what are we looking for? Up? Down? A little of both. Oh! I know, we'll put a little up here..." Alice said excitedly as she twisted and pulled my brown hair every which way. I blocked her voice out and closed my eyes, just waiting for it to be over.

An hour later, Alice had my hair shiny. Really freaking shiny. And I don't know how she did it, but, my god was it was *shiny*. She had curled the ends, and clipped up my bangs with two clips behind my ears. I turned my head in the mirror, admiring the look. It wasn't so bad. It didn't look obvious. It was actually kind of pretty. And the thought of that word made me smile.

I thanked her and promised her she could do it again before she went to bed. Apparently that was the only collateral acceptable. At nine I began making my cookies, and decided oatmeal would be a nice cookie. *Oatmeal Determination*. I packed up Edward's dinner and cookies and slipped on my hoodie, feeling a little glum that I couldn't wear the hood. I took one last peek in the mirror before I left at ten to check my appearance, which just made me feel stupid. I rolled my eyes at my reflection, with my shiny brown hair cascading in loose curls over my black hoodie, and walked out the door, thanking god it wasn't raining tonight.

Edward

WIDE AWAKE

My day was shitty. Vodka is not my friend. I ended up helping Em clean the house anyways, because that fucker was even worse off than I was. Of course, he didn't have Bella making him a fucking fantastic hangover remedy either. It tasted like ass, but it made me feel better. I left the vomit houseplant for him, though. It's what that fucker gets.

Jazz came over at noon to relay the events of the previous night to me. He had a fucking goofy ass grin on his face the entire time. They made out. Second base was cleared. And with the way he was talking, you'd think they'd spent the whole night having the best fucking sex in the world. It was comical, really.

I hadn't eaten a thing all day, too fucking scared I'd be the next motherfucker to vomit in the houseplant. So by the time ten came, I was pretty fucking starved and waiting for my girl anxiously. She was perfectly on time, the little tap on the glass at ten. Always so fucking punctual. I opened the door quickly and went to take the hood off her head, but was instead met by a palm full of soft hair.

I slowly lowered my hand and took notice that Bella didn't have her hood on tonight. In fact, her hair appeared to be made up or some shit. All brown and shiny and curly. And... pretty. She smiled at me and brushed past me to unload my meal on my bed. And I kind of fucking gaped at her hair, because she never really made an effort to do shit like that. It was clipped out of her face... and just really fucking shiny. She shuffled to the sofa like usual and I took notice how it swayed behind her in little wave, and all the little curls bounced around.

I shook my head and went to the bed to begin eating my meal while Bella listened to the iPod on the couch. We began discussing the whole fucking Alice and Jasper situation. Bella chuckled when I told her about Jasper's post-coital glow. Which was hilarious seeing as how there was no sex involved. I was just relieved I didn't have to explain to Bella what post-coital was.

I was still slightly gaping at her hair. It was flowing down that black fucking hoodie in the cutest little tendrils. I wanted to pull on one and let it go and watch it bounce back up. And I felt like a fucking idiot.

"You're hair looks nice." I blurted while still fucking gaping, holding my fork in mid air. Her head snapped up and she fucking blushed. Which was not helping with the whole feeling like an idiot situation. I rolled my eyes and kept eating.

“Alice did it.” She smiled, looking down at her lap. I fucking chuckled, imagining Brandon kidnapping Bella and assaulting her with an overabundance of hair products. Then Bella glanced up at me through her long thick lashes, and my breath fucking hitched. It reminded me of last night when she did that. Because when she does shit like that, she just looks so fucking different.

“I think she wishes her hair was longer.” She said quietly, still looking at me in that same fucking way, and batting her long lashes a bit. I was slightly mesmerized by the action, and then quickly diverted my gaze to my food, trying to shake that shit off. I didn’t look back towards her for the rest of the meal.

I thanked her for the meal and started on a sketch while Bella read her book. I forced myself not to look up at her, and that fucking shiny hair. But I was still fucking tired, even though I slept in that morning. So after an hour, I closed my sketchbook and finally looked up.

Bella glanced up at me from the book through her eyelashes again, so I quickly darted my eyes away. What the fuck was she doing? She got up and went to the bathroom to change, and I sat on my bed shaking my head at myself for being so fucking stupid. I was kind of hoping when she came out of the bathroom she would have her hair up, or something, but it was still there, flowing down her white t-shirt, and looking even better against white than black. I rushed into the bathroom after her, trying not to stare at it. *It’s just fucking hair.*

I did my nightly routine rather slowly, kind of fucking dreading having to face all those shiny curls. When I finally exited the bathroom, Bella was sitting on her side of the bed Indian style, waiting for me. With those fucking curls brushing her elbows and making me gape, even though I really didn’t want to. I got into bed beside her under the covers and quickly turned off the lamp.

Once Bella was situated, I rolled over and scooped her up, and plunged my hands into all those shiny fucking curls, breathing them in with a sigh while she buried her head into my chest. My face didn’t leave her hair all night.

Chapter 17. Bye Bye Brandy Snaps



We woke up again without the alarm clock. The sun wasn't out today like yesterday, but it was still far brighter in the room than I was used to. I opened my eyes and peeked up at Edward, remembering how he looked yesterday. His face was mashed in all my curls, covering his nose and mouth as he breathed. It made me smile brightly.

He liked the hair. I don't only say that because he told me it was nice. I could notice him looking at me differently. In a good way. I hope. I shifted my head slightly, but found that it was being held still by Edward's fist, tangled into the back of all the curls. He definitely liked the hair.

I laid there for a long while with my head on Edward's chest, rising and falling, just enjoying feeling him asleep and so peaceful beside me, buried in my shiny hair. After what seemed like an hour, he finally began to stir, nuzzling his head deeper into my curls. I smiled into his chest yet again. I wondered briefly if he even noticed how much he liked my hair.

He stiffened infinitesimally, then groaned, and pulled away from my hair. Just like always. I rolled out of bed without another glance at him. I wanted the last thing I saw of him this morning to be his face nuzzled in my hair.

When I caught a look at my hair in the mirror, I grimaced and smiled all at the same time. I grimaced because it was everywhere. All the curls knotted up. But I smiled because it was Edward's hands and face that did it.

I packed up hastily; worrying that Alice might catch me coming in the door if I didn't make it home before she woke up. I set Edward's oatmeal cookies on the bed side table, and left through the balcony, doing another sweep of the yard to be positive the coast was clear.

Alice was still asleep when I got home at seven. I walked to her room to see if Jasper stayed again, but found her door wide opened like it always was. I showered and changed, kind of glum about having to wash out all the curls, but remembered she made me promise her she could do it again. I'd take her up on that. It was such a small difference, but felt like it made such a big impact. I spent the rest of the morning waiting for Alice to wake up, wondering what I would do next.

I made her breakfast as a thank you for the hair. At eight, she bounced into the kitchen, doing a little happy spin that made me chuckle at her. Her face was alight with excitement.

“Good morning!” She chirped, sliding into a stool and swinging her legs back and forth with vigor. I loved excited Alice. Much better than hung over Alice. I fixed her the plate of breakfast that had been waiting for her and sat down to eat with her.

She told me her and Jasper had plans next weekend, which didn’t surprise me in the least. We were sitting and chatting and giggling like two normal teenage girls. And I was rather shocked when Esme stepped in the door. She wasn’t supposed to be home until later that evening.

She walked into the kitchen in her pant suit, glancing at our all our giggling, and smiled at us. Her smile looked strangely bittersweet.

“Hey girls, any room for an old woman in here?” She asked sweetly, slipping into a stool next to Alice. I nodded enthusiastically and made Esme a big plate of the food we were eating.

“Fancy seeing you here mom.” Alice squeaked, still swinging her legs and arching a delicate black eyebrow at her mother. Esme smiled at her and began picking at her food, not answering the unspoken question as to why she had arrived home so early.

I warily took my seat and resumed eating, though all the giggling over Jasper had come to a screeching halt. We ate in a tense silence, Alice and I stealing curious glances at one another while Esme ate her breakfast. Finally, Esme set her fork down and daintily wiped her mouth with a napkin, finally meeting my gaze.

“Bella,” She started with a cautious look on her face. I immediately stiffened, wondering what was going on, and praying I hadn’t gotten caught sneaking out of Edward’s this morning. “I got a call last night.” She said softly, smiling at me reassuringly. But I wasn’t reassured at all, something was wrong. “Your guardian in Phoenix, Mrs. Lancaster?” She questioned, and I nodded, remembering the old grey haired women who had legal custody of me during my stay in Phoenix. Esme cleared her throat softly and tried smiling again, though it looked like a grimace, then shifted her gaze to her food. “Phillip’s trial is in a week.” She whispered into the plate.

I clenched my teeth with an audible snap at the sound of his name, and balled my fists up. She glanced up at me warily and immediately looked back down at her plate.

“They want you to leave for Phoenix tomorrow to prepare to testify.” She said softly, picking at her bacon. I stared blankly at her, blinking, but not really knowing else to do. Because I knew I was going to have to face him again, and I really didn’t want it.

“How long?” I choked through clenched teeth, balling my fists more when I realized that I was going to have to break my promise to Edward and leave him.

Esme never looked up from her plate. “Twelve days.” She said softly, stuffing some eggs in between her red lips.

I didn’t know what Alice was doing or how she was reacting, because I couldn’t focus on anything. I looked down at my plate and nodded with a grimace. My appetite was gone quite thoroughly. I slid out of the stool without another word, and went to my room to pack.

I pulled out my suitcase and began stuffing clothes in, not really seeing what I was putting in it, and not really caring. It wasn’t like I hadn’t expected this time to come. I had agreed to testify over a year ago, and now it was time to do it. I zipped up the suitcase in one sweeping motion, feeling numb. I sat carefully on the edge of my bed, staring at the closet door, and allowing a shudder to go up my spine at the sight of it.

The truth is I never spent time in my room. Just enough to take a shower and get dressed every morning. Edward’s room was more mine than this one was. With the blue walls and oversized king size bed that I had only used once the entire time I lived here. Then I realized I was going to have to go twelve days without sleep. And so would Edward.

I lied back softly onto the big blue bed that I never used and cried, rolling onto my side and bringing my knees to my chin. I sat there for a while before I felt the bed next to me sink down on either side. Then I felt four arms surrounding me. Esme and Alice. They sat there with me while I cried, and I heard sniffing suggesting that Esme was crying too. Alice gently lifted my head onto her lap and let all my tears soak her designer jeans while Esme rubbed my back, crying softly with me.

We sat there most of the day, just crying and dreading what I was going to have to do. I didn’t think it was possible to hate Phil any more than I already did, but laying there on that bed and crying with the remnants of my family before I was forced to leave them, I did hate him more.

It was five in the evening before the tears subsided. I lied sniffing into Alice’s wet jeans while she ran her fingers through my hair, telling me how pretty it was. I let out a choked chuckle, remembering my last sight of Edward this morning. Esme gently relayed to me my flight plans and arrangements while I was in Phoenix. It would be a hotel. And I was thankful I wouldn’t have to go back to the group home. Mrs. Lancaster, the old grey lady social worker, would be staying with me.

At six, I finally dragged myself off of Alice, sending her a sad smile. It was the best thanks I could give. I cooked. I cooked a lot. I made things that Esme and Alice could freeze and reheat easily. I made batch after batch of cookies. Bagging them all up for the separate days I’d be gone in five different bags. It was the only calming thing I could do. My only solace aside from the one next door that would be waiting for me at ten, not expecting the news I was going to have to give him.

At nine, I hugged and kissed Alice and Esme goodnight, sending them both thank you's for the bedroom episode, which they both shrugged off. Emse wouldn't come with me, and I understood. She had to stay with Alice, and I wouldn't have it any other way. Mother and daughter shouldn't be separated.

I stuffed my old book bag with the twelve bags of cookies for Edward and the dinner I had made for the night. I didn't look in the mirror tonight when ten came. I pulled my hood over my head and walked out the door glumly. My hair was the last thing on my mind.

I climbed the lattice, feeling better with each step that brought me closer to Edward's balcony, and climbed over, landing soundlessly, and knocking on the glass door timidly. Edward answered without looking at my face and let me in. Once he glanced up and saw the back of my hooded head, I felt him slowly pull it down, letting my very unshiny hair free.

I walked over to his bed without speaking or looking at him and unloaded his meal from my packed bag. I heard him flop down onto the bed and begin opening the containers as I shuffled my way to the couch. Once I turned around and met Edwards's gaze, his eyes widened.

"What's wrong?" He asked, his forehead creasing in worry while he sat in the middle of his bed holding the container of food. I grimaced and flopped down on to the couch.

I sighed and darted my eyes down to my lap. "Edward, I have to leave tomorrow." I whispered, never looking up. I played with my fingers while the room grew silent and still. It was thick and heavy, and I wished it never had to happen in the first place.

"You fucking promised me." Edward growled accusingly from the bed. I grimaced and peeked up from my lap to meet his hurt, narrowed eyes. It broke my heart to see him hurt, and to think that I was the one causing it. My eyes welled with tears by instinct. I didn't even think I had any left to cry.

"I have to testify in the trial. It's twelve days." I croaked through the tears that were fighting their way through my eyelids. Edward's face softened a little, and he put his fork down.

"You'll be back?" He asked eyeing me skeptically. I nodded at him slowly never taking my eyes off of him. His face relaxed and turned more into a frown than anything else. He stared down into his container of food, with a little lock of hair falling over his eyes. He covered it up without a word, and set it down beside the bed.

"I'm ready for bed now." He whispered, staring at his lap. I nodded and got up off the sofa, grabbing my bag and shuffling into the bathroom, just as ready as he was to be in that bed. I barely brushed my teeth; I rushed, just itching to get in the bed with Edward.

When I walked back out, Edward was already in his pajamas and sliding the covers of the bed down. He glanced at me with a sad expression that just made my mood worse. I shuffled to the

bed and crawled into it and under the covers while he did the same. Once we were both lying on our backs, he lifted an arm to the lamp on the table and turned it off.

Just like always, just like instinct, we turned toward each other and wrapped the other in our arms. Edward pressed me to him tightly, burying his face into my hair, and mine into his hard chest. I breathed in deeply, feeling him doing the same. I pulled my arm up, around his shoulder slowly and began caressing his soft messy hair, making him sigh into the top of my head. I got a little shiver, so he held me tighter to him, so hard it felt difficult to breathe, but I didn't care. In fact I moved impossibly closer, tangling my legs in his and nuzzling into his warmth. He sighed again and I began humming softly.

"Not yet." He whispered into my hair. I immediately ceased my humming, but kept stroking his hair and breathing him in. I nodded, understanding the need to appreciate the moment for a little longer. I could feel his big hand begin rubbing up and down my back slowly, pressing me against his chest while my fingers tangled into his hair and he nuzzled even further into mine.

After minutes I felt him press a soft kiss to the top of my head while still rubbing my back. I don't know what it was, but something about the soft kiss just broke me. I was tired of taking what I could get. I tilted my head up slowly to meet his eyes. When he felt my head move he leaned his head back a bit to meet mine. All I needed was one glance at those sad green eyes, and my mind was made up.

I used the hand that was stroking his hair and slid it down to the nape of his neck. He gazed quizzically into my eyes, but I didn't have time for quizzes and questions, or I would lose the nerve. So I quickly pulled my face up and put my lips on his.

He stiffened and halted his movements on my back. Completely.

"Stop." He whispered against my lips.

But I kept going. I grabbed his pouty bottom lip and kissed it softly between mine, waiting for him to respond. But he didn't. He was still stiff. So I did what he did to me when I was frozen. I slid my hand around from his neck and cupped his face, gently rubbing his cheek with my thumb and taking his bottom lip again. But it didn't work. I pulled back minutely and took his top lip between mine, softly kissing it and forcing my bottom lip in between his, hoping he would respond soon.

With one big gust of air, Edward finally responded. He brought his hand up my back and to the back of my head, crushing my lips into his. I began breathing heavily, sucking on his lips while he sucked on mine. I brought my hand to his hair and fisted the back of it, pulling his face closer to mine. I opened my mouth and dragged my tongue across his bottom lip. He didn't hesitate like last time. He darted his tongue out and met mine, making me moan softly. He just pressed me closer to him, shoving his tongue into my mouth while I massaged it with mine. I sighed into

his mouth, wrestling with his tongue and pressing my body closer. He groaned loudly into my mouth again, making my whole body heat up. But this time he didn't pull away.

Instead he pushed me over onto my back and rolled on top of me never breaking the kiss, holding himself up with one palm while the other pulled my face closer. I fisted my other hand into his hair and tilted my head so I could go deeper into his mouth. He groaned again and pressed down onto my body with more weight. I could feel every inch of his body pressed tightly against mine. And the feeling of what I was doing to him made me moan into his mouth again.

He pulled away from my lips and started kissing and licking his way down my jaw to my throat. We were both gasping and our chests were pressed together so tightly that we were panting the same rhythm. I tilted my head to give him better access, moaning at the sensation of his tongue on my neck. When I moaned he shifted roughly into my hips. And I could feel all of him. But I was too far gone to care about being indecent. I brought my feet up and wrapped them around his waist, whimpering softly, and needing to feel him do it again. He let out a throaty growl against my skin and shifted between my hips again, earning another moan from me while I pulled and tugged at his hair, pushing him further into my neck where he was kissing and licking.

It felt like every cell in my body was on fire. He lifted his lips from my neck and dragged them up towards my ear. I could hear his every raspy breath. "We need to fucking stop." He whispered in my ear huskily. But I shook my head, panting, and shifted my hips against his again, arching my back off the bed, closer to his chest.

"Fuck" He groaned loudly into my ear and dropped his head into the crook of my neck, gasping for air and shaking his head, causing his nose to tickle my neck. And I was thinking that even though my virtue was supposed to mean something, I couldn't quite remember why. But this time he pulled away. He rolled over beside me onto his back, his chest heaving up and down, and his eyes still closed.

I lied on my back, licking my swollen lips and catching my breath, and wanting to touch Edward in very inappropriate places. We laid there for minutes, until our breathing calmed down. I chanced a peek over at Edward and he still had his eyes closed.

"Edward?" I breathed, really hoping I didn't just ruin everything. He opened his eyes and slowly turned his head to meet my gaze. He didn't look angry, or upset. His eyes were dark, and he had a look of what I assumed, and hoped, to be lust in his eyes.

He let out a heavy sigh and shook his head. "That was really fucking stupid." He muttered. I frowned at him. Not really understanding what was stupid about it.

He rolled his eyes at me in a very Edward fashion and rolled over onto his side. "I'm ready now." He sighed, then scooped me up and resumed our earlier position.

As I pressed myself closer to Edward, I could see he was still quite excited. But it didn't bother me any. I pushed myself closer and he hissed, so I stilled, and began stroking his hair. I wanted to tell him I was sorry for making him feel like that. But really, I wasn't sorry at all. He buried his head into my hair once again and started breathing deeply, so I began humming to him quietly. Once he was asleep, I nuzzled into his chest and closed my eyes. Enjoying my last night of sleep for twelve days. And praying there would be more when I got back.



The stupid alarm clock was back. The weekend must have spoiled me quite a bit. I squeezed Edward's chest as hard as I could, willing him not to turn away after what happened last night. Willing him to show some sort of sign that he was okay with it. Willing him not to pull away.

He did. He groaned and rolled over, pawing at the alarm clock sleepily with his eyes still closed. I frowned and slowly slid out of bed, shuffling drowsily to the sofa to get my bag. I plucked it off the floor and drug my feet to the bathroom with my head down.

I closed the door with a timid click and slid against it until I was sitting. I was so stupid. Just grabbing Edward and kissing him like it was no big deal. I let my emotions get the better of me, and now not only was I in serious danger of rejection, but there was so much more on the line when he finally did it.

I sat there for a while, stewing in self hatred before finally picking myself up off the floor and looking in the mirror. My cheeks were flushed, of course. And that stupid toothbrush was sitting in the holder next to his. I didn't even use it. I just changed my clothes and heaved a heavy sigh and put my hood up.

When I walked out into the room, Edward was running his fingers through his hair with his eyes closed. Just like always. Not talking or saying anything at all. It hurt. I immediately felt stupid again. I walked over to the bed side table and began piling it with bags of cookies, fighting back the tears that were threatening to spill over. The last bag I placed on top of the stack, *Bye Bye Brandy Snaps* mocked me with its stupid black sharpie ink. I closed my eyes for a moment, standing there beside the bed that I screwed everything up in and just... tried to be numb. Prayed for numb.

Once I opened my eyes, I spared on glance towards Edward in the bed. He was lying in bed entirely still with his bronze messy hair all over the place from all my pulling and stroking, staring at me blankly. No emotion, no anger, no lust, no love, no concern. Just blank. I closed my eyes slowly and turned around; hating that that was the last memory I was going to have of him for the next twelve days. An already hard and painful twelve days.

I made my way to the door, shuffling with my hood up and my head down.

“Wait.” Edward ordered softly from the bed. I stiffened, dreading what his next words would be, and slowly turned around to meet his gaze. He was still blank. I stood, waiting for the inevitable words. But he didn’t say anything. He just reached down one arm under the bed and pulled out his black leather-bound sketchbook and held it out to me.

I stood there for a moment, not understanding what his sketchbook had to do with anything before I made my way to the bed and took the book out of his hand.

“Don’t fucking look at it until you’re gone.” He snapped harshly with narrowed eyes. I flinched away from his hard voice and turned hastily towards the door, running out to the balcony and slamming the door shut. I climbed down through blurry vision and ran through the dark yards to my house, passing the gazebo with a sob.



Esme drove me to Sea-Tac at ten in the morning. I stared out the windows at all the green that I had come to love, dreading having to leave. And dreading having to come back. All at the same time. Esme didn’t say anything to me the entire drive. Just occasionally patted my hand lovingly. I wanted to smile at her and tell her I was going to be okay. But that was bullshit.

I left her in the airport with a hug and a kiss, and I didn’t tell her I would be okay, but she understood. Or at least she thought she did. I walked through the crowd of people grimacing with my hood up and my head down. When my flight to Phoenix was finally announced, I entered the airplane glancing around me, cringing at all the people packed so closely together, and grateful that Esme bought two seats right next to each other just so I could sit alone.

I hurried to my seat and took the window, putting my bag on the seat next to mine to emphasize the fact that I wanted to be alone. It took the plane forever to take off. It was like a metaphor for my entire life. When it finally did, it was afternoon already and the sun was nowhere to be seen. Clouds as far as the eye could see.

Once we were in the air, I slid my hand into my duffel bag and pulled out Edward’s black sketchbook. I fingered the cover reverently, holding back tears at all the stupid things I had done. I opened it cautiously to the first page. There was an amazingly good sketch of a young woman. Maybe in her late twenties. She had Edward’s perfectly straight nose and a big smile on her lips. I glanced down at the corner to read the details of the sketch in neat script.

Edward Cullen
July
Elizabeth Masen

I raked my eyes over the perfect sketch carefully, realizing this must be his mother, and surprised to learn his real last name for the first time.

I turned the page, and it was her again, in a different pose, happier and smiling with another man, who I assumed was his father, *Edward Masen, Sr.* He had the same messy hair as Edward did. It made me smile seeing it. I fingered the page carefully, noting all the tiny details. Edward was truly talented.

I kept flipping, and there were dozens and dozens of sketches of his parents, all meticulously drawn during long nights of boredom while he was trying to stay awake. It made me frown and smile all at once. But then while I was flipping through the pages, one caught my eye that wasn't either of them.

It was a girl. In a black hoodie. It was *me*. Sitting in his room on the black leather sofa reading a book. I ran my hand along all the black shading awestruck. I flipped the page and it was me again, laying my head down on the picnic table at the gazebo, smiling. The next page was me throwing my head back in laughter. There were pages among pages of just... *me*. I furrowed my brow and looked down at the corner of all the pages. They all said the same thing.

Edward Cullen.

November

My girl.



I woke up, all tangled in shiny fucking curls. They smelled so fucking good. Then I stiffened, remembering how the curls taunted me, and rolled over with a groan. I felt Bella roll out of bed, and I forced myself to keep my eyes closed and not look at them anymore.

I heard her shuffling out of the bathroom ten minutes later and hastily packing up her things. Once I was sure she was out the door, I let my eyes finally open. I pathetically sniffed her pillow one more time before I rolled my eyes at myself and rolled out of bed.

My day was fucking boring. There wasn't anything to do but sketch. And I spent my entire day sketching those shiny fucking curls. Three pages of them in fact. I felt so fucking stupid, and I was wondering if I was going to end up as one of those hair fetish freaks or some shit.

By ten I had put my foot down on the shiny fucking curl situation. I refused to let them control me. So when she came back at ten that night, I opened the door without looking at her. Fearing the shiny fucking curls. But as she walked past me I saw her hood was up again. And for some reason, I was pathetically disappointed. I slowly reached up and pulled her hood down like I always did. No pretty shiny curls.

She began unloading my meal on my bed with her back towards me, never speaking. I tried not to read too much into it, and flopped down on the bed while she shuffled to the couch. I began opening the containers, smelling them reverently. But when I looked up, Bella turned at the same time. And the look in her eyes scared the shit out of me. Pain.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, trying not to panic. She grimaced and flopped down onto the leather sofa.

She let out a heavy sigh, and shifted her gaze towards her lap. I furrowed my brow. “Edward, I have to leave tomorrow.” She whispered, so quietly I could barely hear.

But I knew what she said. It had been my biggest fear for weeks. She was fucking leaving. Just like everyone else I ever fucking cared about. And after she fucking promised...

“You fucking promised me.” I growled, hurt and angry that the whole fucking routine was going away. I would never fucking sleep again. And my girl was gone. She grimaced and met my gaze, and I was staring fucking daggers at her.

“I have to testify in the trial. It’s twelve days.” She croaked, sounding on the verge of tears. My face softened with that sound. I fucking hated seeing my girl cry, even if she was leaving me. Then her words sunk in.

“You’ll be back?” I asked, eyeing her skeptically and setting my fork down. She slowly nodded, holding my gaze for a few moments. I knew her better than to think she wanted to do this. Go and face that fucking monster. I frowned into my container of food, realizing that my girl would be gone for twelve fucking days. I’d be alone. And fucking tired.

I covered the container up, not wanting to waste the little bit of time we had left with something stupid like fucking eating, and set it beside the bed, staring at my lap and feeling fucking tired. “I’m ready to go to bed now.” I whispered, just needing to feel her next to me. I heard her get up and begin shuffling to the bathroom.

I began throwing on my pajamas while my girl was in the bathroom putting on hers. I couldn’t wait to get into that bed. She was fucking leaving. The routine would be gone for twelve days. And so would my girl.

When I heard the door open, I glanced over at her. She looked so fucking sad that it made me sad. I pulled down the covers and slid under them, while she did the same. I didn’t waste time. I

reached up and turned the light out and scooped my girl up. I buried my face into her soft hair, pressing her little body tight against my chest. I breathed it in. All fucking brown and flowers and cookies. It wasn't as shiny tonight, but it didn't fucking matter to me.

I felt her little fingers working through my hair and I sighed into hers. She shivered, and I didn't want my girl to be cold, so I held her tighter. Probably too fucking tight. But I wanted to keep her next to me. Make her fucking stay. Keep her monsters away for just one more night. As if knowing exactly what I was offering, she nuzzled her head into my chest, tickling my nose with all her hair.

But then she started humming, and I didn't want it to end yet. I wanted to stay next to her conscious for a just a few more fucking minutes.

"Not yet." I whispered against her head. She immediately stopped humming and nodded into my chest. Her little fingers felt so fucking good in my hair. I wanted her to feel something like that. Anything like that. So I began rubbing her back. Firmly but slowly up and down from her neck to her waist, tangling her hair beneath my fingers with each hard caress.

She tangled her fingers further into my hair, and it made my eyes roll back into my head a little. I nuzzled further into hers. It was everywhere, all over my face. My nose pressing into her head, just trying to drink in as much as I possibly fucking could before it all went away. I kept rubbing her back. She seemed to like it.

Without even thinking about it, I tilted my head slightly and pressed a soft kiss to her scalp. I don't know why. I just wanted to show her more affection. I didn't even fucking think about it. It just felt natural. I felt her little head tilting up, so I moved mine back slightly.

I was afraid I crossed a line with the soft head kiss. I didn't mean for it to be romantic or anything, I just needed to show her how I was feeling in that moment. Once I could see her face, I darted I gazed into her big brown orbs. She had the strangest look on her face. It reminded me of Jazz when he finally worked up the balls to talk to Brandon. Determined.

Then her little hand was sliding down my head and onto my neck. I furrowed my brows at her, wondering what the fuck was going on. Then she pulled her face up and put her lips on mine. I fucking froze. Everything froze. Her little soft warm lips were pressing against mine. And I was panicking, because one more kiss was sure to make that fucking switch turn on. And neither of us wanted that.

"Stop." I whispered against her lips. She would fucking stop, and I would be fine. I'd never bring it up again, and things could stay normal. Her eyes were closed, but mine remained open in shock. *Why the fuck is she doing this?*

She kept fucking going. Grabbing my bottom lip in between hers, just like I fucking taught her to do. But I couldn't fucking move. Because I was focusing on anything else but her lips on mine and her soft body flush against me.

Then she moved her little warm hand around from my neck and cupped my face, rubbing her thumb over my cheek. And I briefly wanted to praise her for paying such good attention on the last kiss I gave her. But then she grabbed my lip in between hers again, sucking softly and lightly. And I was fucking grasping for control, trying not to move, because if I did, everything would be ruined.

But then she moved to my top lip and forced her bottom in between mine. And having her soft pouty bottom lip just *right fucking there* broke me. Every nerve in my body was waking up and coming to life. And suddenly, I was a hormonal teenage motherfucker. I brought my hand up from her back and pulled her to me roughly, crushing her lips against mine. All the air left my lungs as I began sucking on her bottom lip. That same fucking lip. And she was doing the same, and she was doing it so fucking good, fisting her little hand into my hair and pressing me against her mouth harder. When I felt her tongue come out, I didn't freeze up like last time. I was too fucking far gone.

I darted my tongue out and licked hers. And she fucking *moaned*. And the sound of her soft little moan made me harder than Jessica fucking Stanley and Lauren Mallory combined. I pulled her to me tighter, satisfied that she was enjoying this almost as much as I was, and forced my tongue into her warm mouth. And she tasted so fucking good with her tongue pressing against mine while she sighed into my mouth. She just kept pressing herself against me and pulling my face closer, panting into my mouth. And for the first time ever, I finally allowed myself to really *feel* all of Bella against me. And my girl felt so fucking sexy pressed against me that I groaned into her mouth. It was the groan that always told me it was going too fucking far.

But I couldn't pull away. I had to feel her beneath me; I had to feel her little soft body pressed against mine completely. So I rolled us over. Like the hormonal teenage motherfucker I was. I held my upper body up with one palm on the bed, but used the other to pull her face closer. And I was idly wondering if this was too much for Bella too fast. But then she fisted her other little hand into my hair, and tilted her head just so she could plunge her fucking tongue deeper into my mouth. I groaned again, and just let my palm go, pressing into her completely, just like I wanted to. When she felt me pressed against her, she moaned softly into my mouth again.

But I couldn't fucking *breath*. And I could feel her panting beneath me, gasping for air, so I pulled away from her lips. But I couldn't stop. I began kissing my way down her jaw, licking every now and again to taste her warm skin. When I made it to her neck, I began sucking and licking and just fucking enjoying the shit out of turning switch on. But then she had to moan again. And by reflex at hearing it, I shoved my hard on right into her hips. I couldn't fucking help it. It was almost like she knew exactly how to drive me fucking crazy. Because when she felt me do that, she lifted her little legs up and wrapped them around my waist. And I could feel all of Bella through our flimsy flannel pajama pants, and my hard on was right in between her hips.

And she had heat just fucking radiating from between her legs. She whimpered softly, her little fists pushing my face into her neck. She fucking liked it. And so did I. So why not?

I growled into her neck and shoved into her again, rougher. Just fucking needing to feel the friction and all of Bella's heat. And she moaned again. I panted into her neck and clenched my eyes closed, realizing that if I didn't do something soon, we'd be going too fucking far. So I lifted my lips up slightly and dragged my bottom lip up her neck to her ear.

My breath was raspy and husky, and all I could feel was my hard on shoved in between us. "We need to fucking stop." I whispered into her ear. And we really fucking did. Because there's only so much provocation a hormonal teenage motherfucker can take. But Bella had different ideas. She shook her fucking head, arching up to press her chest against mine and rubbed her hips roughly against my dick again.

"Fuck". I groaned into her ear. I dropped my head down to her neck and shook it. She wasn't going to help me end this shit. I was all on my own. She was a hormonal teenage motherfucker too. Tit for fucking tat.

I rolled off her with my eyes closed, trying to tone down all the hormones for a minute, which wasn't fucking working at all. I was going through mathematical equations in my head, just trying to get my mind off Bella panting beside me, trying to calm myself down.

Ten minutes later my dick was still rock fucking hard, and all I could think about was Bella's tongue in my mouth and her hips rubbing against me.

"Edward?" Bella's soft voice called from beside me. I even groaned in my fucking head hearing it. I was so fucked. I opened my eyes slowly and turned my head towards her. All I could see were those fucking red swollen lips and her licking them. The switch was still on. And now I was still hard, and there was no fucking way I was going to walk into that bathroom to whack off with Bella feet away from me.

I let out a heavy sigh and shook my head. "That was really fucking stupid." I muttered, knowing that I was going to have to sleep beside her all night with a throbbing erection pressed against her. That was bound to be a little awkward. She frowned at me for my suggestion and I just had to roll my fucking eyes. *Let her see for herself.*

"I'm ready now." I sighed, just wanting to go to sleep and have the switch back off. I scooped her up, trying to keep my hard on as far away from her as possible, but she just kept scooting closer. I hissed when she moved against it, and she finally stilled. I buried my head into her hair and breathed deep, hoping her smell would calm the hormones. Once her humming started, I was drifting off to sleep. Warm and soft and completely fucking hard.

I woke up to the alarm clock again. And Bella was squeezing me with everything she had in her. And even though I really wanted to squeeze her back and just have her stay in my bed forever and never fucking leave, I knew she had to. So I pulled away.

I more felt than saw her roll out of bed. I kept my eyes shut. Praying that the next time I saw her, the switch would be off again. I heard her close the door with a timid click, and it made my heart clench. I fucking hated timid clicks. I'd take a fucking slam over a timid click any day. Then I heard her back sliding softly down the bathroom door. I was pretty fucking positive that's what it was. It was just like my girl to do some shit like that.

Minutes later, I heard the door to the bathroom open, but I didn't open my eyes. I listened to her shuffling around the room, packing up her shit. Then I heard her walk over to my bed side table. I finally let my eyes open and I turned my head towards her. She was unpacking bags of cookies for me.

But I couldn't fucking focus on that. Because I saw her face and I just fucking knew. The switch wasn't on or off. It didn't even exist anymore. I still wanted to lick her neck and kiss her fucking senseless. And it scared me shitless. She turned then and met my gaze. And she was wearing that goddamn hood. I hated it. I hated the hiding. I couldn't let her think I was just some horny asshole like Newton. I had to show her how much more she really was to me.

She closed her eyes slowly, and turned away from me, shuffling to the door with her hood up. And I fucking panicked. I couldn't let her think of me that way. She'd never fucking come back. I realized the only thing I could possibly do. And I fucking hated to do it.

"Wait." I called softly. She turned around slowly and met my gaze. Still fucking hiding. I reached my arm below my bed and produced my sketchbook. I had been drawing Bella ever since the first day I met her. She would open it, and see every part of my fucking soul. And I hoped and prayed that when she saw herself through my eyes in the sketchbook, she would just fucking... get it.

She slowly shuffled her way to my outstretched hand and took the sketchbook from it. And I was really pissed off, because I had never shown anyone my sketches before, and she was still fucking hiding under that goddamn hood. It wasn't fucking fair.

"Don't fucking look at it until you're gone" I snapped harshly, Hating the hiding.

She flinched away from me and turned, sprinting out the door. And I was the asshole. Because I let her leave without saying anything I really wanted to. I wanted to tell her to stay. I wanted to tell her that I would miss her like fucking crazy. I wanted to tell her how fucking beautiful I thought she was. And most of all, I wanted to tell her that I would be here for her when she got back, and that I hoped she would keep her chin up, and be all grown up again, and face down that dirty fucking monster like the brave girl she was.

But nothing coming out of my mouth would have sounded right. So I gave her the book, and watched her run out. Finally seeing the look in her eyes for what it really was. Rejection.

Chapter 19. Rocky Road Reprieve



Phoenix hadn't changed one bit. It was still dead and dry, just like I'd remembered. It was so fitting. I wondered, as Mrs. Lancaster drove me from the airport to the hotel I'd be staying at, how I ever loved this place so much. Everything seemed so shriveled and cracked. Every road and landmark ghosts of a distant and painful past.

I clutched Edward's sketchbook to my chest the whole flight, and the whole drive to the hotel, keeping my hood up and my head down. I missed the smaller population of Forks. The city was bustling and teeming with greedy, dirty people that I just wanted to run away from.

My hotel room was bright and cheery, decorated in dry pastels that made me feel thirsty. Everything was wrapped in sanitary single servings that seemed rather metaphoric. The room had a closet that I didn't even open. I packed my suitcase away under my bed after Mrs. Lancaster left. I spent that first night in the bathroom, away from the dark closet, lying in the bathtub in the pajamas I had packed away at the last second and browsing through Edward's sketchbook with his scent surrounding me.

I would run my fingers over the fine indentations from the pencil, and it almost felt like he was somehow closer than he actually was. He always drew me smiling. There were little grins, tiny half smiles, and smirks. Then there were big grins. I noticed the date of our first kiss on one of me with a big goofy grin on my face. I smiled automatically thinking of it. I looked stupid, but he always drew me beautifully.

It was confusing. And I didn't really understand where I fit in amongst the pages of all the people he had loved and lost. He called me 'My Girl' in every page that held my face. But I couldn't understand why, or in what context. I was so afraid to hope. I didn't know what love was, or if I was even capable of feeling something so good and pure. But I did know that whatever it was I felt for Edward was as close I'd probably ever get to it. And I had no idea how he felt about me, or if he was even capable of it either.

The second day was long, full of briefings filled to the heap with lawyers. I was already tired. I had to give the lawyers their credit. They worked overtime to make me comfortable, never letting the male lawyers and investigators in the same room with me. It must have been quite

the task. I was thankful they knew so much regarding my situation. I couldn't handle any more stress than was already put on me.

By the third day, the exhaustion was already getting to me. I could see my circles reappearing. Mrs. Lancaster was concerned, but I refused medical treatment. I had to re tell the same story over and over for the lawyers and examiners. I worked to remain numb. Relaying the story with as little emotion as possible. I could tell they wanted more. More emotion, more feeling, more tears. But I was saving it. I was saving it for the day where I could stand up and tell the whole story to the real people that mattered. Any sooner, and I would be useless.

I sat in the cold white porcelain bathtub every night, eating my daily bag of cookies, and hoping Edward was eating his too. I'd still wear the pajamas, and I would always look through the sketchbook, memorizing his mother and father. Picking out small details and features that they had given to Edward. His mother's nose. His father's hair. His mother's eyebrows. His father's strong jaw.

And I really, really tried to look at his mother and admire her, but I just couldn't. She ruined Edward. Threw him out and abandoned him like a used rag. It infuriated me. I probably had no right. I knew that Edward told carefully crafted half truths when it came to her. I knew there was more. I just couldn't seem to find any reason acceptable. So I knew one didn't exist.

I spent day after day in a cushy leather office. Drinking steaming coffee and being scrutinized by every highly paid professional the state could find. It was awful. All I wanted was to get it over with and go home. Go giggle with Alice, Go see Edward. Go sleep. Go smile again.

On the fourth day, I slept. I curled myself in the covers of the fluffy white bed, hating every second of it, and I went to sleep. And the dreams came stronger and more vivid than ever. As if knowing the man responsible was so much closer, only miles away somewhere.

There were more and more days, bleeding together in a blur of black coffee and brown leather chairs and people taking notes. I kept my hood up, even in the building. I got stares and glances from people, silently insinuating my mental stability left much to be desired. And they were probably correct. And as Edward would say, I really didn't give a shit.

I thought about looking up the Cullen number many times to call Edward, but I knew it would just make it worse. The need to be with him. So I didn't even bother. I just spent night after night in the cold bathtub, fingering the sketchbook and eating my cookies in the pajamas.

And then, somewhere in the blurs of days of minimal sleep and mediocre bitter coffee, it was finally time to get it over with. Mrs. Lancaster arrived early, handing me a garment bag with a nice dress in it that I was dreading having to wear. I unzipped the modest blue dress and gave Mrs. Lancaster a look that said, *Why can't dresses have hoods?*

She was an old, loving woman. Grey and worn. Dry and wrinkled. Very Phoenix. She brushed my hair for me because it reminded her of her daughter. I let her. Because it reminded me of my mother. I slid into the stiff blue dress with a grimace, and we made our way to the courthouse through the city, tinted orange with dawn.

I was led to yet another leather office to await my turn. I wish I could say I was nervous, or somehow scared. But I was too tired to be. So I leaned my head against the stiff leather chair and just thought of Edward and what he was doing. I figured it was almost time for third period, and he'd surely be crossing the quad soon.

When they finally opened the door and requested my presence, *that* was when I began getting nervous. I shuffled nervously into the courtroom with my head down. Because it was the only way I knew how to do it. As I took the stand, I looked anywhere but at Phil. If you asked me, I couldn't even tell you what he looked like, or if he was even there at all, because I never actually looked right at him.

I relayed my story in a quiet whisper, utilizing my tiny microphone gratefully. I cried. I sobbed. I gave them exactly what they had been waiting for for eleven days. And by the time I was done, my face was soaked, and I was numb again.

I don't really remember even walking out, or Mrs. Lancaster guiding me to the car that was waiting. I remember reassuring her I didn't want to stay long enough for a verdict. We all knew what it would be. Phil was an incompetent criminal. The case against him was solid.

So I tore off the ugly blue dress and finally slid back into the comfort of my hoodie once we entered the hotel. My suitcase was already packed on the white fluffy bed, and I was ready to go home. Home to Forks.



I thought for sure the first day would be the worst without her. When I sat at lunch and ate her goodbye cookies all by myself while Jazz pawed Brandon in the janitor closet. When she wasn't sitting next to me in Bio, or passing me in the quad. I thought when I got home and went to my room and stared at that empty fucking sofa, I couldn't feel anymore like shit than I already did. But then I brushed my teeth, and while I was doing it, I saw her little blue toothbrush sitting there in that toothbrush holder all alone.

I wore the goddamn pajamas that night. There was no fucking reason to, because there was no way I was sleeping without my girl. But they smelled like her. And the bed did too. So I put on

my pajamas and got under the covers, smelling the cookies and flowers, and feeling like shit, and just laid there awake all fucking night.

Jazz knew by the second day. Alice had told him that Bella left. I was already fucking tired and he could see it. He didn't talk to me, just gave me a sympathetic look that I nearly snorted at. Because he had no fucking idea that I was missing a hell of a lot more than just fucking sleep. By the third day my black circles were back, and so was the zombie. When Jazz got in the car that morning, I fished for information on Bella from him while I drove slowly. Just fucking hoping that Brandon would tell him something about how Bella was. But he had nothing to offer me.

By the fourth day, I was swaying again. Refusing to sleep without her, but knowing it would come. That night, I tried sleeping with my pajamas on in hopes that all her fucking flowers and cookies would keep the dreams away, or maybe make me dream of her instead. But it didn't fucking work. I still had the dream, and I still woke up crying and shaking like a fucking baby two hours later. I began smoking again that night. I had quit ever since we began sleeping again. But now I fucking needed it. I stepped out onto my balcony and stared at the lattice, wishing she was climbing up it in her black hoodie. I was fucking pathetic.

On the fifth day, I raided daddy C.'s stash of amphetamines again. He had graciously restocked since I had been sleeping. And I used them rather liberally. I bought a new sketchbook, and I sketched my girl all night long, glancing over at the sofa ever so often just to stir her memory.

I still wore the goddamn pajamas every single night. And by the seventh day, her smell had completely faded from the dark flannel and white cotton. I tried downloading the song. All the Pretty Little Horses. I put my iPod ear buds in and lied down in my pajamas in the bed and played it. But it was all fucking wrong. It didn't work. The dreams came. Except now they had a creepy song in the background. I gave up on that the first time.

I was so fucking tired. I'd walk around the school and house in a numb daze, just trying with everything in me not to go to sleep. Plenty of things came back the eighth day. The tunnel vision, the slight shreds of memory loss, the complete fucking inability to concentrate on anything. I had become the irritable asshole again. I didn't blame Jazz when he decided to leave during lunches with Brandon. In fact, I preferred it. I think he probably knew that shit.

Every day I ate a new bag of cookies. It was the only thing I had left of the routine. Sometimes I'd get impatient, and almost eat an extra bag. But I never fucking did. One a day was all I allowed myself. All the food I made tasted shitty, and I was hungry. But I was too fucking tired to really notice or give a shit.

On the ninth night, I climbed down to the gazebo in nothing but my pajamas, hoping the cold December wind would just keep me the fuck awake. All the quiet and silence just made me feel even more tired. It was empty. I was just counting the days one by one. And they bled into each other slowly. There was no night, and there was no day. It was just one big lump of shit running together.

On the tenth day, Carlisle dragged my zombie ass out Christmas shopping. He fucking knew something was up, and he tried all afternoon to force it out of me. But there wasn't shit I could possibly tell him. He walked around the mall in Port Angeles all day, sparing me wary sideways glances that made me want to fucking scream.

Ten o'clock was always the worst time of day. I would always wonder where Bella was and how she was coping. And wishing like hell I could be there to hold her when she cried. Because I knew she would. My room was fucking empty without her. Everything had little impressions and whispers of her in their every fiber.

I kept telling myself that my fears were irrational. My girl would come back, and she'd still want to see me, and hum me to sleep, and maybe fucking kiss me a little more too. I didn't care how much of her she gave me. I just needed something. But the doubt was always there. Fear that I scared her away, that I hurt her too fucking much and she'd never let me fix it again. If I even could. It was so completely reminiscent of another beautiful person who used to hum me to sleep every night.

By the eleventh night, I was tired of trying to stay awake in my room, so I wandered around the mansion when Em and Carlisle fell asleep. I ended up in the dark kitchen. The clock was the only thing I could hear. The constant ticking, each one bringing my girl closer to me. I sat at the table just listening to it, fighting to keep my eyes open and my head upright, while I ate my last bag of cookies. *Rocky Road Reprieve*. They were hard, and nearly stale. And still fucking delicious.

And while I was eating them I was saying goodbye and letting go. Just in case. Just in fucking case history repeated itself and she didn't want to be my girl anymore.

Chapter 20. Cocoa Hidden Middles



When Esme pulled up to the Sea-Tac airport, it was already almost dark out. She pulled me into a huge hug, telling me ridiculous things like how proud she was of me, and asking me if I was okay. I was thinking my physical appearance probably hadn't fared very well. She let me go with a big kiss and tears in her eyes. And I really tried to smile at her, but I don't really think I managed it completely. She seemed to understand,

Every mile we got closer to Forks, I grew more tired. My eyelids were heavy from not sleeping, and so many tears I didn't have any left. I pulled down the visor mirror to look at my eyes for the first time in days. It was bad. They were swollen underneath, and a dark purple that went all the way around my bloodshot eyes. I looked awful.

Esme kept glancing at me sideways and telling me about all the things I had missed while I was away. She was worried. And I wished I could have reassured her in some way that I was okay. But I just couldn't. So I laid my head back on the seat and just watched all the trees blur by while she talked.

When we pulled up to the house, I didn't look at it first. I looked at the Cullen mansion. I couldn't see Edward's window from the front, but the entire house was still lit up. It was barely eight. I slowly dragged myself out of the car, trying to slam the door, but only having the strength for a small click. Esme grabbed my suitcase and walked in while I trudged behind her heavily with my hood up and my head down.

It was a Friday, and Alice was waiting for me in the kitchen, bouncing up and down with an enthusiasm that almost made me want to smile. Almost. Unfortunately, when she took one glance at my face, her smile died and fell. I hated that I was the one to kill her enthusiasm. She was all dressed up, and I quirked an eyebrow at her provocative dress.

She cleared her throat daintily. "I have a date." She chirped, trying to smile at me genuinely, but I could still see the concern in her eyes.

I rolled my eyes. "Jasper?" I rasped, flinching at the sound of my rough voice. Her smile fell more before she attempted to perk it back up and nod. I let out a very unauthentic chuckle that just sounded empty. But it was the best I could do.

Alice threw herself at me, nearly knocking me over with a hug I didn't think her size capable of. I hugged her back, and sent her my best smile, taking my suitcase to my room. But it was dark, and I didn't want to go in, so I just shoved it through the doorway and closed the door again.

I dragged my feet to the kitchen, deciding I would just really like to cook something again. Esme and Alice sat at the island and watched me cook, telling me about how they heated up all the food I made and how good it was.

I got that same feeling as when I first moved here. Like everyone was walking on egg shells around me, trying not to upset me. I hated it. I loved it.

I kept stealing glances out the kitchen window at the big white gazebo. For some reason expecting to see him out there. Which was really stupid. I began wondering if he would be okay if I came tonight at ten like always. If he was anywhere near as tired as I was.

"Esme" I rasped, turning around to face her sitting in a stool. She met my gaze, so I continue, clearing my sore throat softly. "I'm going to the library early tomorrow to look for some books." I crafted an alibi just in case everything went perfect. "So I might be gone by the time you wake up. And I probably won't be home until afternoon" I croaked. My voice was still scratchy and sounded as awful as I felt.

She nodded at me with a sweet smile. I hated lying to Esme, but at the moment, I couldn't really care. Alice left at nine to go meet up with Jasper, and I began baking cookies after Esme went to bed. *Cocoa Hidden Middles*. The hidden middle was minty cream.

I didn't know if Edward wanted me to come, or if I was even welcome anymore. But I was going to go anyways. I had nothing at all to lose.

So at ten, I packed my bag with food, cookies, and the sketchbook, and stumbled out the door. I was so tired I couldn't even walk straight. It was cold out, and a fine mist was lingering. I looked towards Edward's room and noticed his light was still on. With a deep breath, I drew my hood up and began stumbling across the yard to the Cullens'.

I climbed the lattice carefully with really bad coordination. My limbs all felt like mush. It took three times as long to reach the balcony as usual. I dragged my heavy legs over the railing, landing soundlessly, but clumsily. I took a moment to appreciate the skill required to accomplish such a climb in my condition. I could barely stand.

I turned toward the glass French doors, all lit up, without any sound coming from inside, and lifted a heavy fist. Knocking once. And only once, because when the first knock hit, the door flew open.

Edward was standing in the doorway of the big bright room, wearing his usual plain black t-shirt and dark jeans. His hair was hanging all in his face. And his eyes looked nearly as bad as mine.

Dark purple and bloodshot, drooping heavily. He was tired. He was staring at me blankly again, not blinking. I bit my lip lazily, feeling too tired to even put in the effort required to do it all the way, and just stared back. A gust of wind came from behind me and rustled Edward's hair out of his face momentarily.

"Hi." I whispered softly, my legs feeling very heavy. Edward seemed frozen in the doorway just staring at me with those tired blank eyes. I was starting to get worried that I did the wrong thing by even coming. And before I could question whether or not he wanted me to stay, he held his hand out without breaking my gaze. I dropped my drooping eyes to his upturned palm, and without hesitation lifted mine and slid it into it. And before I knew what was happening, Edward pulled me into the room quickly, sliding off my hood and wrapping his arms around my waist so tightly it lifted me off the ground. And I just collapsed in his arms. So tired and exhausted, and just glad to be home again. I threw my arms around his neck and buried my face in his shoulder. Taking big gulps of his scent in greedily. He had his face buried into the crook of my neck, breathing in just like I was. I brought my hand up and cupped the top of his head, tangling my fingers into his messy hair with a sigh. He squeezed me tighter, nearly hurting my ribs, but I didn't care. My feet were dangling off the ground, and I was so happy he had the strength to hold me up, because all of mine was gone.

"I missed the shit out of you." Edward whispered into neck, squeezing me tighter as if to emphasize the fact.

And I smiled. I finally, really, truly smiled into his shoulder. "I missed the shit out of you too." I slurred, still smiling, and just happy that it was even possible to smile again. Edward turned his face into my neck, and planted a soft kiss to it. And I smiled more. Big and goofy, surely, and squeezed his neck as tight as I could with the energy I had left. And without another word, he turned us around and shut the door with his foot. And then he carried me to the bed and sat me down on the edge, pulling away from me and kneeling in front of me eyelevel.

"You look so fucking tired." He sighed, lifting a finger and stroking the swollen bags under my eyes. I let my eyes flutter closed as he touched me, reveling in the electricity I had missed, and nodded heavily. Tired was an understatement. I felt him stand up and take the two straps of my book bag from my shoulder, sliding them off my arms and taking it off my back. I opened my eyes once it was off, and he just put it on the couch and walked back to the bed. He flopped down in the center behind me, and I just scooted back. Knowing that we both needed it before anything else could possibly be done or said.

"No alarm." I slurred, and scooted drowsily to my side of the bed, not even bothering to take off my shoes and I lied down. But Edward sat up, leaned down the bed to my side, and grabbed my feet, untied each of my shoes and slid them off.

"Thanks." I slurred, watching him throw them on the ground. He just smiled at me, and I had to smile back, because I was so happy to see that smile again. Without another word he laid down on his side of the bed and turned the lamp off. I didn't even have the energy to roll over all the

way, so he brought his arms around me and pulled me to the center of the bed against him. Burying his face into my hair like he always did, and making me smile into his chest. I brought my arm around his shoulder and up into his hair, and started stroking it softly, humming his lullaby. He sighed into my hair and relaxed his body, tightening his grip on me, then drifted off to sleep right before I did.



It was a sleep that could only be rivaled by that first night. Deep and long. I awoke to a soft caress on the back of my head, fluttering through my hair. And even though I was groggy and disoriented from sleep, I knew it was Edward. I could feel his electricity. I smiled and nuzzled further into his chest. I felt and heard him yawn into the top of my head.

“Wake up. You’re fucking lazy.” Edward mumbled into my hair. But I could feel his smirk, so I had to chuckle, though it was a drowsy one.

I stretched my legs, all tangled in his, but didn’t let go. “What time is it?” I rasped. My voice still hadn’t returned to normal.

I felt Edward pull away and I frowned, but just as I was about to open my eyes and get up, he put his arm back around me and pulled me back to his chest.

“Ten thirty.” He whispered, burying his face back into my hair. I sighed with a smile. Thankful that for *once*, he came back when he pulled away, and I put my arm back around him and gave him a tight squeeze.

Edward resumed stroking my hair. “How are you?” He asked in a whisper into the top of my head.

I smiled into his chest. “Better now.” I rasped sincerely. I felt him nod a little and nuzzle farther into my hair. We laid like that in silence for a while, just breathing each other in. It was the best feeling in the world. I felt like I had just woken up from running a marathon. Next to Edward.

Edward

WIDE AWAKE

She fucking came back. And even more than that, she still wanted to stay with me. She looked so tired and worn. I hated seeing my girl so broken. When I saw her at the door, the switch was still gone, and even with that goddamn hood up, I still wanted to kiss her all over and fucking beg her to stay. But she took my hand on her own. I didn't need to beg. And I was pretty fucking thankful for that, but I would have done it anyways. But I had to hug her, and I had to smell her, and I even had to kiss her neck a little too. Just because I was so fucking happy to be able to.

And my poor girl was so tired she could barely stand. So I tried to take care of her, the same way she would take care of me. Not even caring about the food or anything else. Just needing to get in that bed with her finally. Twelve days felt like a fucking year. She couldn't even get her shoes off. So I did it for her. And not because I didn't want the dirt on my bed, because I could really give a shit less. More because I needed to take care of her a little too.

Her humming was slurred and raspy, and barely audible. But it worked. The sleep was divine. Having the real flowers and cookies and humming just did it for me. Maybe it was fucking stupid, and childish, but it was impossible without Bella.

Then I woke up first. And waking up next to Bella and watching her sleep was one of the best moments in my entire life. I was confused about everything. Happy to have the routine back, but fucking confused. I had no idea where to take it, no idea what to do. No fucking clue how I really felt about my girl.

I spent the time she was sleeping thinking it all over. I knew I hated it when she wasn't beside me. I would kill anyone that fucking hurt her. I would do anything to see her smile and make her laugh. But that was all shit I already knew. I never thought much of it, because she *was* the routine. Without her, it didn't exist. But now the fucking switch was gone, and I was afraid there was more to the whole thing than I was letting myself see.

And I didn't know how Bella felt. I knew she kissed me, all on her own. And I knew the look she had on her face when she did it. And I had no way of knowing if she did it just to distract herself from all the bullshit that was going on, or because it was me. And if she was doing it because it was me, I was fucking clueless. Because that would mean Bella had feelings for me beyond that of our usual fucked up situation. Because there would be plenty of little signs and clues over all these weeks that I had completely missed while I was trying to keep the switch off.

And by the time my girl woke up, I was no closer to any solution or conclusion on either subject. And I figured I could just come out and ask her what the fuck was going on, and I could probably

run away from whatever she told me because I was scared shitless that it would ruin everything. And if I really needed to, I could fully appreciate the fact that I was completely and entirely dependent on her. Not just her company, or her fucking delicious food, or the fact she made me sleep, but just *her*. That was some scary shit.

So as my girl was lying here with me, all fucking tangled up with me and nuzzling her way further into my chest, I decided I would just let her lead me. If she wanted to just sleep then I would do it happily, and I'd enjoy every single minute of it. And if she wanted to kiss me senseless, I would do it right back to her. Because the switch was gone, and my girl was beautiful.

"Edward?" Bella rasped into my chest. Her voice sounded awful. Like she had spent the entire twelve days crying. She was so fucking nuzzled into my chest that her nose was poking the shit out of me. And I didn't care.

I just nuzzled further into her hair. Letting her lead me. "Hmm?" I hummed, taking in a deep breath of all the flowers and cookies I had missed.

"Your sketches were beautiful." She whispered quietly. And I kind of fucking grimaced because they really weren't. At least not compared to the people in them. "You're very talented." She concluded with a nod into my chest. I chuckled a little, because I really wasn't, but I was glad to hear her say it nonetheless.

"Thanks." I rolled my eyes into her hair and breathed it in some more.

She did the same thing to me, breathing deeply; I could feel her against my chest when she sighed. "Do you want it back?" She asked quietly. And I just shook my head. Because I wanted her to keep it.

By that time, I was kind of wondering when I should pull away. Or if she even wanted me to. It didn't seem like it. But real life was waiting for us, and if I was going to explore all these confusing feelings with my girl, I couldn't get us in trouble before I even got a chance.

So reluctantly, and with one more big breath of her tangled brown hair, I rolled over. She kind of clutched on to me and frowned a bit, but I had to fucking do it.

I shrugged at her frown. "Esme's going to fucking freak if you don't get home soon." I explained, which was definitely true. Bella nodded glumly and finally rolled over, and out of bed. I watched her shuffle to the bathroom drowsily. I had her hair all tangled up and sticking up everywhere. *So fucking cute.*

She spent ten minutes in the bathroom like always, and I was hoping she took notice of the fact that her little blue toothbrush was still here. Sitting in that toothbrush holder next to mine. And she must have because I heard the water running, and figured she was probably using it.

I was hungry. Fucking starving. There was no way I was eating last night. The sleep was so much more important than anything else. I wanted to say all kinds of shit to Bella, but I knew I wouldn't be able to think straight until it was done. Unfortunately, the sleep still didn't clear shit up.

Bella finally came out of the bathroom, and she had her hood up. And I wanted to tell her to take it the fuck off, but I didn't. She shuffled over to the couch and grabbed her bag, opening it up and pulling out a bag of cookies. She shuffled over to my bedside table and put them next to the alarm clock she hated. When she glanced at me through all her tangled hair, I smiled crookedly at her. And I had never used that smile on her before, and I don't know why I was doing it now, but it made her whole fucking face light up. And when I saw it, I swore to myself I would do it more often.

She smiled back with a big goofy ass grin, and blushed a little. I snickered at her, because she always blushed at the stupidest shit. So she rolled her eyes, still fucking grinning like mad and walked out the door.

Once she was gone, I snatched that bag of cookies up, hungry and needing to see what her day was like yesterday after she got home. The little white rectangle said, *Cocoa Hidden Middles*. And I fucking snorted at the bag. Because it was just so fucking fitting. Our middles were hidden. And I hoped that soon, she'd let me see her middles so I could stop being so fucking confused. And whenever I found out exactly what my middles were made of, I'd show her mine.

Chapter 21. Malted Chocolate Smiles



That *smile*. That crooked, glorious, radiant, sexy, seductive smile. He had *never* smiled at me like that. And I *knew* that smile. I had only seen him use it on two occasions. One was to get Mrs. Cope to excuse an absence. The other was to get free pudding from the lunch lady. That smile was Edward's weapon for women. He knew once he used it, they'd be putty at his feet. And, my *God* did it work.

I don't know if it was the kiss, or the twelve days without me, but something about how he looked at me had changed. In a very, *very* good way.

So when I got home, I was downright giddy. The trial was behind me, Phoenix was behind me, and I still had Edward. And possibly the chance to get a little more of him than I had previously expected. I was hoping, and I was okay with it.

Alice and Esme were lying in the living room in their pajamas when I got in. I snuck back to my room and dropped my book bag off and brushed my horrifyingly tangled hair before I went to see them. They were just lounging, and when they caught sight of my refreshed giddy Edward face, they smiled widely at me. I was aware it was a complete three sixty from yesterday's mood. Edward had that kind of effect on me.

I slid my hoodie off and flopped down on the couch between them. I could tell by their happy smiles that I hadn't been caught. Esme patted my knee and smiled at me sweetly before she lifted herself off the couch in her pink pajamas and stretched, walking out of the room to get dressed.

And I remembered how much I wanted to giggle with Alice again, so I took my shoes off and sat Indian style facing her, conjuring up the teenage girl inside of me.

"Alice." My voice was still slightly scratchy, but nearly back to normal. I painted a very serious expression on my face and she arched an eyebrow. "Spill it." I asked seriously, needing to know what was happening with Jasper. Her face lit up and she turned toward me, mimicking my position and nearly vibrating.

She giggled once. "Jasper is amazing." She squeaked, drawing out the word out and rolling her eyes in the back of her head a bit. I giggled with her, loving that things were finally happening between them. I waved my hand for her to continue. I needed details. She giggled again. "We spent all week together." She looked around the room and leaned into me with her hand cupping her mouth and continued in a scandalous whisper. "And the janitor closet is now color coordinated."

I couldn't help it. I really tried to keep it to giggles, but that had me nearly falling off the couch in loud, raucous laughter. I could just imagine poor Jasper's face when she stopped making out long enough to realize the closet was too filthy for her standards. She laughed along with me, and it felt so light and carefree.

Once her giggles had died down, she continued. "And the kissing..." She sighed with a dreamy look. She shook her head a little, making her black spiky hair bounce, and met my gaze again with a wide smile. "The kissing is almost better than the sex." She wiggled her eyebrows suggestively.

I gaped at her. Openly. Shocked. Though I really shouldn't have been. Alice was no virgin. The leather pants said it all. She giggled at me and rolled her eyes. "Oh, come on, Bella!" She chided, slapping my knee playfully. "Don't look so shocked." She smiled. And I smiled back, because at least they gave it a couple weeks. I hoped. And maybe if I took her indiscretions well, she would take it easy on me if she ever found out about Edward. I stopped asking questions after that. Jasper was my second favorite guy, and I didn't want to compromise that fact with a really bad case of T.M.I.

I spent the rest of my day unpacking and re-evaluating my Edward situation. I was wondering if I should go farther with my previous plan of little steps, to show him that I liked him. I figured now was probably a pretty good time to give it a shot, seeing as how we was looking at me differently. And definitely *smiling* at me differently. Plus, I already basically tried to have sex with him through pajamas. It was no time to be coy about something like a little flirting.

So when Alice begged me to let her do my hair again, I gratefully accepted. And not only because I thought Edward would like it, and I knew he would because I saw the three different sketches of the hair in his sketchbook, but because I just liked spending the time with Alice. She somehow amplified the teenage girl inside of me. And I used to hate that, but now it just felt good to be normal. Or as normal as I could possibly get.

She brushed and doted on my long brown locks for two hours. Making it shiny again, curling it just like last time. She had a heavy look of concentration on her face as I gazed at her through the vanity mirror. I wasn't lying when I told Edward she wished her hair was longer. But she sorely lacks the self control to grow it out. I watched her this time, seeing the way she smiled when a curl came out perfectly bouncy, and the way she frowned when she didn't hold the hair in the iron long enough and it sagged. Of course, in typical Alice fashion she would pick it up

and redo it with narrowed eyes. I was wondering if her perfectionist tendencies were spreading to Jasper yet. I didn't even think 'grubby' was in her vocabulary.

She talked distractedly while she was curling, telling me about things I missed in school before it let out for the Christmas holiday. Mike Newton was with Jessica again, and I had to smile because they were perfect for each other in all the wrong ways. Once she finished, she did a little bow/curtsy at all the shiny curls. I giggled at her and shook my head, making the curls bounce around. She smiled wider.

I made chicken alfredo for dinner. It was really for Edward, but Esme and Alice loved it all the same. Christmas was coming up in a week, and school was already out for holiday vacation. So Alice was roping me into a shopping excursion. I told her no five times, and she resorted to the pout. And I gave in. She knew how to play me like a fiddle.

When nine came and Alice and Esme went to bed, I began a batch of cookies, and I knew automatically what the most significant event in my day was. So I packed up all the chicken alfredo and *Malted Chocolate Smiles*, and went to go see Edward at ten. I left my hood down again, and I looked in the mirror before I left. The ridiculously shiny curls stayed all day long. Though I had removed the rather painful clips. I rolled my eyes at my reflection again, and walked out the door, bouncing curls and all.

There wasn't any rain again, and I was thankful for the sake of the hair. I stalked across the yards and climbed the lattice, fairing better after a long night's sleep than the previous evening. I could feel all my hair bouncing around as I climbed and made my way over the railing. I knocked quietly, and Edward was waiting by the door for me. When he saw me standing on the balcony with all my shiny bouncy hair blowing around in the light breeze, he got a strange look on his face. I wasn't sure what it meant, but I inched my way past him and into the room, and began unloading his meal onto the bed.

"You're probably really hungry, huh?" I chuckled while unpacking the alfredo, imagining him having to make his own food for twelve days. He didn't answer me or jump on the bed like always, so after my bag was emptied, I turned around. And he was standing right behind me, still staring at me blankly. I furrowed my eyebrows, wondering what the problem was. But instead of answering the silent question, he reached up a hand and tucked a wayward curl behind my ear, following his movements with his eyes.

Then I blushed, as if the whole shiny curl situation wasn't nearly obvious enough without it. He slowly lowered his hand and broke his gaze from my hair and walked to his bed in silence, flopping down in front of the food. He opened the container and his eyes widened. And I chuckled again, because I knew he'd be starving. When he heard my chuckle, he looked over at me, still standing beside the bed, and smiled that same crooked smile. My breath hitched, just like it did when he did it this morning, and my face grew hotter. Appropriately mortified of my reactions, I turned quickly away and shuffled my feet to the couch.

The iPod was on the sofa waiting for me, and I smiled when I saw it, having missed the music. I flopped down, bouncing my curls all over the place and scooped it up, putting the ear buds in my ears.

“Alice again?” I heard Edward mumble from the bed with his mouth full. I looked up from the iPod and he was still staring at my hair.

I nodded my head at him, making my curls bounce some more. “Yeah,” I cleared my throat softly. “We spent the day talking about Jasper. Catching up, you know?” I shrugged nonchalantly, trying to save myself a shred of dignity and focused on the iPod again, praying my face wasn’t still red as a tomato.

I heard him hum quietly, either at the food or my question. “They’re attached at the fucking hip. It’s disgusting.” He chewed. I chuckled, because they probably were. Quite literally. Attached at the hips. I grimaced a little.

I blew a lock of hair out my face, regretting leaving out the painfully necessary clips. “So,” I started trying to distract my mind from dwelling on Alice’s sex life. “What are you doing for holiday vacation?” I asked, finally looking up at Edward devouring the alfredo enthusiastically.

He furrowed his brows while chewing the noodles, then shrugged. “You?” He asked after he swallowed, spinning his forks around more noodles.

I looked down at the iPod and glanced up at him through my lashes, batting them a bit and feeling ridiculous. “Alice is taking me shopping some day this week. Other than that, probably nothing.” I shrugged softly, watching his eyes grow wide a bit. I was afraid I was being too obvious implementing the eye moves with the hair so soon, so I quickly focused back on the iPod, probably flaming red.

He was silent while I knitted my eyebrows together at a particularly eerie rendition of ‘All The Pretty Little Horses’ playing on the iPod. I was briefly panicked that he had found some kind of loophole to my humming before I realized he was tired when I got back, so I figured it didn’t work. Which was understandable, because the song sounded downright disturbing. I wondered idly who would play something so creepy for their child.

“We should do something.” Edward said quietly from the bed. I snapped my head up, making all my curls bounce over my hoodie. He was looking into the container of food intently, poking at the noodles with his fork, and not meeting my gaze. And I was surely gaping.

I let the gaping subside, trying not to get my hopes up. “Like what?” I hedged, trying not to sound nearly as hopeful as I was.

He furrowed his brows at his alfredo and raked his fingers through his hair. “I don’t fucking know...” He mumbled, and then paused, letting out what appeared to be a sigh. “Maybe you

could come with me to Port Angeles.” He twirled his noodles around his fork. “Help me update the book collection or some shit.” He shrugged, plunging his fork into his mouth with much more force than necessary, and still not meeting my gaze.

I was stunned. Edward and I had *never* been seen together in public, and had only talked in the daylight once, behind the school. “Yeah.” I blurted, my face getting hotter at all the giddiness that was rising in me. “I’d like that.” I smiled down at the iPod a little, trying not to seem nearly as happy about the whole thing as I actually was. I felt so much like Alice trying to seem indifferent towards Jasper. I inwardly rolled my eyes at myself.

After a few moments of silence, I chanced a peek up through my lashes at Edward and he was staring at me intensely, still chewing. When I met his gaze, I saw him swallow heavily and nod, shifting his attention to the container of alfredo once again.

We were silent for the remainder of his meal. Edward was enjoying his alfredo quite thoroughly, and I was pondering over all the new developments, wondering exactly what they meant. I was trying not to read too much into it. And probably failing rather miserably.



It was the shiny fucking curls. She *knew* how much I liked those curls. There were three fucking pages of them in the sketchbook. In fact, they were the last three pages in there. She *had* to have known. Which could only mean one thing. My girl was *trying* to look pretty for me. It was so fucking obvious. The little blushes just confirmed it. I could write off the fucking delicious alfredo easily. She was just doing it because she was gone for so long and she knew I was starving. But only one thing could explain the shiny fucking curls.

And not only did she get pretty for me, but she looked up at me through her eyelashes again and batted them with a small smile. And that just fucking sealed it for me. She was *fucking flirting*. And then I realized... it wasn’t the first time.

It was obvious that the first time she did the shiny fucking curls, she was flirting with me then. Which meant that the night before she left for Phoenix, she wasn’t kissing me for some distraction. She did it because it was me.

I was wondering, while I was eating the fucking delicious alfredo like it held the key to my existence, exactly how long she had felt that way about me, and how many times I had fucked up because I never realized it.

Maybe I could even trace it back to the party, when she asked me about the strawberry blonde, and wanted to know if I thought she was pretty. The harder I thought about it, it even explained the whole Stanley situation. She had to hear about me fucking Stanley. She was fucking *jealous*. Even the first kiss made more sense. The way she basically fucking roped me into doing it.

It even explained Thanksgiving, when she let me put my arms around her, and she stayed and got as close to me as possible. Maybe I could even trace it all the way back to the gazebo when I first attempted to tell her about Stanley. And the more I traced it back, the more fucking stupid I felt for not seeing it all sooner.

The epiphany almost made me choke on my fucking noodles. My girl never had a switch for me. And I was so busy trying to keep mine off, I never fucking realized it.

And because I was letting my girl lead me, I had to make a move too. She had made so many small moves that I needed a bigger one to make up for them all. Thankfully she left me a window right as she was trying to flirt. It felt like I was doing shit so ass backwards. We already slept in the same bed every night. We had already kissed and made out. And just now, I was trying to take her out on some fucking quasi-non-date. Confusing was the fucking understatement of the century.

Then there was the whole dilemma of *where* to take her. I couldn't do it in Forks, my ass would get caught, and it would find its way around town in an hour. I wasn't ready for all that shit. I was still pretty fucking positive that Brandon would castrate me. I don't even think Jazz could deter her. Port Angeles was my only option. And my girl liked books. And I'd probably spend the whole fucking day staring at her shiny fucking curls anyways. Something told me she'd be wearing them.

Then when I asked, I was worried I was reading more into it. Forcing the words out and looking like a complete idiot. But she said yes. Then she did that eye thing again. My epiphany was spot on.

I was finally done with the fucking delicious alfredo, so I put the container beside the bed and chanced a peek at Bella on the sofa. She was staring at my iPod, and still fucking blushing. It made me smirk. Even all the blushes made more sense.

"Thank you. It was fucking delicious." I said sincerely, settling back into the bed. She finally met my gaze and smiled, so I gave her my crooked smile, the one I knew she'd liked. And just like the last two times, her eyes lit up and she blushed harder. It was almost too fucking easy. She quickly darted her eyes back to the iPod.

And I really wanted to sketch my girl's shiny fucking curls and talk to her more, but I was tired as hell, still catching up on sleep. "Tired?" I asked, not wanting to cut into her music time. She looked up at me and nodded, making her curls bounce everywhere, and I was still gaping at them. And really kind of fucking impatient to feel them in my hands.

She removed the ear buds and set the iPod down on the sofa, pushing herself up and grabbing her bag. She shuffled to the bathroom with it, and I just kept staring at her curls, watching them bounce with every step she took. She was so fucking beautiful.

While she was in the bathroom I wondered when would be a good time to tell her that. How fucking beautiful I thought she was. Bella was a girl after all. I figured they liked hearing shit like that every now and again. It wouldn't be inappropriate. In fact, if I had enough faith in my epiphany, I could even go so far as to say she would fucking love to hear some shit like that... from me specifically.

Ten minutes later my girl walked out of the bathroom in her pajamas, bouncing her curls around her white t-shirt. Her arms didn't look obscene to me now. Even they looked beautiful. She shuffled her way to the bed while I went to change into my pajamas. When I walked in the bathroom and closed the door, I glanced at the little blue toothbrush, and I wondered if it didn't have something to do with this whole epiphany too. But then I reasoned it was just a fucking toothbrush. Definitely reading too much into shit.

I walked out, glanced at Bella in bed waiting for me, and slid the covers down, determined not to let the epiphany make shit awkward for me. I slid comfortably under the covers and turned the lamp out quickly, still kind of impatient about the whole touching the curls situation. As soon as the room went dark I rolled over to my girl and scooped her up. I didn't waste any time, plunging my hands into all her soft silky curls and burying my face into them before she even got her head onto my chest completely. It always smelled so fucking good.

And I usually sighed when I buried my face into my girl's hair. But tonight I hummed in contentment, and just fucking squeezed her to me tighter. I knew she'd like it. I could feel her breathing in my chest. She liked the way I smelled too.

I felt her little fingers stroking my hair softly and sweetly. And because I was letting her lead me, and because I just couldn't fucking stop myself, and because she had already started humming and I was afraid I wouldn't get a chance to, I lifted my arm from around her waist, and smoothed all the curls out of her face and off her little neck. Bunching them all up above her head so I could bury my face into more of them. I could feel her smiling into my chest and nuzzling in deeper as she hummed, and it made me smile into all her curls. I was going to put my arm back around her, but opted instead to cup her face as it was pressed against my chest. Rubbing her soft little cheek with my thumb softly as I breathed in all her flowers and cookies.

And the moment just seemed right. "You're so fucking beautiful." I sighed into all her shiny fucking curls truthfully, nuzzling my way deeper into the top of her head. Her humming stopped, and she slowly tilted her little head up off my chest, moving all the hair away from my face to meet my gaze, so I leaned my head back so I could see her too.

It was almost like one of those weird silent conversations I always had with Jazz. My girl's big brown eyes were staring right into mine. And the way she was looking at me and smiling told

me she was real happy I thought that, even if she didn't believe it herself. I just kept rubbing her little cheek with my thumb, trying to tell her with my eyes how much I thought it was true, and how lost it made me.

And that was the real fucking problem in all of this. I was lost, and confused. And I really needed her to understand that. And I fucking hated that I couldn't be better for her.

Slowly I closed my eyes, never ceasing the movements of my thumb on her soft cheek. "I'm so fucking clueless, Bella." I whispered. And I really fucking was. I felt her little hand move from my hair down to my cheek, where she cupped it, a lot like I was doing with her. Slowly I opened my eyes to meet her gaze.

She just looked concerned. For me. And I wanted to snort at her for being so ridiculous, because I was so accustomed to being clueless by now.

Slowly, she smiled at me. "It's okay." She whispered, rubbing my cheek like I was doing to her. And I really fucking hoped it was. Because I needed it to be. For the both of us. But I had to make the customary disclaimer, just she'd know.

"I'm really good at fucking shit up." I whispered, trying to make her understand that I probably would end up doing just that. And trying to show her with everything in me how fucking terrified that made me. I sighed and closed my eyes again, shaking my head gently against her palm. "But I really want to try..." I whispered, pausing to stroke her cheek harder to show her all my conviction. Because I really did. And because I had to know. "...if you *really* fucking want me to."

I could feel her little thumb rubbing my cheek gently, and it was calming me, but I was still utterly terrified of either answer. So I opened my eyes. And my girl was smiling. Because she did want me to try. I let out a deep breath and nodded at her. Just so she'd understand, I'd be okay with trying.

She smiled bigger and moved her thumb across my lips. I pressed a soft kiss to it, because it was just fucking there.

She let out a big sigh that blew across my face. "What does it mean?" She asked quietly with those big brown eyes.

And I just shrugged, because I didn't know. "We'll just have to wait and fucking see." I sighed against her thumb, and knew I had to add the last disclaimer of the night. "Try not to push shit too far. Just..." I paused and let out a deep breath, shaking my head against the pillow gently. "...Just let it come." I shrugged. It probably sounded like a bullshit answer, but it was all I had. She nodded at me and moved her thumb against my lips again, darting her eyes down to them. She wanted to kiss me. And I knew I probably shouldn't, because there'd be another awkward situation like last time, but I wanted to kiss her too. So I leaned in, and watched as her eyes

fluttered closed, and pulled her face to mine, giving her a soft gentle kiss. She pulled my face to hers harder with a sigh.

I took her soft pouty bottom lip in between mine and sucked it gently, while she did the same to my top lip. But I pulled away. Not because I wanted to. But because I didn't. I moved my lips up to her forehead and planted a soft kiss there. Just to show her, it wasn't all about lust for me. Just in fucking case she didn't already know it.

With a sigh, she pressed her head back into my chest, once again granting me access to all those shiny fucking curls. I removed my hand from her cheek finally and bunched all the curls up again while she resumed stroking my hair and humming. And I just fucking buried myself into all those soft silky curls and fell asleep quickly, just praying that I wouldn't fuck everything up.

Chapter 22. Frosted Pecan Patience



In the third grade, I made honor roll, and my mom got me a new puppy. And I was so excited about it that I spent the entire day squealing and jumping all over the house like a miniature Alice on crack, and just scaring the crap out of that poor little puppy. That same night I got cake and ice cream, and I went to bed on a sugar high, hugging my new puppy, and just plain loving my life. It felt like the best night of my life. Until last night.

Because when Edward Cullen told me I was beautiful, it effectively moved my puppy night down a notch. And as if him just saying that wasn't enough to completely make my year, he wanted to try. He didn't come right out and say exactly *what* he wanted to try, but I understood. He wanted to try to be with me the way I always wanted to be with him. And then he kissed me. And not because he pitied me, and not because I forced him into it, but because he just wanted to.

He was scared, and I could tell. And I wanted to just tell him that there was nothing he could possibly do to make me turn away from him. But if I was being honest with myself, I was a little scared too. Because all my excitement scared that poor little puppy, and I didn't have him long enough to even give him a name. So as I started humming Edward to sleep, I promised myself I wouldn't scare him away. As much as I wanted to call him my boyfriend, or give what we had some kind of label, and giggle with Alice about all of our kisses, I knew I had to be patient. So I would do exactly like he asked, and just let it come.



We woke up to the alarm again, and it felt really cold outside of the covers. I could feel Edward breathing into my hair still. I smiled against his chest and gave him the squeeze that always said, *I don't want you to pull away*. If I didn't know my dreams better, I would have thought the whole night was just one big dream. And before Edward did his usual morning groan, he nuzzled further into my hair and gave me a soft kiss on the top of my head. Then he groaned and pulled away. But I was okay with that. Because I was being patient, and just letting it come.

Reluctant to feel the cold chill in the dark room, I slowly rolled out of bed and shuffled to the sofa. It took Edward longer than usual to beat the alarm clock into submission. I went into the

bathroom while Edward ran his fingers through his hair, letting him wake up. My hair was terrifying. I think I had hair curling upwards. All tangled and still warm from Edward's breathing.

I got dressed quickly, just needing to start the day. I pulled my hoodie on and brushed my teeth, smiling when I put the blue toothbrush back in its place, right next to Edward's. When I came out, Edward was still running his fingers through his hair, and obviously very groggy. It was cold, so I put my hood up, and tried to do everything just like normal. I got my bag from the sofa and shuffled to the bed side table, still kind of waking up. I pulled out his bag of cookies and dropped them next to the alarm clock. I chanced a peek at Edward in the bed, still lying under the warm covers. He was lying on his back, still running his fingers through his messy bronze hair, but his eyes were open, and he was staring at me intensely.

Suddenly I got an irrational panic that he was backing out of the whole thing. In the harsh light of day he realized I really wasn't beautiful at all. And before I could give myself a complete heart attack over the entire notion, he lifted his hand up from his hair waved me over.

Skeptically, I got closer to the bed, wondering exactly how close he wanted me to get. But he didn't lower his hand any, so I lifted my knee and climbed up beside him, leaning back on my ankles at his side with my palms on the bed. Finally he sat up, never breaking my nervous gaze, and reached his hand up to pull my hood down and free all my tangled curls. After the hood was off, he slowly moved his hand to cup my cheek, just like before, rubbing gently with his thumb. He just stared into my eyes intensely for a few seconds before he leaned into my face. I thought for a moment he was going to kiss me again, and my breath hitched as I stared into his intense green eyes and I let my eyes flutter closed, parting my lips slightly by instinct. But instead he leaned into my free cheek, and grazed it lightly with his lips and nose, holding them there so I could feel his hot breath wash over my face as he rubbed the other cheek with his thumb. He kissed it softly before trailing the tip of his nose across my cheek and over my jaw, into all my tangled curls until his nose reached the top of my ear.

He nuzzled my ear lightly through all my curls, and I could hear his lips part as he began to speak. "I hate that fucking hood." He breathed through my hair into my ear, and then flopped back down onto the bed, once again running his fingers through his hair with his eyes closed. I let out a breath I didn't even know I was holding and scurried off the bed with a flaming face.

I shuffled out the French doors into the cold December morning air, and let it cool my hot cheeks while I climbed down the lattice with a goofy grin on my face.

I stalked across the yard to my house, and quietly entered the kitchen, closing it behind me with my usual quiet click, and making my way to my bathroom to take my morning shower. I grimaced at my hair again in the mirror, but smiled a little too. My face was still a little red from the cheek kiss. I got under the steaming hot water of my shower, and finally allowed myself the excited squeal I had been holding in for the last seven hours. I felt kind of stupid for being so excited, but I just couldn't help it.

I cooked for Alice and Esme like usual, and we sat around the kitchen discussing all the holiday decorations Alice was forcing us to put up that day. She had diagrams of light displays, and lists of garland and tinsel, cunningly marking the most efficient locations to hang decorations without compromising the drywall. It was all a bit ridiculous. I lovingly dubbed her the Christmas Nazi. And as a punishment, I was in charge of untangling all of the strands of lights that kind of reminded me of having to brush my hair out that morning.

At noon, Alice was screeching over the phone to Emmett, who had been bribed into transporting the freakishly large Christmas tree from the lot to our house in his jeep. And because of that, I was now making six bags of *Frosted Pecan Patience* tonight. I didn't mind, in fact I quite enjoyed the idea of making Emmett a bag of cookies every day. I still felt awful about the hand shaking incident. And Alice was using my cookies as her secret weapon for everything. It made me snicker at her.

When Emmett finally arrived carrying the tree, I stood in the far corner of the room, offering him a smile and a nod as hello, which he returned. He put the tree in six different places before Alice was finally satisfied she found the 'optimal location for the impact of maximal holiday cheer'. Ridiculous.

By three in the afternoon, our house looked like a disturbingly mutated version of the North Pole, and I was swearing that if I ever had to touch another Christmas light again, I was going to go even more insane than I already was.

When I finally got a chance to slow down and think, I spent the rest of day thinking about Edward and everything he had said the night before. And I didn't even have to ask Alice to do my hair again, or even agree to it. Because she basically forced me to the vanity in her room, telling me about how much curls were 'in' for the Christmas season. I think she was trying to coordinate me with the Christmas decorations. I certainly felt like one.



After Bella left I just fucking laid in bed the whole morning thinking... and waiting for my very first case ever of raging morning wood to subside. That was going to be a problem. And one I had never had to deal with before. Now I was pulling away for much different reasons.

Everything was so fucking new and confusing, and I had no idea where to go with any of it, and I was so terrified I was going to ruin everything. And really, I just wanted someone to vent it all out to. And I couldn't do it with my girl. So I had to go to the only other motherfucker who knew about our situation. And I was going to have to eat a massive amount of crow. Because I kept telling him it wasn't like that. And now it fucking was.

Dreading the upcoming conversation, I dragged my ass out of bed and got dressed, throwing on my leather jacket and boots. Emmett had gone to fetch Brandon a Christmas tree or some shit, and Carlisle was at the hospital, so I locked the house up and made my way over to Jazz's house.

I didn't call first, because he never fucking cared. I figured if Brandon needed a tree today, she was occupied with decorating in her usual horrendous fashion, so he'd be home, and bored as hell. When I pulled up to the house, I allowed myself a second to stew in my Volvo until I worked up the nerve to get out.

And as if the whole upcoming conversation wasn't nearly painful enough, Rosalie answered the door. Standing in her tight jeans and sweater, staring me down like I was filth.

"Edward." She sneered with narrowed eyes. I smirked at her, because she was fucking a bitch and just so easy to piss off. She spun around, making all her blonde hair smack the door frame. "Jasper! You're lover is here." She called out into the house, turning around to smirk back at me before sashaying back into the house. And I just rolled my fucking eyes, because she always used that one. I could hear her and Jazz bickering at each other in the other room, and I just leaned against the door frame and picked at my nails. They argued like cats and fucking dogs. I could hear a screech and door slamming before Jazz finally appeared in the doorway, rolling his eyes. I quirked an eyebrow at him as I entered.

"She's not taking me and Alice very well." He explained, leading me through the entryway and down the hall. He looked at me over his shoulder and rolled his eyes again. "But I seem to be the only one she's fucking blaming." His voice rose higher to a shout at Rosalie's door as we passed, where I could hear a very distinct "Fuck you." coming from the other side. I snickered and shook my head. So fucking glad Daddy C. never adopted a teenage girl.

Jazz led me into his big messy room, stepping over all the cluttered clothes and paper on his floor and shutting the door behind him. I looked around the large room that really hadn't changed one bit since the last time I had seen it, and crossed the room to his desk chair, flopping down on it heavily. *Such a fucking slob.*

"You're such a fucking slob." I muttered shaking my head at the mess. Jazz never got my brain filter. He smirked and shrugged, sitting at the edge of his bed and picking up his guitar, strumming it lazily.

"I think it gives the whole room a certain character." He pursed his lips and looked around the trash heap. I rolled my fucking eyes. I was wondering if Brandon ever saw this room, and then decided I really didn't want to know. "So, to what do I owe this pleasure?" He asked distractedly while fingering the guitar strings.

I let out a deep sigh, and reached over to the desk to pick up a baseball, tossing it up and down casually. "It's about Bella." I responded.

Jazz looked up at me with furrowed brows. "You look better. More sleep since she came back?" He asked, still strumming, and obviously pointing out the fact I looked less tired than the last time he saw me.

I nodded slowly, still tossing the baseball and dreading what was about to come out of my mouth. "It's more now, though." I muttered without looking at him. His strumming stopped and I kind of grimaced, chancing a peek at him looking at me confused.

"More what?" He asked, tapping his fingers against the wood.

I rolled my eyes and put the baseball down. I'd have to spell it out for him. "Bella and I are more." I raised my eyebrows. Understanding flashed across his face and then he fucking smirked at me, which made me nervous. "I'm really going to need you to channel your inner non-prick for this conversation." I narrowed my eyes at him.

He allowed himself one snicker before painting on his serious face and nodding at me. I leaned back against the chair and rubbed my hand over my face, briefly wondering why I decided talking to Jazz would be any help at all.

"So," He started, resuming his strumming, but paying much more attention to me. "How much more, exactly?" He asked in a suggestive tone, quirking an eyebrow.

I immediately knew what he was getting at, and I had to stop that shit right here. "I'm not fucking her." I said truthfully. Jazz furrowed his brows and nodded.

"Okay." He said slowly, pursing his lips and giving me a once over. "So, what? Is she like your girlfriend or some shit?"

I grimaced at the word, because I really didn't know if you could call us that. "We're not really giving it a name yet." I said, knitting my brows together. "I think we're just accepting that there's..." I paused struggling to find a way to explain, then settling for the earlier term. "...more." I said conclusively with a shrug.

Jazz still looked confused. "So, you're not fucking her, and she's not your girlfriend?" He asked slowly, as if trying to do some mathematical equation, and not approving of the answer. I nodded. Both facts were true. He nodded along with me for a moment, pursing his lips. "So where exactly does the more come in?"

I let out a deep sigh and rubbed my hands over my face again. "Well, we like each other as more than friends." I started, knowing that much was a fact, and we were probably never just friends any fucking ways. "So we're just going to take shit as it comes." I shrugged one shoulder deciding my words from last night were still fitting.

He lessened his strumming and quirked an eyebrow. "And what the fuck does that mean?" He asked, clearly not understanding.

I huffed and picked the baseball back up, resuming my casual tossing. "It means we'll just do what feels right." I explained while furrowing my brows, attempting to expand on any of my earlier musings. "If kissing feels right, then we'll do it." I said conclusively with a nod. "If going out feels right, then we'll do that too." I shrugged, having no better explanation or plan in place, because I was so fucking lost. "And if calling her my girlfriend feels right... then I'll call her my girlfriend."

Jazz completely stopped his strumming and grimaced while shaking his head. "Why does this sound so goddamn confusing, man?"

I let out one humorless chuckle. "Because confusing is exactly what it fucking is." I shook my head, realizing exactly how true those words were. Jazz still looked confused, quirking his eyebrow at me still. I sighed exasperated as the need to vent all the bullshit came flaring back. "We need each other to sleep. And when I fuck everything up and she wants nothing to do with me, we'll both be screwed... and tired. And furthermore..." I sat up straight in the chair and put the ball back down with a bang. "If anyone ever finds out what we're doing, they'll fucking split us up, Jazz." I said seriously. He looked a little taken aback by my tone. But it was true. That was always a worst case scenario for the entire arrangement. "And when they do split us up, we'll both be losing a lot more than just fucking sleep. So," I leaned back into my chair slowly. "We can't just date like two normal fucking people. Because we aren't." Then after a pause. "Normal." I clarified. Then after another pause. "And because your girlfriend will fucking castrate me."

I was hoping the last comment would lighten shit up a bit after my outburst, but Jazz was still fucking gaping at me like I had an extra head. I rolled my eyes, and tossed the ball from hand to hand, waiting for it to pass. It felt good at least, just to get all that shit out there and in the open with someone. Even if he was gaping. Suddenly I heard the guitar strumming again, so I looked up at Jazz.

He pursed his lips and nodded in understanding, and I let out a breath I didn't even know I was holding. Thankful that he wasn't being a prick about the whole situation.

I decided to take advantage of that fact. "And even more than all that bullshit, I'm fucking lost. I have no clue how to treat her anymore." I sighed. He stayed silent, allowing me to get it all out, which was more relieving than I had even expected. "We're going out this week." I told him, referring to the quasi-non-date.

He quirked his eyebrow at me in a way that said, *Risky?*

“Port Angeles.” I explained. He dropped his eyebrow and nodded. “It’s a quasi-non-date.” I muttered with a small shrug, deciding I liked that term for the occasion. Jazz let out a loud chuckle and shook his head, mouthing the words ‘quasi-non-date’ in amusement.

He began strumming an actual song on his guitar, furrowing his brows in concentration. “If you do it tomorrow, I’ll have Alice completely occupied for the day.” He mumbled distractedly, messing with tuning and trying to get the sound right.

I pursed my lips and nodded. It was kind of fucking soon, but I’d take the chance. I knew how Brandon spent her every vacation day in that town shopping. Better not to tempt fate.

After that, I took Jazz out to lunch to get him away from Rosalie for a while. Poor bastard. I had to beg him not to make me vomit up my burger by giving me details on his sexcapades with Brandon. He just snickered and nodded. We didn’t talk about Bella anymore. I was pretty fucking determined to try to be somewhat normal about the whole thing. Or as normal as I could get.

Jazz came home with me, wanting to go see Brandon at her house. I spent a good portion of my evening chatting with Daddy C. and trying to make up for the twelve days of asinine behavior he had to deal with. He seemed oddly curious by my seemingly random rollercoaster of moods, but took advantage of my current, better one. I took a moment to appreciate how fucking clueless our guardians were. And I wasn’t stupid. I knew Esme and Carlisle took four ‘business’ trips on the same weekends. There had to be something up with that shit. But I never asked. None of my business. Still, you’d think they’d see the parallels. I guess they didn’t do a lot of talking on the ‘business’ trips.

My girl arrived at ten, right on time, and as I opened the door, noticed she was still trying to look pretty for me. Her shiny curls blowing in the cold, misty breeze as she inched past me into the room, glancing at me sideways with a smile. Usually she would just unload my food on the bed after she walked in. But tonight she kind of stood in front of me after I closed the door, picking and pulling at the ends of her sleeves, and looking like she was nervous as she gazed into my eyes. And I just took a fucking guess at the odd behavior, and walked closer to her, watching as her eyes darted to my lips. I mentally smirked. She was so fucking transparent sometimes.

I walked closer until I was nearly pressed up against her, and slid my hand under all her shiny fucking curls, and around her neck. I tilted her head up and watched her eyes fluttered closed as I leaned in and put my lips on hers. I decided, as I sucked on her bottom lip while cradling her little head in my hand, that if I was going to do something not so chaste, I should definitely do it before we got into that bed and I had her all pressed against me and every inch of my hard on. So I darted my tongue out and dragged it against her lips, which immediately opened.

And since the switch was gone, when my girl licked my tongue and brought her little hands up to tangle in my hair with a sigh, I pressed her face closer to mine, shoving my tongue in her

mouth and enjoying the fuck out of it. I wanted to feel her closer though, so I slid my other arm around her waist and pulled her to me. And she had her little hands fisted in my hair, pulling me closer, and tilting her head so she could plunge her tongue into my mouth. And I was so fucking thankful we weren't doing this in the bed. But then I felt her body rub against my already quite obvious hard on, and I groaned into her mouth. Reluctantly I pulled away from her lips, slightly breathless, giving her shiny fucking curls one last stroke.

She stood there for a moment, kind of panting, and licking her lips, before she opened her eyes and smiled at me. I smiled back and just fucking shrugged, in a gesture that clearly said, *I wouldn't mind adding that to the routine.*

She finally turned away when her face turned red and began unloading the meal on the bed. Determined to find the middle ground where the new routine met the old, I flopped down on the bed and began doing my usual thing while she shuffled her way to the sofa. I began devouring the casserole she brought and humming while I watched her play the iPod. I decided I was going to get my girl her own iPod for Christmas.

"What are you doing tomorrow?" I chewed, remembering my window of opportunity that Jazz provided. She glanced up at me from the iPod and smiled.

"Well, provided the Christmas Nazi doesn't detain me, probably nothing." She said quietly, shaking her head at something and making her shiny curls bounce everywhere. I furrowed my brows wondering who she was talking about before I realized it must be Brandon. The name was so fucking fitting. "Why?" She asked glancing up at me through her eyelashes. *This shit again?*

I gulped my bite of food. "I was thinking we could go to Port Angeles tomorrow." I mumbled, stabbing my casserole with my fork. She smiled wider and nodded, finally turning her gaze back to the iPod. I continued eating the food she brought me, mentally rolling my fucking eyes that she was still doing the flirting bit with me, when she so obviously had me already.

"How will we meet?" She muttered. I looked up from my food and she was staring at me biting her lip. I wasn't sure if that was another flirting move, or just fucking... Bella. Either way it worked.

I furrowed my brows at her question. "I'll park at the end of the road, just meet me there I guess?" I asked as more of a question, and sort of grimacing at the fact I was sneaking us around like we had something to be ashamed of or some shit. Which was not the case in the least. She nodded and looked back down at her iPod still biting her lip.

And then I felt like shit for not just having the balls to take her out like any normal fucking guy would. But I wasn't ready for everyone to know yet. And I had to wait until it felt right. So I let myself feel like shit for the rest of the meal.

We talked a little bit after that while I sketched my girl's shiny fucking curls some more and she listened to the iPod. She told me a little about Phoenix, but left out all the shit about the trial and Phil. I tried filling her in on all the shit she missed here, but there really wasn't much to say. And by eleven, I was already tired again. So I shut my sketchbook indicating I was ready. She took the ear buds out and shuffled to the bathroom and changed.

Once we were both done with our nightly routines, we got into bed and I turned out the light. A lot like last night, I bunched all her curls up on top of her head and nuzzled my way into them with a smile. I planted a soft kiss to the top of her head, satisfied with the fucking fantastic kiss I had earlier in the doorway. She didn't seem to mind. She just nuzzled deeper into my chest and began stroking my hair softly and humming my lullaby. I sighed into all her curls and fell asleep, somewhat excited for the quasi-non-date.

Chapter 23. Luscious Sugar Licks



When the alarm clock went off this morning, Edward still gave me the little head kiss into all my tangled hair. He still groaned and pulled away after I squeezed, but I couldn't find it in me to be sour about it. I got dressed quickly, anxious to start the day and have my... afternoon... with Edward. We never really specified exactly what it was, and I was too wary about the new situation to risk looking ridiculous by calling it a date.

When I exited the bathroom, Edward was running his fingers through his messy hair, grumbling about something or another, though I couldn't understand him. While shuffled to the couch, I decided not to put my hood up. Edward said he hated it. And even though it would have been nice just to feel him pull it off my head again, I didn't do it.

I produced his bag of cookies and walked to the bedside table to drop them off. I spared him a sideways glance, wondering if I could maybe get another cheek kiss, and he was looking at me again. I turned full on and smiled at him, which he returned. Crookedly, he sat up and leaned towards me, so I got closer, and he put one little kiss right on my cheek. Not nearly as erotic as yesterday's, but still sweet all the same. He flopped back down and began running his fingers through his hair again.

"Noon?" he grumbled, turning over in the bed to face me. I furrowed my brows wondering what noon was relevant to, before I realized he must be talking about the time to meet him. I smiled widely and nodded. Noon seemed like a good time. He smiled back and closed his eyes again, still in his morning stupor. I left out the door while all my tangled hair blew around in the cold, misty wind. I could only imagine what someone would think if they saw me sneaking out of Edward's room with my hair looking like it did. I think Alice would call it sex hair.

All the Alice approved red lights on our house illuminated the yard in an eerie red as I snuck back into the kitchen. I spent forever in the hot shower, using an overabundance of conditioner cream that Alice insisted made my hair shiny without all the usual fuss. Esme had already left for work by the time I emerged, so I cleaned the kitchen and waited for Alice to wake up.

She finally came bounding into the kitchen at nine, fingering all of the hanging garland with nods of approval. I rolled my eyes.

“Breakfast?” I asked kind of itching to relieve some of my anxiety somehow.

She slid into one of the stools and nodded enthusiastically. “For two.” She chirped, swinging her legs back and forth. I quirked an eyebrow at her. “Jasper’s coming over soon.” She smiled widely. I nodded in understanding and began cooking a full breakfast, slightly interested in impressing Jasper with my cooking skills. *Second favorite guy.*

He arrived thirty minutes later, sauntering in the kitchen looking grubby as ever. I was so shocked that Alice hadn’t made him up yet. She just ran up to him and jumped, wrapping her arms and legs around him. I grimaced a bit, and kept my attention on the stovetop while they kissed.

“Bella.” Jasper nodded, offering me a smile once Alice unwrapped herself. I nodded and smiled back while they each took a stool. I set all the food out on the counter top, and poor Jasper looked like he was salivating at the sight of all the pancakes and bacon and fruit. He reminded me a little of Edward in that moment. I chuckled and shook my head; taking my seat in front of them and watching him just basically eat everything in sight with a smile.

It was still tense having him in the house, and I ate as far away from him as I could, but he seemed to emit an air of calm and cool around himself that even seemed to spread to Alice. I excused myself once they started licking syrup off each other’s faces, and went to my room.

I stood, biting my nails nervously in my bedroom, staring at the wardrobe in equal parts of interest and trepidation. Edward hated the hood. It only made sense that he didn’t particularly care for the entire hoodie either. I didn’t want to dress up for so many reasons. I never dressed up because it drew too much attention. But if Edward was with me, maybe I would be more comfortable. I had no way of really knowing. And besides that, I didn’t want to come off so obvious.

So I took a middle ground between the two ideas, and chose a nice thick blue sweater. It was tighter than I was necessarily used to, and had a v-neck that showed more of my chest than anyone had ever seen on me, but I supposed for most girls it was modest.

Once I had it on, I panicked and decided I would need a jacket to cover it all up. But I couldn’t do the hoodie, so I had to resort to desperate measures and pillage the wardrobe that Alice had bought for me before I moved here. There were tons of tops and skirts that I would never wear, but I did manage to find one nice jacket. It was long, reaching down to my thighs and dark grey wool. I slipped it on and buttoned it up, spinning a little in my mirror with a grimace when I realized my collar bones were still showing and it hugged my waist very snugly.

I did my best to persevere in the ensemble, reasoning that I did have nearly three layers on. A little collar bone never hurt anybody. Right? I fixed my own hair, refusing to interrupt Alice’s make out session with Jasper in her room. She was right about the conditioner; my hair was nearly as shiny as when she did it. I curled it, but not too much, deciding the outfit was a large

enough leap for me. I took a moment to be happy that Alice didn't know about Edward for once. She would most likely want to paint my face with makeup I didn't want nor need.

So by noon, I looked... acceptable. Decent. Deciding that I didn't want to lie to Alice to her face, I left her a note on the kitchen table telling her I would be in town for the day. I glowered at my collar bones in the mirror and blushed profusely at the five inches of skin showing before I left the house. I chanced a peek at the Cullens' driveway, taking notice that the Volvo was already gone, and began making my way down the road. I wrapped my arms around myself, feeling far more naked than I really was and kept my head down as I passed the houses on our block.

I could spot the little silver car on the side of the road at the end of the block, and I immediately began feeling really stupid for not just wearing the damned hoodie. But I kept shuffling towards it with my head down, blushing at the gravel that was crunching beneath my boots. I didn't look up until I saw tires come into my vision. I took a glance around the road to make sure no one was looking and opened the door, quickly throwing myself in the cushy leather passenger seat, and still feeling really ridiculous while I closed the door. My face was flaming hot and I chanced a peek over to Edward in the driver's seat. He was wearing his leather jacket with all his bronze messy hair still falling in his face. And he was staring right at my freaking collar bones with wide eyes. My face got impossibly hotter, and I moved all my shiny hair to cover the skin that was peeking out, and stared down at my lap.

I heard Edward clear his throat. "You look nice." He mumbled and started the car, shifting his attention to the road.

I shifted uncomfortably in the seat. "Thanks." I grimaced, keeping my gaze on my hands in my lap, and fighting the urge to hug my knees to my chest. The Volvo was really nice inside. Comfortable. Warm. I stiffened for a moment when I realized exactly what happened not even two feet behind me, but quickly shook it off.

We drove for a while in silence. I kept stealing glances at Edward, hoping that my face had lost some of the red, before I decided to make an attempt at conversation.

"Jasper was over this morning." I said quietly, still fidgeting nervously in my seat. "I made him breakfast." I added with a small smile.

Edward peeked sideways at me for a split second. "Lucky fucking bastard." He muttered shaking his head. I smiled widely and chuckled a bit, realizing that Edward had never had my breakfast food. I decided I would make him some tonight. Breakfast for dinner.

I relaxed in my seat a bit with a small sigh. It was getting more comfortable. Edward always made things more comfortable. We spent much of the drive in silence, with the occasional conversation revolving around Jasper and Alice. Edward drove kind of fast, and it made me nervous, but I didn't say anything about it.

Once we arrived at Port Angeles, Edward pulled up in front of the town's best book store. It had very large windows and people were traveling the sidewalk in front of it carrying holiday shopping bags. The whole town had been decorated festively for the season.

Edward sent me a small half grin and got out of the car. I gave myself a moment to glower at my collar bones one more time before I reached for the door handle. But Edward was already there and opening the door for me. I looked at him from my seat, slightly surprised to see him do such a gentlemanly gesture. But he was standing aside, raking his fingers through his hair and staring at the ground while he held the door opened.

I stepped out onto the curb and sent him a questioning glance, but he just smiled at me and closed the door. As soon as I faced the sidewalk and the entire late holiday crowd traveling up and down it, I tensed up, trying to fight the urge to cringe back against the car. Edward furrowed his brows at me before understanding lit his face. He glanced around the sidewalk for a moment before turning to me and holding out his hand with an apologetic expression. I didn't hesitate to slip my hand into his and give it a nervous squeeze. He gave me a small smile and led me up the sidewalk to the book store. Holding hands with Edward in public was heavenly, and I allowed myself a small grin when he squeezed it gently.

A man passed us while talking on his cell phone, and I reflexively cringed into Edward's side. I was feeling really embarrassed that I couldn't just walk down a sidewalk like a normal person, but Edward just took his hand out of mine and put his arm around my shoulders protectively. I immediately relaxed into his side and smiled at him in thanks.

He dropped his arm once we reached the door and held it open for me. The familiar smell of old books greeted me as I entered. The store was thankfully rather empty of the holiday shoppers. I was guessing books weren't very popular gift ideas. I took one glance at all the large, filled bookshelves and my eyes grew wide. I wasn't expecting such a large selection of books. Edward chuckled beside me, likely at my expression, and began walking towards an aisle of books. I followed behind him slowly, running my fingers along the spines of all the books, and catching glances at familiar titles.

One of my particular favorites caught my eye, and I came to a halt, gently plucking the book out of the shelf and fingering the pages with a grin. It was one I had read plenty of times, but I still had to stop and flip through it every time I saw it.

I opened to the first page and began reading through the text, feeling particularly glum that I didn't have any of my old books from Phoenix anymore. I got to the second paragraph before I felt Edward step up behind me. I was going to close the book and resume following him, but instead I felt his arms snake around my waist. I smiled and leaned back into him while he rested his chin on my shoulder and gazed down at the open book in my hands.

"Is that a good one?" he whispered, releasing one of his arms and moving all my hair off my neck and shoulder his chin was resting on.

I smiled wider and tilted my head to give his chin better access before his words sank in. “You’ve never read this one?” I asked incredulously, closing the book so he could read the cover. He shook his head against my shoulder and shrugged around me. I scoffed. “And here I thought you knew good literature.” I teased.

He chuckled quietly and turned his face, giving me a soft kiss below my ear, and effectively rendering me incapable of thought. “That’s why you’re picking out the books today.” he whispered in my ear, giving me a small shiver.

Before I could gain any coherent thought, he took the book from my hands and stepped away with a smirk. I blushed furiously and began following him through the aisles of books, occasionally stopping to make a recommendation. I thought it was a little suspicious that he had never read any of the books I picked out, seeing as how he was a fan of the classics as well, yet had never heard of any of my favorite choices.



Yeah, I had read all those books before. The only reason I didn’t own them in my own collection is because I thought they were shitty. But my girl liked them, so I wanted them on my shelf. I knew she’d get all fucking huffy if I just offered to buy them for her, so I didn’t even bother. She’d still read them at night when she was in my room.

We spent almost two hours in the bookstore. Bella was so fucking easy. I could tell immediately when she found a book she really liked. She’d get the cutest little smile on her face and quickly pluck it off the shelves, fingering the pages reverently. I’d slip up behind her and hug her tiny little waist with my chin resting on her little shoulder. I’d look like I was reading the book with her, but I was really just smelling her shiny hair and enjoying holding her close to me. She’d asked me if I had read that particular one and I’d always say no. If I thought she was getting suspicious of my motives, I’d just give her a little kiss below her ear and take the book from her with a smirk. I had to take advantage of that move while I could. Something told me it would probably lose its shock value after so many uses.

I’d watch her go up and down the aisles, running her little fingers along the spines of the books. I had to fucking battle not to ogle her neck and chest. I had never seen her wear anything but that goddamn hoodie and loose white t-shirts. She had the most petite little pale collar bones sticking out from behind her jacket. I wanted to lick them. Quite fucking thoroughly.

I was dying for her to take that jacket off. Every now and then I’d catch a little glimpse of blue when I had my chin on her shoulder. But of course, it’d be pretty fucking rude of me to say something like that.

By three, I had ten new books and a growling stomach. I hated to lead Bella out of the bookstore because she had become so comfortable, but I had other plans for the day in mind.

"I'm buying you lunch." I said while I paid for all the books and picked up the bags. Her eyes got wide and I just knew she'd start getting all fucking huffy over it. "Don't fucking start." I narrowed my eyes at her. "You always make me dinner, and I never get to do shit for you." I explained. She darted her eyes back to the ground and started blushing for some fucking reason, but I just shrugged it off and walked her out the door.

There were a lot of holiday shoppers running amuck. And that shit made my girl tense as hell. So as soon as we hit that sidewalk I put my arm around her again. She immediately relaxed into my leather jacket and began walking to the car with me. I opened the door for her, feeling really fucking stupid and not knowing if I was doing shit right. Fortunately she smiled widely at me and got in. I figured maybe the whole opening doors gesture was more important than people let on.

"What do you feel like?" I asked as I started the car. I let it idle until she answered me.

She pursed her little lips and furrowed her brows. It was so fucking cute. "Pizza." She said with a conclusive nod. I quirked an eyebrow at her. I was expecting something a little less casual. She shrugged and smiled, so I went to go get pizza. Because it's what my girl wanted.

I chose something a little more upscale, but not terribly so. The parking lot was fairly empty, so I decided it was a good choice. I opened the door for her again, feeling a little more confident I wasn't making a complete ass out of myself.

I led her to the door of the restaurant with my arm around her shoulders again. There weren't any people milling about or anything, I just fucking felt like it. It made her smile. I led her through the doors and into the building, where a hostess was waiting to seat us.

She looked about our age, and had flaming red hair. She was also quite obviously eye fucking me from behind her podium, staring at me from beneath her lashes and sucking on the end of her pen as she asked what she 'could do for me' in a disgustingly suggestive tone. Bella shifted uncomfortably beside me, so I put my arm around her tiny waist and pulled her close to me. The hostess finally noticed someone was with me.

"Table for two." I said sharply, kind of fucking emphasizing the 'two'. She spared Bella a momentary glare and finally straightened up, and led us to a booth in the back. It didn't escape my notice that she was basically putting a comical amount of effort into swaying her hips as we followed behind her. I rolled my fucking eyes, and squeezed my girl a little tighter. Just so she'd know I wasn't fucking interested.

We got to a booth and I slid in beside Bella, opting to sit beside her rather than in front of her. I don't fucking know why. She fidgeted next to me, knitting her brows together and looking

uncomfortable. I was kind of scared I did the wrong thing by sitting beside her, but before I could get up, she began unbuttoning her jacket. My eyes widened as she slid it off. I really fucking tried not to stare. Honestly. But the blue sweater she had on was a perfect color against her skin, and the deep v-neck showed more of her than I had ever seen. It wasn't slutty or anything. In fact, it was quite modest. But she still looked damned good. I looked away quickly before I got caught ogling her like some fucking Mike Newton, and leaned back leisurely against the booth seat, satisfied she was comfortable enough to remove the jacket finally.

She smiled at me and began glancing over the menu, pursing her lips and furrowing her little brow again. Her hair was shiny today, though not as curly. And equally as adorable. I leaned into her a little bit to smell her hair involuntarily. I stiffened when I realized what I was doing and rested back into the back of the seat. I chanced a sideways glance at her and she was smiling widely, still staring at the menu. She fucking saw that shit.

I smirked and scooted closer to her, deciding that the smile meant she didn't give a shit whether or not I smelled her hair. So I did. I plunged my nose into the side of her head and took a deep breath. She chuckled a little, so I figured I wasn't being inappropriate. I smiled into all her hair and lifted my arm to rest on the back of the booth behind her. I ran my fingers through all her shiny locks while we looked at the menu together. It all felt so fucking normal and comfortable. There were brief moments of awkwardness at the beginning, but we shook that shit off. It felt more like a definite date than a quasi-non-date. We were masters of simplicity, choosing the pepperoni and cheese pizza.

A pimply faced kid a little younger than us walked up to take our order. Unfortunately, while he was doing it, he eyed my girl's chest a beat longer than I was entirely fucking comfortable with. Ogling the same collar bones that I had been dying to lick all day. And I could feel her tension from his stare emanating off of her in waves as she cringed into my side. I sent him a glare when I ordered, and a very pointed look that every male knows to mean *back the fuck off*. After pimply face walked away nervous and stammering, my girl leaned back comfortably into my shoulder while I had my arm around her and smiled up at me. I sent her a crooked smile back, watching as her eyes widened a bit and her face got a little red. I snickered at her and hugged her to me tighter for a second before I went back to fingering her silky hair.

When pimply face returned with our drinks, he kept his eyes on the fucking floor. I smirked at him when he met my gaze again as he walked away. Now, normally I have a very strict policy against fucking with people in the food service industry. It's never a wise move to piss someone off who prepares your food. But my girl and I were sharing the pizza, so I knew I was safe this time. It was assholes like him that made my girl feel the need to wear that goddamn hoodie all the time. And really, she was much too fucking beautiful to hide behind it.

I made a mess with all my pizza and Bella snickered at me while wiping the melted cheese off my leatherjacket with a napkin. I just fucking shrugged. Something about tomato sauce and melted cheese just made me messy. We sat for a while after we ate, just fucking enjoying the comfortable position with her head on my shoulder and my arm around her while I played with

her hair. She was smiling and telling me about all the decorating horror stories of casa de Brandon. I'd snicker every now and then at Brandon's torture tactics and occasionally lean into my girls hair to smell it some more.

I decided when it began getting dark outside the restaurant windows it was probably a good time to leave, so I paid the pimply face motherfucker, and left him a very condescending tip with a smirk. Bella looked at odds with the idea of putting the uncomfortable jacket back on, wanting to cover herself, but not liking the way it felt or some shit. I decided for her, scooping it up and draping it over my arm while I led her out of the restaurant with my arm around her shoulders.

I did the door thing again, which made her smile once more. Once I got in the car, I drove away and towards Forks feeling really fucking victorious. The day went far better than I had expected, and one glance towards my girl's face, occasionally lit up from the headlights of oncoming traffic, told me she really enjoyed the shit out of it too. I drove with one hand, lounging a bit with my arm resting on the console between us. Halfway to Forks, I felt a little hand slide into mine on the console and intertwine with my fingers. I smiled at the road ahead of me and wrapped my fingers around her little knuckles. *We can totally handle this shit.*

We spent the drive in silence, both leaning back against the seats comfortably with small smiles on our faces while I rubbed the back of her little hand with my thumb. When we finally reached our road, I decided I definitely did *not* like the idea of my girl walking to her house in the dark, so I decided to chance it and just park at home and let her stalk over across the yards. She quirked an eyebrow at me when I pulled up, and I just fucking shrugged. I parked in the garage behind the house, which I don't usually do, but it would give her some cover for the whole stalking bit. I had to release her hand to put the car in park and turn the ignition off, but I left the keys in so I could have a little light from the dashboard. I shifted my gaze to the middle console where Bella's little hand was still resting, and I slowly slid mine back into hers, intertwining our fingers and staring at them thoughtfully while I rubbed her hand with my thumb some more.

"Thanks for bringing me. I had a lot of fun." Bella said quietly from her seat. I looked up at her and she was staring at our intertwined hands on the console with a small smile. She glanced up at me from under her lashes a bit, and kind of made my fucking breath hitch. I smiled back at her and squeezed her hand a bit, kind of unsure what to do next, and reluctant to leave. Which was pretty fucking ridiculous seeing as how she'd be climbing up to my balcony in only four hours.

Deciding I wanted to stay on track with the whole idea of doing shit normally, I figured I should give her a goodnight kiss. Guys did that kind of shit all the time. Right? I looked into her big brown eyes and licked my lips by instinct. When she saw the movement she darted her eyes towards them momentarily. I figured it was a pretty good giveaway of what I was going to do, and she didn't seem to be protesting, so I shifted my body towards hers and lifted my free hand from the steering wheel. She got the point rather quickly and shifted her body towards me,

licking her lips lazily in anticipation. I used my free hand to brush all her shiny hair away from her face before I wrapped my hand around her head and brought her face closer to mine. Her eyes fluttered closed as we leaned in towards each other over our intertwined hands on the console between us.

When her lips met mine, she took my top lip. I'm pretty fucking sure she knows how much I love her bottom lip by now. I took it in between my lips, sucking on it gently while she ran her free hand up my neck and tangled it in my hair. She pulled away slightly and moved to my bottom lip while I pulled her face closer. We must have been in sync or some shit, because we both darted our tongues out at exactly the same time. Her tongue tasted so fucking good and warm against mine, I moaned a little when she licked me. When she heard it she pulled my face closer, tilting her head so she could push her tongue inside my mouth. I was pressing against her tongue softly at first, occasionally rubbing her head with my thumb. But all my hormones were getting the better of me as I unclasped my hand from hers on the console and wrapped it around her little neck, pressing her closer and forcing my tongue into her mouth. She moaned breathlessly before she brought her newly freed hand to fist in my leather jacket and pull me closer. I leaned in closer over the console and pushed my tongue in farther, nearly panting into her mouth. She let go of my jacket and pushed it apart, rubbing her little hand up and down my chest slowly. I pulled away from her lips to catch my breath, but instead of letting me go, she dragged her teeth across my bottom lip and sucked it into her mouth. I groaned and gripped her shoulder.

When she finally let my lip go I opened my eyes, but I stayed leaned over the console, inches from her face, breathing heavily from the fucking fantastic kissing. Her eyes were hooded and dark with lust as she caught her breath and licked her lips, still rubbing up and down my chest. I slowly slid my hand from around her neck, never breaking her gaze, and trailed my fingers down across those fucking sexy collar bones from shoulder to shoulder. Her eyes fluttered closed again, so I took the opportunity. But I wanted to start somewhere a little less advanced, so I leaned into her neck, used my fingers to sweep all her shiny hair away, and began kissing it softly. She lulled her head back, fisting her hand into my hair and pulling me closer. I darted my tongue out and licked right below her ear, eliciting a deep moan that turned my licking into sucking. Her moan grew louder as I trailed my tongue down her neck, stopping occasionally to suck and lick her warm skin. She fisted her hand into my t-shirt and twisted it, trying to bring my body closer over the obstacle of the console. I kept my mind on the prize, licking down slowly to her shoulder. She was panting and gripping my hair so fucking hard it almost hurt while she tried to pull my face closer to her. Finally, I reached the promised land of the fucking sexy collar bone. I lifted my lips from her skin and licked them in anticipation. Without any hesitation, and completely fucking overcome with lust, I quickly swept my tongue across the length of her collar bone, working from her shoulder to her throat. She moaned loudly into the silence of the car, gripping my hair even tighter. Once I reached her throat I groaned into it. *Sexiest fucking collar bone ever.*

I gave the wet collar bone one last sweep with my tongue back to her shoulder, placing a small kiss on her neck, and settling back into my seat, victorious.

She leaned back into her seat while still licking her lips. "I think I'm wearing this sweater over tonight." She chuckled breathlessly. I chuckled breathlessly with her and shook my head against the back of the seat, because that was probably a really bad fucking idea.

I let out a deep sigh, feeling a little painful below the belt. "I'll see you later?" I shifted in my seat. She nodded and gave me a big smile, opening the door and stepping out. I stepped out shortly after her, watching her run across the yards to make sure she made it okay. Once she was around to the front of the house safely, I painfully shifted my hard on with a loud hiss, and walked up to the house.

I snuck to my bedroom, afraid of being caught in my current condition. Once I made it, I peeled off my jacket, and went straight to the bathroom, shedding my clothes and jumping into the shower. And I fucking did it. I lathered myself up real good, leaned one palm against the tile wall, and just fucking stroked my hard dick, fantasizing about licking those collar bones all the way across her chest, and the way she gripped my hair and moaned when I did it. My strokes became desperate pumps. And when I finally came with a loud groan, I imagined I was groaning into her throat again. It was the best fucking orgasm ever.

After I relieved myself, I stepped out of the shower and got dressed, trying to dry my hair quickly before I went downstairs to see Daddy C. for a while. We spent two hours battling in a game of chess which he fucking owned me in. I frowned at my king and went back upstairs to wait for my girl.

She came on time at ten, and when I opened the door, I was equal parts elated and disgruntled that she hadn't changed out of the blue sweater. I opted for a quick kiss at the door. My allotted time for jerking off had come to a close when she arrived. And I definitely didn't want to go another fucking night with a hard on for seven hours.

She seemed satisfied with the chaste kiss and unloaded my food on the bed. It looked to be breakfast food. Fucking delicious pancakes and bacon. Before she walked to the couch, I grabbed her arm and kissed her again, a little more roughly. I let my fingers dance over those fucking collar bones one last time before I released her and settled in on the bed to eat my breakfast.

She sat on the leather sofa with the goofiest grin on her face, plucking one of the new books from the shopping bag I had brought in and began reading it. I hummed and moaned at the pancakes, wondering how someone so fucking perfect like my girl could even exist. And want to spend time with an asshole like me.

I spent my entire meal staring at her collar bones, and trying not to fantasize about licking them some more. When I was done, I spent an hour and a half sketching them. Sometimes they were wet, glistening in the light of the dashboard. I was wishing I could sketch that moan and save it too. She was the first to break, shutting her book and getting up from the sofa.

I followed suit, closing my sketchbook and getting my pajamas out while she was in the bathroom changing. When she came out, her collar bones were gone. No. Not gone. Just fucking hiding. I got dressed quickly, my earlier shower saving me some tasks. She was already under the covers when I came out, lying on her side, and waiting for me. I slipped under the covers and turned out the light, rolling over and scooping up my girl. I bunched all her hair up on the top of her head again to bury my face into it.

She yawned into my chest as she began stroking my hair. "Thank you for the books, Edward." She whispered into my chest.

I frowned into her hair. "Am I that fucking obvious?" I mumbled sourly, rubbing her back up and down slowly. She chuckled groggily and nodded her head against me. I rolled my fucking eyes and shrugged around her. She was silent for a moment, just stroking her hair, so I decided to take the opportunity to get a good impression on how the day really was for my girl.

"Bella?" I whispered into her hair, nuzzling further into it, and breathing it in.

"Hmm?" She hummed, stroking my hair softly and squeezing me tighter.

"What cookies did you make tonight?" I asked against her head, still rubbing her back up and down slowly.

She nuzzled further into my chest, and I could feel her smile. She let out a small chuckle. "Luscious Sugar Licks." She answered.

I smirked into her hair as she began humming, making a silent promise to lick those sexy fucking collar bones again some time.

Chapter 24. Candy Cane Surprise



The six nights leading up to Christmas were amazing. Every night when I'd enter Edward's bedroom, he'd pull off my hood and give me a kiss at the door. It was my new favorite part of the night. I'd still unload his food on the bed when he pulled away, and I'd still go to the sofa and read the books he got me. I tried to keep things as normal as they ever were. I did begin removing my hoodie once I was inside. Edward seemed to like that. I never wore anything quite as revealing as the blue sweater, but it was still a leap for me.

We kept things simple and light, never venturing into conversations regarding our pasts or our current relationship... or lack thereof. It didn't upset me. I was being patient. Sometimes I wanted to climb back down the lattice just to come back up and get another kiss. There was some kind of silent rule about not kissing once we were in bed. I wasn't sure what it was related to, but I was always followed it.

Edward still gave me a soft kiss on the top of my head before he pulled away every morning. And once I was dressed and ready to leave, I'd drop off his cookies and he'd sit up to kiss me on the cheek. I think he had a thing about morning breath or something, but I wouldn't have minded.

He had been acting the same as always. No more and no less distant. I was rather relieved that we had established a pace, and he was happy with it.

Alice was spending most of her time in Port Angeles during the days, leaving me home alone when I'd refuse to go with her. My days were mostly boring. I'd flip through Edward's old sketchbook sometimes, or read one of the books he insisted I take home with me.

Two days before Christmas, I broke down and went shopping with Alice. I still had to buy presents for her and Esme, and I wanted to get something special for Edward. We never discussed exchanging presents, but I wanted to have one in case he ended up buying me something. I was still hoping he didn't.

I efficiently dodged Alice in the mall that afternoon and went off on my own. I hugged the walls and cringed into my hoodie as I walked the large building. As soon as I saw it, I knew it was I

wanted to give Edward. It was very symbolic, not expensive or anything. And after I was home with it, I got really scared that it was a bad idea to give it to him. It was possibly a little too symbolic.

Ever since my trip to Phoenix I had been wrestling with the notion that I was in love with Edward. I still didn't know exactly what it was supposed to feel like, or if I was even capable. But I did know that whatever I felt for him was as close as I'd ever get. And I was comfortable calling it love. It was a scary notion, to be in love with someone. Especially someone like Edward, who quite possibly could never love me back. And not because he didn't want to and not because I wasn't good enough – which is probably a fact anyways. But more because he had been too damaged and scarred by the people he had loved to allow himself to.

I wrapped it up anyways, deciding that it was very possible that he wouldn't quite grasp the entire symbolism of it. So at ten on Christmas Eve, I packed the little box in the bottom of my bag, along with all his food and a bag of *Candy Cane Surprise* cookies.

Alice was pretty exhausted from her week of shopping, so she was out like a light before I even started on the cookies. I lined up the bags of cookies on the counter before I walked out the door. One each for Esme, Alice, Jasper, and Emmett.

It was cold out tonight, but I had expected that and come prepared with a thick sweater under my hoodie. I drew my hood up on the back porch and began making my way across the yards. I climbed the lattice easily, nearly snorting at the memory of Edward worrying I'd get hurt doing it. I could climb this thing in my sleep with one hand tied behind my back.

Once I was over the railing and safely on the balcony, I tapped on Edward's door. He opened it rather quickly, likely having been waiting on me. Once his green eyes met mine, I smiled widely at him. I couldn't help but smile when I looked into his eyes. His bronze hair rusted in the cold breeze as he stepped aside to let me in.

As soon as I was over the threshold and he had the door closed, he reached up and slid my hood off, letting my hair free. I turned to face him, anticipating the very best part of my day. He smiled crookedly at me and grabbed my face between his hands. I smiled back, enjoying the feeling as he rubbed my bottom lip firmly with his thumb, and leaned in to take it in between his lips.

My knees always got weak as soon as his lips met mine. But I just sucked his top lip into my mouth, snaking my arms around his neck and up to tangle into his soft messy hair. I sighed as he darted his tongue out against my lips. I parted my lips without hesitation, needing to feel his tongue against mine. He pressed my face closer to his as he entered my mouth, massaging my tongue with his slowly and lazily. I moaned at the taste of him, pulling him closer so I could deepen the kiss. He removed one of his hands from my face and snaked it around my waist, pulling my body flush to his as I forced my tongue into his mouth. As soon as my body touched

his he groaned. And I almost pouted against his lips, because that groan always meant the same thing. He pulled away.

Tonight was no different. He backed away, planting one last chaste kiss on my wet lips, and stroking my cheek with his thumb as I opened my eyes. I smiled at him, not letting all my disappointment show. Taking what I could get. He smiled back and finally released my face, walking over to the bed while I removed my book bag from my shoulders. I unzipped it carefully, removing the containers of the Christmas Eve meal I had made, and placing them on the bed for him while I licked the remainder of his taste off my lips.

He flopped down in the center of the bed and began uncovering the containers with enthusiasm. I chuckled and made my way over to the leather sofa, dropping my bag on the ground and removing my hoodie before I settled into the cold leather. I leaned down and removed my shoes while he began devouring the food. Once they were off, I crossed my legs on the sofa Indian style and reached down beside me to pick up the book I had started the night before.

I wasn't really reading, so much as listening to him enjoy the meal. I had a small smile on my face as I flipped the pages, acting like it was holding my attention. I could tell when he was done, because all the moans stopped and I could hear him covering the containers back up. I peeked up at him from under my eyelashes and watched as he set them beside the bed.

He met my gaze and smiled. "Fucking delicious." He said simply. Just like he always did. I smiled at him in thanks and returned my gaze to my book, furrowing my brows and realizing I had to go back two chapters to really understand what was even going on in the story.

He cleared his throat, getting my attention as I peeked up at him again, leaning back against his headboard with his legs straight and his feet crossed. "I have a present for you." He smirked.

I frowned and closed my book. "I don't like you spending money on me, Edward." I said sincerely, and embarrassed that I would definitely have to give him my present now.

He snorted. "Bullshit. You can't bitch about Christmas gifts." He reached down below his bed and pulled out a small box, wrapped in Christmas paper. "I heard somewhere it was rude or some shit." He said smugly, placing the rectangular box in the middle of the bed. He patted the spot in front of it. "Now get your ass over here and open it." He smirked, clearly excited at the idea of giving me something.

I huffed indignantly and lifted myself off the sofa, already blushing. Either at the idea of him buying me a gift or the idea of what I was going to give him, I wasn't sure. I shuffled my way to the bed, leaving his gift in my bag to give me a chance to back out.

I climbed up onto the mattress, watching as he relaxed against the headboard again with a smirk on his face, and climbed over to the present, sitting Indian style in front of it. I pursed my

lips at the box, and tilted my head, wondering how much money could be spent on something that particular size. The conclusion wasn't good. I could practically hear Edward roll his eyes as he let out an exasperated sigh from the headboard. I grimaced as I reluctantly picked the gift up and brought it into my lap.

I tore the festive paper off, glancing at Edward once to see his smirking at the white box I had uncovered. I lifted the white lid slowly, praying it wasn't something horribly expensive. There, sitting in a little bed of white tissue paper was a shiny blue iPod. I smiled and gaped at it simultaneously.

"I've already put all your favorites on it." Edward said quietly from the headboard. I wanted to grimace at the thought of how much an iPod cost, but I knew that it would upset Edward, so I pushed that fact aside, and smiled widely at him. Because I really did want an iPod.

"Thank you. I really did want one of my own." I smiled honestly. His face lit up a bit and he leaned over to put a small kiss on my cheek. I smiled wider and turned my face to give him one back. He chuckled and shook his head, leaning back against the headboard. I put the white lid back on the box, and collected the used paper.

"Umm..." I started hesitantly, fisting the used wrapping paper tightly. "I kind of got you something too." I whispered, chancing a peek up from the white box in my lap. Edward narrowed his eyes at me. "It's not expensive or anything." I quickly explained, watching as his eyes relaxed out of a glare. "It's more..." I stared at the white box and fisted the paper in my hand harder. "...symbolic." I shrugged tensely. I darted my eyes to his nervously, where he was still sitting against the headboard, quirking an eyebrow at me. I let out a deep, anxious sigh, and plucked up the white box. I crawled off the bed and shuffled to my bag by the sofa, grimacing and blushing the entire way. I plunged my hand down into the bag and fished out the small box, replacing it with the iPod.

I stood with my back to the bed, staring at the small silver wrapped box in my hand, and both blushed and glowered at it simultaneously. Reluctantly, I turned toward the bed and began shuffling my way to it, praying he wouldn't go running if he figured it out.

I climbed up on the mattress again, grasping the box, and crawled over to Edward as he sat up and crossed his legs in the middle of the bed, glancing at the box curiously. Once I was in front of him, I crossed my legs back and sat the box down carefully in between us.

It resembled some kind of disturbing offering. I took in the scene with equal parts of dread and anxiety. That one little silver box laying atop his comforter between our laps, summing up everything I felt for Edward. I had to fight the urge to snatch it back up and chuck it off the balcony.

It was like slow motion as he reached his hand out and plucked it from the covers. My heart thudded loudly in my chest, making me dizzy. Making my brain scream and plea to just rip it

from his hands and run as far away as I could. But I sat there in front of him, completely paralyzed as he began peeling the shiny silver wrapping paper from the box.

I held my breath as he lifted the lid slowly, and peered down into it curiously. He furrowed his brows and reached a finger down into the box and lifted out the gift that was so small, yet so enormously huge.

I watched as the chain swayed precariously, making the shiny bronze ring hanging from the end of it swing through the air between us back and forth. Edward furrowed his brows and used his other hand to sweep the ring up to inspect it closer.

"It's a claddagh ring." I blurted, blushing furiously, and really just kicking myself for not just buying him the sketchbook. "You don't actually have to wear it or anything." I chuckled nervously.

Edward stared at it blankly for a moment. "What's the symbolism?" He asked. Because the universe still hated me.

I let out a defeated sigh, weeping on the inside. "The hands..." I started, fidgeting my fingers nervously. "The hands represent friendship." Edward glanced up at me from the ring and darted his eyes back to it quickly. We had friendship. That was no big deal. "The crown..." I trailed off, buying me some time. I began pulling at the ends of my sleeves anxiously. "The crown represents loyalty." I choked out as Edward still sat staring at the ring blankly. I bit my lip hard and began pulling at my sleeves rougher. "And the heart..." I trailed off, shifting my gaze to my hands in my lap. "Well, you know..." I grimaced, realizing it was too soon for him to hear this from me, and there was no backing out of it now.

I chanced a peek up at Edward while I still pulled and picked at my sleeves at my wrists.

He was staring at me blankly, his dark green eyes unblinking. "The heart?" He asked quietly, his face completely void of any emotion. The smiles from before gone to somewhere else for the time being. I hated that it was coming out this way.

I grimaced and shifted my gaze back down to my hands. My face was so hot you could fry an egg on it. I gripped my sleeves tightly. "The heart represents... love." I choked, clasping my hands together until my knuckles were white. It was silent for a few moments as I was too afraid to chance any peeks at Edward. I never expected him to feel it back, or even say it, but I had anticipated many different reactions. So I braced myself.

"You don't love me, Bella." He said quietly in a monotone voice. I furrowed my brows at the covers beneath my lap and tried to wrap my head around his statement. I don't love him. And something about hearing him deny it, and completely dismiss my own feelings made something click inside of me. Completely cemented the reality of the whole idea into my head. I was in love with Edward. And how dare he tell me my own feelings.

I snapped my head up and lifted my chin, staring at his blank and emotionless face, and growing even more offended by the second.

“Don’t tell me what I feel.” I growled, narrowing my eyes, and hating that emotionless mask he was hiding behind. He sat there motionless for a moment before he shook his head at me. Still dismissing my own feelings. And that just made me angrier. “I love you.” I glared. And saying it felt like the most normal and comfortable thing in the world. Because it was completely and utterly true.

Without warning, anger flashed in Edward’s eyes and he clenched his jaw, glowering at me, and balling his fists around the silver wrapping paper he held in his hand. Even the messy bronze hair falling in his face looked darker. He narrowed his dark green eyes “Don’t you ever fucking say that again.” He sneered. I flinched away from his voice, completely shocked that he was reacting with all of this anger. I had prepared myself for some form of rejection, but I hadn’t expected him to get so furious with me. His posture had become completely rigid, sitting right in front of me, seething.

I refused to let his irrational anger affect my conviction. “I love you.” I said determinedly, watching as the anger in his eyes grew more defined. The muscles in his arms were bulging and he leaned towards me on the bed, glaring right into my eyes, flaring his nostrils. Anyone else would have been terrified. But I wasn’t. Not of Edward.

“You don’t even fucking know me.” He growled in a threatening voice. I should have been hurt by his reaction, but I couldn’t get past the incredulity of his statement,

I gaped into his furious eyes, watching as he breathed heavily, nearly shaking with anger. “What are you talking about? Of course I know you.” I said incredulously. I didn’t like how my voice shook when I said it. As if I was unsure of that fact, when I really wasn’t.

His eyes narrowed further and he took the fist with the silver paper in it and flicked it, sending the ball of trash flying off the bed. His dark green eyes flared in anger as he reached up over his shoulder and yanked on the black t-shirt he was wearing. All I could do was sit and stare at him while he yanked the shirt off his back, and tore it off his head, momentarily breaking our stare down as he lifted it off.

He took the shirt and threw it across the room. I gawked at his stomach and chest, seeing more of the burn scars that I had only caught a glimpse of before. It covered half of his chest, and most of his stomach. I stared at his chest as it rippled and heaved in anger, and something I was assuming was self disgust, which was just ridiculous. Because even with the scars Edward was gorgeous. Lean and muscular, covered with inches upon inches of pink scar tissue that merely marred the skin, but didn’t disfigure him in any way.

I met his heated gaze and lifted my chin and rounded my shoulders back. Scars wouldn’t scare me away. I had scars covering most of my body too. They meant nothing to me.

"I'm just as ugly on the inside, Bella." He said in a scarily calm voice, clenching his fists at his sides.

And I probably should have done a lot of things in that moment. But the absurdity of that statement made me snort. He got impossibly angrier, leaning into me more. He had a frighteningly calm mask covering his expression. It was as close as I'd ever gotten to being afraid of Edward.

He glowered at me from behind his thick dark lashes. "Do you want to know the real reason my mother sent me away, Bella?" He asked in a daunting whisper. I could hear it because he was only inches away from my face, breathing down my nose. I fought the urge to cringe away from him. I would take all his anger into myself if I could. I swallowed heavily, making his eyes dart down to my throat momentarily before flicking back up to my eyes. "She sent me away, because I murdered my father." He continued. I furrowed my brows, confused by his statement, because his father died in the fire when Edward was only nine years old. I just shook my head at him, Edward was no murderer. He chuckled humorously, sending his hot breath into my face. "It's true. I'm a fucking murderer." He leaned back into his spot slowly, still glowering intensely at me and clenching his fists with barely controlled fury.

I shook my head vehemently at his retreating form, and kept my chin up and my posture determined. He couldn't scare me away with his stories. "That's bullshit." I repeated Edward's most common saying right back to him.

He sat Indian style in front of me, and the look in his eyes of pure self hatred made bile burn up into my throat.

"I may not have started the fire, but I sat back and watched him fucking burn. I didn't even try to help him." He sneered at me with narrowed eyes. "I could have run and gotten help, but I didn't. Because I'm a *fucking murderer*." His voice shook with fury. "And you can't love a murderer."

I always knew Edward was leaving out specific details about the fire. I never wanted to pry because I wanted him to tell me on his own terms. But this was just ridiculous. To blame himself for something so huge, when he was only nine years old. I let out a deep breath, trying to keep my determined posture. "You were just a child, Edward. You can't be held responsible." I said firmly, staring into his eyes and trying to convey all the sincerity of that statement.

Still, he grew more furious, knitting his eyebrows down lower into his eyes. He let out some kind of frustrated growl and leaned over and snatched up my wrist that had been resting on my knee.

He gripped it tightly, wrapping his long fingers around the small circumference of my wrist, glaring into my eyes as he held it over my knee. He was leaning into me again, breathing down my nose as his face grew reddened by his fury. "You're so fucking naïve." He spat, yanking my

wrist towards him. I flew forwards toward him as he yanked me roughly, and shoved a hand out in front of me to stop from falling into his lap. The free hand met his scarred chest and nearly knocked him over with the force of it. He was pulling me closer and pushing me away all at the same time. I flicked my eyes up to his, balancing precariously on my knees as he seethed and towered over me, still holding my wrist. I couldn't be determined anymore. By reflex, I cowered away from his hateful stare, tugging at my wrist in his grip.

And all at once, his expression turned from hatred to complete and utter horror. His dark green eyes grew wide and his mouth fell open as he dropped my wrist. I fell back into my spot, bringing my wrist to my chest protectively, rubbing it soothingly, and blinking back all the tears that were fighting their way through my eyes at the sight of Edward's self hatred. I watched as he fell back onto the mattress with a flop and backed away from me with wide eyes.

"Holy fuck," he breathed, his face losing all the red fury and becoming a sickening shade pale of terror. He shook his head at me slowly, his green eyes glistening and wide. "I'm so sorry, I didn't mean..." He trailed off in a pained whisper.

I was frozen as he crossed his legs again in the middle of the bed, propping his elbows on his knees and dropping his head into his hands, gripping his hair with both his fists.

He let out a hollow chuckle and shook his head, still gripping his hair. "I knew I'd fuck this up." He spoke into his lap in a pained voice that made my heart clench. I couldn't see his face because it was pointed downward, but I saw one tear fall onto his dark jeans, staining it a deep black and glistening in the light of the bed side lamp. I unclamped my wrist and held a hand out by instinct. I couldn't bear to see Edward in pain. I hesitantly leaned over the bed and touched his knee with my hand gently, and he flinched away from it. "Just fucking leave, Isabella. I'm not stopping you." He choked.

My heart sank as the realization that he thought I wanted to leave made a lump form in my throat. I wouldn't let him push me away. I didn't care if he thought all those terrible, untrue things about himself. It didn't change the way I felt. And Edward had always stood by me when I was hurting and scared. So I lifted myself on my knees and crawled over to him, grabbing both his fists in my hands and not moving away when he flinched.

I pried his fingers from his hair and gripped his warm, bare shoulders, pushing him upright. It took quite a bit of effort. He was entirely stiff, not wanting me to touch him. But I didn't care. He always held me when I cried, and nothing he did would make me go away, so I eventually pushed him straight. He kept his eyes closed as another tear trailed down his cheek. I crawled over him, straddling his lap, and threw my arms around his bare neck, burying my face in the crook of it and pressing my body against his completely. Trying to show him with my embrace how much none of it bothered me. Hoping he could feel all the love I had for him. He was still and rigid for a long while as I stroked his hair softly, planting the occasional soft kiss on his neck. After what seemed like hours, I finally felt his arms move. Slowly snaking around my back as he

hesitantly rested his head on my shoulder. He hugged me softly, as if I was fragile, stroking the hair that was flowing down my back.

"I fucking hurt you." He whispered in a pained voice into my shoulder. I shook my head against his neck. It hardly hurt at all. I had lived with multiple broken bones and cuts covering fifty percent of my body. One little wrist grab was nothing. He let out a deep breath and moved his arms from around me, gripping each of my shoulders and pushing me away from his body. I clenched onto his neck tightly, not wanting to let go, but he was stronger, finally succeeding in prying me off of it.

He hung his head, his face still damp with tears, and red eyes that were still pained, and reached up to his neck, gingerly removing the very uninjured wrist from around it. He brought it around him, to in between us, and began inspecting it. It appeared fine, with no apparent bruising, just a couple red marks in the shape of fingers. Edward let out a strangled agonized choking sound at the sight of it

I snatched it from his grip, lifting it above his head and hiding it around his neck. "It's nothing, Edward. It's not even bruised." I told him sincerely, not willing to let him expand on the painful choking sound that made my heart clench even tighter.

He gazed into my eyes, looking deeply trouble and agonized. "I'm so fucking sorry, Bella." He whispered, inches from my face.

I smiled and shook my head at him. "You're already forgiven." I shrugged dismissively, leaning down to kiss the trail of the latest tear. He huffed and shook his head against my lips, pulling away and reaching up once again to take my wrist in his hands. He brought it around his neck and looked at it again, hissing as he fingered the slightly red marks. I grimaced and tried to pull it away again, refusing to let him beat himself up over something so small. But he held it firmly, bringing it up to his lips, and planting soft, ginger kisses around it.

I stroked his hair softly with my free hand, showing him I wasn't bothered by it in the least, and still smiling at him as he occasionally glanced into my eyes from under his dark lashes with every soft kiss he placed on the red marks. He began moving my fingers and flexing my wrist to check for any signs of damage. It didn't hurt one bit, all the soreness disappearing after a few minutes. Once he was done with his ministrations he let my wrist go, giving it one last gentle stroke.

He glanced down at his bare, scarred chest and grimaced in disgust, shaking his head at it with a hateful expression and glancing around the room, likely looking for his shirt that had been lost when he threw it across the room somewhere.

The look of pain and complete disgust on his face as he looked upon his scarred form completely overcame all of my inhibitions. It was what we always did. Whenever I felt like a freak, Edward would show me his, and it always made me feel better knowing I wasn't alone.

So it only felt natural for me to do the same. I had scars scattered around my stomach and ribs from one of the few times I had attempted to escape from Phil. Glass had shattered into my flesh as I was pushed face first into our old coffee table, hunching over it as I impacted the glass surface with my torso. Those particular scars were just another reason why I always made sure to cover myself thoroughly. But I had to show Edward mine.

So I removed my hand from around his neck and gripped my thick sweater at the bottom hem while he was searching the floor around the bed with his eyes, not hesitating for a second to lift it up and bring it over my head. The slight chill of the room hit my bare back and chest as I pulled it away quickly, making my hair swing and sway around my shoulders as I freed it. I threw it behind me and watched as Edward finally turned his gaze back to me. His eyes grew wide and his mouth fell open a bit as he stared at my chest. I had on a bra. Nothing sexy or anything, just plain white. I wasn't completely naked. I reasoned to myself it'd be just like him seeing me in a bikini.

He gaped momentarily before darting his eyes back up to mine. "That was highly fucking unnecessary." He said disapprovingly. I shrugged my shoulders, and smiled at him. Because it was unnecessary, but it's how we were. And I wasn't even blushing a tiny bit because of it. I glanced on the bed beside Edward, spotting the necklace that had caused all this pain and hatred, and I grimaced at it. He followed my gaze to the ring and stared at it blankly.

"I'm sorry, it was a stupid present." I sighed regretfully, shaking my head and wishing once again I had just gotten the sketchbook. Edward stared at it blankly for a moment before he reached a hand down and scooped it up. He looked at me and slipped the long chain around his neck without breaking my gaze.

"It's not stupid." He whispered, rubbing the suspended ring and dropping it against his pink scarred chest as his green eyes stared into mine with a rare intensity. "It's the best fucking thing anyone's ever given me." He said simply. Something was telling me he wasn't really talking so much about the ring itself, as much as the fact I was giving him my heart.

He leaned into me and snaked his arms around my bare waist, pulling my chest against his and resting his head on my shoulder once again. I lifted my arms to wrap around his neck, burying my face in the crook of it again, and stroking his hair softly.

He used his nose to nuzzle my hair off my neck and gave me a soft kiss below my ear. I squeezed his neck tighter, crushing my breasts to his bare chest. Scars against scars.

He sighed into my neck. "I can't say it back." He whispered sadly against my skin and began rubbing my back up and down with his big warm hand slowly and gently. I could feel every bump as his hand ran over my spine. "You have no fucking idea how much it kills me that I can't." He said in an almost angry tone.

I shook my head against his neck. "That's not why I said it, Edward." I mumbled truthfully. I had never expected him to feel it back, let alone say it. He rubbed up higher, tangling his fingers into the hair at the nape of my neck.

He turned his head and put another soft kiss below my ear. "You deserve better." He whispered sadly into my ear.

I furrowed my brows and shook my head vehemently. "Nothing's better than you." I said sincerely, and almost angry at the thought of it. I crushed myself to him further, as if I could crawl inside of him and never leave.

He snorted at my comment, shaking his head again, but didn't say anything else about it. He kept rubbing my back up and down softly, occasionally kissing my neck and giving me another squeeze. I could feel his heartbeat through my own chest as I was pressed against him. We fit together like two pieces of a puzzle. Like we were molded for one another. Maybe Edward couldn't see it yet, but I had hope that he would eventually.



I stroked her soft back lightly, gliding over her spine, enjoying the feeling of my girl's skin pressed against mine. The feeling of her heartbeat on my chest. I didn't fucking deserve any of it. Her company, her food, her sleep, and most of all her love. I was a monster. I did the one thing that I didn't even think myself capable of. I fucking hurt her. It just proved further how black my soul really was. And yet, here she is, hugging me and loving me with all her fucking flowers and cookies that I don't deserve. It wasn't fair. It just wasn't fucking fair for her to feel that for me when I couldn't give it back.

I knew what the ring was when I saw it. I was trying to lie to myself, because I knew the ring could hold many different meanings depending on how you wore it. She put mine on a chain. Giving me a choice. She was my friend, and she was loyal, and when the heart came up, I was praying that she wouldn't fucking say it. But then she did. And something inside of me just snapped. She loved what she thought she knew about me. But she never saw the truth. So I showed her the real me. Burned and scarred and fucking ugly on the inside and outside. Even now she denies what I know to be a fact. I'm a fucking murderer. I sat in the corner, too fucking cowardly to do anything to help him, and just watched him die. And yet she denied it. It pissed me off that she could be so fucking naïve as to still feel anything but complete disgust for me.

So I lost it, and fucking hurt her. I was expecting her to leave. I wanted her to leave. To get as far away from me so I couldn't poison her anymore. But she stayed. And then she had to hug *me*. Like I was the one who needed any fucking comfort. I just spat at her gift and hurt her. And

she fucking comforts me. The thought was so fucking ridiculous, I wanted to laugh at her, and cry on her, all at the same time.

And as if the gift of her love and comfort wasn't enough to make me feel like shit, she showed me hers. Her scarred stomach and ribs littered with scars. Some small, some deep, disappearing behind the white bra she was wearing. I had seen enough glass wounds from being the hospital with Carlisle to know one when I saw it. And it didn't matter a bit to me. Even with all her scars, she was still fucking beautiful. And still too fucking good for me. But nothing in that moment was sexual or obscene. It was all loving and caring. Her scars for mine.

And for some reason, even after knowing everything, she still wanted me. Still wanted to crush her chest against mine and stroke my hair and just be fucking wonderful. She was still holding her heart out for me to take. It made me want to wretch that I couldn't give her mine. Maybe she was hoping I could change with time, but even I wasn't sure of it. I really fucking wished I could though. I wish I could love her in the way she deserves. Take her out in front of the world and tell them all about how she made me feel. But instead I'm just a fucking shell of a soul. Holding on to her with every fiber of my being, and praying to God that she would wait, and she wouldn't be doing it all in vain.

"I'm tired, Edward." She whispered into my neck. And I was fucking tired too. But I didn't want to let her go. So I just fucking pivoted my body and leaned over to turn out the lamp, never removing her from my grasp, and eased down onto my back with my girl lying on top of me in the middle of the bed. She rested easily straddling me, and never ceasing her strokes of my hair. I hugged her to me tighter, crushing her warmth against my chest. She nuzzled into my shoulder, resting her head right below my chin so my face was inches from her shiny hair. But there was no fucking way I was letting my girl get cold, so I unwrapped my arms from around her bare back, reached both hands out beside me and grasped the covers in two fists, bringing them up and wrapping them around us protectively.

I felt her free hand run across my bare chest lovingly as she found the ring and caressed it. She fingered it sweetly, and began humming my song while still stroking my hair. I tightened my grip around her, glancing at the clock and realizing it was past midnight.

I let out a deep sigh, lifting my head just enough so that I could place a soft kiss at the top of her head. I held my lips there, holding my girl tightly to my chest, and praying and fucking hoping that I could be more for her someday, and she'd wait for me. She kept humming as I whispered sadly into the darkness of the room against her soft silky hair. "Merry Christmas, Bella."

Chapter 25. Mocha Desperation Sensations



I awoke to a loud banging that made me nuzzle further into Edward's chest. I winced with every bang, barely conscious. I could hear a muffled booming voice behind the banging as I rose and fell with each breath of the chest I was lying on. I hugged Edward tighter, willing it to go away. All of a sudden I was being shot up into the sitting position against Edward's chest.

"Hold on!" Edward screamed in a panicked voice. I stiffened as I realized the muffled voice belonged to Emmett. At Edward's door.

"Come the fuck on! Carlisle's waiting for you!" He yelled through the door. My eyes grew wide and I glanced forward to Edward, whose eyes were as wide as mine, with a frantic expression on his face. Then I heard it. The doorknob rattling. Panicked, I grasped at the covers to hide my bare torso, nearly elbowing Edward in the face. He grabbed my arm and his face softened in relief. He mouthed "locked" to me as the rattling subsided.

He darted his eyes at the, thankfully locked door. "Fuck off! I'll be down in ten." He yelled back at the door. I cringed at the loud noise in my ear as he glanced back at me apologetically. He held onto my arm lightly, waiting for confirmation that Emmett had left. We stared into each others eyes. A silent panicked conversation going on. I was worried that something was wrong. That they suspected I was up here. He clearly saw that worry in my eyes, because he shook his head at me with serious expression on his face.

Eventually we could hear Emmett's loud footsteps retreating down the hallway. We both let out a deep breath of relief as our postures relaxed.

Edward fell back onto the bed, while I stayed upright. He began grumbling and running his fingers through his messy hair. All I could make out was "...impatient fucking bastards..... too fucking old for that shit....thirty minutes..... perfectly good sleep."

I chanced a glance at the clock and realized it was only five in the morning. Realizing that it was probably a good idea for me to get home early anyways, I reluctantly lifted my knee from Edward's side and climbed off of him. He kept his eyes shut. Either because he was too tired to open them, or because he was giving me privacy, I wasn't sure. But I fetched my sweater from the end of the bed and slid it back over my head quickly.

My hips were stiff from our unusual position, and I made a promise to myself to never do it again as I waddled to the sofa to put my shoes on. I threw them on quickly, pulling my hoodie over my head hastily, fearing that Emmett might return again. I snatched my bag up and began stuffing the used containers from the previous night's meal into it. I fished his cookies from the bag and dropped them off beside the alarm clock that still hadn't gone off yet.

I turned to Edward, still lying in the bed, and he was staring at me with the most heartbreaking desolate expression on his face. I smiled at him, unwilling to let him be sad over any of the previous night's events. He smiled back sadly and waved me over to the bed. I climbed up without hesitation, ready to receive my morning cheek kiss. He sat up and leaned over to flick on the lamp, illuminating the dark room in bright light, and making me squint against it. Edward was squinting too as he leaned into my cheek and planted one single soft kiss onto it. He held his lips there, on my cheek for a few seconds. I closed my eyes and relished the touch of his lips against me. Eventually he eased himself back down onto the bed. But his expression had turned hollow and impossibly sadder.

My heart clenched and I wanted to ask him what was wrong, but I was too afraid that Emmett would return while I was doing it. But I had to let him know that whatever he was thinking or feeling, it wouldn't make me turn away. So I leaned into him slowly. His sad green eyes never left mine as I eased down over him, sliding my hand down below the blanket covering his chest, and felt my way across his skin to find the ring hanging around it. I grasped it tightly and planted a soft kiss on his warm neck. He remained motionless.

I trailed my lips up his neck to his ear. "Nothing could make me love you any less." I whispered sincerely, letting go of the ring and pulling my hand back out of the covers while I climbed out of bed. His expression hadn't changed any. If anything it just made it worse.

I let out a shaky breath and glanced at the door desperately, wishing we had more time. But I had to leave, so I turned around and exited the French door, plunging myself into the cold December darkness as I left Edward alone and desolate.



Alice awoke no more than three minutes after I walked in the door to the kitchen. I was unbelievably lucky my hair wasn't tangled from Edward's nuzzling, and for the first time that morning, thankful for the awkward position we slept in that prevented it from happening. I didn't even have time to pull my hoodie off before she bounced into the kitchen. She quirked an eyebrow at my hoodie, and I shrugged, letting her assume I slept in my full clothing last night. She shrugged back and hopped onto the stool, vibrating with excitement that Christmas morning was finally upon us. I began making a ridiculously large Christmas breakfast, earning Alice's festive holiday approval.

After the three of us ate our big breakfast we all opened our gifts. It was my second Christmas without my mother, but my first one with my aunt and cousin. They eased the painful bitterness I was feeling at the fact she couldn't be there.

Alice went sort of crazy with gifts. Our tree was overflowing with shiny wrapping paper spilling out from all sides. Some for me and Esme, but many for Jasper, Emmett, and Rosalie as well. She graced me with more adorable clothing that I would probably never wear, most likely with the intention that I would be more inclined to wear them if they were a gift. Apparently she and Edward shared the same philosophy when it came to bitching about Christmas gifts. So I smiled and thanked her profusely, hoping it would suffice, because I wasn't wearing them. I think she probably knew.

By noon, we were all exhausted. Me more so since I had only slept four hours the night before. Though I was feeling very thankful for Emmett's intrusion. I spent the day cleaning up after all the presents and large breakfast that I had made. It took me three hours. Esme kept insisting I leave it, but I was happy for the distraction. The weight of last night's events weighing quite heavily on me.

Jasper and Rose came by that evening to exchange presents with Alice. I stayed in the kitchen while they did it, not really feeling up to company or pretending to be normal for an hour or two. I cooked our Christmas meal in solace as the sounds of laughter and scolding came from the room across from me. I think Jasper and Rose weren't really getting along very well since the whole Alice thing. Rose was obviously not approving of the relationship, for reasons I couldn't fathom. Maybe she didn't think Jasper was good enough for Alice, or perhaps the other way around. It was a situation that would be similar to Alice's reaction if she ever found out about Edward and me. It made me more sympathetic of Alice. And gave me good ammunition for when... or if... she ever did find out.

They left right as I got dinner finished, needing to spend it with their family. I had been hinting at Esme to invite the Cullens over for Christmas dinner all week. She had refused when I eventually came out and asked her. Opting instead for a nice small dinner with just the three of us. I felt like it had something to do with me, but I didn't say anything, happy at least for the intimacy of the affair. I did talk her into taking them our surplus dinner. I actually made them a whole meal separate from ours, but they would never know the difference, and Esme seemed silently pleased by my generosity, likely anticipating the appetite Emmett would have.

When we were finished, she ran the large box over across the yard. I smiled as she made her way to the door, watching from the front porch as Dr. Cullen invited her inside with a wide, surprised smile. I lounged around the living room for the rest of the evening with Alice. We were both full and tired, rubbing our stomachs in misery and swearing we weren't eating anything else for a week. She grimaced at me when I got up to make cookies, but it was routine. I knew she'd end up eating them anyways.

And when they both finally fell asleep fat and happy at nine thirty, I began packing my bag with the *Mocha Desperation Sensations* cookies I had made, and loads of food.

I bolted out the door at ten, anxious to see Edward, and hoping that his mood had brightened a bit since that morning. I tapped on the door softly, feeling particularly freezing in the cold rain that was coming down outside. When he answered I searched his face automatically. I didn't like what I saw.

He was standing in the doorway wearing the same clothes from that morning, dark t-shirt and jeans. His bronze hair was impossibly messier, sticking up in all directions and looking a lot like he had spent the entire day running his fingers through it. But his eyes were what got me. They were just as despondent as before as he met my gaze.

My stomach sank, knowing that his mood definitely had something to do with my actions the previous night. I wanted to ask him what I did, and how I could make it better. But the look on his face made it clear that questions would only make things worse, so I stepped into the room silently, cold and wet. Once he closed the door he reached up and pulled my hood off, letting my hair free. I turned quickly, needing the feeling of the best part of my day. Edward's kiss. He smiled at me as he leaned in. But it wasn't crooked. It was somber and sad and full of sorrow that I couldn't justify. My blood was pumping anxiously in anticipation of his intimacy as he took my bottom lip in between his.

I responded quickly, tangling my fingers into his hair and pressing him closer. This kiss was different from our usual night kisses. It lacked his usual lust and urgency as he cradled my cheek lightly, caressing me softly. The whole kiss felt sad, and it nearly made my eyes water as he pulled away without even attempting to deepen the kiss. I dropped my arms and searched his face desperately. His green eyes were no longer intense, but hollow and dismal. I stood in front of him trying not to let all my hurt and disappointment show through. The look in his eyes told me that he had some serious issues to work out. And there was nothing I could do but wait for him to come to terms with whatever it was he was feeling. And he was blocking me out while he was doing it.

I quickly turned away; unloading his meal onto his bed, and fighting back the tears that were forcing their way through my eyelids. I sat on the sofa and watched him eat in complete silence. Edward never ate in silence. It was like he was in his own little bubble on the bed, never meeting my gaze, and looking off into the distance as if something was there, but it wasn't. He didn't speak for the rest of the night.

We went to bed as soon as he finished eating since we were sorely lacking sleep from the previous night. As we slid under the covers and the light went out, he scooped me up gently. Kissing my hair softly as I rested my head on his chest. His embrace was looser around my waist, and I squeezed him tighter, willing him to return it. But he didn't. It was almost like he didn't want to touch me. The thought made bile rise into my throat as I stroked his hair and

hummed him to sleep, feeling utterly desperate for his real touch, while my cookies still held all of their previous meaning tenfold.



The four days following Christmas were cold. Frosty wet breezes that teetered just barely above the required temperature for snow. Edward grew even more distant from me. I wish I could say it returned to the business-like relationship we shared pre-Phoenix, but it was much worse. The passionate kisses at the door became soft chaste pecks. He barely caressed me at all anymore. The look in his eyes never changed. It was always a hollow shade of green, hopeless and desolate. I'd sit on the couch and read and watch as he ate in silence. He stopped moaning and humming, simply eating the food as if it was merely sustenance, and nothing enjoyable. He was pulling away and folding in on himself completely. I could see it in his eyes when he avoided my gaze. He was right in front of me, yet so far away.

I asked him the second night what was wrong. His distance was killing me. But he just mumbled that he was fine and managed a small smile for me. I wanted to jump on him and shake him and tell him how stupid he was being and make him kiss me again like he meant it. But I barely restrained the urge. It was something he needed to deal with on his terms, and no rushing from me would make things any better. It was just a feeling I had when I looked into his eyes that night. A knowing that all of my efforts to break him out of it would only make things worse. So I took his rare kisses with a grace I didn't think myself capable of and I kept my mouth firmly shut, refusing to open any more wounds than I already had.

His grip on me at nights was nearly laughable, barely resting his arm on my waist as he slept. I could feel the dreams pushing their way through, barely skimming the surface and making me awaken in the morning with a familiar sense of dread. It was never a full on dream. But impressions of them, working to fight their way into my sleep. I wanted him to crush me to him and keep them away. But instead I got distracted strokes and light kisses. It was as if the already dim flame he had in his soul before Christmas had died out completely. I was battling and fighting to hang onto him and remain patient.

I'd spend my days alone in the house, feeling regret towards the whole Christmas gift fiasco. I knew it had something to do with it. As much as I tried to deny to myself that a gift such as love could result in such a reaction, I knew better. And I *hated* that I had to regret telling him.

Alice kept asking me what was wrong, clearly interpreting my mood rather well. I blew her off and pushed her away feeling frustrated. Frustrated that I couldn't even go to her for advice. Because she could never know about us. If an 'us' even existed anymore. My hurt and disappointment was quickly growing into resentment each morning I had to wake up to my almost dreams in his almost embrace.

Edward

WIDE AWAKE

It was that first kiss on Christmas morning on her cheek. I watched as she closed her eyes, drinking in my kiss reverently, as if it was something she lived and breathed for. And I tried harder than I ever had to feel it in that one moment. To just feel the love for her that I was desperately searching for. That she desperately deserved. But it wasn't there. I wanted to push her away and hold her close and ask her why she didn't fucking hate me.

And she didn't. Her love for me was completely unconditional. It just made it all worse. I wanted it more than anything in the world. To just fucking feel that for her and show it to her. But every time I opened the door and looked at her, it just made me feel emptier that I couldn't find it. That I couldn't fucking feel it.

So I distanced myself from her the nights following. I tried to tell myself I was just protecting her from my darkness and shitty mood when she walked in the door those nights. But that was a lie. I hated myself more every second that she glanced at me with those sad and hurt eyes. I was still hurting her because I couldn't feel it. I knew it by the names of her cookies and the look in her eyes. I really was a poison. I stopped kissing her as completely as I used to, tried to hold back on my touch. I didn't do it because I wanted to. I did it because her love for me made me so goddamn bitter. The way her eyes brightened when I brushed her skin or kissed her head. It just made me realize that I wasn't fucking capable. And it wasn't fair to her.

After the first night, I couldn't even meet her gaze anymore. I'd just fucking look away, hiding from all the love and forgiveness in her patient, hurt stare. It ate away at my very core. Pecking off in small increments that grew into an ugly heap of complete fucking self disgust. When she'd leave in the mornings, I'd stay in bed for most of the day. I suppose to some people it would look pretty fucking pitiful. But I was still searching for it. Searching for something that I was terrified I'd never find. And I'd spend the day locked up and trying to sort shit out in my head.

I could feel friendship towards her, loyalty, caring and protectiveness, and endless amounts of adoration. I could even easily feel lust for her. But it was almost as if it was impossible for me to reach another level of emotion. Not just for her, but for anyone. And the more I thought about it, the shittier I felt. I should love Carlisle. He fucking saved me. He loved me as unconditionally as Bella did and stood by me through all of the bullshit I put him through. He deserved my love just as much as my girl did. And even it wasn't there. After four fucking years, it still wasn't there. There was respect, and loyalty, and caring, and even a little fucking admiration towards him too. But no love.

It seemed so senseless to me that I couldn't feel it. I was a human after all. I had a heart and a soul. I just couldn't fucking feel them. I couldn't even find it in myself to be afraid to feel it, because the idea that I never would made me want it so much stronger.

I felt like such a fucking freak. Empty and hollow. She wanted to help me and care for me. I could see it when she looked at me. But this was the one thing that she couldn't help me with. She couldn't show me hers. Because where love, or the lack thereof, was concerned, we weren't tit for tat. It was all on me. Because she could still feel it, and show it, and make me fucking smile. And I couldn't do that for her.

So when she'd come at night, I'd fold into myself. I was there, in the room, but I was gone. Swimming in my head and searching the murky depths for that same thing every night, and never fucking finding it. I became lost and desolate as the feeling of hopelessness washed over my being and lingered stagnantly in the air surrounding me.

I hated what it was doing to her. For those nights she was with me, all of her smiles were forced and faked. And for the first time ever, I wished she would put the hood on and just fucking hide her hurt from me. Because I couldn't take it away.



Before she left on New Years Eve, we had to discuss an alternate plan for her coming over that night. Carlisle and Esme were holding a block party in the back meadow by the river. They did it every year; the water making it safe to shoot off fireworks. As if anything in this fucking town was dry enough to catch fire. We were all forced to make an appearance at midnight, and the whole fucking yard would be too visible to the partygoers for any lattice climbing.

I toyed with the idea of just cancelling the entire night with my girl. But eventually found that I didn't want to ring in the New Year alone and fucking tired. So I settled for the front door. It was easy and no one would be out front during the party, so it made sense to me. I relayed the plan to her detachedly. Still keeping a distance from her and speaking in a monotone voice so she couldn't see all of my fucking self disgust and blame it all on herself. She agreed in a quiet voice before she left out the door that morning.

I felt shittier every time she left. I'd give her a gentle kiss on the cheek, and she'd leave without looking me in the eyes, hurt and feeling rejected, and trying to hide it from me and not fucking succeeding in the least. It was in those moments, those small soft kisses that I tried harder than ever to feel it for her. I wanted to grab her and crush her to me and tell my girl that it was finally there, and watch as her face lit up like a fucking Christmas tree at the sound of me saying it.

But it never happened.

I spent New Years Eve day alone in my room after she left. Maybe I was fucking wallowing and acting like a complete emo douche bag, but I couldn't help it. I wanted to snap out of it so I could keep trying to be more for her. Wondering if maybe I was pushing it too hard, and thinking that maybe if I gave it time, it would just come to me. Like when you try to remember something so fiercely and you just fucking can't... until the second you stop trying. But the desperation and hopelessness of the whole situation just fucking pulled me under and held me down. I was wondering if Daddy C. wasn't right all along when he suggested I had some kind of chemical imbalance. Then I was wondering what kind of drugs it would get me if I did. Then I was wondering if maybe the drugs would make it possible to feel it. If they would, I would take them in a fucking second just see my girl's smile when I finally showed her.

No one bothered me that day. Everyone was so fucking caught up in the party preparations that I was paid no notice. Which was just fucking fine by me.

By the time the block began filtering into the yard that night, I had grown impossibly darker. I could hear the music and laughing and happiness coming from my balcony door, and it made me want to fucking vomit. I turned off my light when they began shooting off fireworks, letting the eerie glows illuminate my room in a strange opposition to my own personal atmosphere.

At eleven thirty, I pulled on my leather jacket and boots and made my way outside to the back yard. I was only showing up to please Carlisle, and maybe catch a glimpse of my girl's smile as she watched the fireworks. I hadn't seen her smile in days. I trudged across the yard, glaring down at my shoes, as my mood grew impossibly sourer with the cheery and upbeat music playing. Brandon had the meadow behind the gazebo completely illuminated with lights and a rather impressive sound system that was all too classy for the Forks block crowd. I had to give it to her. She never did shit half ass. It was an admirable characteristic I envied quite thoroughly. Because half ass was something I found I was really fucking good at.

There were plenty of people around, drinking and smoking and laughing at jokes. I could spot Carlisle by a barbecue pit, making food for all of the guests. No one spared me a glance as I made my way to an empty folding chair at the edge of the crowd just beyond the gazebo. I flopped down in it heavily, feeling cold as fuck and spreading my feet out wide in front of me while I stared blankly at the river.

The occasional firework lit up the meadow even more, casting brilliant reflections in the water of the river. I chanced a glance around to see if my girl had made it out yet. I could spot Jasper at the far end of the meadow hanging all over Brandon and looking so fucking happy and in love it made me hate him a little. I watched her smile widely as he spun her around and planted a big wet kiss on her neck. She laughed joyously at his actions, throwing her little head back while all her spiky hair brushed his cheeks. He smoothed it back lovingly and in a very un-Jasper gesture, kissed the back of her hand after he released her. Lovingly. Making her smile. *It can never fucking be me.*

I looked away from that scene, feeling pretty fucking bitter about the whole thing, and kept looking around. But then I spotted Emmett and Rosalie at the other side of the meadow. Looking fucking happy and madly in love too. And the more I looked the more I saw it. And the more I saw it, the more bitter I became.

I kept searching for Bella, trying to force down the bile that was forcing its way up my throat at the sight of all the happy fucking couples. At first I didn't see her, and I thought that she might have stayed inside, which kind of fucking disappointed me. *Aren't girl's supposed to like fireworks?*

But then I finally found her standing upright, away from everybody in the crowd twenty feet away from me, and looking pretty fucking uncomfortable and cold. She was standing in the darkness, just like I was. *At least we're still tit for tat on something.*

I stared at her unabashedly in the darkness of my lounging spot. She was wearing her hoodie with the hood drawn up tight around her. But occasionally, she would lift her head up to the sky to watch a lone firework that would illuminate her face in various colors. She looked so fucking beautiful. I felt a strange and powerful tugging sensation at watching her where she stood shrouded in the darkness. An itching to go and be with her that was so strong my feet twitched. And it was kind of fucking weird that I reacted like that, because I had spent many days with her in school. Looking but avoiding.

I continued watching her in curiosity as the countdown to midnight reached the two minute point. She shoved her hands into her hoodie pockets and looked at the ground, kicking the wet grass carelessly with her feet. No one in the crowd even spared her a glance as she stood covered in darkness. I stared at her intensely, willing her to meet my gaze so that I could look into her eyes and see if the fireworks made her happy.

And then suddenly, her head snapped up towards me from the ground and her brown eyes met mine. She looked surprised. Probably that I was even fucking bothering to come out in here in the cold to watch the fireworks. But she didn't look happy or wondrous at the sight of the flashing in the sky. She hastily broke the stare and began looking around at the crowd that was pairing up for their midnight New Year's kisses as the countdown continued. All those fucking happy couples who had someone else to start the New Year with. Her face fell at the sight of it as the tugging in my chest became more prominent.

And I just had to fucking do it. I tried to justify the risk with the fact that I wanted her to have a New Years kiss like every one else. Or maybe even because I wanted one too. But it was a fucking lie. The tugging was pulling me to her so strongly that I couldn't fucking take it anymore.

I shot up from my chair and sprinted towards her, hugging the cover of the darkness that we lingered on the fringe of. She didn't see me coming, but I knew she felt me. The electricity that she always said made me feel like home to her. When I finally reached her I grabbed her covered arm and pulled her back towards me into more of the darkness. She spun around and

looked at me wide eyed, but I didn't have the time to explain. So I held her arm firmly and pulled her away from the river and the meadow, jogging to the safe cover of the gazebo. She remained silent as she followed hastily behind me.

Once we ran up onto the platform of the dark gazebo, I spun around and pushed her up against one of the large beams that would hide us from the sight of the crowd. Her eyes were wide and shocked as I chanced a peek around the beam to determine if we were seen. But everyone was too caught up in their own kissing partners to notice anything else as the countdown reached twenty seconds. I was kind of fucking breathless from the adrenaline of the running and sneaking around. I glanced back at my girl who was standing in front of me pressed up against the beam wide eyed and searching my face.

I stepped closer to her until I was pressed completely against her, almost completely relaxing as the tugging inside of me subsided with her proximity, and pulled her hood off. I let out a deep breath and smiled at my girl. The first real smile I had felt in days. She looked so fucking confused it made me want to chuckle at her. But instead I just took her little face in between my hands as the countdown reached fifteen. People were counting down already as I leaned my face into hers. Understanding finally dawned across her face as the crowd chanted the seconds away. And then she fucking smiled at me. Big and full of teeth and all of her radiance and beauty beaming right at my face, and *holy fucking christ*, had I missed the sight of it. Her eyes were shining with something akin to relief and happiness, and brimming with the unconditional love that she felt for me. But I wasn't looking away this time. I wanted her to have it. And I needed to do it. The tugging had subsided, but I could still feel the need to be closer.

I put my lips barely against hers and closed my eyes as the countdown reached ten, and I could feel her fucking struggling to hold the smile back so she could kiss me right, but it was so big that she barely could. And I just fucking smiled against her lips too. Because how could I not when she smiled like that? At me. For me. Because of me.

I grabbed her face firmer, stroking her cheeks with my thumbs, and tangling my fingers into the soft hair behind her ears and struggling to wait for the last second to put my full force on her lips and kiss her fucking senseless to ease the tugging. I didn't even bother with the bullshit soft kisses. When the countdown finally hit one, I just fucking plunged my tongue in between her smiling lips as the need to be closer to her completely overcame me. And she accepted it with an enthusiasm that made me weak in the knees as she dove her fingers into my hair and pulled my face closer to deepen the kiss and push her tongue into my mouth. My movements grew frantic as my breath sped up and I pushed against her tongue frenziedly and pressed against her body.

There were loud booming fireworks in the background and that stupid fucking New Years song, Auld Lang Syne. But I couldn't hear or feel anything but my girl pressed against me. So fucking tightly that the ring nestled between my t-shirt and my skin was pressing painfully against my scarred chest.

She gripped my leather jacket with one fist, pulling me and moving her tongue against mine just as fiercely.

I pressed my body impossibly closer while I urgently pressed against her tongue with mine. She was so fucking sandwiched between me and that beam that I knew it had to hurt, but she just kept pulling me closer and tilting her head to deepen the kiss further. My head was thick and fuzzy with lust as I pushed into her hips with mine. But there was something else with it. And I was pulling and tugging and pressing, and being too fucking rough with my girl. But I couldn't restrain the need to possess her completely. To just fucking crawl inside of her and never leave.

And the raw feeling that it ignited within me made me fucking *whimper* into her mouth as I tugged her hair. It was something so fucking new and alien and more intense than anything I had ever felt before. I didn't know what name to give it. I couldn't discern anything from the raw need to be closer to her. I had no way of knowing how close it was to the love I had been desperately seeking, but I knew it was on a completely new level for me. A level above simple caring and friendship and adoration, and even lust.

And I *fucking basked* in it.

Nearly laughing into her mouth as the complete euphoria of the foreign emotion filled me to the brim. Instead of questioning it, I just fucking poured that new emotion into our kiss. Whatever it was, I gave it to her completely, hoping and fucking praying she could feel it, and maybe tell me what it was and if it was good enough for her.

And as my kiss grew impossibly more urgent with the foreign emotion I was forcing behind it, she whimpered back into my mouth breathlessly. And then we were both breathing raggedly and panting our hot breath into each other's mouths. Pulling and tugging and pressing as we continue our frenzied kiss in the dark cover of the same gazebo where it all fucking began.

I was so completely terrified that if I pulled away from her kiss that it would leave, and I'd never feel it again. But I needed air so fucking badly. So I grudgingly ripped my lips away and began gulping in the cold December air, but my girl kept kissing me. Up and down my neck and littering my throat with her hot, wet kisses.

And it was still fucking there.

I laughed breathlessly at the wooden beam in front of me as I held her head to my neck tightly, still fucking basking in it. She probably thought I was fucking insane, but she never pulled away from my neck to tell me so. I kept laughing and panting as she trailed the kisses up my throat and to my cheeks and chin, and just fucking everywhere. And once I had caught my breath enough to do so, I gave her all the kisses back. Grabbing her face between my hands and scattering tiny kisses around her little cheekbones as she still smiled at me radiantly and tugged my hair closer. I used all my kisses and my eyes and my smiles to finally fucking show her mine. I didn't know what mine was yet, but it was there. And it made her smile and chuckle around

my lips with each kiss that I planted on her overheated skin. And when I had every inch of her beautiful face covered, I wrapped my arms around her tiny waist and held her against me firmly. She chuckled breathlessly once again and returned my embrace with vigor. Exhausted from the kiss, I dropped my face onto her shoulder, turning so that I could rest my lips against the warm skin of her neck, and smiled into it joyously. It was hands down the happiest fucking moment of my entire existence.

Chapter 26. Heavenly Hazelnut Perfection



Relief. Overwhelming, all encompassing relief was what I was feeling as I squeezed Edward's neck so tightly that I thought I might just choke him to death right there in that gazebo. I could feel him smiling into my neck, and the feeling of it was just complete euphoria. He came back to me. And not only did he come back, but he did it with an intensity that nearly brought tears to my eyes. I didn't know what snapped in him, or what brought the whole thing about, but his flame wasn't gone. And it wasn't even dim like it used to be. It was burning so brightly that I could feel it in his touch.

And for once, I was the one that had to pull away. And when I did, he was still smiling, and his eyes were shining with a silent refusal to let go of my waist that made me chuckle at him. But I had to go before Alice came, so I planted one last small kiss on his swollen lips and unwrapped his arms from around me.

"I'll be up when I lose Alice." I promised, knowing that she would be with Jasper all night. I had already spoken to Jasper before they started the fireworks and asked him to keep her busy for the night so I couldn't get caught absent from the house. His easy agreement just solidified his spot as my second favorite guy.

Edward nodded at me, and reluctantly turned away with one last glance at me to return to his house. After he was gone, I weaved my way through the crowd to find Esme and make a good alibi. She was easy as I relayed my story to her while she stood next to Dr. Cullen at the river bank. All I had to do was tell her I was tired and I was going to bed. She never checked on me at nights, so I knew I had nothing to worry about once my bedroom door was closed. I did take notice of the fact that she and Dr. Cullen had spent most of the night together. And before Edward had pulled me away, I also took notice of the fact that they paired up together for the New Year's kiss. I was almost frustrated that I couldn't have seen their kiss to calculate how romantic it was.

I spotted Jasper across the meadow and gave him a pointed glance. He understood what was going on, and sent me a minute nod that wouldn't alert Alice, who was hanging on his back. I spared one last moment to glance around the meadow to confirm Emmett's whereabouts. He was sitting next to a very bored Rosalie, still shooting off fireworks, and looking far too amused

by them than entirely appropriate for any eighteen year old man to be. So I made my way across the yards, sneaking through the shroud of darkness, and around the front to the Cullen mansion with ease.

Edward had told me that morning to just walk in, so I did. The house was bright and empty, and I flew up those stairs to Edward's room where I knew he'd be waiting for me. Once I reached his door, I didn't even knock on it; I just grabbed the knob and flung it open.

He was sitting in the middle of his bed, still wearing his leather jacket, and smiling crookedly at me again. And the sight of it must have made my whole face light up. I had missed that smile so much, that I couldn't even contain myself as I shut the door and darted to the bed. I jumped on it carelessly, flying over to Edward and throwing my arms around his neck once again. The force of my enthusiasm knocked him onto his back, and I was afraid that I had crossed some line. But he chuckled at me and wrapped his arms around my waist, burying his face into my hair and breathing in deeply.

I kissed his neck with reckless abandon, just happy that I could. And happy that he was really holding me, and really smelling me, and really happy to have me there.

And he was. He rolled us over onto our sides and slid us up to the pillows. And instead of putting my head on his chest, he rested his forehead on mine and let out a deep sigh. A sigh of relief. I didn't know what he was relieved about, but I welcomed whatever it was. He held me impossibly tighter against him with both arms around my waist. I was afraid the arm I was lying on would go numb, but he didn't seem to care. I smiled widely at his death grip on me and squeezed his neck tighter.

"I've been such a jackass." He whispered into my face sadly, gazing into my eyes with a regretful expression.

I shook my head against his. "Doesn't matter now." I whispered back sincerely while I stared into his eyes, trying to convey all the love I still had for him. The resentment that had been building up inside of me had completely dissipated with his new intensity.

He smiled back at me and moved his head to give me a soft slow kiss on my lips. I was surprised that he was even kissing me in bed seeing as how we had some kind of silent rule against it in the past. It was gentle and sensual. The complete opposite from the kiss in the gazebo. But his intensity was still there in his tight embrace as he sucked on my bottom lip lazily, so I returned it happily and lovingly, moving my hand to stroke the messy hair on the nape of his neck softly.

We didn't sleep that night. We didn't even move from our position. We spent five hours just continuing the soft slow kissing. There were no tongues involved in those kisses, which was a good thing. Because we weren't gasping for air and needing to break away to catch our breath. The lust was still there, and I could definitely feel that fact from Edward as he held me tightly against him, occasionally shifting his hips into mine. I didn't mind that one bit. In fact, I was a

little overcome with lust myself and having my own bodily reactions to it. But something else was driving his kisses. And I had no clue what it was, but I let it wash over me. Making me smile against his lips every so often.

And by five thirty, I knew that I had to leave. So I grudgingly backed my face away from Edward. He opened his sparkling green eyes and frowned in a way that made me giggle quietly. He didn't want me to leave. But I had to. So I planted one final soft kiss onto his lips and lifted myself off of the bed and his poor arm.

I didn't bring my bag with me or any pajamas, but I still had his bag of cookies in my hoodie pocket, so I dropped them off beside the alarm clock that we never set to go off. They were a little crushed from his hugging, but mostly intact. I sent him one last big grin as he lied on the bed staring at me intensely, and turned around nearly pouting at the fact I had to leave.

I was almost to the door when I heard him jump out of bed and sprint towards me. I turned around just as he stepped in front of me, taking my face in between his hands and putting his lips on mine once more. He crushed his face to mine with vigor, and plunged his tongue into my mouth. Pleased at the reappearance of the rougher kisses, I returned the kiss fiercely, fisting my hands into his leather jacket that he still hadn't removed, and tilting my head to deepen the kiss as I pulled him closer. It was a little taste of the gazebo kiss as he slowly backed me up against the wall beside the glass French door, moving his tongue against mine urgently and tugging my hair to bring my face closer. I whimpered into his mouth and moved my hands up his jacket to fist in his hair, pulling and tugging just as roughly as he was. He pressed me tightly against the wall behind me, finally showing me his lust as he shoved his hips into mine with a throaty groan. I was already panting into his mouth again, pushing against his tongue fervently, as I moaned breathlessly into his mouth at the feel of him against me.

I arched my hips away from the wall, pressing back into him, and fighting the urge to wrap my legs around his waist to get closer. I moved against him with a whimper, wishing that he were as willing to move things farther with me as I was with him. He groaned breathlessly into my mouth again and moved one hand from my hair to grab my hip tightly, pulling it impossibly closer to his as he moved his tongue against mine feverishly.

Excited that he wasn't pulling away, I writhed against his hips with mine, gasping into his mouth at the increasing wetness between my legs. As if he read my mind, he groaned into my mouth again while he slid his hand down my leg, wrapping his fingers around my thigh and hitching it over his hip while gripping it firmly and pushing back into me. The contact the new stance provided made me whimper and writhe against him more. I was thinking idly that if we kept going like this, I'd be climbing down the lattice with authentic sex hair. Quite happily.

I think he probably knew, because he drew his tongue back from my mouth, keeping his wet lips lightly against mine as he gasped for air against them, and gently released my thigh from his grip.

He opened his intense green eyes, hooded with lust and shining with something else, and gazed into mine intensely as we panted against each other. "Happy Fucking New Year." He breathed against my lips.

I smiled against his lips and let one quiet, breathless chuckle slip through. "It certainly is." I replied honestly.

Edward

WIDE AWAKE

It was a pretty fucking good day. I jerked off three times in the shower after my girl left. I couldn't fucking help it. It's not easy having a throbbing erection for five hours straight, especially when the cause of it is far too encouraged by the feel of it against her to push you away.

She was acting a whole lot like she wanted me to take her. And if it were any other girl in my room kissing me like that – pre-Bella – I would have stripped them down and fucked them right against that wall. But I didn't want to fuck my girl. She deserved so much more than to just be fucked. She deserved to be made love to. And I had no way of knowing if I could ever be that motherfucker, but the new foreign emotion that I spent my night showering her in gave me hope that it was possible. I allowed myself one laugh at my expense when I realized that I was the one in the pair that wasn't ready yet. Of course, she could feel her love for me without any doubts to that fact.

I spent the rest of my day basically waiting for her to come back. The tugging was somewhat eased when I wasn't watching her from afar, but I could still feel it there. The need to have her beside me and touching me. I wanted to take that goddamn ring off my neck and wear it the way it was meant to be worn when two people were exclusive and in love. But I didn't fucking know yet. I was wishing whoever created the damned thing had come up with a way to wear it that said "*Too emotionally retarded to feel it back, but really fucking wants to*". Then I was wondering what kind of killer fucking profit that line would make in the greeting card industry.

I tried to spend my day downstairs to pass the time, but Daddy C. had a hangover. He was sulking in his study and trying to hide that fact, but I knew better. He always hid when he got a hangover. I wanted to give him some of my girl's fucking fantastic hangover remedy, but figured it would rouse too many suspicions for my own comfort. I efficiently dodged Emmett while he was playing some new video game he got for Christmas. I did spend a little time on schoolwork since it was starting back up the next day. I cringed at the thought of starting the New Year without my Volvo if my grades dropped.

By the time my girl finally came at ten, I was growing restless, and feeling really fucking tired from not sleeping the night before. I flung the door open and smiled at the sight of her, as the tugging oddly both grew and subsided simultaneously. Her big brown eyes were shining when they met mine, and she had a big grin on her face. And when I finally tore my gaze away from her happy face, I realized that the shiny fucking curls had made a welcomed reappearance.

I ushered her inside out of the cold impatiently, not even waiting to close the door before I pulled her to me and took her lips with mine. She smiled against them and returned my kiss joyfully as our tongues finally met. I crushed her body to me tightly, plunging one hand into her shiny curls and sighing as the tugging was almost completely dissipated and replaced with a surge of the new foreign emotion.

I ended the kiss before it could escalate into another painful five hour throbbing erection incident. She unloaded my meal onto the bed and moved to make her way to the sofa, but I grabbed her arm.

“Sit with me tonight?” I implored when she faced me, knowing that the tugging would be nearly fucking unbearable if I had to watch her across the room on the sofa all night. Her smile grew wider and she nodded enthusiastically, making all those shiny fucking curls bounce around her face and neck. Relieved, I flopped down onto the bed and began uncovering all my dishes while my girl removed her hoodie, wearing a dark sweater that revealed a whole two centimeters more of her skin, and retrieved one of her books from the shelf.

She sat beside me while I ate, telling me about her day with Alice and Esme. We spent some time discussing our suspicions about Carlisle and Esme. Bella seemed shock when I pointed out the parallel business trips.

She gaped at me as I popped a piece of fucking delicious ham into my mouth. “You don’t think...” She trailed off incredulously. I snickered and shook my head at her naivety as the wheels started turning in her head. It was rather comical to me that everyone hadn’t noticed yet. She spent the rest of the meal convincing me that Esme was perfect for Carlisle. I watched as her big brown eyes lit up at the thought of it. I wasn’t fucking protesting. She was far better than any of the nurses at the hospital that were so hugged up on his nuts he could barely breathe.

After I had finished the meal, I thanked her with a soft kiss, caressing her shiny curls away from her face as I took her bottom lip in between mine. I let the foreign emotion surge into the kiss as it grew, showing her whatever mine was, and still fucking basking at the feel of it. When I pulled away, she was smiling at me widely. I basked in that shit a little too.

We were both pretty fucking tired, so we got dressed for bed quickly. Once the light was out, I turned over and crushed my girl against me tightly, bunching her curls up over head and burying my face in them with a sigh. I gave her one last soft kiss on her head as she began

humming me to sleep, wrapping her in my arms and the new foreign emotion as I finally drifted off.

When the alarm went off, I didn't want to pull away. So I just fucking rolled us both over with a groan. She rolled on top of me, nuzzling into my chest as all her curls covered my neck and throat while I subjected the alarm clock to all my hatred.

She tried to look up at me while she was on my chest, but all her shiny fucking curls were in her face, making it impossible for her to see. I chuckled drowsily and lifted a hand from around her waist to smooth all the curls away. She gazed into my eyes for a moment before a smile lit her face. And I just fucking smiled back with a shrug. I'd do it every fucking morning if that smile was the first thing I'd see when I woke up.

She shifted to get up, and then fucking froze, looking at me with wide eyes. I closed my eyes slowly and shook my head regretfully, wishing that I hadn't chosen this position with my thin pajama pants on. *Stupid fucking morning wood.*

I opened my eyes back and glanced up at her with a grimace. "I can't fucking help it." I grumbled sleepily, hoping that she didn't think I was some kind of fucking freak for just waking up at full attention when nothing had called my soldier to duty. She sat motionless for a moment, and I was worried that I had offended her or some shit. But then, god fucking bless her, she just fucking smiled at me and chuckled while she lifted herself out of bed.

I rolled my eyes and began running my fingers through my hair as she shuffled to the bathroom snickering at me softly. When she came back out and began packing up all her things, I rolled out of bed. I didn't usually do that until she left, but I wanted to give her a real kiss to start the day. So I waited for her as she dropped my cookies off on the bed side table.

When she turned around and saw me standing at the French doors waiting for her, she looked a little shocked. Probably because I had a hard time even fucking functioning at this ungodly hour. I smiled crookedly at her and leaned against the wall beside the door as she shuffled her way over to me wearing a big fucking smile. When she was close enough, I grabbed her face and brought her lips to mine. It was then that I remembered how all my morning cheek kisses used to make me feel fucking terrible. So I gripped her face tighter and poured the new emotion into the kiss.

When she pulled away, her eyes were alight with happiness in a way that made the new emotion swell and surge within me as I stroked her cheeks. Without another word, I opened the door for her and watched as she stepped out onto the balcony, with all those tangled and shiny fucking curls blowing every which way in the rainy breeze, And I kind of fucking frowned at the thought of my girl out in all that cold rain. But she climbed over the railing and down the lattice so quickly that I didn't even have time to voice my concerns.



I drove to Jasper's still on a Bella/new foreign emotion high. When he got in the car looking all fucking grubby and still worn out from the New Years bash, I thanked him for the Brandon diversionary tactic that night. I wrestled with the idea of telling him about the new foreign emotion and all the tugging, but then worried that it might commit us to having sleepovers and braiding each other's hair as we discussed our feelings. Fuck that shit.

And as I pulled into school that morning, I realized where I fucked up. I spotted my girl standing alone in the parking lot while Brandon greeted Jasper with a rather skanky enthusiasm that nearly made me retch. And the tugging was there full fucking force at seeing her standing alone in the rain, and knowing that I couldn't go to her.

It seemed so fucking weird to me that I was having this tugging. I was wondering if it was this bad, then what would it feel like if it were love? And how the fuck did Bella handle something so strong? I tried my best to shrug it off and walk to first period, feeling shittier by the minute. I spent my first two classes focusing on the work, and being grateful that the tugging wasn't so bad when I couldn't see her.

Then on my way to third period I passed her in the quad. She was walking towards me with her hood up and her head down. And she fucking felt me coming like always, because her head rose a bit and she met my gaze as I passed, trying to avoid the tugging and the way it made my fingers twitch towards her. But right as my fingers twitched out to hers, her fingers twitched out towards mine. And we fucking touched. Right there in the middle of the quad in front of everybody. It was only a graze. But it was completely fucking subconscious. For us both. I immediately stopped and spun around to face her. I don't know why I did it. I was just a little fucking shocked at my reaction. But as I turned I was met only with her retreating form.

I stood there for a moment, running my fingers through my hair and knitting my eyebrows together before I finally snapped the fuck out of it and made my way to class. I spent English going through all the old literature we had read describing love and other emotions, trying to conclude how close my new foreign emotion was to love. But that shit was confusing. I was guessing that reading about it and feeling it were two completely different fucking things. After so long, I just gave up. I figured that if I was feeling it, and it made her happy, then it didn't fucking matter what it was called, or even how close it was to love. I was happy to just be feeling it.

And by the time lunch came, I had resolved to stop obsessing over it and just fucking enjoy it. Still basking. I walked to my table in the cafeteria and flopped into my seat. One glance at my girl's table told me she hadn't made it in yet, so I took out my bag of *Heavenly Hazelnut Perfection* cookies and began eating them while I waited for her to enter. I couldn't sit with her, but I could still fucking look at her.

I was shocked when Jazz walked in the room. And even more fucking shocked when he came to sit with me. He flopped down into his seat in front of me, and pulled out his bag of cookies that Bella had made for him. And for some weird fucking reason, I got an irrational flaring of

something that felt a lot like jealousy at seeing him with a bag of my girl's cookies. But I swallowed that shit down. Fucking irrational.

I quirked an eyebrow at him as he opened his bag. "No humping in the janitor closet today?" I asked curiously, wondering why he wasn't pawing Brandon for the hour.

He shoved a cookie into his mouth. "Alice wanted to sit with Bella." He shrugged and chewed at the same time. And I kind of fucking grimaced at all the crumbs flying out of his mouth when he did it.

I shook my head and kept eating my cookies, so fucking happy that Brandon wasn't ditching my girl to go suck face with this fucking slob.

I kept my eyes on the door, waiting for them to enter, as we ate in silence. Brandon walked in first, glancing at Jazz longingly while she took her seat at her table with Rose and Emmett. I was wondering if she's ever seen this motherfucker eat before. It was disgusting. Worse than Em. I was wondering how long it was going to take her to pussy whip some manners into his ass.

Then my girl walked in. All fucking black hood and cringing away from the people around her with a grimace. I watched her intensely as the tugging in my chest grew and swelled and made me want to just fucking forget everything that prevented me from going to her.

She took her seat next to Brandon with a general nod of hello at the table's occupants. As she bent over to get her book and cookies from her bag, I did the thing where I willed her to meet my gaze again. The one that worked two nights prior out in the meadow. Staring fucking intensely at the top of her hood as she was fishing into her bag and blocking everyone else in the room out.

Finally, as she was sitting back up, our eyes met. She stared back at me from her spot, and I could see her eyes fucking light up as they met mine. They were big and brown and just fucking brimming with all of her love as she gazed at me. The intense stare we had made the new foreign emotion inside of me swell again. The tugging was pulling me to her so fucking strongly that my feet were twitching. But I knew I couldn't go to her. So I did the only thing I could and just fucking poured that new emotion into our stare, hoping that she could see, that even though I couldn't be with her, I really fucking wanted to.

And as if she knew exactly what I meant, she grinned at me and hastily broke our gaze to open her book. I blinked my eyes a few times, realizing that the whole cafeteria had filled while we were staring at each other. I let out a deep breath and finally tore my gaze from her, back to Jazz.

He was sitting in front of me wide eyed for some fucking reason, just gaping at me with a cookie in his hand. I quirked an eyebrow at him, wondering what was so fucking interesting. But

instead of answering me, he slowly turned his head around to look at Brandon's table. I followed his gaze across the room, and was kind of fucking surprised to him staring at my girl.

Finally his head turned back towards me. I quirked an eyebrow at him again, but he just looked back at Bella, then at me again. And then he was fucking *smirking*. I furrowed my brows at him, wondering if Brandon flashed him or some shit. It wouldn't shock me in the least. He snickered and shook his head, making all his grubby blonde hair fall into his eyes. Then he said the three words that nearly fucking gave me a stroke.

"Aint love grand?" He smirked knowingly.

I fucking gaped at him, wondering how the hell he came to the conclusion that I was in love. "What the fuck are you talking about?" I asked in a frustrated tone. It was kind of fucking mean for him to even mention it when I was trying so hard to feel it.

He snickered, yet again, making me want to fucking bash his head into the table. "Are you really that fucking clueless?" He asked in a tone that dripped with condescension.

I huffed and raised my eyebrows him. *Yes, but it'd be nice if you didn't rub it in my face, you fucking prick.*

He shook his head at my pointed glance. "You love her." He said simply. Like he was some kind of fucking all knowing empath or some shit.

I tried to bite down all the hope that was coupled with the bitterness that I didn't yet. "And how the fuck did you come to that conclusion?" I asked through clenched teeth as my frustration grew.

He finally put his cookie down, rubbing the crumbs off onto the table in front of him like the fucking slob he was, and leaned forward with his forearms flat on the table. "How long have I known you?" He asked cryptically.

Answering questions with questions. It was just so fucking... Jazz. "Almost five years." I answered impatiently, fighting the urge to narrow my eyes at him.

He nodded his head at me. "And how many times have I sat my ass in front of you in the lunch room?" He asked another fucking stupid question. I rolled my eyes at him, choosing to make that particular question rhetorical. He nodded his head again while his lips twitched. "Any how many times have you looked at anyone like you just looked at her?" He asked knowingly. And since he was so fucking knowing and I wasn't, I failed to see the connection to the conclusion. I was closer to Bella than anyone else. Of course I'd look at her differently.

He huffed and sat back in his chair when I didn't immediately understand him. "The look, Edward." He said exasperated, throwing his hands in the air. And I just fucking looked at him.

What about the look? “Fucking Christ.” He muttered shaking his head. I furrowed my brows at him and barely restrained the urge to lunge across the table and fucking strangle him for being so goddamn condescending. He rubbed his hands over his face and took a deep breath before he leaned back onto the table on his forearms and looked at me with his serious Jazz expression. “That look you just gave her?” He asked with raised eyebrows. I nodded. “I’d know that look anywhere.” He said simply. As if he really was all knowing about these things. “It’s the same way she looks at you.” He continued with a raised eyebrow and a near smirk on his face. I furrowed my brows and looked back at my girl sitting at her table reading her book. Trying to fucking comprehend that I was looking at her with the same look she gave me. “With love.” Jazz finished, leaning back into his seat and resuming his disgusting consumption of the cookie.

I continued staring at her thoughtfully as she ate her cookies. Wondering if it was even possible for that foreign new emotion to actually be love after all. I was testing it out and trying it on.

I love Bella.

Jazz snorted from his seat. “Yeah, fucker. That’s what I just said.” He chuckled. I snapped my gaze back to him bewildered, not even realizing that I had said the words aloud. But I did. And it didn’t sound fake, or like a lie, or even fucking wrong or uncomfortable. It just fucking... was.

And the reality of it hit me so fucking hard that I wanted to laugh and cry and fucking run to my girl and kiss her again. Because I really did. I really fucking did love Bella. Jazz watched me in amusement as my whole fucking face broke out into a smile at the realization. That new emotion finally had a name. And I had been showing her all of my love for the last two days.

And I was fucking battling to hold my laugh in so Jazz wouldn’t be a complete prick about my emotional ignorance. And then I realized the best part of it all. I couldn’t *fucking wait* to tell my girl that I loved her back. I wanted to just run to her right then in the lunch room and spill it all out to her and finally get to see her face when I said it. But, because I was in love, and feeling fucking sappy and sentimental about the whole revelation, I needed it to be more private and special. So I held my fucking tongue and ate the rest of my cookies with a shit eating grin plastered all over my face. Jazz kept snickering at me and shaking his head, clearly amused by my euphoria. But even him being a prick couldn’t ruin my mood.

I walked to Bio ten steps behind my girl, glaring at anyone that even came fucking close to touching her. I could feel the tugging and the new foreign emotion... no... the love... I had for her swell inside of me as I took my seat next to her and felt our electricity.

It was a movie day. A really boring fucking movie about some parasite that I really didn’t give a shit about. And as soon as Mr. Banner turned the lights off and started the movie, I slid my hand to my girl’s side of lab table, and snatched her hand up, bringing it below the table and rubbing it with my thumb. I could almost feel her smile in the dark as she gripped my hand back tightly. We spent the whole hour just rubbing and caressing each other’s hand. There were multiple occasions when I almost fucking broke down and told her right then. All I would have

to do is lean over the distance between us and whisper it in her ear. But I held myself back, just thinking of how much fucking better it would be when we were alone, and I could really show her and she wouldn't have to hide her smile, and I could kiss her fucking senseless afterwards.

And when the movie was over, I really didn't want to let go of her hand, but I fucking had to when he turned the lights on. We both slid our hands away from each other slowly, and hesitantly. And when the bell rang, we packed our shit and got up to leave. I walked ten steps behind her again, still glaring at any motherfucker that even got close enough to make her cringe, before I had to break away to go to my last class of the day.

I spent the entire hour cooking up ways to tell her, wanting to make the moment so fucking right and perfect that I would finally get to see that look on her face I had been dying to see ever since Christmas morning. I was thinking that I could tell her after a kiss, or maybe even take her down to the gazebo to do it. The gazebo seemed right. It was the place where I first showed it to her, even if I didn't even fucking know at the time that it was love I was feeling. I was wondering if guys got girl's presents or some shit when they told them that kind of thing. I was so fucking lost when it came down to it. I could probably make a girl cum six ways to Sunday and scream my name, but when it came telling one I loved her, that shit was so far out of my league.

By the end of the hour, I decided that it was just Bella. My girl. She probably wouldn't give a fuck how I told her, just as long as I did. And I definitely would.

I was probably the first motherfucker in the parking lot at the end of school. Just so fucking anxious to have the day over with so I could tell my girl. Determined to catch one last glimpse of her before ten came, I leaned against my car door and stared at the gym door to wait for her to appear.

Oddly, instead of anyone coming out of the gym, faculty was going into it. I saw Mr. Banner go in and Ms. Cope, and then Mrs. Presely the nurse. But no one was coming out. Figuring they maybe had a late basketball game or some shit, I stood by my door and waited while everyone else in the parking lot began pulling away to go home.

I waited until the parking lot was empty, but no one was fucking coming out. I furrowed my brows and ran my fingers through my hair, wondering if maybe they all got dismissed early. It would explain the faculty that was steadily pouring in. And just as I was about to give up and leave, someone came out. Jazz.

And I was so fucking wrapped up in waiting for my girl that I didn't even fucking think to notice that he wasn't in the car. He stood by the doors to the gym running his fingers through his grubby hair before he finally met my gaze. And the look on his face shocked me. *Panic.*

I pushed myself off the door to my car as he came jogging over. As he ran closer to me in the parking lot, a million different scenarios were going through my head. *Anthrax, school shootings, roof collapse, though it appears fine to me.*

Once he was finally in front of me, he hunched over panting, resting his palms on his knees. He looked up at me with a frantic expression. "It's Bella." He panted.

My fucking eyes grew wide as his panic became mine. "What?" I asked frenziedly, fighting the urge to just run into that gym myself if he didn't fucking talk faster.

He gasped in air and shook his head, still holding his knees. "Some fucking asshole in gym elbowed her by accident or some shit while they were playing basketball." He straightened up as realization hit me. But before I could ask more, Jasper's frantic gaze shifted to behind me. I followed it to see Esme's car speeding into the parking lot. She didn't even fucking park the car, just shot out of it and began running towards the gym, her caramel hair flying behind her into a blur. I turned back to Jazz with an urgent expression on my face. *Spit it the fuck out.*

He crossed his arms across his chest as it heaved and spoke hurriedly. "He elbowed her fucking hard, man. And she just fucking freaked out. She won't let anyone touch her, not even Alice." He gasped and took in another gulp of air. "There's blood..."

And I didn't even fucking wait to hear anymore. I flew across the quad to the gym, running like my fucking life depended on it. And praying that my girl was okay. The cold rain slapped me in the face as I bounded across the grass and concrete. I had my arm extended to the door handle before I even fucking reached it. And as soon as I pulled the door open, I felt like I had been hit in the chest with a fucking sledgehammer.

Screams. Fucking god awful shrieks and sobs resonating around the gym and right out the door. And I'd know those fucking sobs and screams anywhere. *My girl.*

As I darted into the gym, I could see them. A whole fucking crowd of people in the middle of the shiny gym floor. Some were students, still dressed out in their gym uniforms, and some were faculty, wearing frantic expressions at the sounds of Bella's agonized screams and sobs. And all of them were gathered around the source of the awful noises.

I cringed and shuttered with each sound as I ran across the gym floor, nearly slipping as my wet boots contacted the shiny wood. But I didn't fucking stop, I kept going until I reached the crowd. But I couldn't see past them. So I just started fucking shoving them all out of my way furiously, desperate to see her. Ms. Cope grasped my leather jacket as I passed her, shouting at me, but I wasn't fucking listening to anything but those blood curdling screams, so I pushed her off of me angrily. I could hear in her voice, she had been screaming for a long while. I was wondering how long ago all this shit happened as I shoved Stanley aside using extra unnecessary force to do so. And with one last shove of Mr. Berty, I could finally see her.

And the sight of her nearly brought me to my fucking knees. She was lying on the wooden floor in a fetal position, with her little knees tucked up to her forehead, still wearing her gym uniform and hoodie. And she was fucking shaking and shuddering and trembling and just fucking vibrating the whole room with the hoarse screams that were ripping violently from her chest. This was no ordinary Weird Random Emotional Breakdown. This was fucking chaotic and violent, and just ripping her apart at her fucking seams.

Esme was standing over her with the most heartbreaking and helpless expression on her tear stained face. She reached a trembling hand down to stroke her hooded head. And she really fucking shouldn't have. Because it made the screaming and the shaking and the sobbing impossibly worse. Esme snapped her hand back as the look of hopelessness grew on her face into complete panic. She reached into her bag to fish something out and came out with a cell phone and began talking on it. But I couldn't fucking hear anything going on around me except for my girl, and all her fucking misery and agony. Poor Brandon was hunched over beside her, fucking crying along with her, and looking just as hopeless as her mother. Jazz broke through the crowd then and went to her.

But my attention was on the shaking form in front of me. And even more importantly, the dark blood that was smeared on the wooden floor around her head. I was fucking frantically searching her to find where the bleeding was coming from, but her face was covered by her hair, and her head was covered by that goddamn hood.

I began breathing deeply, trying to think straight against all the shrieks that were making me cringe and shudder, and almost making me fucking sob as I gripped my hair and clenched my eyes closed. And then I just fucking knew what I had to do. She wouldn't even let her aunt or cousin touch her. But I was betting that I could. To hell with any secret. I would have given my fucking life to snap her out of her *that*.

I opened my eyes, and darted them to Jazz, who was staring right back at me with a very fucking knowing look as he held Brandon against his chest and rocked her on the floor next to Bella. And for once I was so grateful he was so fucking knowing. Because I was going to be met with much resistance.

With a determined breath, I began making my way to the center of the circle. And as I stepped forward, Mr. Berty grabbed the back of my jacket and pulled me back. And I fucking shoved him off angrily. No one was going to stop me from getting to my girl. I pressed on as everyone in the crowd began yelling for me to stop. I blocked them all out. None of them fucking mattered to me. I began creeping slower as I approached her; worried that Alice would jump me. I shot another glance at Jazz who was holding her face against his chest. *Thank fucking god.*

I regretfully wasn't prepared for Esme however. She stood over Bella with the phone to her ear, glaring at me and screaming something that I wasn't fucking listening to. I stepped closer to my girl and all her fucking shrieks and blood and sobs that were just tearing me the fuck apart. As I got closer to her curled and trembling body, Esme took a protective stance over Bella, standing

over her with her caramel hair flowing down her shoulders in her light business suit. I darted my eyes up to meet her gaze.

And she was *fucking beautiful*.

A brilliant inferno lighting her eyes and transforming her into a glorious angel of fury. A mother protecting her young. The raw maternal instinct and wrath towards the one who would bring their child harm made her majestic in a way that absolutely fucking *demand*ed compliance. The sight of her magnificence made me gasp. *That is what a real mother looks like*.

I was afraid. And I was in awe of her and all her splendor as she towered over my girl radiantly. But, goddamn it, I fucking loved her too. So I kept going. Nothing was going to hold me back. Not even all her motherly glory. And the closer I got, the more furious and glorious she became as I held her gaze. And the escalation of her fury and beauty made me want to worship her more with every step I took.

And thankfully, the closer I got to my girl, the more of my electricity she could feel. She grew minutely quieter with my proximity. And not many people could actually fucking register the change in the pitch of her shrieks. But I could. And so could Esme. Her maternal bond made her as in tune with Bella as I was. The brilliant inferno remained in her gaze as I crouched down, never moving my eyes from hers.

Bella grew minutely quieter once more as I was only just three feet away from her trembling body. Esme noticed again, but refused to back down from her protective stance on her young. So I pushed on, lowering my palms to the floor and slowly crawling the rest of the way to my girl. I never took my eyes off of Esme. I was so fucking mesmerized by her defiant posture, that it nearly made me want to back down first.

But I had to fucking show her why I was doing it. Make her fucking see that I was the answer. I was trying to show her with my eyes that *I could fucking handle this shit*.

I reached a hand up and extended it towards Bella's leg. She was wearing gym shorts, and I needed the skin to skin contact to make the quickest and biggest impact so that Esme wouldn't fucking kill me before I got a chance. Esme's eyes grew impossibly more furious at my movements. And I knew I had to do it swiftly and quickly to make it work. So I just fucking lunged at my girl and grabbed her leg tightly with both hands.

Esme made to pull me off her by my leather jacket, but immediately froze as Bella began to still. I rubbed her leg soothingly with my shaking hands, moving over her against Esme's grip. The blood was pooled around her face and hair, but I couldn't see her face. She was still sobbing loudly and shaking, though my touch had lessened it significantly. Esme finally let my jacket go, almost making me fucking fall onto my girl as I crouched over her.

After I had steadied myself, I leaned back on my heels, and put my arms under her to lift her into my lap. Once I had her full weight in my arms, I folded my legs Indian style in front of me and lowered her onto my legs. She was still fucking crying and shaking, but I knew that she could get through her breakdown. So I focused on the more urgent matter and began moving the hair from her face with one hand while I cradled the back of her head in the other. It was wet with fucking sweat and tears and blood. Once I had her face clear of all her hair, I could see it. Her eye was swollen and bruised. And all of the blood was coming from her nose, which was probably broken. And I didn't give a shit if it was an accident. I wanted to find the motherfucker responsible and bash his fucking head into the gym floor.

I caressed her cheek softly, willing her to open her eyes since they were clenched shut. She stilled more with my... loving... caress, and finally opened her eyes. They were clouded with tears as her jaw trembled against the sobs, but she could see me. So I gazed into her eyes with all of the fucking love that I had for her, and willed her still more. And she fucking did. And because I only knew of very few ways to convey that love I felt, I leaned down and gently kissed her sweaty forehead with my lips.

She let out a deep breath, still sort of fucking gasping from the event, but able to breathe nonetheless. She gazed back into my eyes as I sat back up and stroked her cheek. I could see her coming out of it more and more with each second that I held her and stroked her and finally fucking showed her all my love. I didn't know what was going on around me, or who the fuck was close by, because I kept my gaze firmly on her eyes, willing her to come back to me and out of her flashes and visions and fucking terrible memories.

And moments later she did. She lifted her arms heavily and brought them around my neck, lifting her body up and hugging onto my neck with all the strength she had left in her. Which really wasn't much. She was still panting as she rested her cheek gingerly on my shoulder. I rubbed her back up and down slowly and soothingly, slightly rocking her back and forth, just like I did the last time she experienced one of these things. She seemed to relax more and more, until eventually she was entirely fucking limp in my arms.

I held her waist tightly and lifted us up off the bloody gym floor. She was just fucking dangling from my grip, too exhausted to hold on. So I held onto her firmly and turned around.

And fucking everybody in that gym was staring at me like I had just sacrificed a virgin or some shit. Everybody except for four people. Esme and Brandon looked relieved and awestruck, and a little fucking confused. Jasper just looked knowing as he stood by Brandon's side. He was always fucking knowing. Prick.

And I was shocked to see Daddy C. on the fringe of the crowd next to Esme. It was then that the realization hit me that she had called him. He was the one she was speaking to on her cell phone. And I was glad because my girl definitely needed a little medical attention. Carlisle looked a little confused and relieved too. But there was another emotion in his eyes that almost made me want to smile despite the fucked up situation. *Pride.*



I exited the French doors downright elated, not even minding the freezing rain as I lithely made it over the railing of the balcony and down the lattice with ease. Edward had definitely changed since New Years, and I was pretty much enjoying the crap out of it. I was hoping that all these new changes in our routine would become permanent. Or as permanent as they could be.

I showered quickly, relieved to start school again. Truthfully, being locked up in the house all day had its downsides. I was actually looking forward to returning to Forks High. It was a rather frighteningly uncharacteristic reaction. In honor of the occasion, I cooked Alice her favorite breakfast, blueberry waffles. And because I was in such a good mood, when she came bouncing into the kitchen whistling, I really did whistle along with her. She stopped in her tracks and turned to me. Then we both busted out in laughter. It really was quite ridiculous.

She spent the meal and the ride to school chatting with me happily, and I gave her my full attention as an attempt to make up for all my awful behavior after Christmas. And really, I didn't mind. My mood had surpassed the 'Alice Chatter Danger Zone'. I felt invincible.

That is, until we arrived at school. She and Jasper both leapt from their respective car doors at exactly the same time. It was weird, really. The way they were so synchronized. I just stood beside the car waiting for her with my hood up and my head down. The cold rain was still coming down, and I was getting rather impatient. Then it occurred to me that I hadn't been to school since her and Jasper hooked up. Which probably meant I would be flying alone from now on.

With a huff, I started across the quad without waiting for her. I couldn't blame her. If I could be with Edward in the daytime, I probably would never leave his side. The thought made me sigh at the linoleum floor of my first period class. I couldn't really figure out why it mattered to me so much. I had resolved to take what I could get. And I had gotten so much more than I'd ever expected. I should be happy with it. And I was. Am.

I wandered the halls with my hood up, slopping a bit onto the floors as I cringed past all the people around me. I was definitely out of practice from vacation when it came to blocking people out. I struggled towards every class to put my shield up, cursing myself for becoming so comfortable. And actually looking forward to such torture.

On my way to third period, I had anticipated seeing Edward. Or at least, catching a glance at him as he passed me. And I could feel him coming as I sloshed across the wet cement of the quad, the source of the electricity that always made me tingle and feel at home. Without a second thought, I lifted my hooded head to the direction I always knew he traveled. And was rather surprised to see him looking at me as well.

His newly intense green eyes held mine as he passed, so close that I could smell him. And without even thinking about it, or really trying, my fingers twitched out towards his and we touched. The shock of electricity that his touch held momentarily relaxed me from the stiff posture I had assumed all day. Worried that I had just subconsciously crossed the line and risked our exposure, I kept walking hastily. Hoping that no one saw and that Edward wasn't upset about the incident. The thought of him losing this new intensity was enough to make me want to stay in line. As soon as I reentered the busy halls from the quad, my tense posture returned. I bobbed and weaved past the people, hugging the walls when necessary. And by the time third period was over, my muscles were almost sore from the tension of sitting beside Tyler Crowley all hour.

I was rather pleasantly surprised when I entered the lunch room and saw Alice sitting at our table. Without Jasper nonetheless. I gave her and Rose and Emmett my perfunctory nod of hello as I took my seat and began rifling through my bag to retrieve my books and cookies.

As I was sitting up I began to feel the tingling sensation again. The same one I got on New Years night. It was almost like a trace amount of Edward's electricity. I lifted my hooded head to his table, and sure enough, he was staring at me intensely. I got lost in his stare and his trace amount of electricity as I gazed back lovingly and longingly. His new sparkling green eyes shone with the new intensity that relaxed me minutely at the sight of it. I was pleased by the relaxing reaction that I was gaining from his unusual stare, but was also afraid I was taking an unnecessary risk by continuing. So I sent him back a small grin and broke our gaze to read my book, determined to remain on my best behavior.

I could just barely feel him behind me on the way to Biology after lunch. It was something new to me. I had always felt his electricity, but it had become more magnified over the last two days. And as I took my seat beside him, the electricity surged momentarily, relaxing me yet again, and nearly making me sigh.

It was a movie day. And Mr. Banner always chose the most disgusting material to subject us to. Today was no different. Parasites. The word alone was off putting enough. He flicked the lights off as the class participated in a collective groan at the sound of the subject matter. I had my hand resting atop the lab table when I felt Edward grab it. I was momentarily worried, before I felt him bring our hands below the table and began caressing mine soothingly with his thumb. And every muscle in my body eased with the contact and his intense electricity. I smiled into the dark, more pleased by this new occurrence than he could possibly imagine, as I squeezed his hand back.

I am quite glad to say that I know absolutely nothing about the parasites Mr. Banner had on that screen. Because I spent the whole class with Edward. I mean, technically, I spent every Biology class with Edward. But today, I *really* spent it with Edward. He would draw his hand back and run his fingers across my palm in a way that almost made my breath hitch. Then I would return the gesture, gliding my fingertips across his warm palm, and savoring the calming current of our touch as I smiled into the darkness of the room. I channeled every soft caress with all of my love for him, trying to show him how much I appreciated the small gesture.

And by the time the movie was over, I was so relaxed that I thought I might fall asleep. We grudgingly detached our hands, softly sliding our fingertips against each other's palms once more before the connection was broken, and the current returned to a tingle.

I could feel him walking behind me again towards gym. And I was glad for the remaining tingles because our classroom antics had completely dissolved my shield. When I felt him move away, likely to go to his class which was nowhere near the gym, I battled to block out the bodies around me. My muscles constricted instinctively against the people walking near me as I made my way through the door of the large gymnasium.

I entered the locker room hanging my head lower than normal. Jessica Stanley still had a bit of a grudge against me for the whole basketball incident, and I had no desire to bring anymore unwanted tension to myself. The first time I had ever dressed out in the locker room, people had made notice of my scars, so I had made a habit of dressing out in the privacy of the stalls. I could hear them snicker and whisper every time I entered the stall and closed the door. I was the only one who took the precaution, and that fact singled me out. Especially since I was pretty sure that news of my scars had already gotten around quite thoroughly.

I slid my hoodie on afterwards like I always did, and exited the locker room before any of the other girls. They were all too busy talking and gossiping and fixing their hair to give a crap about basketball. I flopped onto the bleachers unceremoniously, dreading that we were still being forced to play basketball after our vacation. I was hoping we would have moved on to something else. Like ping pong. I'd be comfortable with ping pong. Wouldn't even need to wear the ugly shorts for ping pong. There is no touching in ping pong. And the more I thought about it, the more I was resolved to mention the whole notion of ping pong to the gym coach.

When all the girls had finally made their way to the bleachers, we began watching the boys play like we always did. It was so boring. My options were to either listen to all the gossip going on around me, which I was trying my best to block out since the last incident, or watch the sweaty bulging males dribble a ball across the floor and knock each other down.

"SWAN!" I heard the gym coach's yell resonate around the acoustics of the gym. I snapped my head up to meet the coach's stare as I was waved over from across the gym. I furrowed my brows, wondering what I was needed for. I was endlessly worried that I was going to be reprimanded for my hoodie. I was wondering if I could get Dr. Cullen to write me some kind of doctor's note as I stepped down the seats of the bleachers to the floor.

I hesitated as I reached the edge of it, biting my lip anxiously at the game going on in the middle, but kept going, deciding that the reprimand would only be worse if I were to waste my time walking around the gym floor instead of across it.

I kept my head down, shrouding myself with my hair and struggling to block out all the guys on the gym floor that I was sure to pass. I could see my reflection in the wooden floor as I walked. I stared down at myself and kept the fuzzy eye contact, feeling utterly ridiculous for doing something so weird. I could hear the screeching of the shoes against the floor and the dribbling of basketballs as I cringed past the game going on.

And the dribbling was getting closer. Too close. I lifted my head slightly, breaking my own eye contact from the shiny floor, and froze in horror. It was like slow motion as I stood in the middle of the floor. James Morris was running right towards me with his head turned dribbling the basket ball. And he was too close for me to do anything.

He spun his blonde head around just in time to see my horror stricken face as the elbow of the arm dribbling the ball contacted my face with a blinding force. My vision turned white with the hit as a searing pain shot up my nose. I was thrown onto my back with the force of his strike, sliding a small ways, and finally coming to a stop.

But it was too much. I had been hit that hard before, and in that same place. Again and again. The pain in my nose was too similar, and the flashes and visions that accompanied it possessed me with a violent intensity. And suddenly, I wasn't even in the gym anymore. I was locked inside a closet hundreds of miles away.

I could feel the screams ripping from my chest, but I was deafened by a ringing sensation in my ears as I relived the most physically painful event of my existence. At times it would get fuzzier and I could almost get my hearing back. Then I'd feel something touch me again, pushing me back into the memory as I cringed away. I was banging and yelling and crying, and I didn't even know what was going on around my real body as I was trapped inside my head.

It felt like hours, sitting in that dark closet again, lying on the gym floor. Until eventually I wasn't even sure which was real anymore. The thought was running through my head as I sat in the darkness, that perhaps Forks was nothing but a dream. A figment of my imagination that my mind had invented to protect me from the pain. It began making sense to me. Until eventually I came to believe it as fact. Then I began wondering what Alice and Esme were doing at that exact moment in their home in Forks. And the more I thought about it, the more panicked I became. Not knowing whether or not Edward even existed. I had never actually met him before Phoenix. And the idea that the world I existed in at that exact moment had no Edward Cullen, defeated me. And I was hoping and wishing that my mind would make it all up again and take me away from that awful place.

And just as I was about to completely give up on everything and admit my defeat, I felt it. The tingle. It was minor, still far away. But it was *there*. And if it was there, than Edward did exist.

And it was coming closer. Slowly. Ungodly slow. The tingles were going up my spine and resting at the back of my neck like a soft whisper against my skin. I willed it closer to me. Begging and pleading into the darkness for him to find me wherever I was and pull me out.

Until, finally, I felt the full force of the current against my leg. Jolting sparks, and Edward and all of his glorious electricity cascading through me in gentle and intense waves. The closet was shaking and shuddering from my vision, blurring into a dark fuzz as I was lifted into the air. And as I was lowered back down, the ringing in my ears was subsiding into a soft buzz. And then suddenly I could feel my other body again. I was trying to fight back the feeling inside of me that was screaming that it might not be real. And then I could feel it against my cheek. The warm current flowing softly into my face and lulling me out of the dark closet. Until I realized that it wouldn't be dark anymore if I just opened my eyes.

So I did.

Black, White, Bronze, *Green*. It was like a slap in the face, and a hug around my heart all at the same time. *Edward*. He was an angel. My angel. And he really did exist. I fought back harder against the darkness that was tugging me back as I gazed into his intense yet gentle green eyes. They were shining right into mine, burning and passionate and fierce. I didn't move my gaze from his until he leaned over me and put his lips on my forehead softly. The rush of current it brought granted me hearing. And I could only hear... *me*. I let out a deep breath to bite back the sobs as he leaned back up and connected his gaze with mine once again, never ceasing his stroking of my cheek.

I swam in his green eyes as I battled harder to regain *this* reality. And then eventually I could really feel everything. My aching nose and sore muscles, and my lungs were burning as I gasped for air. I tried a hand to see if I could lift it. But I could only barely move it. So I continued gazing into his green eyes, occasionally testing my arms and waiting to regain function of them.

Until finally, I could lift my hand. And all I really wanted was to hug Edward and thank him with everything in me for saving me. For finally pulling me out. I lifted my arm to his shoulder to drape around it, using all my energy to lift myself up against the exhaustion and draped my other arm around his neck as well. I finally broke from his gaze as I gently laid my cheek on the shoulder of his cold leather jacket, panting for air and still lightly shaking.

He began rubbing my back up and down slowly and rocking me. I closed my mouth against the panting, just so that I could breathe in his unique scent. And it was so wonderful it made my mouth water. I kept my eyes open as I stared at the skin on his neck above his jacket. I wanted to stroke his hair, or kiss him like crazy. But I was just so exhausted, and his rocking and rubbing, and all of his electricity eventually eased me into a completely limp form.

He eventually ceased his rubbing, wrapping his arms around my waist tightly, and lifting us up off the floor. I wanted to hang on, or stand up on my own. But I had no energy left to do so. So I

let him carry me as my limp arms hung around his neck and my feet dangled at his shins. I couldn't see what happened when he turned around, but I could feel him stiffen.

That's when the realization hit me that we were still in school. And most likely, not alone in the gym. I let my eye lids flutter closed, and was unable to flinch at the pain it caused. Edward broke the most crucial silent rule he had ever made regarding us by doing it. But he did.



I glared at all the curious onlookers who had no fucking business still being there, and watched as they began to slowly disperse.

I held my girl tightly as I shifted my gaze back to Carlisle. "She's injured." I informed him, feeling really fucking pissed at that fact, and impatient to find the person responsible for causing her such agony.

Carlisle glanced towards Esme who stood beside him, gaping at the scene in front of her as I held Bella to my body. "Esme? I need consent for an examination." He asked her softly.

My vision turned red at the thought of it. "I won't let you fucking touch her." I snapped at Carlisle with narrowed eyes. Esme, Alice, and Carlisle all blanched at my harsh tone and looked at me in shock with wide eyes. I don't know why they were all so fucking shocked. It was obvious that it would only make shit worse.

Carlisle didn't look offended in the least. "That's fine. I'm sure you can help me?" He asked with a raised eyebrow at first me, then Esme. I nodded at him with pursed lips. I didn't know how much help I would be, but I would sure as fuck do my best. Esme cleared her throat daintily, a stark contrast to our earlier confrontation, and nodded her head at him.

I really wanted Jazz to take Brandon away before she put two and two together and realized exactly how close Bella and I were and began looking for the closest instrument to castrate me with. But her eyes held a silent refusal to exit the room as she gazed at Bella worriedly. And Jazz was just looking fucking bored as hell as he stood beside her, occasionally swiping at the wet spots on his grubby shirt from her crying.

"I'm sure I'll be given full disposal of the nurse's office." Carlisle instructed and turned to walk towards the gym doors. I shifted my girl a bit, lifting her higher to get a better grip on her before I followed behind him.

Esme and Brandon flanked me, standing on their toes and taking glances at Bella's bloody face beside my neck with grimaces and hisses. I held her firmly as we crossed the quad to the administrative offices where the nurse's office was located. She was still fucking limp in my arms, but her breathing had returned to normal.

The nurse stood at the door as we entered. She probably wanted to help. And I'm sure that my girl would have been losing out on some really fucking exquisite community college nursing care by me telling her to leave, but I didn't know if my girl would want anyone but me touching her yet. Not even a woman.

So I told her so. "Fuck off." I spat at her as I entered the office. She glared at me and closed the door behind the six of us a little louder than entirely fucking necessary. Carlisle stood by the bed, looking at me all disapproving, but I could hardly find it in myself to give a shit. So I walked to the examination table unrepentant as Esme, Brandon, and Jazz sat in the little chairs by the door.

I stopped in front of the bed and moved my hands to my girl's little hips, lowering her onto the crackling white tissue paper gingerly. I grabbed her shoulders and gently eased her head off my shoulder. I held her steady until I was sure that she could hold herself up. Her eyes were open mostly, but one of them was a little swollen and bruised at the corner closest to her nose. And she had blood just fucking caked on the cheek she was lying on. I slowly let her shoulders go, making sure that she wouldn't just fucking collapse. She didn't. I stood in between her slightly spread legs, waiting for Carlisle's instruction.

I gazed into her swollen brown eyes lovingly as Carlisle began unloading supplies from his bag. "Does it hurt?" I whispered in concern. The only thing worse than my girl being in pain was her lying on that gym floor.

She licked her lips while gazing back into my eyes. "A little." She rasped. And I kind of fucking cringed at the sound of her voice. It sounded like she had spent hours screaming. She tried to clear her throat. "Thank you." She grated sincerely, lifting her little hand to take mine from my side. She held it in her lap, stroking it softly and gazing down at it with a sigh.

I snorted softly. "Nothing to thank me for." I shrugged lightly, flipping my hand over to grasp hers. My girl would have done the same thing for me. In fact, I remember a night over a month ago when she risked having one of those fucking awful episodes just to save me from mine. She smiled down at our hands, and then lifted her gaze to the chairs by the door. She darted them back to meet my gaze quickly.

And then we were having a silent conversation. One meant only for the two of us. My girl was worried about everyone seeing us being so fucking casual with each other. I could tell by the way she hesitantly gripped my hand and warily looked at the people behind me. I wanted to fucking snort at her. Who the fuck cares now? I sure as hell didn't. So I rolled my eyes at her, and held her hand tighter, loving the way she fucking smiled a little about the whole thing.

I heard Carlisle clear his throat, so I reluctantly tore my gaze away from my girl. He was holding out what looked like a towel, I assumed to wipe her face with, so I leaned over and extended my arm to take it from him. He was obviously a little fucking terrified to get too close to her. Thankfully.

The towel was already wet and warm so I turned to my girl's face. And yes, it was a little fucking gross. I mean, she was still beautiful, but it was fucking gross. And her hair was all over the place.

I huffed. "Brandon?" I addressed her with a regretful tone. "Do you have something to tie all her fucking hair back with?" I asked, knowing that it would just make shit easier for me. I heard movement behind me as I began wiping my girl's forehead.

I felt a tap on my back, so I turned my head... and looked down. Brandon was staring up at me and holding out a hair tie. And she wasn't fucking glaring at me. Her big brown eyes were wide and innocent as she gazed up at me with a grateful expression on her tiny face and held the tie up closer to me. I furrowed my eyebrows at her and took the tie, turning back to my girl. I placed the towel in her little lap before I began gathering all of her wet hair back off her face. She sighed as my fingertips gathered the hair from her neck. I smiled crookedly at her, because she always fucking liked that shit. And she smiled back while I struggled with the hair tie from my awkward position in front of her.

Eventually, I won the battle, picking the towel back up and working on her bloody cheek. I wiped her little cheek bones softly, afraid of hurting her, and still fucking plotting the demise of the motherfucker responsible.

"Who was it?" I whispered as I furrowed my brows at a particularly stubborn patch of blood near her ear.

She cleared her throat with a grimace, then a grimace at the grimace. "James." She rasped. And I fucking balled my fist into that towel as I fought to remain gentle with her and nodded. Now the motherfucker had a name. And a face. And I was going to fucking break it. "It was an accident, Edward." She croaked knowingly.

"Yeah, accidents happen." I smirked in a suggestive tone. I could make plenty of fucking accidents happen. There were stairs in this town somewhere.

She shook her head against my ministrations. "No. Promise me." She rasped. And I fucking snorted at her, because I couldn't make any promises where his well being was concerned. She reached up and grabbed my hand. I leaned back to look in her eyes. "Please." She pleaded hoarsely. And the look in her eyes when she said it made me groan quietly. Because I could never say no to that shit.

I huffed again. "Fine." I growled. But she was still staring at me with that pleading expression. I rolled my fucking eyes. "I promise." I added with raised eyebrows. She nodded and finally let my arm go.

"So," Esme started from across the room. "Do you know Bella well, Edward?" She asked in a tone that suggested that she already fucking knew the answer, but wanted me to say it aloud anyways.

I didn't take my attention away from the blood on my girl's cheek. "Yes." I answered honestly, not wanting to lie to Esme since she had gained a whole shit load of my undying respect from the gym incident.

"Oh." She replied trying to sound surprised, even though I fucking knew better. "I've never seen you two together." She said. Though it was more of a question as to why. And I wanted to groan again as I slightly halted the strokes on my girl's cheek.

I resumed rubbing, deciding to be evasive. "People rarely do." It wasn't a lie. And knowing that she wouldn't just drop it at that, I decided that her face was clean enough for examination. "Done." I said as I put the soiled towel down on the bed beside her and turned to Carlisle.

He craned his neck to get a good look at her face. "Bella, are you having any trouble breathing from your nose?" He asked. She visibly breathed in deeply through her nose and shook her head. He nodded, still craning his neck and looking like he was just fucking itching to get his hands on her to see better. "Edward, try touching the bridge with your fingers. Look for any signs of crunching or crackling."

I gazed into my girl's eyes apologetically, because I knew it would hurt, and lifted my hand to feel her nose. She winced as I touched it, and so did I. But I kept going, knowing it had to be done. She persevered as I prodded her nose, clenching her fists around the fabric of her hoodie.

"Nothing." I declared, finding no crunching or any of that other gross shit, then reached down to take her hand that was fisted into her hoodie, stroking it lovingly in apology for all the prodding before looking back to Carlisle.

Carlisle nodded in relief. "Are you having any trouble with your sight, Bella?" He asked. She shook her head immediately, looking into my eyes with a smile dancing at her little lips. I fought to hold mine back. "She should be fine. I could always x-ray to be sure?" He turned to Esme uncertainly.

"No!" Bella rasped, shaking her head. "No hospitals." She pleaded, shifting her gaze behind me to Esme. She must have agreed because Bella relaxed, while Carlisle wrote out a prescription for pain.

With a little more discussion on proper care, we were finally fucking ready to leave. I helped my girl down from the bed, steadying her as she swayed a bit from her exhaustion.

"I think..." Carlisle started, gaining everyone's attention as we turned to him. He was standing at the door with his hand resting on the knob. "...When we get home, the four of us should have a little discussion." He made a pointed glance at Bella and me. And I wanted to fucking groan again. But he didn't look upset or anything, just merely curious. And curiosity killed the Edward.

Esme nodded in agreement, while Brandon looked downtrodden that she wasn't to be included. I bit back a smirk, and nodded back at Carlisle, leading my girl out the doors and to Esme's car. I opened the door for her, showing them all that I could be a fucking gentlemen. I resisted the urge to sniff indignantly at the looks I got when I did it. Jazz just fucking snickered as he made his way to the Volvo. Once she was in the seat, I leaned in, not really giving a shit, and gave her a soft kiss on her cheek. She leaned her little head back against the seat and smiled radiantly at me with droopy eyes.

Chapter 28. Coconut Confession Confections

Edward WIDE AWAKE

Fucking silence. I shifted uncomfortably in my stiff leather seat, making my leather jacket squeak loudly against it as Esme and Carlisle scrutinized me from behind the desk inside his study with pursed lips. Bella shifted at the same time, freezing to glance at me from the seat at my side. She looked fucking uncomfortable too.

She had obviously changed and showered after she got home. I was a little delayed, having to drop Jazz off at his house before I could come home and be subjected to all of this fucking... silence. And all I could hear in my head was the sounds of crickets chirping. Esme was sitting in Carlisle's desk chair as he stood beside her; both glancing back and forth between me and my girl as if we were some twisted fucking science experiment gone awry.

I sighed quietly and turned my head to look at Bella again. She didn't have her hoodie on, instead clad in a large sweatshirt. I was guessing that it was being washed or some shit. Fucking bloody. Her nose and eye were bruised and slightly swollen as she bit her bottom lip at the scene in front of us. It was really quite ridiculous, the way they were just staring at us. And making my girl uncomfortable. As if she needed any more of that shit.

With a disgruntled eye roll, I reached over the space between us and took her hand from her lap, grasping it tightly as they hung between the two stiff leather chairs. She turned her head and smiled at me while I rubbed it with my thumb. I tried to convey all my love to her as I gazed back into her tired eyes intensely, trying to relax her stiff posture with my caress. She eased back into the seat, turning her head again to face the parental figures.

And they were just fucking gaping at the space between our chairs. Like we had just stripped off all our clothes and began fucking on the desk in front of them rather than just holding hands. I didn't let go. I would have thought our closeness would have been pretty fucking obvious by then.

Carlisle opened his mouth, piquing my attention, but then just closed it again as he stared at our hands with a furrowed brow. I propped the elbow of my free arm on the arm of the chair, dropping my cheek into my palm and tapping my head with my index finger.

Esme was the first to finally speak. “How...” She trailed off as she stared at our hands. I didn’t move from my position since I pretty fucking much anticipated the particular question she was attempting to ask.

Bella sighed deeply beside me. “You want to know why he can touch me?” She hedged in her awfully raspy voice that made me just fucking rub her hand with my thumb firmer. That shit sounded painful. Esme nodded, finally breaking her gaze from our hands to meet Bella’s tired stare. My girl squeezed my hand back, so I shifted my head in my palm to look at her. She straightened up in her chair, lifting her chin up and rounding her shoulders back. *All grown up.* I thought smugly, fucking loving when she did that shit. She looked right into Esme’s eyes as I gazed at her confident posture from my palm. “He’s different.” She rasped, squeezing my hand and turning her face to gaze back into my eyes. And she looked so fucking proud of that fact as she gazed at me lovingly, not giving a shit that she had to tell them. And I just fucking smiled back at her, because I loved that I was different too.

I shifted my head in my palm to look back at Esme. Her brows were furrowed as her gaze turned to me, scrutinizing me harder with her eyes, likely trying to find the difference. I decided to squash that line of thought quickly. “I just am.” I said a little too sharply as the thought of trying to explain the electricity made me internally cringe. That shit was private between my girl and me. And even if I wanted to explain it, I probably couldn’t.

She looked taken aback by my comment, and unsatisfied with the answer, but I resolved to keep that particular subject closed. I told her with my eyes that it wasn’t a topic meant for further discussion. I hated to be a prick to her, but there were a lot of questions I couldn’t answer, and many subjects that *would not* be touched upon. That was only one of them.

Carlisle shifted beside her, gaining my attention as he looked at me disapprovingly with a sigh. He cleared his throat. “How long have you two been...” He trailed off looking at us questioningly.

Friends? Confidants? Sleeping partners? Almost lovers? I wasn’t sure how to answer his quizzical gaze. There was no fucking way I was going to let them get suspicious of our sleeping arrangements, and I really didn’t want to touch on the subject of our relationship either. Not until I could tell my girl that I loved her and we figured it out for ourselves. And since we weren’t the only couple in the room fucking hiding, I decided to use it.

I smirked cockily at Daddy C. from my seat, still lounging with my cheek in my palm and holding my girl’s hand. “We met that one time you went away on business.” I replied smugly, fucking loving the way his eyes grew minutely wider at the mention. “You know,” I shrugged casually, darting my eyes to Esme. “The both of you.” I said in a meaningful tone.

And then Esme fucking blushed and darted her eyes away from mine to the desk top. I bit back a hearty snicker, seeing the similarities between her and my girl as her face grew red. Then it was Carlisle’s turn to shift uncomfortably.

I took the window of opportunity. “Are we finished here?” I asked finally removing my head from my palm and sitting up in my seat. I had shit that I needed to attend to. “I’m sure Bella would like some time to relax.” I added, turning my head to look at my girl who was smiling back at sweetly. I rubbed her hand a little firmer, feeling the need to bring it to my lips and kiss it softly. Of course there was no fucking way I would. Not in front of them. That would bring up the question I couldn’t answer yet.

Carlisle’s eyes grew wide. “Oh yes! Of course.” He exclaimed, shifting his gaze to Bella. “Please forgive me for keeping you. I’m sure I can continue this conversation with Edward alone.” He made a very fucking pointed glance at me that made me want to groan yet again. He wanted to do this shit now. Impatient bastard. And I could see in Esme’s eyes when she looked at my girl that she was thinking the same thing. They were going to divide and conquer.

And I couldn’t allow them the opportunity to ask that question until I could talk to my girl.

I sighed and raked the fingers of my free hand through my hair. “It’d be really fucking nice to have a moment alone with Bella first.” I said frustrated, emphasizing the word ‘alone’. He just wanted to usher her ass out the door and ask me all the shit he didn’t have the balls to ask in front of her. Esme glared a few daggers at me for some fucking reason after I asked from her seat behind the desk.

Carlisle pursed his lips and glanced down at Esme with a quirked eyebrow. She looked thoughtful as she gazed at Bella questioningly. I almost fucking snorted when I realized she was asking my girl if it was okay to leave her alone with me. Bella nodded enthusiastically, clearly as impatient as I was to get some much needed alone time.

Esme nodded her head at Carlisle, and made to stand up and leave the study, but I stopped her.

“We’ll be outside.” I informed them as I stood up from the stiff leather chair, bringing my girl with me. I didn’t wait for any confirmation as I led her out of the study and down the stairs. She followed beside me quietly while holding my hand.

I led her out back to the gazebo. Because it was our neutral territory. Our very own middle ground. It was different in the day when you could actually see the meadow and the river in perfect clarity. Once we were up on the platform, I turned to Bella and grabbed her by the waist, lifting her up to sit on the back side of the table facing the river and the sunset so that her face would be level with mine.

She looked relieved for the privacy as I stood in between her legs and smoothed her damp hair away from her bruised face. The orange of the sunset behind the clouds colored her face in a lively pink that made her look a lot less fucked up than I knew she really was. And I was afraid that her damp hair was making her cold without her hoodie, so I removed my jacket and brought it around her body, draping it over her shoulders.

“How do you feel?” I whispered as I secured the jacket in the front so the chill wouldn’t get to her

“Tired mostly.” She rasped out, gazing into my eyes and slipping her arms in the sleeves, and just basically swimming in my jacket since she was so much smaller. I frowned, realizing that we couldn’t sleep for at least five more hours. She dropped her gaze to her lap and began pushing the sleeves up, playing with her fingers. “But I’ve had worse.” She glanced up at me from under lashes. But it wasn’t flirting or any shit like that, it looked a whole fucking lot like anger.

And even though I was so fucking glad to see her get angry over it rather than sad, I didn’t want to go there. So I changed the subject. “It’s going to be the fucking Spanish Inquisition later.” I told her honestly, taking the hands from her lap in mine.

She nodded in understanding. “I already got a taste of it on the car ride home with Esme.” She rasped with a small smile, shaking her head. “I might have used my condition as a distraction.” She chuckled drowsily. And I fucking smiled, loving my girl a little bit more for being so goddamn crafty. She made an attempt at clearing her sore throat before looking at me with a sad expression. “It was so much worse than any of the other times.” She croaked quietly. And the way she was looking into my eyes, it seemed like she was just fucking begging for me to understand. “And I’m so thankful that you found me.” She smiled sadly, squeezing my hand in hers firmly. “But I’m so sorry that it’s causing us so much trouble.” She frowned.

And I had to just fucking stop her right there. “Bullshit. Fuck all those other people.” I narrowed my eyes at her, slightly offended that she was even apologizing for it. “They don’t matter. They can ask all the goddamn questions they want.” And if we didn’t want to answer them, we didn’t fucking have to. I softened my face and gazed into her big brown eyes while I released one hand, using it to move a lock of damp hair away from her forehead. “I’d do it again in a fucking heartbeat.” I replied honestly. And I really fucking would.

She smiled sweetly at me as I leaned in to put my lips on hers softly and gently, afraid of hurting her face. I cupped her little cheek gingerly, taking her bottom lip in between mine and basking in all of our weird electricity as I sucked on it gently. I pulled back minutely, letting our slightly parted lips hover over each other so that they were just barely touching, and opened my eyes to look into hers. And my girl was looking at me with so much fucking love in her big brown eyes, that I decided it was time to finally showing her all of mine. “Because I fucking love you.” I whispered honestly against her lips, gazing intensely into her eyes to show her just how fucking honest I was being about it.

I felt the sharp intake of her breath as I held my lips against hers and watched her eyes grow wide with the weight of my confession. And then it fucking happened. The beauty of the sunset behind me paled in comparison to hers as her whole fucking face lit up under my lips with her smile. And the way her eyes just fucking shone with happiness made me smile right back against hers. It was even better than I had imagined on Christmas morning as the space between us grew impossibly more electrified with all of my girl’s radiance.

She threw her little arms around my neck and pressed our faces closer, crushing her lips to mine, still fucking smiling. I tried to kiss her back a little more gently; still afraid of hurting her nose, though she really didn't seem to give a shit about it at the moment. I chuckled against her lips, pulling myself back from her death grip. Because there was something I had been just fucking dying to do, and now I finally could.

I lifted a hand to the collar of my shirt and dipped it inside, retrieving the silver chain around my neck that held the claddagh ring my girl gave me. I slid it out and pulled it over my neck, fucking loving the way her face lit up even more at the thought of what I was about to do. She was almost bouncing on the picnic table as I unclasped the chain with a smile and took the ring off of it.

I never removed my gaze from her shining eyes as I slipped the ring on my right hand ring finger, with the heart facing inward towards my body, just like it was fucking meant to be when someone had captured the wearer's heart. And I knew, because I wikied that shit in computer lab that afternoon. I smiled wider as she vibrated more with her excitement and crushed my face back to hers, still being a little fucking careless with her nose as we smiled against each others lips, trying to hold it back long enough to get one good kiss in.

I pulled back with another chuckle, more than satisfied with her reaction.

Her cheeks were wide and red, and her huge smile was probably hurting her face a little, but she didn't care. Some movement over her shoulder alerted me, shifting my gaze away from her face and back towards the houses where Esme and Carlisle stood between them. Fucking waiting. Bella slowly turned her head to follow my gaze over her shoulder. When she turned back her smile was gone in a way that made me want to frown and just fucking tell her I loved her all over again. I didn't get to see it long enough.

She bit her lip. "What do I say when everybody asks what we are?" She rasped uncertainly.

I backed up from between her legs and grabbed her by the waist, helping her down off the table, and steadying her when she swayed a bit. I took her hand in mine and turned us around to the houses where our parents were waiting. I turned my head to look down at her by my side, still gazing up at me with an uncertain expression and biting her lip. "Tell them to stop being so fucking nosy or your boyfriend will shove his foot up their ass." I smirked.

And the smile immediately returned, all fucking big and making her eyes alight with the pleasure of me calling myself her boyfriend. I smiled back and led my girl off the gazebo; just really fucking pleased that now she really was my girl, in every sense of the word.

She rubbed the ring on my finger in her hand as we made our way up the yards, stopping when we reached Carlisle and Esme who were glancing at us even more curiously. She slid my jacket off and handed it to me with a knowing look. Because we fucking knew that they wouldn't ruin

our mood as we smiled, walking away back to our houses to meet the Spanish fucking Inquisition.

Emmett was waiting for us by the door when we walked in, looking flustered as Carlisle passed him. “Would somebody please tell me what the hell is going on?” He asked in a really fucking annoyingly near whine.

I rolled my eyes and just walked up the stairs behind Carlisle. Dealing with Daddy C. was bad enough, I’d let Emmett get his information from Brandon or some shit. He growled in frustration at our retreating forms as we reached the top of the stairs without disclosing anything.

I returned to the seat I had used before while Carlisle took his desk chair. Apparently when Bella wasn’t here, he had no problem with the whole talking deal.

Once he was settled he rested his forearms on the desk in front of him, leaning forward towards me and clasping his hands together. “What is she to you?” He asked bluntly. In these kinds of situations we usually had a no bullshit policy. Though the situations were usually involving a suspension or an arrest.

And I had no problem with the no bullshit policy as far as that particular question was concerned. At least not now. “She’s my girl.” I stated honestly with a casual shrug. *No bullshit.*

Carlisle pursed his lips and bore his gaze into mine. “Girlfriend?” He asked skeptically. And I had no clue why he was so goddamned skeptical, like the idea of me having a girlfriend was so fucking hard to grasp. I rolled my eyes and nodded in confirmation. Though I much liked calling her my girl.

He sighed and nodded, leaning back into his chair with a look of dread on his face as it got a little paler. “How serious is it?” He asked in a wary tone that clearly suggested he was afraid of the answer.

I rolled my eyes at him once again, taking a guess at his implication. “I’m not fucking her if that’s what you mean.” I muttered, shaking my head.

He let out a deep breath of relief as the color returned to his face and he relaxed into his chair further. I tried to bite back all the offense at his suggestion. Because I just fucking knew that it wouldn’t be the first time it was implied.

Looking far more relaxed and casual, he picked up his prescription promo freebie Flobox stress ball and began squeezing it, looking up at the ceiling with a thoughtful expression. “It is a bit odd that you can touch her though.” He pursed his lips at the ceiling. And I just fucking knew that look. He was interested in the mechanics of the whole thing, and I wasn’t going there, so I kept my mouth shut. He darted his eyes back down to me, eyeing me carefully. “I don’t know

why you two were hiding, and I won't ask." He said with a knowing look. And I almost fucking smirked at him, because of course he wouldn't ask me. Because then I'd ask him.

He continued eyeing me carefully. "It was Thanksgiving wasn't it?" He asked with a small smile. I furrowed my brows wondering what he was drawing his conclusion from, and then realized that it was the first night I had slept. And he fucking noticed my change in mood. I nodded at him, just letting him believe that we got together that day. He smiled at me with a compassionate expression. "She must be some girl to have that kind of effect on you." He chuckled, shaking his head. I just nodded again. She really was some girl. Even if it was the sleep that made me change so drastically, she had more to do with it than anything.

He looked up at the ceiling again as I relaxed further in my seat, spreading my feet out in front of me and slumping further into it to get more comfortable. Fucking stiff leather chairs. I leaned my head back and awaited the next round of questioning.

"Have you ever seen her experience anything like that before?" He asked curiously, and obviously trying to delve a little deeper into our business.

With a deep sigh, I decided to give him a slice of what he was seeking. "Once." I replied, picking at the leather arm rest. "After she found out she could touch me, she tried on Emmett in the lunch room." I shrugged, leaving out exactly how she found out she could touch me. There was no fucking way I could tell him that. I shook my head at the memory of her trying it out on Emmett. "It was pretty fucking stupid." I muttered disapprovingly.

He eyed me thoughtfully some more while squeezing his stress ball casually. "And it was a less severe episode." He said as more of statement than a question. I was guessing that Emmett had already told him about it.

I nodded in confirmation. "Yeah." At the time it seemed severe, but not compared to the shit I saw today. "Though, they are often referred to as 'Weird Random Emotional Breakdowns' amongst the student body." I used air quotes, deciding that Jazz's term was more fitting than just 'episode'.

Suddenly, Carlisle straightened up in the seat, putting down his stress ball and looking at me with a grim expression that alerted me to his doctor stance. "What Bella has is not some random breakdown." He replied in a tone that kind of fucking shocked me. I didn't think he knew enough about her condition to really give a shit about the semantics. "It's a severe case of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder accompanied by stressor induced haphophobia." He added with raised eyebrows. And I just kind of fucking looked at him blankly. Because I had no fucking idea what the hell he just said. I made a mental note to wiki all that shit later. I almost wanted to ask him to write the last word down for me.

He relaxed back in his seat, looking like he believed I actually understood his diagnosis. "And what happened today was so much more." He shook his head seriously. I rolled my fucking eyes

at him, because I knew it was, as his face grew impossibly graver. "What happened today was a dash of that, a pinch of hysteria, and a heaping spoonful of brief psychotic disorder."

I shot straight up in my chair as my vision turned red at his massively fucking offensive suggestion. "She's not fucking psychotic." I spat at him.

He let out a deep breath. "I'm not saying she's psychotic, Edward." He shook his head. "But she described her episode to Esme on the way home." He continued somberly, as I narrowed my eyes at him, still not fucking satisfied he wasn't calling my girl psychotic. "She lost touch with reality, it's just textbook."

I glared at him while I gripped the arm rest. "Bella doesn't fit some fucking textbook. She's not some goddamned science experiment; she's a living and breathing person with feelings." I glowered angrily.

He raised his eyebrows at me further. "Did she tell you she thought Forks was a figment of her imagination?" He asked knowingly. I slowly furrowed my brows and shook my head. She never actually told me the whole fucking story. And I didn't give a shit. "She believed her delusion more than reality." He shrugged, like it was just a fucking fact that she was psychotic because of it. I glared at him further as he put his hands in the air defensively. "I'm just trying to make sure you grasp the severity of her case is all."

I snorted. "I know her better than you think." I replied cockily. He was acting like I treated her like a regular girl or some shit. I relaxed back in my seat a bit, wondering what Daddy C. would say if I told him just how fucking similar I was to the psychotic basket case next door. Maybe I could touch other people, but I had nightmares where I lost touch with reality too. I was wondering if he'd be so fucking quick to make the conclusion then.

"So I've seen." He muttered under his breath. Then he grimaced. "And please try to control your language, especially around Esme and Bella." He pleaded. I rolled my eyes and nodded. I felt compelled to remind him of the car door opening gesture. I wasn't a complete fucking Neanderthal or anything.

"That little event in gym today was rather impressive." He said in an oddly appreciative voice. I quirked an eyebrow at him, wondering why he was still making such a big fucking deal out of it. He glanced at me apologetically. "It's just that brief psychotic episodes commonly affect patients for days, sometimes even weeks." He explained as he looked at me incredulously.

And I kind of fucking gaped at him, not wanting to consider it a 'psychotic' anything, yet still cringing at the thought of my girl having to deal with something so fucking violent for weeks.

He chuckled at my shock. "Yes, you see now? If you hadn't helped her, she'd be fully sedated in a hospital at this very moment." He replied, sounding rather smug about the whole thing.

I pursed my lips and furrowed my brows thoughtfully. I was happy as hell that I brought her out of it, but was also trying to match up our similarities. I was wondering if she hadn't come on Thanksgiving, if I would have ended up sedated in a hospital too. Because really, I just had no fucking clue.

Carlisle leaned back in his chair, taking off his glasses and rubbing his eyes. "There are some things you must know about Bella before you go any further with this, Edward." He sighed, placing his glasses on the desk. Like he could say something that would just send me fucking running from the city limits. I scoffed at him and waved a hand for him to continue, resuming my comfortable position as I slumped in the seat and spread my feet out casually.

He cleared his throat and leaned over the desk, reassuming his doctor stance, and still looking fucking grim. "Conditions such as Bella's are incredibly unpredictable. They could improve on their own with time, or perhaps given the proper therapy..." He paused, furrowing his brows at the desktop. "Though I've been told that every obvious method has been unsuccessful in the past." He muttered shaking his head at the desktop thoughtfully before looking back up to me. "Bella has refused further medical care for her condition, and has chosen a fickle path of touch and go. It's quite possible that she could never improve." He raised his eyebrows at me expectantly.

And I fucking snorted at him. "So?" I said simply, knowing that we were both fucked up, and the chances of me ever getting better were pretty fucking grim as well.

He sighed with a nod at my dismissal of his warning, leaning back into his seat, and doing the annoying scrutinizing thing again. I continued picking at the arm rest while he pursed his lips at me. "Do you talk to her about it?" He asked in a quiet suggestive voice.

I clenched my teeth, and looked away from him, staring out the window of his study.

He cleared his throat softly, but I fucking refused to meet his gaze. "I know you won't talk to me about it, Edward." He sighed as I began picking at the leather seat harder, really fucking uncomfortable even discussing a discussion about it. "Maybe it's because of what happened to her?" He hedged. I grimaced at his mention and clenched my teeth harder, still refusing to meet his gaze as I picked the leather chair loudly with my fingers. "You can talk to her about the fire, can't you?" He whispered in a coaxing voice.

I immediately ceased my fingers on the leather, darting my eyes to his with a tight nod, and fucking praying my confirmation would get him off my back about it.

His grave expression slowly transformed into a small smile as he leaned back in his seat and continued squeezing the stress ball. "Then something tells me that you will both be of great benefit to each other." He stated as he gazed at me with the same expression of pride he had worn in the gym.



I walked in the door with Esme feeling ridiculously elated despite the rather crappy day I was having. Of course, when Edward Cullen tells you that he's in love with you and that he's your boyfriend, it kind of tends to have that effect.

Ever since the car ride home with Esme, I had been anticipating her question. She wanted to know what he was to me. And in an effort to give her a really big chunk of my honesty where the whole event was concerned, I told her about what happened on the gym floor, using my condition to be evasive about her question. And of course, it worked. I also spent most of the way home apologizing profusely and reassuring her that I was okay.

I was fairly exhausted from the whole thing, really impatient for ten to come so that I could go to bed with Edward. And my nose was aching rather badly, so tender that it hurt to even smile. Not that it could stop me.

I followed Esme into the living room where Alice was waiting on the couch. When she saw me walk in, she smiled sweetly at me. And I just felt really crappy for worrying everyone. I smiled back a little and made my way to sit beside her.

"Alice dear?" Esme called from the doorway. "We'll need supplies." She said while glancing at her knowingly. Alice perked up and nodded, jumping off the couch and bouncing to the kitchen. Esme removed her jacket, glancing at me with a worried expression. "How are you feeling? Do you need some of the medicine yet?" She asked sweetly. I shook my head as I crossed my legs on the couch Indian style. They would just make me more tired. I'd wait until I was at Edward's for that. She nodded at me and began removing her shoes, getting comfortable.

I felt like maybe they had some kind of tradition when it came to matters like these. Then I was wondering if they had ever had a matter quite like this. And as Alice came bouncing in the room with a tub of ice cream, three spoons, and a large blanket, spreading it out on the floor with a box of tissues present, my suspicions were confirmed.

Once Esme had gotten comfortable, she sat on the blanket Indian style with Alice, glancing at me expectantly. I took in the scene with much amusement. They looked so serious, sitting on the blanket in the most cliché way. Like two girls about to get down to business, and then

maybe give each other manicures afterwards. It was like the Pretty in Pink version of the Spanish Inquisition.

With a martyred sigh, I lifted myself off the sofa and joined them on the blanket-o-pain, folding my feet below me and glancing at the tub of moose tracks ice cream in the center appreciatively. At least there was chocolate involved in the torture.

Alice removed the lid and handed Esme and I both a spoon. I watched them both take two large spoonfuls before I grudgingly followed suit.

I was wishing I could somehow split them up as I slid the spoon in my mouth, and swallowed the ice cream in relief as the cold soothed my sore throat.

Esme wasted no time once her first spoonful was devoured. “Edward Cullen?” She asked without looking at me, dipping the spoon back into the tub. I grimaced, and then winced at the pain it caused. Her and Alice both ceased their eating to look at me expectantly.

I let out a deep sigh, leaning over and taking another spoonful. “What about him?” I rasped, deciding to be evasive until they could ask an actual question.

Alice narrowed her eyes at me and stabbed her spoon into the tub, bringing out a large spoonful and cramming it into her mouth without breaking my gaze. I swallowed my bite thickly, deciding that maybe the Pretty in Pink version of the Spanish Inquisition was scarier than I had originally thought.

Esme cleared her throat and smiled at me. “How do you two know each other?” She asked sweetly. I glanced back and forth between her and Alice. It was like good-cop bad-cop.

I decided to just lay it all out there. I wasn’t ashamed. “He’s my boyfriend.” I rasped matter of factly, dipping my spoon back in, and blushing furiously despite all my efforts not to. I put the spoon in my mouth slowly, watching as Alice’s jaw dropped a bit.

Esme looked a little taken aback by my answer, but did a much better job hiding it. “Why haven’t you ever mentioned him?” She asked softly, no longer paying attention to the ice cream.

I grimaced again, shifting my gaze down to the blanket. “We were just waiting for the right time.” I shrugged uncomfortably, playing with the spoon in my hands between my fingertips. “To get more comfortable, you know?” I lied. And I hated lying, but it seemed like a good enough reason to me.

When I chanced a glance back up at Esme she nodded at me, smiling in something that looked a little too much like understanding. And sympathy. I darted my eyes back to the comforter, wondering if that was why her and Dr. Cullen had been sneaking around as well.

"That is just plain stupid!" Alice screeched, making me cringe away. I glanced up at her, and she looked so furious and... hurt. "We're like sisters, Bella! You should be able to tell me anything!" The screeching continued, as Esme shushed her disapprovingly.

My face fell when I realized she was more hurt than angry. "I'm sorry, Al. It wasn't like that, honestly." I rasped apologetically. "I didn't want you to be upset when I told you."

She grew impossibly more furious as her face grew red. "Why on earth would I be upset?" She squeaked wide eyed, throwing her hands in the air dramatically.

I huffed and leaned over the blanket to take another spoonful of ice cream from the tub. "Because you basically despise Edward." I explained hoarsely, popping the spoon in my mouth, and letting the coldness sooth my throat.

Then it was her turn to huff. "Well, of course I do. He's downright vile." She said simply, like it was a fact.

I narrowed my eyes at her painfully. "Don't say that. You don't even know him. Not really." I defended Edward hoarsely. Because all of her dislikes were completely unfounded.

Esme finally stepped in. "I think..." She started as she put her hands in between us as we glared at one another. "...that we ought to give Edward's character a pass for a day, considering what he did for Bella." She raised her eyebrows at Alice.

Alice's face fell as she looked down repentantly in a way that nearly made me smile. She couldn't even touch that logic. "Right." She said sullenly, glancing at me apologetically. I smiled back at her a little, happy that at least I had that one thing on my side. She arched her eyebrow at me. "How did he do that anyways?" She asked, tilting her head to the side curiously.

I sighed and looked down at the blanket. "His touch is different." I shrugged one shoulder, hoping that I wouldn't have to delve into the whole electricity thing. I was fairly certain I looked crazy enough without adding things like that on top of it.

Esme cleared her throat, gaining my attention as she reached back over the blanket to refill her spoon. "And how close are you and Edward, dear?" She asked softly with a gentle expression.

I furrowed my brows, wondering how best to answer that particular question. "Well," I tilted my head a bit, trying to find a good way to be vague. "We talk a lot I guess." I shrugged. "We've only really gone out once." I said in reference to our first and only date. "Port Angeles." I added when Esme glanced at me quizzically.

She nodded thoughtfully before turning to me with a worried expression. "What's he like when he's around you?" She asked carefully.

I lifted my chin up and looked Esme in the eye. “He’s very sweet and protective, and always makes me feel comfortable.” I rasped honestly. Not many people ever saw that side of Edward, and I knew they’d all get the wrong impression if I didn’t set them straight.

She smiled at me sweetly. “Yes, I think we all got that impression earlier.” She chuckled, shaking her head, then stopping and looking at me with a grimace. “Though I’m not entirely partial to his filthy mouth.” She said disapprovingly. I had to hold back a snicker while I shoved the spoon in my mouth, nodding with a faux disapproving look.

“The hair!” Alice gasped loudly, clamping her palm over her mouth and looking at me with wide eyes. I could feel my face heating up as I nodded minutely at her suggestion. I was caught trying to look nice for Edward. That was so ridiculously embarrassing; I was wishing that the blanket-o-pain could double as a hole for me to crawl into. When she removed her hand from her mouth, she smirked at me deviously. “Did he like it?” She asked in a loud whisper.

I was a little taken aback by her curiosity. I figured that she wouldn’t want me doing anything that Edward liked. But he did like the hair, so I nodded cautiously.

Her smile grew wider as her expression grew impossibly more devious. “I bet he would just *love* all the new clothes you got for Christmas.” She smirked in a suggestive tone.

My jaw dropped. Literally, spoon and all. She was utterly fine with pimping me out to her arch nemesis so long as I wore her crappy girly clothes. Esme chuckled softly at the exchange as I gaped at Alice’s devious smirk.

I closed my mouth with an audible snap, preparing to make the ultimate sacrifice for any kind of semi-normal relationship that involved both Edward and Alice. “Maybe he would like them... occasionally...” I croaked carefully. Looking for some sign of a truce.

Alice pursed her lips thoughtfully at my offer. “How occasionally?” She asked delicately arching her eyebrow at me.

I huffed at her and put my spoon down; happy for the extra burst of energy the chocolate gave me, but preparing for a rather lengthy negotiation. Esme chuckled again and stood up from the blanket as Alice scooted forward closer to me. “Not at school.” I said firmly. Too many people at school for my comfort to see me in some of things she liked.

She frowned at me with furrowed brows, and a near pout. Although she already knew I was defenseless to her pout where clothes were concerned. “That only leaves weekends.” She pouted. I rolled my eyes at the pout, showing her that it wasn’t working this time. She huffed and crossed her arms over her chest. “Fine. Weekends only.” She grudgingly accepted. I smiled at her, surprised that I had won out so easily, and resolving to lock myself inside every weekend. “But!” She added with a squeak, making my smile fall. “Nothing is out of question.” She smirked.

I shook my head vehemently. “No way, Alice. No skirts, no heels. And I get one veto a weekend.” I negotiated firmly, needing for this to work, but knowing there was no way I could be anywhere near comfortable in anything like that, even around Edward.

She snickered at me. “Okay, no short skirts or dresses, no heels. One veto only.” She clarified with an arched eyebrow. I bit my lip thoughtfully at her final offer. She stared at me for a long while with baited breath as I mulled the whole deal over in my head. Eventually, I nodded at her with a martyred sigh.

And the squealing as she jumped up and down on the blanket excitedly made me cover my ears and cringe away. I was happy to see her happy, but I was dreading the whole truce.

I began dinner shortly afterwards while Alice assembled my new weekend wardrobe, happy for the distraction to keep me awake. I made the alfredo for Edward. I mean, he did confess his love for me, the least I could do was make my boyfriend his favorite dinner. I smiled sleepily into the pot of pasta as it boiled.

Throughout dinner, Esme kept shooting me sympathetic glances as Alice prattled on endlessly about accessories and the best colors for my skin tone. I think I was a winter. Or some stupid crap. And I think the only reason Esme let her go on about it was just so that things wouldn’t be so tense.

And as she washed dishes with me afterwards, I found out why.

Esme picked up a plate, drying it while I washed. “Dr. Cullen and I had a discussion today.” She said quietly, placing the plate inside the cabinet and taking another. She wasn’t meeting my gaze as she said it, making me a little nervous as to what this conversation was about. “About alternative therapies.” She whispered.

I shook my head at the dishwasher, grabbing the counter top in frustration. “No.” I rasped firmly, closing my eyes. It wasn’t a discussion I ever wanted her talking about. “I’m very sorry for the incident today, Esme, but...” I trailed off turning my head to her with a pleading expression. “I don’t want it.” I added quietly.

She sighed deeply beside me and leaned her back against the counter. “I know I’ve always respected your decision about that.” She said softly, looking at me apologetically. “But I have to try.”

I shook my head and kept washing dishes, making it clear that all of her efforts were fruitless. Esme was under the impression that I’d just be going to some cushy office once a week to talk about my feelings. But I knew better what happened at those places. They all wanted to trigger me, and then after they did, they all wanted to commit me. And then they all wanted to drug me up to placate me until I was nothing more than a walking complacent vegetable. The life I was leading now was far more normal and comfortable than that.

By the time I began making my *Coconut Confession Confections*, I was so tired that I could hardly keep my eyes open. My muscles were sore and stiff, and I just couldn't wait to get to Edward's so I could start popping those pretty blue pain pills. I lined up all the bags of cookies. I had added Dr. Cullen in the mix tonight, as silent thanks for the help after gym. And also to give Esme a reason to go over every day. And then there were seven.

At ten, I took extra precaution with my bedroom door, locking it before I closed it, and making sure I had the key in my newly cleaned hoodie pocket. I didn't usually resort to those measures, but I was worried about someone checking in on me during the night. I was hoping the locked door would be enough to send them away if they did.

I left out the door promptly, cringing into my hoodie at the cold breeze as I stalked my way drowsily across the yard with my bag on my back. When I reached the lattice, I looked up at the Edward's lit window longingly, granting me the energy needed to climb my way up and swing my legs over the railing.

He had the door opened before I could even knock. His shining green eyes met mine with a smile as he ushered me in from the cold hastily, reaching up to remove my hood. I turned around to face him with a big smile, nearly bouncing despite my exhaustion, really looking forward to a real kiss.

And he didn't disappoint, steeping close to me and taking my face gently in his hands and gingerly touching his lips to mine with a sigh. I figured he was afraid to deepen it and hurt my nose. As if I would really care when he was kissing me?

So I tangled my fingers in his messy hair and pressed him closer, darting my tongue out across his lips and urging him to deepen it. He sighed again, parting his lips to meet my tongue with his while he cradled my cheek lightly with one hand and brought the other around my waist to gently pull my body closer to his.

He massaged my tongue with his slowly and lazily, caressing my cheek with his thumb. He pulled away after only a few moments, opening his green eyes to gaze into mine, as I figured out that all that new intensity he was showing in his gazes lately was actually his love. The realization made me smile at him drowsily as he dropped his hand from my cheek and took my hand in his to lead me to the bed.

I removed my bag once I reached the edge, unloading the containers of food with a smile on my face, and removing my hoodie as I climbed up beside him.

"We can go to bed now." He said softly as he looked at me in concern.

I scoffed at him. "No way. I made your favorite." I rasped, pointing to the container in front of him. He smiled at me sweetly, then he rolled his eyes, making me chuckle.

I left the bed for a moment to take my heavenly pain medication. He quirked an eyebrow at me as I popped it in my mouth and took a drink from his can of soda. I just smiled back and climbed back onto the bed, sitting beside him once again and leaning my head on his shoulder as he ate.

He was moaning and humming with every bite, making me chuckle sleepily as I gazed up at his face from his shoulder.

“So,” He started slowly, taking a drink from his can and setting it back down on the bed side table with a click. “School tomorrow ought to be pretty fucking interesting.” He smirked down at me.

I attempted a small grimace as I gazed up at him. “If by interesting you mean horribly mortifying and utterly embarrassing, then yes. I concur wholeheartedly.” I rasped sarcastically.

He frowned at me and switched his fork to his other hand, and then put his arm around my waist with a small squeeze. “I won’t let anybody fuck with you.” He said confidently, spinning his noodles around his fork.

I smiled into his shoulder at his mention of actually being with me in school. I was wondering how opposed Edward was to PDA. Like... in front of Jessica Stanley. The thought made me smile wider.

“What the fuck are you smiling about?” he chewed with a smirk on his face as he looked down at me.

My face grew hot as he stared at me quizzically. I let out a deep sigh at his penetrating gaze, knowing that I could rarely avoid it. “Kissing you senseless in front of Jessica Stanley.” I answered hoarsely with caution.

I was relieved when he snickered at me, shaking his head. “Yeah, that’d be pretty fucking priceless.” He continued snickering softly as he ate another bite, and then turned to me with a serious look. “Of course, we’d have to make sure Newton was watching too.” He chewed.

I chuckled softly and nodded my head against his shoulder. He’d be beyond jealous that Edward could actually touch me.

He finished eating quickly, probably rushing just so that I could get to bed. I walked in the bathroom and slumped when I saw my face in the mirror. I poked softly at my bruised eye and nose, wincing in pain, and hating how my eyes looked lopsided from the swelling. As I was changing into my pajamas, I was wondering how bad of a person it would make me if I rescinded my request for Edward not to hurt James. As I brushed my teeth, I decided it probably would make me a very bad person. Violence is never the answer... though it is on occasion hilarious.

I slid under the covers to wait for Edward while he changed into his pajamas, feeling far more comfortable than I had all day long, and absolutely basking in it as I wiggled my toes against the soft cotton sheets, rolling over to assume position.

He nearly sprinted to the bed when he was done in the bathroom, either impatient to hold me or impatient for me to get sleep, I didn't know. Probably a combination of both. He slid under the covers turning off the lamp before lying down completely.

He made to scoop me up gently, but it hurt my nose to bury my face in his chest like I usually did. I frowned up at him, darting my eyes to his chest and back to his meaningfully. Understanding crossed his features as he rolled us slightly, lying on his back and leading my cheek to his shoulder as he put his arms around me.

Fairly satisfied with the new position, I brought my hand up and began stroking his messy hair softly. He sighed and shifted his head to kiss me gently on top of my hair.

"Love you." He breathed into my hair softly and sweetly, squeezing my waist tightly.

I smiled widely as I tangled my legs in his, looking forward to hearing him say that to me every night we went to sleep. "Love you too." I answered in soft whisper, humming him to sleep and drifting off myself shortly after. In the loving arms of my boyfriend, Edward freaking Cullen.

Chapter 29. German Chocolate Inferiors



My nose was sore when I woke up on Edward's chest to the alarm clock. It was dull throbbing pain that made me wish for the searing white pain of the previous day.

Edward removed a hand from my waist and used it to angrily slap the alarm clock at his side. He didn't groan. But I sure as hell did. He shifted under me and moved down until he was level with my face. When I finally opened my eyes he was lying in front of me, hooded green eyes inspecting the morning after damage of James's elbow.

He hissed.

I groaned. "Is it that bad?" I rasped. My voice wasn't as bad as yesterday, but still plenty grating, and making me wish that I had something either really hot or really cold to drink. He ran a hand through his disheveled bronze morning hair and grimaced.

I groaned again, and lifted the covers over my obviously awful face, turning over on my back and wallowing. I heard him sigh, and try to pull the covers down, but I held them there. As if my day wasn't going to be awkward enough, I had to stand next to gorgeous Edward Cullen looking like... whatever it is I looked like.

He sighed again when I didn't let the covers go. "Don't be so fucking difficult. You're beautiful." He muttered in his thick morning voice.

I inched the covers down just enough to see him lying facing me, propped up on an elbow. "Really?" I whispered, sounding like a stupid self conscious teenage girl. Probably because I was.

He rolled his eyes behind his heavy lids. "Yes." He flopped onto his back and began running his fingers through his hair again. "You're always fucking beautiful. Now get your ass out of bed." He turned to me and smiled crookedly. I smiled by instinct, but the little Edward in my head was yelling 'Bullshit'.

With a grunt, I rolled out of bed and made my way to the bathroom. It was just... awful. I glowered at the mirror. The swelling had mostly subsided, but a large patch of dark blue spread up the bridge of my nose and towards my eye. People were going to see me like this all day. Bella Swan... weird crazy girl with the black and blue nose. I turned away, deciding that denial was a river in Bella land too.

I stared at his shower longingly, impatient to get home so I could take one. Really hot. My muscles were still sore and aching, and I was wondering if the school had a policy against students being under the influence of pretty blue pain pills.

Edward was waiting by the door for me again when I dropped his cookies off. I shuffled over to him where he was standing against the wall, looking far more tired than I was. He smiled sleepily at me and snaked his arms around my waist, pulling me to him and leaning in to give me a small kiss on my lips. I was going to pout and pull him closer and just crush his face to mine. But I decided to save gestures like those for the pretty blue pain pills. So instead I sent him a smile and climbed down the house.

The hot shower was just.... Heavenly didn't even do it justice. It was... Edwardly. And as I stood under the steaming stream of water that relaxed and soothed every inch of my tired, sore body, I decided that Edwardly should definitely be an adjective.

The morning at home was far more hectic than I liked. While making breakfast, I discovered that Esme had to come to the school with me to meet with the faculty regarding my incident. She kept telling me I could stay home, but I decided since it was a Friday, I wanted to get it over with. Have the weekend to recover. Because I just knew it was going to be awkward and horribly mortifying. Even Edward couldn't stop the stares and whispers. Better to let them get it all out of their systems now, and maybe... if I was very lucky... by the time Monday came, I'd return to being the invisible girl that everyone carefully avoided.

Alice looked disappointed by Esme's presence when she joined us for breakfast. I was guessing that she was just dying to get me alone so that she could get all the gritty details on me and Edward.

She looked at my nose and hissed as she slipped into the stool opposite me. I rolled my eyes, stifling a groan. "You know..." She chirped while buttering her toast. "I have some killer foundation that will cover that bruise up." She said in a sing song voice.

I furrowed my brows as I sipped my orange juice because I couldn't grimace without pain. I didn't do the makeup thing. Ever. But there was good chance that if I showed up non-bruised, the gawking wouldn't be *as* bad. I spent the whole of breakfast mulling it over beside Esme before I finally agreed with a nod that made Alice's face light up.

And as she was gingerly applying the makeup to my nose while I sat at her vanity, I sharply informed her that it was a one-time occurrence. She smiled widely and snickered with a nod, making a comment on how lucky I was the swelling was gone.

And by the time she was done, I was ready to track down the inventor of the magic cream and give them a bag of cookies too. I turned my face in the mirror with an impressed expression. If you knew exactly what you were looking for, you could probably tell. But to the casual observer... I was just Bella Swan... weird crazy girl. The usual.

Esme smiled at me widely as I drew my hood up to walk out the door with an appreciative glance at Alice's handiwork. Alice took the Porsche while I rode with Esme. And I pretty much spent the whole car ride slumping farther and farther into my seat, as if it could swallow me and save me from the awful day ahead.

She parked closest to the administration building, saving me the immediate humiliation of the student parking zone. The looks I received as we entered the small office weren't much better than the ones I got in the halls. The adults didn't see me as some novelty or joke. They looked... scared. I wasn't sure what they were scared of, nor could I decide which reaction I preferred. Either way, I kept my hood up and my head down as they led us into the principal's office.

I lifted my head just enough to find the furthest chair in the corner to slump into. Esme took the seat closer to the Principal's desk, where I assumed he was sitting, and making wary glances at me as I kept my head down.

I was thankful for the principal's excess use of state money once my teacher's began filtering in. His office was so big that everyone remained a... mostly comfortable distance away. I listened in morbid interest as they discussed my issues as if I weren't even present. Esme began throwing words out there that I loathed. Technical medical terms for my 'condition' that I couldn't even mentally hear without misspelling.

I listened in horror as they began encouraging educational alternatives such as homeschooling. Which was absolutely preposterous. Like it was something we had never discussed and ruled out. Esme told them so. And she also made a very witty and sharp reference to that excess use of state money that came out of her paychecks. The principal stuttered and stammered. Not expecting a dainty woman such as Esme to put him in his place.

Instead of pushing the matter any further, the principal hastily instructed all of my teachers to make careful changes to my seating arrangements, and agreed that the faculty would 'accommodate' me to the best of their abilities. I was both thankful and impossibly more mortified by their efforts. It was only bound to bring me more attention if I was found to be treated differently. And as if hearing all of that wasn't horrifying enough, they eventually they began discussing... emergency situations.

“In the case of any future incidents,” Esme started in a tight voice, making me cringe into my hoodie at the thought of any such thing. “You have my immediate permission to allow Edward Cullen to attend to her in any way possible.”

My head snapped up, finally allowing me to absorb the scene in front of me as I gaped at Esme in her seat across from the balding principal. It was an unexpected comment, to say the least. She shot a sideways glance to me where I sat in the far corner of the room. She looked uncertain, so I gave her a small smile, reassuring her that it was a good idea.

The expressions on my teachers’ faces were fairly priceless. I got the feeling they rarely wanted to allow Edward Cullen to do anything. The room was eventually filled with a general nod of agreement to her request.

And by the time the meeting was concluded, Esme looked rather smug as we exited the administration office.

She gave me a kiss on the cheek before she got back into her car, shooting me one last pointed glance. She was giving me an out, telling me with her eyes that this could be the end of my school day if I really wanted it to be. But I just smiled back at her. I was never much for procrastination, even when it was a mortifyingly uncomfortable situation.

The bell rang indicating the ending of first period as I watched her car disappear from the parking lot. With a deep sigh and a resolve I didn’t even think myself capable of, I made my way to class.

The doors began emptying as I started towards the quad with my head down. I looked up enough to make my way around, but no more. I couldn’t see the stares, but I could practically feel them as I made my way across the middle of the quad. I shoved my hands into my hoodie pockets and clenched my fists tightly.

They were looking and whispering and sometimes even snickering. But they were still avoiding; granting me a careful distance as I passed, staring at the wet concrete with a red face.

And then I felt it.

Tingles.

I smiled at the concrete and slowed my steps minutely, wondering if I should look up and go to him.

I didn’t need to. I felt an arm snake around my waist with the surging pulse of electricity that was Edward as I halted my steps. My stiff posture immediately eased with his touch. I sighed and finally lifted my head to the person at my side.

Edward was standing beside me in his leather jacket with his messy bronze hair blowing in the soft breeze of the morning. His piercing green eyes were boring into mine as I smiled and leaned into his side cautiously, not knowing how close we could be. He smiled back at me crookedly, leaning down to place a soft kiss on my forehead. I smiled wider, turning my body into his chest and closing my eyes while his lips lingered momentarily on my skin.

When he finally leaned back up, he made a pointed glance at the hood on my head. More like a glare really. I never could understand his grudge against it. Maybe he liked my hair, I didn't know. He seemed to sense my unwillingness to allow its removal because he didn't make any move to.

He scrutinized my nose with pursed lips. "You heal pretty fucking quick." He smirked, moving his free hand to cup my cheek lovingly. I chuckled and rolled my eyes. But my eye roll changed my field of vision momentarily enough for me to notice the people surrounding us.

I let my gaze slowly wander over the expressions of the students, who were multi-tasking as they walked and gaped at the vision of Edward cupping the crazy girl's cheek simultaneously. Edward's thumb began a soft caress of my cheek, relaxing me while I turned my attention back to his green eyes. But he was glaring at the passersby, a stark contrast to his loving caress.

I sighed, gaining his attention, and smiled back at him. "I'm kind of used to the whole staring thing by now." I shrugged honestly. It didn't mean I was comfortable being gaped at, but I had built a resistance to it somewhat.

He sighed and drooped his hand, returning to my side and snaking his arm around my waist once again. "Come on, I'll walk you to class." He smiled, leading me across the quad to the doors. I relaxed into his side as we traveled past all of the stares and whispers. He tightened his grip on my waist as we entered the halls of the school and the whispers were easier heard.

I ignored them as I leaned my head against Edward's shoulder, letting his love and electricity ease me thoroughly. He stopped me at the door to my second period class, pulling me aside to the wall, and backing me up against it as he glanced around the halls nervously.

He sighed and placed one of his palms on the wall beside my head, leaning into me in an oddly protective stance. "Make me a promise?" He whispered, inches away from my face with his brows slightly furrowed in concern. I nodded without hesitation. He took another wary glance around the hall before finally facing me again. "Wait for me at your desk after class?" He asked in hushed voice and an expression that suggested he intended the promise to be made after every class.

I rolled my eyes. "Edward, you can't possibly walk me to every class." I said rationally. As appealing as the idea was, it didn't make sense for him to take the extra time to cross campus and risk constant tardiness at my expense.

He rolled his eyes back at me, leaning his face into mine further and gazing into my eyes intensely. My breathing hitched a little as he came closer, until his lips were barely resting on mine. Without my permission, my breathing began speeding up as he lightly took my bottom lip in between his, never breaking my gaze. I wanted to kiss him back, but the way his eyes were hypnotizing me as they bore into mine rendered me completely paralyzed.

He released my bottom lip as he slowly smirked against it. "You just fucking watch me." He whispered against my lips, raising his eyebrows and leaning back with the same wry smile plastered on his face.

I nodded. Quite profusely.

He chuckled and stepped aside, waving a hand towards the door and watching as I walked inside. I took the new seat the teacher pointed out to me in the back of the class. When I looked back at the door, he was gone, but I still had a little grin. And when all the students filtered in and began looking at me, all I could think about was seeing Edward in one hour.

Edward

WIDE AWAKE

I glared at all the people I passed as I made my way to my second period class. Bella was naïve. She didn't understand how much power these people had over her. All it would take is one asshole who was too curious. And she'd be fucked. Nothing was stopping me from protecting her completely now. If I thought I could really get away with it, I'd just fucking transfer into all her classes and never leave her side.

Of course, walking her to every class was as much excess as I could possibly get away with. So I'd do it. People were staring at me more, not that I really gave a shit. Usually that kind of attention would make me fucking restless and pissy. They'd get over it eventually, once the novelty of us wore off.

Once the bell rang for second period, I was the first motherfucker out of that door and crossing the quad back to my girl. She was good. Sitting in her seat and waiting for me just like I asked. She lifted her head when I appeared in the doorway and smiled at me, picking up her bag and shuffling over to me.

I really wanted to ask her to take that goddamn hood off, but I knew better. There were too many people here for her to do that. And I didn't want to make my girl uncomfortable, so I just put my arm back around her little waist and walked her to third period. She leaned into my side

as we walked the halls, breathing in deeply on occasion and smelling me. I was doing that shit a little too. Flowers and cookies. *Fucking divine.*

I still fucking glared a little as I steered her around the people in the hall. They stared, I glared. I dropped her off at third period with a soft kiss on the top of her head. She smiled up at me and walked into class, looking back at me as I made sure she got to her desk without being fucked with.

By the time third period was over, I was certain that everyone already knew. The whispers in the halls were a little fucking ridiculous. Nothing even remotely original. When I walked to her classroom door, I peeked inside, taking a moment to inspect her face carefully to make sure the whispers weren't getting to her as she walked towards me.

She was being quite the little champ about the whole thing. Still fucking holding her head down and leaning into my side as we passed the people, but she was doing it. She probably had the chance to stay home today, avoid it for as long as fucking possible. But that's not how my girl worked. I was beginning to see that more and more every day.

I walked us to the lunch room after third period, pausing at the door with my arm around her waist and furrowed my brows... a little fucking uncertain. I didn't know where to sit with her. I eventually decided to take her to my table. If Brandon and Jazz wanted to sit with us, they could. And even though it would bug the shit out of me, if Rose and Emmett wanted to come and sit with us too, I'd keep my fucking mouth shut about it.

She looked a little surprised at first when I led her to my table, but didn't object to my choice as I pulled a seat out for her. She smiled at the ground and sat in the seat timidly, taking her cookies out of her bag as I took my seat beside her. Then she did something I had never expected her to do on her own. She reached a hand up and slid her hood off, letting all her long brown hair free. I smiled pretty fucking widely at her, glad to have the hood gone, even though I was pretty sure she'd put it back up after lunch. It was still a big step. My girl was comfortable with me beside her.

I chanced a glance around the lunchroom where everyone was pretty fucking much still gawking. I rolled my eyes and scooted my chair closer to my girl, worried that they were making her uneasy.

I slid my hand under her hair, cupping the back of her warm neck and caressing it softly with my thumb.

She shivered and turned her head to me, blushing with a small smile. I snickered at the blush and kept stroking her neck as we ate our bag of fucking delicious cookies in a silence that was far more comfortable than one would have expected as we remained under the scrutinizing eye of the cafeteria.

Brandon and Jazz walked in the room ten minutes later, looking particularly fucking unkempt. Their hair was all over the place, red swollen lips, straightening their clothes as they glanced around the room. Brandon got a flash of panic in her eyes as her gaze fell upon Bella's empty seat. Rose and Emmett were present, but too caught up in each other to notice anyone missing. Eventually her gaze slowly wandered to our table... and me. I could see her fucking huff from all the way across the room. I smirked at her as she made her way to the table with Jazz.

Jazz and I had a conversation on the way to school. It was strictly a 'bros over hoes' speech. I was to keep my fucking mouth shut about what he knew, and he was to save my ass if any castration was going down. He sat across from me at the table, just like always, leaving Brandon the seat next to him as she glared at me a little. I was guessing the whole grateful bit went out the window when I was discovered to be the boyfriend.

She eyed my hand that was hidden under my girl's hair as I caressed her neck softly and took a bite of my cookie. She eyed Bella with a serious expression. "Are you two sleeping together?" She asked bluntly.

Bella and I both choked on our bites of cookies simultaneously, coughing up crumbs and turning red. I think I realized first that she meant sex... and not actual sleeping, so I shook my head, still trying to clear my airway.

My girl was not pleased. I watched as they began shooting each other weird pointed glances, and finally recovering from the choking fit. Brandon shot a dagger at my hand, still rubbing her neck, like she didn't want me touching her. Bella narrowed her eyes back. A silent debate that Brandon was apparently losing as she huffed and slumped in her chair.

That was some interesting shit. Curious about this odd new development in which Brandon couldn't bitch at me for touching my girl, I leaned my head into Bella's pressing my nose to the side of her hair and breathing in with a smile.

"Oh for the love of god." I heard Brandon mutter from her seat. I chuckled into my girl's hair and pulled back, smirking at Brandon. I really wanted to do more, like kiss her neck right in front of her, and watch her have a fucking coronary. But I never would. It would make Bella uncomfortable, so I settled for the soft stroking of her neck as we ate.

Brandon had no trouble settling into our table. She was pretty much the only one talking. Jazz, my girl, and I were quiet people.

I furrowed my brows at her as she began excitedly discussing Valentines Day plans with Jazz. Poor bastard. That shit was over a month away, and she already had everything planned. And even weirder, Jazz didn't seem to really give a shit, watching her vibrate with enthusiasm over the event with a small smile flirting at his lips. *Fucking smitten.*

Somewhere into listening to Brandon bluntly suggest her own Valentines Day gift and top three choices of preferred flower arrangements, I felt a hand on my knee. I looked over at my girl who was staring intently at the table top as she ate with her free hand and rubbed my knee with her other.

I smiled and caressed her neck a little firmer with my thumb, just showing her that the gesture was okay with me.

We walked to Bio together after Bella got her hood up after lunch. I held her waist firmly as we meandered the halls, already used to the staring by that particular point. Mr. Banner wanted to change her seat, but she didn't listen, sitting down at our lab table as he looked at her with a frustrated expression.

My girl sat with her lab stool close to mine, scooting closer once class had started. I didn't mind one fucking bit. In fact, I took her hand again; bringing it under the table and holding it until she needed it back to write with. I could see Newton two tables a head of us, just fucking dying to turn around and analyze us like everyone else was doing. Including Mr. Banner. Which seemed a little fucking inappropriate if you ask me.

Even under the close stares of the entire classroom as we sat close to one another, my girl seemed completely relaxed next to me, taking my hand again when she was done writing her assignment. When the bell rang, I waited for everyone else to exit before I led my girl out of the room.

I was worried about gym. I didn't fucking want her going in there. Not with James, not with Stanley and her hyenas, not even with that stupid as shit gym coach. And as we stood by the double doors, I told her so.

She sighed at me and glanced around nervously. "I'll be fine. The coach has already made..." She paused and grimaced, holding up air quotes. "'accommodations'." She finished dryly, looking down at the ground and fiddling with her hoodie sleeves.

It still didn't placate me one fucking bit. Especially when I spotted Stanley walking up with her group. She looked me right in the eye and smiled at me... attempting to be seductive but really only succeeding in making me fucking nauseous. I quickly turned back to my girl, who was staring at Stanley with an odd expression that I didn't quite understand.

I furrowed my brows and lifted my hand to put my fingers under her chin, turning her to face me. Her big brown eyes met mine with an odd mixture of determination, love, anger, and that same fucking bitterness that I had seen in her eyes before.

And before I could even fucking question her about any of it, she shoved me hard up against the double doors with a strength that I didn't even think my girl capable of. I hit the doors with a hard thud, and I looked at her in shock, and a little bit fucking hurt.

But instead of just slapping the shit out of me, which was what I was truthfully expecting given the rough shove, she pressed her body against me and crushed her lips to mine. And then it all fucking clicked.

I fought to hold back a smirk against her lips as I slid her hood off and tangled my fingers into her soft hair, darting my tongue out across her bottom lip. I figured if I could get my girl any kind of vindication against that tramp, I was going to do it right.

And we definitely did. She parted her lips to shove her tongue in my mouth, but I wouldn't let her. Instead I plunged mine into hers, pushing off the doors just enough to turn her around and press her against them.

She fisted her hands into my leather jacket, pulling me closer as she tilted her head to deepen this kiss further. I was worried about hurting her face as I cradled her head in my hands, trying to stop her from being so fucking rough. But she wasn't having any of that shit. She brought her hands to my hair, pulling my face closer to hers and pressing against my tongue urgently with hers. My eyes rolled back a little when she pulled my hair, and then suddenly, we weren't doing the kiss for anyone but ourselves. I pushed her back into the doors harder, just fucking needing to be closer to her. She moaned into my mouth as I pressed against her, breathing heavily and pulling my hair harder. Because she just figured out I liked that shit. I gasped, pressing against her tongue more fervently. And then she fucking did it again. I groaned breathlessly into her mouth. And that was pretty much my cue to back the fuck off. I slid my tongue out of her mouth and eased off of her from the door.

When I opened my eyes and met hers, she fucking smiled at me. And I smiled back, panting a little from the kiss, but happy as hell to see all that bitterness completely gone. She chuckled at me and leaned up to give me one last chaste kiss on my lips. It felt a whole lot like a thanks. As if the kiss wasn't plenty fucking thanks enough for me.

I cleared my throat and backed away from her as she drew her hood back up over head, still fucking smiling. And when I turned around to see Stanley, it really was fucking priceless. Jealousy was the understatement of the century. Her face was red as she fumed silently from the concrete walkway; starring daggers at my girl that made me want to fucking stab her again.

My hard on completely fell in my pants when I realized she had just made shit worse on herself. With a curse under my breath, I turned back to tell her to be careful, but she was already walking in the doors and out of my sight before I could.



When the last bell of the day rang, I threw all my shit into my bag carelessly and damn near sprinted towards the gym, fucking praying that my girl wasn't going to walk out crying again. Or worse.

Luckily by the time I reached the doors, she was already exiting. Tear free. I let out a sigh of relief and walked over to her, snaking my arm around her waist. She looked up at me with a weird blank expression and a smile that looked completely fucking forced.

I groaned as I walked her towards the parking lot with her. “Did they fuck with you?” I asked, pretty fucking aggravated at the thought of it. She shook her little head against my shoulder, but didn’t say anything. Making me think she was probably lying.

I stopped when we reached the gravel, grabbing her arm and turning her towards me, lifting her chin with my finger again. “Jazz can ride with Brandon if you want to come with me.” I suggested quietly, hoping that she could talk to me about it once we were alone.

Her eyes got wide. “No!” She yelled, looking into my eyes all panicked and scared. I frowned down at her, feeling a little fucking hurt and rejected by her vehement refusal. She sighed and shook her head, glancing around the parking lot. “I mean, I just wanted to get some time alone with Alice.” She pleaded with her eyes as she gazed into mine. I nodded, deciding she wasn’t lying about that fact, and leaned down cautiously to kiss her forehead.

She smiled at me as I leaned back. And I was somewhat reassured because it seemed real, so I led her to the Porsche where Brandon and Jazz were waiting. We split after that, getting into our two cars without another word, and going home for the weekend.



When I got home, I was so fucking thankful that Emmett had practice. Because I just knew he was going to drill me about all that shit. But before I could even go up the stairs to my bedroom and relax, someone knocked on the door.

I groaned and turned around on the stairs, walking down and throwing the door open angrily. And, of course. It just made fucking sense. That Brandon would be standing on my doorstep fucking glaring at me with her arms crossed over her chest.

“What?” I snapped, not feeling particularly up to her bullshit at that moment. Instead of answering me she ducked under my arm, walking into the house like she fucking owned the place. With a frustrated growl, I closed the door. Hard. Just so she knew she really wasn’t welcome.

Not that she cared, as she bounced to the living room and flopped onto the couch, leaning back and looking entirely too fucking comfortable. I quirked an eyebrow at her, just wanting her to get it over with.

She rolled her eyes at me. “Oh, relax, I’m not here to castrate you or anything.” She teased with a smile as she ran her finger down the arm of the couch. I huffed and walked to the nearest

chair, flopping down and looking bored as fuck. Which was a total bluff. Because the gleam in her eye when she said the word was scary as hell.

She pursed her lips at me for a moment as her expression turned serious. "My cousin loves you, you know?" she whispered quietly, clasping her hands in her lap.

I was pleased the words came out of her mouth quietly and calmly, so I nodded at her. I knew she loved me. "I love her too." I shrugged in honesty, feeling a little fucking offended when Brandon got all wide eyed and shocked at the words coming out of my mouth. I rolled my eyes. "Not that it's any of your fucking business or anything." I muttered, shaking my head and glaring at my boots.

Brandon's lips remained pursed for a moment as she tilted her head at me. "And you make her happy." She said as a statement, and in an awestruck tone that was just further fucking offensive. I rolled my eyes again and nodded. I liked to think I made my girl happy.

She nodded, bobbing her little head and looking around the room before sitting up straight on the edge of the couch and looking me right in the eye. "Here's what you're going to do, Edward." She chirped with a smile and a tone that just fucking dripped condescension. "You're going to come over tomorrow night for dinner. Meet Esme officially as her boyfriend." She said in a matter of fact voice with a smug expression. Like if I didn't there'd be hell to pay. She stood up then, rocking on her heels. "You're going to be polite, and you're going to bring Bella flowers." She nodded decisively.

And I kind of fucking gaped at her. It was a little pretentious for her to be telling me how to treat my own girlfriend. Instead of explaining herself, she smiled at me sweetly and skipped towards the door, throwing a wave over her shoulder.

"See you tomorrow at five!" She sang as she exited the house, leaving me in the chair, raking my fingers through my hair in utter frustration. Fucking bitch.



Emmett eventually cornered me in the hall that evening. I just gave him the now perfunctory "Yes she's my girlfriend, no I'm not fucking her" speech and locked myself in my room before he could question me any further about it.

I flopped on my back onto my bed, ridiculously happy to be away from everyone. I didn't know how my girl could handle so much fucking attention all the time. Everyone always staring at her and waiting for her to do something weird. I was fucking exhausted after only one day of it.

I was waiting for her when she came at ten, hungry and wanting to question her about gym. And kind of fucking ready to shove my foot up an ass if need be. When I heard her tap on the door, I opened it hastily, leading her in out of the cold while I slipped her hood down.

She turned to me with a smile that eased my fears as I leaned down to kiss her softly, cupping her cheek and rubbing it with my thumb the way she liked. She sighed and tangled her fingers into my hair, pulling me closer and trying to deepen it the way she always did. I sighed back, taking her tongue into my mouth and massaging it slowly with my own.

I ended it quickly, in attempt to make our night more comfortable. We did have a pretty long fucking day. She sighed and turned back around without looking me in the eye, and unloaded my meal onto the bed. I furrowed my brows at her weird sigh and followed her, flopping onto the bed and inspecting her expression carefully as she removed her hoodie and climbed up beside me.

I began eating the fucking delicious Teriyaki Stir-fry while she leaned against my shoulder silently, just waiting for the right moment to ask her what the fuck was bothering her. I studied her expression as I ate, looking for any signs of distress or discomfort.

“What kind of cookies did you make tonight?” I asked casually while I chewed the stir fry.

She shrugged against my shoulder. “German Chocolate Inferiors.” She responded quietly without looking up at me. I furrowed my brows at the beef and vegetables in my container, trying to figure out what the fuck made my girl feel inferior.

Eventually I was fed up. I covered the container and turned towards her. “Okay, tell me what the fuck happened in gym today.” I sighed, putting my fork down.

I watched as she grimaced, falling onto her back and covering her face with her hands. “It’s stupid.” She mumbled through her hands.

“Bullshit.” I said simply. And it was. “Nothing that bothers you is stupid.” I told her, watching as she peeked through two fingers at me. She slowly slid her hands off her face with a deep sigh. And she was fucking blushing.

I furrowed my brows at her red face. The same thing was bothering her was making her blush. That’s new. I quirked an eyebrow at her lying before me on the bed.

She grimaced again, slowly lifting herself to a sitting position in front of me and eyeing me carefully. “It’s really none of my business, or my place to ask.” She replied quietly, pulling at her long sweater sleeves and gazing into my eyes with a look of caution.

I frowned at her, watching as she picked at her sleeves in a way I knew all too well. “You can ask me anything.” I whispered coaxingly, and kind of fucking hurt that she even had to think twice.

She didn’t ask me anything though, just whispered two words into her lap. “Lauren Mallory?”

I blinked at her a few times, just wondering who I had to kill for even telling her about that. But really, I should have told her myself. I was always fucking priding myself on how honest we were with each other, and I just so happened to let that little piece of information slide by unmentioned. So instead, I grimaced. "Oh." I answered lamely, not denying it like I really wanted to.

She peeked up at me with a red face. "It doesn't matter to me or anything." She whispered in a sad tone that was completely fucking unconvincing. She pulled her sleeves harder, still glancing up at me cautiously as I grimaced and nodded in confirmation with a sour expression. Her face fell a little before she was able to catch herself and smile at me reassuringly. Not that it was the least bit reassuring.

I sighed deeply and raked my fingers through my hair. "If I could change all that shit I would." I muttered without meeting her gaze. It was probably the first time I felt ashamed for fucking Mallory. It was really no big deal to me. It wasn't romantic or any shit like that. It was barely intimate at all. When I finally met her gaze again, she was staring at me, biting her lip and still pulling at her sleeves nervously.

So that wasn't all.

I sighed again and quirked an eyebrow at her expectantly. Might as well get it all out there in the open.

She darted her eyes around the room nervously, avoiding my gaze. "Are there more?" She asked in a tiny whisper I had to fucking struggle to hear.

I breathed a sigh of relief at the only question I could answer right. "No." I answered honestly.

She looked relieved by my answer as she finally met my gaze, still beet fucking red.

I attempted a smile at her, still feeling a little ashamed. "That shit really doesn't bother you?" I asked skeptically. And of course I was fucking skeptical, because if it were her, that shit would bother me. A lot.

She shook her head. "No, that doesn't bother me." She replied quietly before looking back down at her lap, still pulling her sleeves. "It's just..." she trailed off with a sigh, finally ceasing her pulling of her sleeves and looking me in the eye. "I'm not like those girls." She whispered with a sad expression.

And I couldn't figure out why that would make her sad. Who wanted to be a skanky bitch?

She must have noticed my obviously confused expression because she huffed at me, rolling her eyes. "Its stupid, I already told you." She muttered, shaking her head in a way that indicated she didn't want to continue with her line of thought.

I was getting impatient. “Just fucking spit it out, Bella.” I said exasperated. I didn’t have *this* kind of experience with girls, and it was really fucking frustrating that I didn’t know what was bothering her so much. And that she was afraid to tell me.

She began pulling at her sleeves once again, chancing an occasional peek at my frustrated expression. “You treat me differently than you treated them?” She asked in question form, not meeting my gaze as her long brown hair shielded most of her face from my view.

And I fucking snorted. “Of course I treat you differently. I’d never disrespect you like that because I love you.” I added sincerely, scooting back to lean against my headboard while I let that shit soak in.

She peeked up at me through her lashes and hair. “That’s the only reason though?” she whispered skeptically, biting her lip.

I raised my eyebrows and nodded at her. “What other reason would there be?” I asked incredulously.

She looked back down and shrugged one shoulder, playing with her sleeves still. I watched her for a few moments with pursed lips, trying to piece together the clues to figure out why she was so upset since she wouldn’t just fucking tell me. *I treated her with more respect than those other girls. She seemed sad that she wasn’t like them. She felt inferior.*

And when the notion finally seeped into my slow ass brain, I snorted again.

“You don’t think that I wanted them more or some shit.” I scoffed as a statement, trying to make it true. Because the thought was just so fucking ridiculous. She shook her head at her lap, not looking me in the eye, and basically confirming my suspicion by doing so.

My whole heart fucking sank. I pushed off the headboard and scooted in front of my girl, folding my legs beneath me and grabbing her by the waist. She didn’t look up at me as I lifted her into my lap so that she was straddling me. I grabbed her red face in my hands and forced her to look me in the eye. I gazed intensely into her sad brown eyes; using all the love I had for her to fucking cement my next statement in utter sincerity. “You’re right. That is really fucking stupid” I whispered, shaking my head.

She grimaced and closed her eyes. “I know it is.” She sighed in a regretful tone. She opened her eyes and rolled them at me. “Just forget I said anything.” She muttered, still fucking blushing and obviously embarrassed as she stared into my eyes.

But that wasn’t something I could just fucking forget. I was constantly fighting to push the lust away to make her comfortable until we were even ready to consider it. I knew Bella got carried away in the heat of the moment some times, but I had no fucking clue she even wanted me to

take shit any further. I wanted to tell her I jerked off to stupid shit like her collar bones and curly hair because I wanted her so fucking badly, but decided to save myself that humiliation.

Instead, I brought her face to mine and crushed my lips to hers. She was taken aback but returned the kiss as I slid my tongue in between her slightly parted lips. I deepened the kiss this time, pulling her face closer and tilting mine to drive my tongue deeper into her mouth. She sighed and tangled her fingers into my hair, and fucking pulled it with her fists as she brought my face closer. It really didn't take long for me. I removed my hands from her face and grabbed her hips as she fought against my tongue, bringing her closer to my body as I pushed her down into my rather obvious boner. She moaned into my mouth as I pulled my face away from hers.

I was breathless as I stared into her hooded brown eyes and rested my forehead against hers. "See" I breathed into her face, pushing her down harder just to emphasize my point. I felt her breath hitch as her grip on my hair momentarily tightened, making my eyes roll back a little bit. She nodded against my forehead and writhed her hips against my dick again, making my eyes flutter closed as I groaned loudly. That really wasn't my intention, so I tightened my grip on her hips to make her stop. I opened my eyes and looked at her all fucking disapprovingly. "My point was," I breathed as she looked at me confused, leaned against my forehead. "That even though I really fucking want you, I hold myself back." I concluded in a whisper against her face.

She furrowed her brows at me, loosening her fists in my hair to stroke it gently with her fingertips. "Why?" She whispered quietly as she looked into my eyes.

I sighed into her face as she stroked my hair softly. "Because it would fucking kill me to make you uncomfortable." I said honestly while gazing into her confused brown eyes.

She snorted. "That's it?" She asked incredulously, rolling her eyes as she backed off of my forehead. I quirked an eyebrow at her and nodded. It seemed like a pretty fucking good reason to me. She chuckled shaking her head. "Christ Edward, I've been basically throwing myself at you since..." She trailed off with another chuckle that kind of fucking annoyed me. "Since Phoenix, definitely." She nodded and chuckled some more.

I rolled my eyes as she chuckled and flopped onto my back. "You let yourself get carried away in the moment, Bella. Doesn't mean you're ready for all that shit." I raised my eyebrows at her as she sat on top of me still.

Without warning, her chuckles died, as anger flashed in her eyes. "I'm not a child, Edward." She glared down at me, holding her chin up and rounding her shoulders back indignantly while she narrowed her eyes at me. I fought the urge to smirk up at her as she fumed at me, because she just looked so fucking cute. I've seen kittens that were more frightening.

She huffed, staring down her nose at me. "Just because you happen to be more experienced than me when it comes to-" She paused; fucking blushing and making me want to smirk more, because she was just proving my point. And she must have known because she lifted her chin

higher. “sex,” She spat down at me. “Doesn’t give you the right to be so condescending.” She went on, looking like she was dying to stick her tongue out at me. “I’d know what I was ready for better than anyone.” She snapped, glowering down her nose at me still.

And I couldn’t fucking take it anymore. I laughed. Kind of hard too, making her bounce on top of me with every hearty chuckle. She got even more furious as her eyes widened. Realizing that she thought I was laughing at her reasoning, I sat up, wrapping my arms around her waist, trying to stop my chuckles, and buried my face in the crook of her neck when I couldn’t.

“I’m sorry.” I chuckled still, shaking my head in the crook of her neck as she sat rigid atop me. “You’re just so fucking cute when you’re pissed off.” I snickered, still shaking my head. I could practically hear her rolling her eyes at me as I let my snickers die off.

When I was certain I wouldn’t offend her further by erupting into another fit of laughter, I eased back and looked into her eyes. She still looked a little pissed off as she held her chin up, refusing to be thought of as a ‘child’. I rolled my eyes at her. “I wasn’t trying to be condescending.” I stared into her eyes apologetically as her posture minutely relaxed. “I was just trying to take shit slow.” I whispered pleadingly.

She frowned at me and nodded, bringing her arms around my neck and hugging it softly. I tightened my grip on her waist, burying my face into the crook of her neck again and breathing in deeply. She shifted again against me, unintentionally stirring me back into a full fledged erection. I sighed into her neck, wondering if it would hurt her feelings if I pulled away. I figured it probably would, so I eased us back and rolled us over onto our sides in sleeping position with her leg still hitched over my hip.

But her nose was still too hurt to sleep like that, and I was already tired from the long day of being fucking gaped at. So I rolled onto my back, easing her cheek onto my chest, and fighting the urge to groan as her thigh rested right on my crotch.

I figured she was just as tired as me since she didn’t object when I turned out the light. I tightened my arms around my girl as she hummed me to sleep softly, vowing to do everything in my power to make her feel as superior as she truly fucking was.

Chapter 30. Brown Sugar Burdens

Edward WIDE AWAKE

I raked my fingers through my hair and knit my eyebrows together at all the assortments. Fucking flowers. There were colors everywhere, and they still all looked the same to me. I sighed and shook my head, turning around the florist shop to find out where the hell my wing man went.

I didn't know the first thing about this shit, and since Brandon had already given Jazz a lengthy crash course in floral wisdom, I dragged his ass along with me. He agreed without much hesitation, and then ended up fucking disappearing on me. Bastard.

I eventually found him standing beside a bucket of roses, pursing his lips at them with his hands shoved in his holey jean pockets.

I quirked an eyebrow at him. "Roses?" I asked dryly. Pretty fucking cliché, Brandon would never be satisfied with that shit.

He snorted at me. "Alice would never be satisfied with that shit." He muttered, shaking his head and echoing my thoughts so exactly, it freaked me out a little. He cleared his throat and waved me over to another aisle of flowers. I followed him through the aisles curiously, wondering how much help he could actually be.

He strode to a purple bouquet of flowers and plucked them from their basket, turning to face me and raising his eyebrows. "These are carnations. Some people think that they lack class, but it's a fact that they are an exceptionally beautiful flower." He sniffed the bouquet, his grubby blonde hair grazing them in a stark contrast as he held my gaze. "Purple flowers represent dignity, and royalty. An arrangement filled with purple blooms represents accomplishment and admiration." He said in a matter of fact tone. And I kind of fucking gaped at his grubby ass, standing there lecturing me on flowers like he was reading notes that Brandon made him study.

He rolled his eyes at me. "You get these for Esme, not Bella." He tossed them in my hands, where I caught them while I still stared at him in shock. He moved to another basket, plucking up a bouquet of yellow flowers, turning to me with a serious expression. "She thinks I don't know, but daisies are Alice's favorite. Yellow represents lightheartedness, joy, and friendship.

It's also Alice's favorite color. You'll get brownie points." He tossed them into my arms along with the purple flowers and moved on to another basket.

He pursed his lips, plucking up individual flowers and arranging them while speaking. "Bella's has to be more significant." I gawked at him while he slid two types of flowers into a plastic bouquet wrapper. "White lilies represent innocence and reverence. They're elegant and subtly majestic." He furrowed his brows in concentration and began adding blue flowers. "The deep blues of an iris can calm worries and preoccupation; representing peace, openness, and serenity." He nodded at the finished arrangement in his hands and tossed them at me with pretty fucking smug expression.

I was so fucking... disturbed. It was like hearing him read from a Cosmopolitan or some shit. I stared at his smug smirk in equal parts awe and worry. "Jazz, dude..." I started in a disapproving voice, shaking my head slowly. "I think your vagina is showing." I choked.

His smirk fell as he narrowed his eyes at me. "Fuck. You. Prick." He growled, spinning on his heel and leaving the shop while I continued gawking at his back, pretty fucking troubled by his complete knowledge of all things floral.

I didn't apologize on the way to his house, but I did thank him. That shit was just so un-Jazz that he couldn't be shocked by my reaction. He eventually blew it off, getting out of the car and shooting me a pointed glance that said, *No more vagina jokes, bitch*.

When I got home at four, with three fucking bouquets of flowers, Carlisle quirked an eyebrow at me in interest as I passed his study.

I rolled my eyes as I passed, not stopping and not looking at him. "Don't fucking ask." I muttered, shaking my head and continuing up the stairs to my room, feeling really ridiculous.

If Brandon was expecting me to dress up or some bullshit, she had another thing coming. I didn't even want to waste the money on buying that bitch flowers. But Jazz was right. I needed the brownie points. So I sucked it up, and left at five, wearing a plain black shirt and dark jeans with my leather jacket. Simplicity. My girl liked it like that anyways.

I walked across the yard glaring at the yellow flowers and feeling even more ridiculous at the thought of someone seeing me. *Fucking nosy neighbors*.

I walked up the steps to the pastel blue door and knocked without hesitation. At least I'd get to spend some extra time with my girl. Can't all be horrible.

Esme answered, thank god. She smiled sweetly at me, stepping aside to allow me entrance. I stepped into the entry way, mentally shaking my head at myself as I turned to face her and held out the purple bouquet of flowers.

She looked at them wide eyed in front of her, making me feel even more fucking ridiculous, before her face lit up into a huge smile. “Oh, Edward!” She gasped, taking them from my hand and smelling them with a smile. “How sweet of you, dear.” She cooed as she stood on her tiptoes to give me a kiss on my cheek.

Pleased by the less mortifying reaction, I smiled back as she took my jacket and followed her into the living room, feeling a little more confident about this whole flower charade.

Brandon was perched on the couch, and stood as I entered the room, smiling at me tightly. I rolled my eyes and walked over to her, fucking battling to keep myself from muttering a particularly offensive string of profanities as I held out the ugly yellow daises to her.

And then it happened again. Her face lit up into a wide, genuine smile as she took the flowers from my hand and smelled them, closing her eyes in reverence.

Fucking Jazz and his fucking brilliant floral wisdom.

I smirked down at her as she finally opened her eyes. Her smile fell as she caught my smirk, lifting her nose in the air all indignant like, and setting the flowers on the table like she didn’t fucking love them.

“Bella’s in the kitchen.” She sniffed, flopping onto the couch and flipping through the channels on the television indifferently. I rolled my eyes and turned away to leave the room.

Esme passed me in the hall, stopping to pat me on the shoulder. “Don’t ask her if she needs help. Trust me.” She whispered with a serious expression, walking past me and into the living room. I snickered and made my way to the kitchen, where my girl was most likely bogarting the cooking duties.

When I entered the doorway to the kitchen I could see her in front of the stove with her back to me. And it was her, but it... wasn’t. All the breath escaped my lungs in a ‘whoosh’ as I gazed at her back. She was wearing tight jeans that made her little ass look so fucking edible. And a red shirt, with sleeves that stopped just below her elbows. Her hair wasn’t curly, or wavy. But instead shiny, and straight as a board.

I shook my head and leaned my shoulder against the doorway with a smile, driving out all the shock at seeing my girl dressed in regular girl clothes so that I could analyze her in her element. The kitchen.

I clutched her flowers against my stomach as I watched her stir something in a pot that smelled really fucking good. She was humming a song I had put on her iPod for her, occasionally moving her hips ever so slightly and bobbing her head, making her straight hair sway behind her.

She looked so fucking beautiful and domestic as she hummed and stirred. And just so... comfortable and warm.

Suddenly, she stopped humming, and let out a quiet chuckle. "You can come in, Edward, I won't bite." She said softly, still chuckling at the pot without turning to me.

I rolled my eyes and walked into the kitchen. She was always so fucking intuitive. I put her flowers down on the counter top and strode over to the stove, impatient to be closer to her. She didn't flinch as I came up to her back and snaked my arms around her little waist. I buried my nose into the back of her head and breathed in deeply. I removed one arm from her waist to pull all the shiny straight hair away from one side of her neck before I lowered my face to her shoulder with a smile, hugging her to me tightly.

I lifted my face to rest my chin on her shoulder and looked down into the pot. Vegetables. Cleavage. I gulped as I looked down at an unfortunate – or fortunate depending on how you're looking at it – angle of Bella's rather tight and low cut red cotton shirt that showed far more of her than I had ever seen. Okay, that's a fucking lie. I had technically seen her without any shirt on at all, but that was just tit for tat shit. *No pun intended*. Nothing sexy about it. And the modest cleavage she had peeking out of that red shirt was definitely sexy.

I immediately darted my eyes up to the wall, inwardly kicking myself in the balls for ogling my girl like a complete dickhead. "You look nice." I whispered, turning my head to rest my cheek on her shoulder so I could look at her face and not her cleavage.

And of course, she fucking blushed and stared intently at the pot of boiling vegetables. "Alice torture." She muttered with a grimace. Her bruise was still being covered up, so I had no clue how it was progressing, but I couldn't see any signs of it from where I was standing.

I smiled and leaned in closer, planting a small kiss on her neck and making her shiver a little bit.

She chuckled as she stirred. "Dinner will be ready in five minutes." She whispered, turning her face to me finally and smiling as she leaned over to give me a chaste kiss on the lips. I hummed against her warm lips while they were on mine, and then backed away; worried Brandon or Esme would walk in and be not so pleased by the scene.

I backed up to the counter and snatched up the bouquet of flowers, clearing my throat to get her attention. She spun to face me, darting her eyes down to the bouquet in my hands. Her face did that same shit as Esme and Brandon. Lighting up into a big surprised smile. I tried to keep my eyes on hers and away from the cleavage as she stepped towards me.

I was thinking flowers were a lot more powerful than people gave them credit for, as she took the flowers out of my hands and smelled them with a big grin, peeking up at me through her lashes.

“Thank you.” She whispered against the lilies sweetly as Esme walked into the kitchen.

Esme glanced at my girl holding her flowers and smiled brightly at us, leading me into the dining room and seating me for dinner. In front of Brandon. Still acting indifferent as she pursed her lips and leaned back in her chair, avoiding my gaze.

When my girl walked in the room and put all the food down on the table, I stood up, shooting Brandon a pointed glance as I pulled the chair next to mine out for her. Fucking polite. Bella sat down with a small smile, blushing of course.

And when Esme walked in the dining room with the rest of the food, I pulled the chair at the end of the table out for her too. Hard core fucking polite. She smiled at me widely, looking pleasantly surprised as she slid into her chair. I smirked at Brandon as she rolled her eyes at the post roast, and took my seat next to my girl.

When we began filling our plates, the silence got a little fucking awkward. The dining room was filled with the sounds of silverware clanking against plates and bowls, but nothing else for a long while.

Esme was the first to fill the silence. “So, Edward,” She started as I gulped my glass of Mountain Dew as if God might suddenly answer my prayers and bless it with a fucking alarmingly large amount of alcohol content. “Carlisle tells me you’re from Chicago?” She asked sweetly, taking a bite of her pot roast and eyeing me with a small amount of curiosity.

I fought back the urge to cringe and nodded at her as I set my glass down, disappointed in religion yet again.

She smiled once more. “What was it like growing up there?” She asked quietly as I chewed the beef and fought against the bile rising in my throat.

That kind of shit brought up too many memories for me. I worked to force them away from my mind as I stared down at my plate and pushed around some vegetables with my fork.

“Abridged.” I spoke in hollow voice, forcing the food into my mouth, and feeling really fucking bitter that she even brought it up.

She seemed to have sensed that as she engaged Brandon in a conversation regarding a new spring line of fabric that her interior design company had bought. She shot me the occasional apologetic glance as I forced each bite of food down with a forced smile and a churning stomach.

I eventually felt my girl’s hand on my knee, rubbing it soothingly. And until she touched me, I didn’t even realize I was gripping my fork so hard it hurt my hand. I let her loving caress relax me as much as possible.

I glanced at Esme and Brandon who were talking animatedly and not paying attention as I turned my head to look at her. Her big brown eyes were seeping with worry as she rubbed my knee. And I just smiled back tightly, quickly diverting my gaze to my plate of food, and struggling to enjoy it as the nausea slowly subsided.

No one attempted to engage me in conversation after that, which kind of made me feel shitty... and so fucking relieved at the same time.

When dinner was done, I thanked Esme sincerely, even though I knew she didn't make the meal. It didn't feel as if there was any animosity towards my dinner behavior as she hugged me in the entry way and handed me my jacket.



I wanted to talk to Edward about what happened at the dinner table, but decided to wait until I made it over at ten. So instead, I just walked him out the door after he said goodbye to Esme, and gave him a big hug that I hoped was comforting. He remained mostly silent as he kissed my head and made his way back to his house next door. I watched from the steps as he walked home with his head down and his hands shoved in his pockets.

When Esme asked him about Chicago, his face turned almost green as his forehead held a crease of distress. And I wanted to be angry at her for even bringing his past up. But the truth was I didn't know enough about it to even understand what was off limits in polite conversation.

When I went back inside, I was worried that Esme was going to question me about his behavior, which was unfortunate because even I didn't know what it was in regards to. Thankfully she didn't. She just helped me wash dishes while making the occasional comment about how polite Edward was.

And I'll admit I was a bit surprised by it too. When I found out he was invited, I was slightly worried about his language in front of her. But instead, he completely shocked all three of us with flowers and grand gestures like pulling our chairs out. Esme seemed pleased enough by it to avoid asking about his reaction to her questions.

When they went to bed at nine, I was contemplating changing out of my outfit that Alice had forced me into. I had already used up my weekend veto on a skirt, so I pretty much had to grin and bear all the cleavage I had poking out of my shirt. Worst of all, I was worried that Edward

would get the wrong impression and think I was trying to be more like Jessica and Lauren, which was so far from the truth it was ridiculous.

The gym incident on Friday was really no big deal. I was in the locker room bathroom stall dressing out when I overheard them talking about it. About how Edward had slept with Lauren too, and basically insulting his taste in girls. If I had already known about it, I would have found it slightly amusing and flattering that I was being added into that particular club; girls that have slept with Edward Cullen.

But I was irrationally bothered by the possibility that there were more. And something else bothered me even more than that thought. That other people had a piece of Edward that he wasn't willing to give me yet. It was stupid, really, because I had his heart and the rest shouldn't have mattered. But I couldn't help feeling somehow inferior to them when they had been so much physically closer to my boyfriend than I was. And he was constantly pulling away from me, when he took them without a moment's hesitation. What girl wouldn't feel insecure about it?

So when Alice forced me into the barely there shirt and tight ass paint jeans, I panicked, trying to throw on a sweater and hide myself so Edward wouldn't think I was trying to be like them. Of course, Alice was having none of that. Instead she spent forty minutes straightening my hair... because apparently, curls were 'so last year'.

Deciding that he didn't seem too put off by my attire, I threw my hoodie on and left the house at ten. I stalked across the yards stealthily as I took glances at his lit window on the third floor of the house. I climbed the lattice and balcony without incidence and was at his door within seconds.

The look on his face when he opened the door troubled me. Not many people would be able to notice the subtle crease in his forehead as a sign of distress. But I knew every inch of his face like the back of my hand, and that crease only appeared when he was recovering from a nightmare. And since I knew he hadn't had a nightmare in well over a month, I figured the crease was probably reserved for memories in general.

He still smiled at me once I was inside and leaned in for a kiss as if nothing was bothering him. And I returned it with enthusiasm, deepening it, and wondering how long it would take him to pull away this time.

Five seconds of tongue, no groan. I smiled when he pulled back, resolving not to let his pace bother me, especially when he was in such a troubled mood. He walked to the bed and flopped down into the center of it where he had apparently been sketching. It was a new kind of night for us, because I didn't bring him any food. He had eaten at my house for dinner, so there was really no point.

Deciding to keep myself occupied while he sketched, I walked to the bookcase and pulled out a book I had been reading for the last week. He didn't look up from his drawing as I made my way over to him and removed my hoodie, grimacing at my scantily clad chest as I climbed up on the bed. While I was climbing up, I caught a brief glance at what he was sketching. His mother.

I didn't want to sit beside him like I usually did. And not because I didn't want to, but because I wanted to give him privacy while he was drawing. It was such a personal and intimate craft for him. So instead, I sat Indian style a few feet away, opening my book and reading it silently.

I studied him carefully by glancing up from my book as he sketched her. His brows were furrowed in complete concentration as he moved his hand back and forth on the page in silence. That same lock of hair was falling into his green eyes and swaying with every hard stroke of his pencil. He didn't necessarily look angry, or even upset. But he was troubled. And it wasn't so much that he hadn't spoken one word since I walked in, or even that he hadn't looked up from the page once he began drawing. It was that crease in his forehead. I wanted to take my hand and smooth it over to get rid of it.

Without warning, his eyes darted up from the page to meet mine, where I was pretty much just staring at him shamelessly. I quickly shifted my gaze back to my book as my face began heating up. I had to bite back a groan of frustration at being so obvious.

I heard him quietly sigh and close his sketchbook, which made me want to groan in frustration yet again, because I didn't want to interrupt his drawing. I chanced a peek up from under my lashes when I heard him put the sketchbook down on the bed.

He smiled at me from across the bed, although it looked awfully forced, and held his arms out as if he wanted me to go to him. I bit my lip and looked down at my book, closing it softly and setting it down onto the bed beside me before crawling over to him.

When I was close enough, he brought his arms around my waist and pulled me down so were lying face to face on the pillows. I laid my cheek on my palm as he rubbed my back softly and I stared into his troubled green eyes. After a moment, I lifted my fingers of my free hand to his forehead and smoothed them across that crease. It came right back, making me frown at it as I lifted my hand to stroke his hair instead.

He sighed when my fingers began weaving through his soft hair gently, gazing into my eyes in complete silence as his fingers tangled into the hair flowing down my back.

We laid like that for a while. Completely silent and just staring into each other's eyes.

I don't know what he was looking for in mine, but I was definitely searching his. I feared that his memories were poisoning him. He held the weight of them on his shoulders as they burdened him and pulled him under; deep down into a place that I couldn't understand, and he rarely let me see. There was always something there lurking behind the self hatred and sadness that I

couldn't quite place. Something that he never showed me, and if I was guessing right, something that he never allowed himself to see either.

There were only so many guesses I could make with the scant amount of information he had granted me access to. And I knew no details about his life before the fire. I had no way of knowing how horrible his mother had really been to him during his childhood. Or perhaps even his father. It was almost as if he didn't exist until his father died. Or maybe just this version of him. I felt the need to know how awful it really was. Why his childhood before the fire was never spoken of.

With a deep sigh, and a hope that I was comforting enough to make it bearable for him, I worked up the courage to ask.

"Tell me about your other life." I whispered in near silence as I gazed into his eyes and stroked his hair softly. I knew he heard me because of his close proximity. And when his eyes got a brief flash of pain in them before he let them flutter closed, I knew he understood what life I was referring to.

I stroked his hair gently as I stared at his closed eyelids. His breathing never changed, nor his grip on my waist. But there was that flash of pain in his eyes that made me nervous about bringing it up. But just as I opened my mouth to tell him not to worry about it, his eyes opened.

When they met mine once again, I snapped my mouth closed. I really shouldn't have been so frightened by what I saw. It was silly and absurd. But his eyes looked so alien. Like someone else's as he gazed back into mine inches from my face. He didn't look angry, or upset, or even bitter or empty.

He looked... innocent. Vulnerable in a way I had never known Edward to be. He was always the strong one, protecting me and shielding me from everything wrong. But in that moment, he looked just like a lost little boy while I stroked his hair.

His newly wide innocent green eyes bore into mine as my heart thudded loudly against my chest. "My childhood was the picture of perfection." He whispered into my face. And even his voice didn't sound like his. The usual hard edge that laced his every tone was completely gone, and replaced with a whimsical naivety that I didn't even know him to possess.

I searched his eyes for the sadness that I would have expected to find by him even speaking of his past. But it wasn't there either. They gazed back into mine wide and honest. And when I finally registered his statement into my brain, it confused me.

I decided to work past my fear and use this new openness to gain any information I could to help him. "Tell me more about your parents?" I whispered to him cautiously, still running my fingers through his messy hair softly.

The corners of his lips lifted into an oddly foreign smile. And that scared me a little bit too, because his once intense green eyes grew impossibly more alien as they took on a gleam of wonder. "They were both crazy in love with each other." He smiled at me, twirling a lock of hair behind my back around his finger as he spoke wistfully. "They got married when they were young." His gaze slowly left mine as he stared over my shoulder, still twirling the lock of hair around his fingers gently.

I continued stroking his hair as I cautiously prodded for more. "What was your mother like?" I whispered sweetly, trying not to let my anxiety show through to him.

His smile grew wider as he stared off into space, appearing as though he was remembering something that made him quite happy, and making me instinctively smile back at his face. "She used to have a huge garden in the back yard." He whispered quietly, dropping my lock of hair, only to pick it back up and begin twirling it again. "She'd let me help her dig holes in the summer." He let out one almost silent chuckle. "I'd always get my best clothes muddy." He lightly shook his head, never breaking his gaze from the space behind me or letting his smile fall.

I stayed silent for a moment as I stroked his hair, unsure of what else to ask without being so blunt and upsetting him.

His wide green eyes suddenly darted back to mine. "When I was seven, they took me to a real live symphony." He said, sounding oddly proud and still smiling wistfully. I smiled back at him widely, just enjoying his happiness despite the sore subject. He smiled wider at me as he twirled my hair. "Have you ever gone to anything like that?" He asked with a curious expression. I smiled and shook my head remorsefully.

He smiled sweetly at me as he fingered my hair. "We'll go to one together one day." He promised softly. And the thought of Edward making plans for us like that made me downright giddy, so I kept my smile in place. But the truth that was staring me in the face was heartbreaking.

Edward didn't force himself to forget his childhood because it was bad. He forced himself to forget it because it was happy.

There were probably plenty of reasons why. Maybe he thought he didn't deserve the good memories, or maybe they just made him bitter because that life was unattainable. Either way, he pushed them back and put that one awful event into the spotlight as his very first defining moment.

I didn't want to ruin his wistfully happy mood, but my love for him only fueled my curiosity about that one particular event. We continued smiling at each other as I stroked his hair and he twirled mine against my back. "What happened when you were nine?" I whispered to him quietly, attempting to be vague by using his age as a reference.

His wistful smile slowly fell as the same pain flashed in his eyes as before. He didn't close his eyes this time, and I was quite privy to viewing his torment as he began to speak again. "It was their anniversary." He whispered sadly, twirling my hair faster around his finger while I continued stroking his, in an attempt to offer some comfort. His tone and comment made it clear to me that he knew exactly what I wanted to know. And he was giving it. "May Thirteenth." He clarified while his agonized eyes gazed into mine. I nodded in encouragement against my palm on the pillow.

He twirled my hair faster around his finger as his eyes grew impossibly more pained. "My dad and I planned a big night for her." He choked in a voice so thick with tears, it made my own heart clench. I was seriously considering stopping him as the anguish possessed his features so completely that my chest hurt just watching it.

He was twirling my lock of hair desperately, almost pulling it as it slid around his finger furiously. His lightly stubbled jaw quivered slightly as his tortured green eyes brimmed with moisture. "I thought that candles were romantic." He whispered in an excruciated tone.

And as I watched the tears finally spill over his cheeks and onto the pillow below his head, I decided that I knew quite enough.

I swiftly lifted my head up from my palm and plunged my face into the crook of his neck, trying to hug him despite the awkward position. He seemed to understand as he tightened his arms around my waist and buried his face into my shoulder. I wiggled my free hand underneath his neck to get a better grip as I hugged his head to me tighter.

I still didn't have any exact details about how the fire started. The little ones that would indicate if he actually blamed himself for the whole thing, and not just for being too scared to get help for his father. It would make so much more sense to me. All that self hatred and disgust. And I feared that if he did have something to do with the fire, he would never forgive himself. It would always haunt him. The same way I'm haunted that I couldn't scream earlier, or run faster, or be stronger to save my mother.

We were so similar and yet worlds apart.

I held him lovingly for what felt like hours, occasionally kissing his neck softly as he held me firmly against him. Willing him to let me take some of his burden. He was completely silent as I stroked his hair. And even though he wasn't sobbing or breathing any differently, I could feel his tears through my red cotton shirt for a long while.

Just as I was considering humming him to sleep, and hoping that he would forgive me for taking advantage of him at such a vulnerable moment, he turned his face into my neck and planted a small kiss on it.

He let out a deep breath against my skin, caressing my neck in moist warmth. "Let's get the fuck out of here tomorrow." He mumbled against me, squeezing me tighter against him as I furrowed my brows in confusion at his request. "Just you and me, away from all this bullshit." He pleaded desperately, back to his normal Edward voice... expletives and all.

I smiled against his neck and nodded in agreement. We had been under an enormous amount of pressure, unable to really enjoy being together as a couple in the daytime without someone analyzing us, or bringing up painful subjects that ended up bringing us down. We had plenty of nights alone, but a nice day alone was exactly what we needed.

He never lifted his head from my shoulder, so I was assuming he was ready to go to sleep. And my assumption proved correct when I began humming and he didn't protest.



Edward seemed better when he woke up that morning. The crease in his forehead was gone, even though he was pretty much just laying in bed with his eyes closed, running his fingers through his hair sleepily.

I didn't have much time to ponder over the events of the previous night, so I jumped out of bed quickly, getting all my things together and dropping off his *Brown Sugar Burdens* by the alarm clock. He was still in the bed looking sleepy as he finally opened his eyes to meet my gaze.

His eyes were red, and you could tell that he had been crying. But they were clear of any pain or burden as he smiled at me, sitting up when I climbed over to give him a kiss.

He held my face sweetly in between his hands as he kissed me chastely, rubbing my cheeks and sighing against my lips. Neither one of us were really willing to deepen it, having neglected our dental hygiene the night before.

I pulled away smiling, pleased that he was feeling better and wasn't upset with me for prying into his past. And he obviously wasn't as he leaned back against the headboard with a smile as he gazed at me.

"Gazebo at noon?" He asked in a sleepy voice as he ran his fingers through his hair. I smiled back widely, realizing he still wanted to go out, and nodded enthusiastically. He chuckled drowsily at my enthusiasm. "Pack a lunch." He added as I stepped out the door.

I left his room feeling relieved, and hoping that maybe I had helped him a little bit by prying and forcing those wounds open a little. He had taken on so many of my burdens; it felt good to return the favor for once.

Esme had no issues with allowing me the day out with Edward. He had impressed her quite a bit the night before with all of his grand gestures. Alice was another story.

“Bella...” She started as she looked at me frustrated in the center of my bedroom. “What do you mean you don’t know where you’re going?” She asked exasperated.

I shrugged and stared at her blankly, not really seeing the big deal. I didn’t really care where we went, as long as I was with Edward.

She huffed and threw down one of the shirts she had chosen. “How the hell am I supposed to dress you?” She screeched with raised eyebrows.

I shrugged again, still staring at her blankly, and still not seeing the big deal. And not really caring what I wore, as long as I wore it with Edward. Plus my veto was already used up.

She let out the daintiest growl ever and began pillaging through the wardrobe, pursing her lips at things that were far too colorful for me to wear. I was very thankful I hadn’t asked where we were going, because the mystery of the whole thing ruled out so many ridiculous items.

She eventually forced me into the itchiest white gauzy shirt I had ever seen in my entire life. Its long flared sleeves hid my hands as they hung at my sides limply while I pursed my lips at myself in the mirror. It looked like it belonged on a babydoll. In fact I think she called it a babydoll. It reminded me of maternity wear. I sent a small blessing to the clothing God’s that designed babydolls for less cleavage. It was a stroke of genius, really.

The jeans were more comfortable, but still ridiculously tight. Her reasoning behind her choice was functionality molded with style or some stupid crap. I left my hair shiny and straight, too put off by the clothing to put any extra effort forward, and went to the kitchen to make us lunch.

I had an Alice moment as I grew frustrated that I didn’t know what kind of lunch to pack. I eventually decided on sandwiches. Just like with jeans... you can never go wrong with a sandwich. I packed it all in my old back sack after I was finished, adding some sodas and chips, and throwing it on my back excitedly.

At noon I walked out to the gazebo, taking note of the clear sky, and semi warm temperature that made my thin, long sleeves bearable. Edward was waiting for me on the bench when I walked up, lounging back against the table, facing towards the houses.

He stood up when he saw me approaching, still wearing his jacket for some reason, and looking gorgeous as the sun made all his messy bronze hair sparkle a little. He smiled at me, holding his hand out for me to take. Without hesitation I slid my hand into his, and let him lead me to wherever he wanted.

I was rather surprised when he led me down to the river silently. I walked beside him while grasping his hand, mildly curious, and taking some time to appreciate the river that I really

hadn't spent much time enjoying. We walked along the rocky riverfront, until we eventually came to a little wooden boat. When he stopped in front of it, I quirked an eyebrow up at him.

He smirked back at me. "We'll need this to get where we're going." He explained rather cryptically. I rolled my eyes and let him help me into the little boat. He snickered at me as he got in behind me, seating himself on the opposite side facing me as I sat down unsteadily on the bench seat.

And I laughed at him while I watched him paddle the boat down the river. It was calm, not rushing or flowing downstream too heavily, so he didn't have much trouble. It was just a funny sight. He rolled his eyes at me and tried to look annoyed, but I could see his lips twitching into an almost smirk every time I would burst into another fit of laughter.

His eyes looked even better in the sunlight, bright and clear, and not as red as they had been that morning. I just leaned back in the boat, slightly squishing my book sack in the process, as I watched him paddle in much amusement.

The river really was nice, and I did take the time to enjoy it as we floated southwards. The trees along the east side were rather thick, overflowing with green moss on their tree trunks as ferns peeked out from every crevice. Every now and then a strong breeze would blow by, making my hair wind and whip around my face as I gazed out at the woods, slapping it back in exasperation.

The boat ride didn't last all that long, which slightly disappointed me. He helped me out of the boat, steadying me when I rocked a little, and lifted me onto the ground with ease. He took my hand again, leading me down the riverfront more as I pursed my lips in curiosity.

Before I could get impatient and nosy and just ask him where we were going, the trees beside the riverfront broke into a clear open space. Almost a meadow. Kind of like the one behind our yards, but with longer grass, and a few trees scattered around.

I smiled and entered the meadow beside him enthusiastically. It was so Edward. No frills or 'bullshit'. Just simple grass and sun peeking through the canopies of the trees surrounding us. And as we sat down below one huge lone tree in the middle of the meadow that provided us shade, I decided it was one of the things I loved most about Edward. Simplicity. It always made me feel normal and comfortable.

We ate lunch in the shade, finally able to just talk and laugh without having to hide how close we were or worry about people gawking at us.

He let me lean against his side with our backs to the tree trunk as we ate with our legs stretched out straight in front of us. He never took his jacket off, which I still thought was weird, because I felt perfectly comfortable with the temperature.

“Do you come here often?” I asked curiously, gazing at the wide open space in wonder as the sun kissed blades of grass swayed in the breeze in the most serene fashion.

He shrugged against me while he ate his sandwich. “Jazz and I used to hide out here to get fucked up when we were freshmen.” He chewed in a no nonsense voice. I wanted to roll my eyes at him because it seemed like he and Jazz used to do that kind of stuff a lot. Good thing Jasper had Alice to keep him in check now. I knew better than to think Edward would be inclined to suggest something so ridiculous.

When we finished eating, he put his arm around my waist, letting me lean into him as he told me the frankly hilarious story of the flower shop. I curled my legs around me as I listened to the story in interest.

His green eyes were filled with quiet mirth and amusement as he explained how serious Jasper was about the meanings of flowers, looking out towards the meadow with a smirk playing at his lips and his messy bronze hair blowing against his forehead. “...but it’s a fact that they’re an exceptionally beautiful flower.” He mocked in Jasper’s slight southern drawl, snickering with a shake of the head at his choice of words.

I laughed too. Because it was almost like he was quoting Alice verbatim. And I knew he was because Esme got carnations, and Alice was annoyed to no end that everyone looked down on them so much. When my laughter got impossibly more out of control at the thought of her sitting Jasper down just to have a full length conversation about something like flowers, Edward turned his face to mine with a smile.

I attempted to stop my laughter long enough to hear the rest of the story. But when he began mocking Jasper further, “...elegant and subtly majestic...” I doubled over laughing, holding my stomach. He really was quoting Alice verbatim.

Edward laughed with me for a few moments, shaking his head in blatant disapproval of Jasper’s choice of words. “Because...” He attempted through our hearty chuckles. “Because ‘here, dude, get these’ just wouldn’t fucking suffice.” He rolled his eyes, leaning his head back against the trunk of the tree and shaking it against it.

When my laughter finally died down into the occasional breathless snicker, I leaned back into Edward’s shoulder, relaxing as the soft breeze billowed through the grass gently.

“Well, I thought they were lovely.” I nodded decisively and honestly. It was probably the most I had laughed since the Scooby doo pajamas. I let the amusement fill me with a euphoria that the whole event was bringing me. Spending time with my loving boyfriend just like any other normal girl. Then I realized that when I was with Edward alone, I really was. A normal girl. It was only for him, but it was far more than I had ever expected. And I wanted to be a normal girl more for him than anyone else.

We did that for a long while, just lounging and enjoying the silence as he fingered the ends of my hair falling just above my waist. I had leaned my head back and closed my eyes, smelling the grass and feeling the breeze coupled with Edward's electricity when I felt his fingers softly slide under my chin.

I opened my eyes and let him turn my face to his. His green eyes were boring down into mine intensely, just staring at me for a long moment while his fingers propped my chin up to meet his gaze. Suddenly, his eyes darted to my lips and back to my eyes.

I fought back a smile as I answered his silent request and leaned up to put my lips on his. He slid his fingers from my chin to my cheek as he took my bottom lip in between his and sucked on it gently. I sighed as I worked on his top lip, bringing my hand up and around his neck to caress the soft hair at his nape.

I impatiently pressed my lips against his firmer, darting my tongue out to lick his top lip, and biting back a really embarrassing moan when he took it into his mouth. We slowly massaged each other's tongues as he held my waist firmer and the hand on my cheek moved to the back of my head.

We gradually pivoted towards each other as our grips tightened and we deepened this kiss, tilting our heads in opposite directions to plunge deeper into each other's mouths. I slid my other hand into his open jacket and rubbed his lean chest lightly at first, before fisting it into his dark t-shirt to bring his body closer to mine.

Our tongues became progressively more urgent, battling for dominance as we began breathing deeply into the kiss. The arm around my waist brought me closer as Edward pushed against my tongue breathlessly. In a decision to utilize one of my newfound discoveries, I slid my hand into his hair and made a fist around all of the messy locks, pulling in the process as I moved my tongue against his.

I fought back a whimper when he groaned loudly into my mouth, pressing my waist closer to his and pivoting towards me even more. The hand he had tangled in my hair slowly slid down to my shoulder, rubbing my upper arm slowly as it eased down towards my elbow. I leaned further into his body as I fought against his tongue breathlessly, nearly panting into his mouth. I gripped his hair tightly once again, earning me a gasp as he pressed his tongue against mine more furiously.

The hand on my elbow slid to my ribs where he held it there in between us, rubbing circles into my stomach just below my breasts with his thumb. I whimpered breathlessly into his mouth, pushing myself closer into his hand, and encouraging what I assumed was his attempt at finally touching me. But instead of doing it, he continued rubbing with his thumb and pushing his tongue against mine fervently, panting into my mouth.

Deciding I had enough with all of his indecision and patience, I gripped his hair with my fist tightly, pulling it hard and willing him to... just... *freaking do it already*.

He let out the sexiest half groan, half whimper into my mouth and finally threw caution to the wind. His hand swiftly slid up, over my breast until he was cupping it completely and squeezing firmly.

I think he was probably going to groan into my mouth again at the feel of it. Unfortunately, I never gave him the chance. Because when his large hand enveloped my breast and squeezed, I got an irrational surge of panic that constricted my chest and made me lurch away from him, gasping for air with the slightest tremble.

His eyes shot open as I yanked myself away, leaving his hand partially suspended in the air where it had just been covering my breast. I stared at him wide eyed in confusion as I gasped for air in front of him.

He dropped his hand as the expression on his face became horrified. "Holy fuck, Bella. I'm so sorry." He panted hastily, shaking his head as his wide green eyes looked at me in concern.

I shook my head and fought harder against the wave of panic tightening my chest. In an attempt to abate it, I leaned back and hugged my knees to my chest, lowering my head in between them and breathing deeply.

I counted to fifty in my head as I rocked slowly back and forth, willing the panic to go away. I never got a flash or a vision, just the unnerving feeling of defenselessness. Completely irrational and so stupid and frustrating it made me want to cry.

It didn't take long to return to normal, and it wasn't really a normal emotional breakdown. If there was such a thing. It was more like the residue of one. The last minute of an episode that made me feel jumpy and breathless.

I lifted my head to finally look at Edward where he sat in front of me, looking like he was afraid to touch me at all. This just made me even more aggravated.

His apologetic green eyes bore into mine remorsefully. "I'm sorry, I should have fucking warned you or something." He said regretfully, shaking his head at himself.

I huffed at him and lowered my legs to sit Indian style and pick at the grass. "I knew what was happening, Edward." I rolled my eyes, pulling the grass angrily while I furrowed my brows. "I wanted it to happen. I just-" I paused as the frustration swelled inside of me and made me yank the blades of grass out of the ground. "It's just my stupid brain." I growled through clenched teeth, and blinking back the tears of frustration that were threatening to push behind my eyelids.

Edward's face fell even further as he finally realized what I was talking about. He frowned at me before he got an odd flash of anger in his eyes. "Did he do that to you?" He asked in a frighteningly calm and low whisper.

It took me a moment to figure out who he was even talking about. And when the realization hit me that he thought that Phil had done that, I shook my head furiously. "No!" I exclaimed vehemently, unable to let him think that anyone had ever soiled me like that. "Nothing like that happened, I swear it." I said truthfully and pleading for his belief.

Phil threatened to do plenty of things to me, and he occasionally backed them up with intentionally suggestive gestures, but he never made good on his promises to take the torture even further. Either because he didn't have the chance to, or because it was never his intention, I'll never know. But something made the agonizing physical pain he inflicted on me good enough to sate him.

Edward looked immensely relieved by my denial as he leaned back against the tree with a deep breath. He eyed me where I sat close to him, probably analyzing my frustrated expression, as his lips slowly lifted into a sad smile. "Don't be so upset." He pleaded softly, lifting a hand to mine where it lay on the grass and caressing it soothingly. His touch was fine as he stroked the back of my hand with his current of electricity. It just confused and frustrated me even more. "I'm sure that kind of shit even happens to normal girls when they get touched like that for the first time."

All of the air escaped my lungs in a painful gust as his words hit me like a slap in the face.

I stared at his confused green eyes feeling hurt, before I eventually pushed it away. A hollow humorless chuckle escaped my lips as I fought back the tears that the truth of his words brought. "Right." I nodded in agreement, shifting my gaze away from his to the meadow and feeling more bitter and frustrated by the second. "Normal girls."

Chapter 31. Brownie Drop Defeats



The meadow was silent for a long moment while I gazed out at the grass blowing in the wind. It just pissed me off even more. All Edward...we...wanted was one day away from all of this. Away from bad memories and pressure and just... crap. No matter how far I ran or how normal I thought I felt, it was always there, just waiting for me to experience one moment of happiness so it could laugh in my face.

Edward sighed from beside me, but I didn't look at him. I didn't want my bitterness directed at him. "I didn't fucking mean it like that, Bella. I promise." He whispered forlornly. And of course, he may not have intentionally meant to say it, but it was in the back of his head. Because it was the truth. I could live in denial all I wanted, but it would never change the fact that I wasn't normal.

I pushed and shoved it all aside the best I could as I turned to shrug at him with a smile. I couldn't blame Edward for any of it. It was just a fact of my life.

His green eyes looked sad and remorseful as he gazed at my, incredibly forced smile. "You know, that shit doesn't matter to me." He whispered as he stroked my hand lovingly. *Accepting.*

And I just smiled back. I ruined the day, and all I really wanted was to go home and wallow in my own misery and embarrassment for a few hours. Edward seemed to sense this as he stood up from the ground and held his hand out to me.

I got cold as we walked back to the riverfront, and Edward gave me his jacket. I was wondering if that wasn't the only reason he wore it in the first place. And the thought just made me feel impossibly worse. Because he was always trying to make me comfortable and avoid crap like this. And now he thought I wasn't ready, that the episode had proved him right, and the chances of him touching me like that again were so small it made me want to growl in frustration. My own broken traitor mind was battling with my heart, instincts, wants, and desires. And just like always, it beat me.



He said he loved me in the gazebo afterwards. He showed it when he looked into my eyes and caressed my hand. And I caressed his as I told him I loved him back, the one with the ring on it. Because I did love him. And I wanted to yell it into my own head so that it would see; there was nothing to be scared of.

When he kissed me that night at his balcony door, I was pushy. Silently begging him to just try it again, and maybe this time would be different. But he wouldn't do it. He told me he loved me again before he went to sleep, and he showed it in his loving caresses as I stroked his hair and hummed to him.

School was school. Stares and whispers and snickers directed at the very thing I hated about myself more in that moment than any other. And Edward was there. Walking with me and making me feel better with his electricity as he glared at all the people and took me to every class. At lunch I let my hood down, because he liked it. Afterwards he leaned into my hair and whispered in my ear that he loved me. And he showed it when he stroked my hair and caressed my neck. We sat in front of Alice and Jasper and watched them talk and behave like a normal happy couple.

He held my hand in Biology, under the table so that no one would stare. And as we stood in front of the gym doors, he kissed me softly on the cheek and told me he loved me again, showing it to me right in front of Stanley and all her witches, and not paying one second of attention to them.

I listened when they talked and gossiped. I didn't usually do that in the locker room when I hid to dress out. But I was still feeling bitter, and figured that at least I could live vicariously through the very person who Edward could touch, and did. Probably quite thoroughly.

James avoided any and all eye contact with me, just like Friday. I think I probably scared the crap out of him, but I couldn't really seem to care. Something about the bruise on my nose just fueled the bitterness.

Edward was waiting for me when the bell rang, looking concerned like he always did after every class, and putting his arm protectively around me as we walked to the parking lot. Before I got into the Porsche, he kissed my forehead and whispered against my skin that he loved me. And he showed it as he opened my door for me and helped me inside.

Alice was being stupid about the whole thing. She was warming up to the idea of us. She just wouldn't admit defeat. So I kept my mouth shut as we drove home, wondering what would be the thing that finally broke her, and made her realize how incredible Edward really was.

I was pushy again at the balcony door. And I felt so ridiculous and pathetic for doing it, but I was just praying he would try it again. Just once more, just to see if my mind was finally falling in line with my heart.

He didn't.

He told me he loved me before we went to sleep. And he showed it as he stroked my cheek with his hand and held me to him tightly.

And I wanted to scream and yell at him, that I knew he loved me. And I knew it didn't matter to him if he could touch me like that. It just pissed me off more. It mattered to *me*. And I wanted it to matter to him, just a little bit. Some disappointment would have been really nice. Instead, I was met with acceptance.

Our whole week was like that. Filled with understanding 'I love you's', and the occasional, 'I fucking love you'. He'd tower by my side as we walked the halls, a silent guardian as he held my waist and glared at the passersby. Looking like he was just waiting for someone to push him. Daring them to get close to me or say the wrong thing.

I needed it.

I resented it.

I adored it.

He began touching me more day by day. In school, in the cafeteria, in his room. His hands were always on me when we were close enough. Touching my arms, hands, cheek, neck, waist, shoulders, and never, *never*, anywhere else.

When I came over on Tuesday night, he seemed occupied with something, and I still pushed him. And he still backed away. I fought and battled to swallow it down like a bitter pill. *It's not his fault*. He was only protecting me. He was only loving me.

And he certainly told me enough. It was five times on Tuesday. I did my best to bask in it, let it abate the bitterness I was feeling for as long as possible. It allowed me genuine smiles and the occasional chuckle.

But there were bad days. For us both. Wednesday was Edward's.

He was walking with me to lunch, curling me into his side and weaving us around the people in the hallway with his usual ease and grace. I was wrapped in the serenity of his touch and loving embrace as someone walked around the corner, right into our path.

It was only an accident, easily avoided as Edward hastily halted his steps and turned protectively into me to avoid a collision with the brown haired boy who immediately stopped as well.

Edward was not so forgiving about the whole thing. “Watch where the fuck you’re going, dickhead.” He snapped at the boy in a harsh tone, glowering at him.

The young brown haired boy narrowed his eyes as Edward steered us past him. And just as we were nearly out of hearing range, he had to make the worst possible comment. “Fuck your mother, Cullen!” He screamed into the hall.

Edward stopped mid stride. And I felt every muscle in his body constrict around me in tension at the comment that was meant to be far less offensive than it actually was. He couldn’t have known.

He made to turn us around and back towards the brown haired boy, who was about to have a very unfortunate broken... something... or everything. But I stopped him, hastily tugging him into an empty classroom. He turned his angry glower at me as I yanked and pulled desperately against his strength to get him inside.

I eventually did, but probably only because he allowed me to. I shut the door quickly, pushing my back against it to save the life of the clueless boy. Edward paced around the empty room rigidly as he raked his fingers through his hair in frustration and anger.

“What the fuck was that for?” He growled, stopping his pace momentarily to narrow his eyes at me. His green eyes were darkened with malice as his nostrils flared and his fists clenched at his sides.

I sighed, knowing his anger wasn’t meant to be directed at me. “If you hurt him they’ll suspend you.” I explained cautiously, trying not to upset him anymore.

He threw his hands in the air in frustration. “SO FUCKING WHAT!” He roared at me in a loud voice that instinctively made me recoil.

I used the only excuse that would matter to him. “I’d be here alone all week.” I said quietly, knowing that he wouldn’t like the idea of me walking the halls without him by my side to protect me.

His face fell minutely before he growled in frustration and flopped into one of the empty seats, slamming his elbows painfully onto the desk top and dropping his head into his palms. “Fuck.” He cursed in defeat, rubbing his face with his palms while I stood by the door, uncertain of how to comfort him. I felt the most irrational surge of guilt that he had to hold his temper back just for my benefit. As if I was being burdensome because he couldn’t go pummel that boy like he really wanted to.

That was just the reality to the depth of my love for him. I would give him anything to make him happy and see him smile.

I hesitantly shuffled over to the seat and slowly lifted a hand to his shoulder. And even though his muscles were difficult to feel through his leather jacket, I could tell he was still stiff with anger. I slid my hand up his neck, rubbing soothingly against his skin, and eventually working into his hair and stroking it gently in an attempt to ease him.

After a few moments, he huffed into his palms and dropped one hand, bringing it around my waist and guiding me into his lap. I sat sideways on his legs as he finally lifted his head from his other hand and used it to yank my hood off my head.

“Sorry.” He grunted, still looking frustrated, but trying to beat it back down. That much I could tell. So I smiled at him and kept caressing his hair as his angry gaze focused on anything but me. The crease was there in his forehead again as his brows furrowed in annoyance.

After a while, he sighed deeply and dropped his forehead to my shoulder, tightening his grip around my waist as his messy hair tickled my ear.

We never made it to lunch Wednesday. We sat in the darkened classroom as I made countless attempts at easing his anger with loving caresses. I stroked his hair. I kissed his cheek. I nuzzled his neck. I whispered in his ear that I loved him. I told him an unforgivably crude and tasteless joke about two nuns who walked into a bar. And by the time the bell rang, he was smiling at me again, crease free.

He still looked rather preoccupied when I made it to his room that night. And I was worried that he had spent his evening in his mind again, but was beyond relieved that the crease was still absent from his face as I kissed him. Still, I pushed. Tugging at his hair and trying to make him so overcome with lust that he would try to touch me again as I shifted against his hips quite intentionally.

Of course, Edward couldn’t be swayed like that, and I should have known by then that nothing I could have done would have worked on him. That night I felt something else along side the bitterness and frustration. Defeat.

I pathetically wallowed in the bitter depression that the defeat plunged me into. All night, and all day Thursday. It was so stupid. Something so small and seemingly pointless to any casual observer. It wasn’t like I was some sexual deviant or anything. But the idea that we may never be complete like a real couple bothered me to no end. We could talk, and sleep, and love, and make each other laugh. I was the only thing holding us back from that next level.

When I was in the kitchen that night making beef stew, I fantasized the most ridiculous things about Edward and me.

I imagined what our first time could be like when he made love to me, and he finally gave me that piece of himself. And I’d give him my virginity without a second of hesitation because I

already knew I'd always want him and nothing else. When we became comfortable enough, maybe I'd even get to grant some credibility to those rumors I had heard from Jessica.

I dreamed that we'd graduate together and go to the same college, never leaving each other's sides. Maybe we'd have our own home or apartment where we could share the same bed without hiding it, and we'd be able to make love again every night before I hummed him to sleep. Satisfied and euphoric as he held me in his arms.

My fantasies became even more ridiculous as I added the vegetables into the beef stew. That one day he'd ask me to marry him, and I'd surely say yes. It was stupid to even consider it, but my mind ran away with me, shoving things in my face that would never come to pass.

I'd maybe even finally hunt my real father down so that he could watch our wedding. After my mother had died they tried to convince me to search for him, even though he didn't know about me. But why seek out someone you'd never be able to live with? Why show him he had a freak for a daughter, one that he could never touch or hug like any normal father would. He'd never be able to walk me down the aisle to a version of Edward that I had conjured and didn't even exist.

The bitterness inside me rose and made my dream swell inside my imagination.

My brain began cruelly weaving the details into my psyche against my own will. Like how Alice would have to plan the wedding, forcing me into dresses that I hated while I asked her things like, *'Why can't dresses have hoods again?'*

And she'd make me grin like a mad woman when she'd hold up the veil with a wry smile.

The elements of the whole fantasy became excruciatingly more vivid, transforming into a relentless vision possessing my thoughts. It was so vivid in fact, I actually snorted into the pot of stew I was cooking when the image came to my mind of the showdown involved when Alice and Esme refused to allow Edward his gratuitous use of expletives in his wedding vows to me. I'd roll my eyes at them, smirk, and refuse to get married without the expletives.

Without my permission, the words rang clearly in my head as Edward would recite them.

...for better or for bullshit...for richer or if we both end up poor bastards... solemnly swear to shove my foot up the ass of anyone who touches you... to love and to cherish you for fucking ever...

Everyone who didn't know him well enough would gape at us, open jawed in shock. The people who did would roll their eyes and sigh in exasperation. And we'd just grin like complete idiots at each other as the minister eyed us indignantly.

I'd make a cookie cake just for Edward. *Peanut Butter Promises* perhaps. We'd impatiently sneak away without dancing, eager to begin the wedding night. I didn't care where we went to. We'd make love first. Intense and incredible and filled with our own personal vows as we became bound by pleasure and the ecstasy of our devotion. Then I'd spend the remainder of the night doing the most wicked and devious things to my husband's body. And I'd hum him to sleep, basking in the grin he'd have plastered on his face.

And with that final impossible thought, my stew was burned and completely ruined as smoke began rising in suffocating billows. I cursed my overactive imagination as I spooned it into the trash can, watching dismally as the charred black glop slid down the white plastic of the trash bag grotesquely. *It could have been good.*

It was such a ridiculous reverie. Edward never even planned a week ahead. He'd never shown an interest in mutual colleges. He'd never even shown an interest in having sex with me. Which was probably a good thing considering the possibility was gradually making itself non-existent.

I slammed the lid on the trashcan angrily and heated up leftovers. I didn't make *Peanut Butter Promises* that night. I made *Brownie Drop Defeats*.

And when I climbed up to the balcony and entered Edward's room, I gave him a soft, loving, chaste kiss. Defeated. I was tired of the rejection and the bitterness that came when he pulled away. So I saved him the trouble and agony of having to do it. Because I knew he didn't want me feeling it. And I was even more tired of making him miserable right along with me. I hated for him to bear my burdens. He already bore enough without my bitterness.

The relief was clear on his face when I didn't pull his hair and intentionally stir his arousal. Though his eyes looked sad. For some reason I couldn't fathom. I did my best to smile more for him, and I knew it made him happy. I told him I loved him before we went to sleep that night. Beating him to the punch before I hummed him to sleep. Refusing to hear his acceptance alongside my own.

My bad day was Friday. It went just like every other day that week, walking the halls with Edward and waiting patiently in my seat after class for him so that I could be picked up like a child. He was still touching me whenever possible with his hands. On my arms and neck, and always perfectly innocent.

We began lunch like we had been all week. Rosalie and Emmett never did come to our new table. I had expected them to a few times, but they looked reluctant as they remained at the old one alone, wrapped up in each other. Rose didn't like Edward or Jasper, but Emmett would have gone wherever she went.

I removed my hood for Edward and he stroked the back of my neck while we ate our *Brownie Drop Defeats*. Alice and Jasper entered the lunch room looking particularly frisky as they came to the table hand in hand, grinning and chuckling, and basically making me want to slap them

both. I knew their expressions well enough by then. They had just returned from a quick round in the janitor's closet.

Edward and I watched as they approached the table. I was already feeling the weight of my depression over the defeat when Jasper moved behind her and reached his hands up to fondle her breasts playfully. Right in front of us and the whole cafeteria. It was nothing new. They always did stuff like that. Alice never cared because she liked it when he did those things. She always said it was like 'branding' him in front of the other girls in the school. And usually, I'd just grimace and look away in disgust.

But it was like the universe was shoving it in my face just as I was beginning to find some measure of acceptance. I could feel Edward stiffen as the hand on my neck faltered momentarily in its caress. I just looked down at the table top intently, shoving one more *Brownie Drop Defeat* into my mouth, and rubbing his knee, just to show him, I really didn't care anymore.

Edward

WIDE AWAKE

I was such a fucking moron. Sitting in that meadow and trying to comfort her with the single most idiotic statement known to man. At the time, I didn't understand why she looked so hurt. The frustration I could definitely understand. But not the hurt. I knew she wasn't ready for that kind of thing yet. I wanted to be even more of an asshole and say something stupid like 'I fucking told you so'. Then she threw my words back to me bitterly.

"Normal girls."

I didn't mean it like that, really. Though, if I was being honest, it was true. She wasn't fucking normal. Neither was I. And really, what the fuck is normal anyways? Who set the standard? And what was so great about it that made her so goddamn bitter?

But that was the whole thing. Her bitterness. I had seen it before a couple times. Mostly dealing with that Stanley bitch. And the more I thought about it, the more I figured the bitterness wasn't directed at Stanley or Mallory. It was directed at not being normal. A normal girl.

I tried to tell her it didn't matter to me. None of that shit. I'd be lying through my teeth if I said it wouldn't be nice to be able to do that kind of stuff with her. To be able to touch her and maybe move things further. But she was so much more to me. And that statement just made her impossibly more upset. She had that look on her face that I knew so well. She felt like a freak. And I always knew how to take care of that. *I'll show her mine.*

But this time, I had nothing to show.

It reminded me of before New Years when she wanted to comfort me because I couldn't feel love. And she couldn't show me hers, because we weren't tit for tat on that particular issue. Now I was the one standing aside and feeling fucking helpless.

Of course she didn't say something ridiculously insensitive like "I'm sure even normal motherfuckers can't feel love sometimes." Yeah. That would have made me feel pretty fucking shitty.

It was a definite 'open mouth, insert foot' moment for Edward – insensitive Asshole Douche Bag – Cullen.

I gave her my jacket on the way back to the boat because she looked cold. It was the only reason I wore the damned thing anyways. Even that little gesture didn't make her smile. I watched her face as I rowed back to our property. She wouldn't fucking look at me. Just staring at the trees and slumping into my jacket with the same frustrated look on her face.

I told her I loved her in the gazebo. Because I really fucking did. I thought it really helped when I saw her smile a little and hand me back my jacket.

I spent the rest of the afternoon and evening just fucking thinking. Wondering why she had to be so bitter about it. And wondering why I couldn't touch her that way if it wasn't a part of her... experience. Truthfully, I was an ignorant bastard. Running around with my girl like I knew everything about her and how to treat her, which was such a fucking lie. Because I didn't know the first thing about her condition. Medically. Psychologically. I blew off all of Carlisle's fancy medical jargon because it was so offensive to her.

When she came again that night, the bitterness was returned tenfold. She kissed me madly... fucking desperately. Pulling at my hair and arching her chest into me. Like she was just asking me to grope her again. It was so unthinkable.

I couldn't bear to make her feel like that. Scared, afraid, panicked, and uncomfortable. It rivaled the bitterness in her eyes as I pulled myself away from her, unwilling to grant her request. I hated seeing her like that. I would have done fucking anything to make her feel better. *Anything but that.*

So I told her I loved her that night, once again, trying with everything in me to convey it with my every movement. Trying to show her it *didn't fucking matter*.

But Monday came, and her mood remained unchanged. I walked through the halls of the school with her at my side, folding her into myself like my protectiveness would be enough to dissolve her frustration. And I kept telling her I loved her. Because I really did. And also because it was one of the only things I could do to just make her fucking smile again.

I stopped her by the gym, and I made sure Stanley was watching when I kissed her on the cheek and told her I loved her yet again. I sighed at her smile as she left me by the double doors, wishing I could understand all of her bitterness and frustration. Wishing I wasn't so fucking ignorant.

When I got home that afternoon, I decided I should know more. About the whole thing. If I really loved her like I knew I did, then I would know this shit already. And Carlisle had a pretty fucking extensive medical library in his study. So I locked myself in the room and started going through his books.

It was all so fucking confusing. I had to have medical references for the texts, and a medical dictionary for the reference. And a regular dictionary for the medical dictionary. And at six when Daddy C. was arriving home, I gathered them all up and took them to my room. It was going to take a lot of fucking time.

It all started out as an innocent curiosity. I spent the entire evening reading about symptoms of PTSD. It took a lot of translation into English, and by the time my girl knocked on the door at ten, I had completely immersed myself in it.

I hastily hid the books from her, not wanting to make her even more upset by discovering what I was doing. She still fucking threw herself at me shamelessly, and I still fucking pulled away. My girl was nothing if not determined and as stubborn as a goddamn mule.

I began touching her more. Innocent little caresses directly to her skin just so she wouldn't feel like I didn't want to touch her at all. I hated rejecting her so fucking blatantly every night, but I couldn't force myself to do it to her again. To be the one that made her feel that way.

At school I would protect her even more relentlessly. Mostly because of the information I had gained on her condition. It was so much worse than I had given it credit for. Everything I read told me that her case was particularly severe. It was all just as grim as Carlisle made it out to be.

Tuesday afternoon, I locked myself in the study again, and resorted to the internet for more information. Some of the material I was reading held eerie parallels to some of my own habits, though I tried mostly to keep my attention on Bella's symptoms.

I was trying to wrap my head around which part of her condition made her react that way to my touch. The PTSD, or the phobia. In the end, I figured out that the phobia was just a side effect of the PTSD. The real problem was the way her brain was protecting her. It sounded good in theory, but a lot of the people writing from experience were frustrated just like Bella was. That their mind was forcing them into an unwanted reaction.

I was locked in my room reading books again when Bella came at ten. And I did the same shit where I hid everything quickly so she wouldn't see. I hated being sneaky and hiding shit from my girl. I just didn't want to add to her bitterness at not being normal.

And she had to do it again when I pulled her in for a kiss. Fisting her hands into my hair and pulling it fiercely as she fought with my tongue and arched her chest into mine. She was panting into my mouth, refusing to let me pull away as she pressed herself against me roughly, allowing me to feel every curve of her little body and just begging me to run my hands over them. I tugged myself away from her, panting and rock fucking hard, staring into her frustrated and lust hooded brown eyes.

It was so fucking desperate.

It was so fucking cruel.

It was so fucking sexy.

She wasn't the only one feeling frustrated by all this. She was just making shit worse for us both by doing it. I tried to fill her void with 'I love you's' when we went to bed. I was also trying not to push my throbbing erection into her as she hummed me to sleep.

Wednesday was just further proof that when it rained it poured. There's always some asshole who has to fuck with me when I'm already dealing with a massive amount of bullshit as it is. His comment pissed me off. Okay. Understatement. It made me fucking furious. I wanted to hunt his ass down and tell him to say it to my face. Then knock every one of his teeth out when he did. But Bella wouldn't allow it, pulling me into an empty room alone. And the only reason I let her was because I couldn't bring myself to fight her off. And all of her efforts pissed me off even more. I couldn't beat the shit out of James, and I couldn't beat the shit out of him either.

So I fucking lost it and yelled at my girl. And when she reminded me of why I couldn't lose my cool so completely, it made me feel impossibly shittier that I almost did. But instead of being angry at me like she should have been, she was her usual forgiving self. Caressing me and loving me like I wasn't a complete fuck up that nearly risked her safety because of something so fucking stupid.

I held her in my lap, shoving the anger down so I wouldn't hurt her or say something mean and asinine. And she knew just how to make realize how much of an asshole I was being. Kissing me and loving me. She covered me in it, extinguishing the flames inside my mind with her touch and love. Then telling me the filthiest joke I think I had ever heard. Which is saying a whole fucking lot. And hearing it come out of Bella's mouth made me smile despite the whole thing.

Because that was just my girl. She would do whatever it took to make me feel better. Despite her shitty bitter mood, she pushed it all aside for me. Filthy nun jokes and all. *And not even a blush.*

I studied her condition even harder that night because of it. I knew I couldn't fix her. In fact, I probably knew better than Carlisle with all of the information I had gained on the subject. But I still had the need to understand her, maybe make shit easier, so I kept reading and learning.

Taking note of little things she did that were related to it. Her posture in school, the way she always hid from people, the nightmares and the anxiety attacks after she was touched.

But when she came that night, there was still that same fucking desperation. Almost like she was trying to prove to herself that she could be normal, and asking for my help as she pushed my willpower and libido to its breaking point, just trying to get me to grope her again.

I had to be the only man on the planet wishing his girlfriend would just fucking... stop trying to get him to feel her up already. I was seriously considering changing my morning shower routine to nights.

And with every blatant rejection always came the bitterness and frustration that made me want to pull my goddamn hair out. I would tell I loved her, every fucking night. Hoping she would understand that it just wasn't as big a deal as she was making it.

Thursday was worse for her. I don't know why or what snapped, but she was impossibly sadder. I still walked to her to every class, kissing her and loving her in front of everyone. Trying to make her feel as normal as I could. I was wondering if she felt this way after Christmas and I was as inconsolable. Fucking helpless.

So when I got home, I did the only thing I could.

I got a little obsessed, I'll admit. Locking myself away every afternoon and evening to learn more about it all. Mostly it was for Bella, but honestly, it was really fucking fascinating. The way the brain reacts to situations and traumas. Working to protect itself by subconsciously forcing her to react to certain stimuli. Her condition was so severe that her subconscious mind wouldn't even allow *me* to invade a space so personal to her. I understood why, even if I couldn't understand why it made her so upset.

I began drifting to subjects unrelated to her phobia. Things that seemed familiar to me. Because if I was being honest, I was more like some of the patient cases in those books than I allowed myself to admit.

But I didn't have the time to focus on it, because when my girl came that night I was expecting the desperation. But it never came. She leaned up and gave me a soft kiss on the lips. Sweet and chaste and full of something I couldn't quite place.

I was so fucking relived that I didn't have to push her away. But the look in her eyes as she pulled herself away made my heart clench. Still, I didn't understand it.

Until the next morning when I got my cookies. Defeat. That was the kiss and the look in her eyes. She felt fucking defeated. And I knew that feeling so well, because I had felt it only a few weeks prior.

Friday should have been a good day. With the coming weekend and all. It started out just like every other day that week. I walked her around school like normal, feeling beyond relieved that most of the stares and whispers had completely subsided by then. I rushed to her classrooms after every bell where I would find her waiting for me like I always asked. Sometimes I think it only made her feel worse. Having to be escorted around the school by her boyfriend. But it had to fucking be done.

I was still touching her skin every chance I got. I felt so shitty about the night time incidents, and more than a little responsible for her defeat. Having to push her away like I wasn't fucking dying to do it. Probably making her feel inferior when I promised myself I was going to do the opposite.

Then the situation got impossibly worse at lunch. We were eating the cookies. And I really didn't want to eat them, and not because they weren't fucking delicious, because they were. But they were tainted, and they made me feel shitty as I caressed her neck and watched her swallow them down.

Jazz and Brandon walked in the room like two horny jackrabbits that had nested in the janitor's closet for the last twenty minutes. And when they came to our table I wanted to fucking punch him. Of all the things he could do in front of her, he had to grope Brandon. *Rub it in my girl's face a little more, prick.*

It wasn't his fault, but it didn't stop me from glowering at him the entire hour. Not that he was paying any attention. Bella just spent the hour staring at the table top, rubbing my knee, and swallowing her defeat.

I was done. Just fucking finished with the whole ridiculous thing. And I couldn't even really call it ridiculous, because I had been there. Trying to feel love and forcing it to come so desperately it pulled me under. *This* was pulling her under. And I wouldn't sit back and watch it fucking defeat her.

When I got home I searched relentlessly. The books, the internet, message boards, therapeutic references. Fucking anything that could help her. And when I finally found it, I knew what I had to do.

It was a simple concept really, to desensitize her gradually to the negative stimuli. It wasn't a cure all, by any means. It wasn't something that could ease her phobia completely, because her phobia was linked to her flashes and visions caused by the PTSD, which wouldn't be affected by the technique.

But I didn't give her the flashes and the visions, just the feelings, so I had hoped that it could possibly be effective, if only on me. That it was just enough to give her that one thing. And if done in a long term situation could maybe even ease her tension around other people, even if she still couldn't touch them.

It was still risky though. It was risky because if it didn't work, it would only make shit worse. For the both of us. But I still had to try, and I knew she'd really fucking want me to. So I spent my evening researching the technique, and trying to perfect it in my head to make necessary modifications.

And I felt like such a goddamn pervert. Because I was spending four hours trying to find out how to cop a feel on my girl. I couldn't do it in the house, especially at night. Because if shit went wrong and she freaked out, we'd be discovered. And I'd probably be hastily detained by local law enforcement.

When she came that night at ten, looking fucking depressed and defeated, I resolved to save my idea until the last possible moment. I didn't want her getting her hopes up all night and all day just to be disappointed.

She didn't talk much during dinner while I stroked her hair and held her close to me. We went to bed early. She was down and fucking glum, and I was half dreading, half anticipating the coming day. I held her close and kissed her head softly. Telling her once again how much I fucking loved her. It always made her smile wider when I emphasized that kind of shit with profanity.

When we woke up the next morning and she got ready to leave, I asked her to meet me at the gazebo at noon.

She froze as she looked at me from the door. And her expression was fucking agonizing. I nearly told her right then about what I was planning. But it would give her six hours to get her hopes up.

"And bring your iPod." I grumbled while I lay on the bed, running my fingers through my hair and squinting at her in the doorway. I already checked the weather for the afternoon, and it didn't call for rain or clouds, much like last weekend, which made the river meadow perfect for the... experiment.

She opened her mouth as if she wanted to say something, but then snapped it shut and nodded at me, leaving the room without asking any questions.



It was a pretty nice day outside, and I was really fucking hoping it was some kind of omen as I made my way to the gazebo at noon. I still wore my jacket, just in case my girl got cold. I didn't bring anything else with me, because all I really needed were my hands.

She was already there waiting for me when I approached. Her shirt was a problem. It was blue and looked a lot like the one she wore last time, but with a low neckline that would allow skin to skin contact if I wasn't really careful. If she decided to go through with it. Which she probably fucking would.

She had her hair up this time, most likely anticipating where I wanted to go and not feeling up to slapping it out of her face. She rose from the bench with her bag on her back when I made it to her. She still had the same sadness in her eyes that had grown over the last week.

I just held my hand out to her. *Would you follow me?*

She did. Slipping her little hand into mine and stepping to my side willingly.

That was another thing about this whole fucked up situation. My girl put all of her trust in me. And I was really hoping that I wasn't doing something to compromise that as I helped her into the boat silently.

I studied her while I rowed us down stream. She loved looking out at the forest while she was in the boat. I could already tell. I rowed slower than normal, just so she could see more of it. Trying to make her as relaxed as possible. She looked so fucking beautiful in her normal girl outfit. The blue looked so good with her skin, making her look a little less pale than usual.

Her straight dark hair flowed from her ponytail, leaving her neck and ears completely uncovered. The collar bones were there, and a little bit of cleavage, but I tried not to ogle them. Because they drove me fucking crazy and this wasn't about me.

When we reached the bank, I helped her out, grabbing her by the waist and lifting her over the water so she wouldn't get her little feet wet. She smiled a little as I set her down and took her hand again. I smiled back. Because it was little, but it was something.

She stiffened infinitesimally as we reached the quasi-meadow. But still followed beside me as I made my way to the same tree in the middle. Once her bag was off, I pulled her down with me against the tree trunk, just like last time as I snaked my arm around her waist and pulled her into me.

I allowed us a few moments of silence before I brought it up, leaning down and smelling all her flowers and cookies from the top of her ponytail, and rubbing her arm in something I hoped was a relaxing gesture.

She sighed and leaned into me as I caressed her. Because that shit always relaxed her. And it was a damn good thing, because I was probably going to be doing a lot of it.

I ran my fingers through my hair with my free hand and gazed out at the grass of the meadow, wondering how the fuck I was going to bring something like that up.

Simplicity.

“Do you want me to try to touch you again?” I asked bluntly. No bullshit. Just a question.

She didn’t move or even really say anything for a moment, until finally her head slowly swiveled around to meet my gaze. Her big brown eyes looked pretty fucking skeptical.

“Really?” She quirked an eyebrow at me incredulously.

I nodded cautiously down at her with pursed lips. “There’s this technique I read about that could maybe work for us.” I explained cautiously, hoping she wouldn’t ask why I was even reading shit like that, but needing her to know there was more to it than just grabbing.

And it was like whatever cloud that had been darkening her face and mood for the last week completely fucking dissipated. Her face lit up into a huge fucking smile, and her eyes shone with excitement. And I was kind of expecting her to blush or some shit, because my girl was like that. But she didn’t.

She began practically vibrating with enthusiasm in a way that made want to chuckle and roll my eyes. She looked fucking thrilled. I had never in my entire life seen a girl so goddamn excited about being felt up before.

It was so ridiculous.

It was so cute.

It was so... my girl.

She turned to me fully with a big excited grin, still doing the vibrating thing, and nodding at me in a way that made all her dark hair bounce around from the ponytail.

I hated to be a buzz kill. “You have to fucking listen to me very carefully.” I said seriously as I looked over at her. I half expected her to just jut her chest out at me and hold her hands up in offering. Instead she tried to stifle her grin and nodded at me, pulling away enough to sit at my side Indian style, listening to my instructions intently. And kind of fucking jutting her chest out.

I sighed and shook my head, really hating that she was getting so excited, because there was no certainty. “Okay.” I began slowly, rubbing my hand over my face for a moment before turning to face her. She was still vibrating a little, but I tried to block it out. “This is a process, so don’t get fucking frustrated when it doesn’t just... work.” I explained the best I could.

Her grin fell a bit before she rolled her eyes at me. “Right. Technique, process, don’t get frustrated, might not work.” She waved a hand dismissively and perked her grin back up. “What do I do?” She asked enthusiastically.

I rolled my eyes at her. She was definitely going to get frustrated, and I was going to feel like shit for it. But it was too fucking late now. “Have you ever heard of a safe word?” I asked, trying to imagine my girl watching dom porn or some shit.

Of course she shook her head, pursing her lips in curiosity.

I fought back at grimace. “You’re going to pick a word that’s in no way related to what we’re doing.” I explained, knowing that I wanted her to choose it, since she’d be using it.

She furrowed her brows for a moment, still pursing her lips, and looking so much fucking happier than I had seen her all week. “Cookie.” She nodded decisively, still grinning.

I bit back a massive snicker at the particular use of verbiage, and nodded in approval. “So,” I started, getting to the part where she realized how serious I was being. “When you start to feel... uncomfortable...” I used the best word I could think of to describe her panic. “You say cookie.” I instructed, watching as she furrowed her brows and nodded.

I raised my eyebrows at her. “If at any point you say cookie, I’ll stop. No questions asked, no fucking frustration.” I continued, and then after a pause, narrowed my eyes at her expression. “And I fucking mean it. If you just persevere it won’t work.” I explained, just knowing that she would try to soldier on without saying anything, and it would be ineffective.

She bit her lip and frowned slightly. “You’ll keep trying though. Right?” She pleaded. I fought the urge to sigh in exasperation and instead nodded at her, because it might take me all fucking day, but I would keep trying. Her smile returned and she nodded her compliance.

I was pleased she was beginning to take it a little more seriously, even though the vibrating was still there, I could see some skepticism in her features. “Get out your iPod.” I instructed softly, watching her remove the shiny blue device from her sack with pursed lips, and glancing at me curiously. Probably wondering what the iPod had to do with getting groped. “Something relaxing.” I explained as she quirked an eyebrow at me and put the ear buds in.

I sighed again and leaned back against the tree with my legs spread out in front of me and grabbed her hand, guiding her between my slightly parted legs and into my lap so her back was to my chest.

I grabbed her shoulders and pulled her down completely onto my chest, moving her ponytail out of the way in the process. I didn’t know what song she chose, but I had plenty of soothing shit on that thing. She reluctantly lolled her head back onto my shoulder so that her ear was right by my mouth.

My girl was so fucking light. I don’t know how she managed it with all the goddamn cookies and food she cooked. She removed the ear bud closest to my mouth. I supposed so she could hear my instruction. Not there was any past this particular point.

I grabbed both of her hands and put them at my sides, palms down on the grass. The most important part of the whole fucking thing was making her relaxed. So I began rubbing her arms slowly and soothingly up and down. After a few passes up her arms, I began working on her shoulders, massaging them gently, and feeling when her breathing became more deep and relaxed.

I slowly worked my way up to her bare neck, running my fingertips up to her ears and back down in a trail, returning to her hands where I’d even massage her little fingers a little bit too. I continued the circuit a few times, from her knuckles to her ears, before she was completely limp on top of me.

I was almost afraid she fell asleep, but I didn’t hear her signature soft snore, so I knew she wasn’t. Keeping true to my own method, I decided it was time to finally try.

When my fingers made their final pass down her neck, I didn’t go over her shoulders. Instead I lightly dragged them down, over her collar bones, and quickly dragged them over her the peaks of her breasts.

“Cookie!” She blurted and tensed up immediately, as her eyes shot open. I took my hands away from her torso quickly, kind of grimacing at how fast the tension took her. She huffed and slumped into my chest. Fucking frustrated.

When she darted her eyes to mine, I glowered at her in a way that clearly said, *Don’t you fucking start that shit.*

She got the hint. Closing her eyes as I resumed my relaxing circuit from her fingers to her ears slowly and soothingly. I made five passes before she was completely limp again. I did the same thing as last time. Not going over her shoulders. Instead I softly raked my fingertips over her collar bones and chest, then quickly darted them across her peaks.

“Cookie.” She informed me in a mildly frustrated tone, slightly tensing. But I could notice the subtle changes. She didn’t say the word as loudly, and she didn’t tense as much. And she didn’t even fucking open her eyes.

I tried not to get my hopes up as I made my third attempt. I repeated the circuit diligently. And it only took three passes before she was totally limp again. Two less. Pretty big fucking difference. I ran my fingertips lightly down her chest again, hastily brushing them over the peaks.

“Cookie?” She asked quietly in question form, like she wasn’t quite sure whether or not she was uncomfortable. But I could feel her on top of me, and I didn’t feel the tension.

So I did it again, just to make sure, lightly brushing them back up to her neck. She didn’t say the safe word that time. And when I darted my eyes to her face, I could see a little smile flirting at the corners of her lips.

I repeated the trails, gradually increasing the pressure of my fingertips against her skin as I worked from her fingers to her neck. Then I just fucking dragged my fingers down harder and slower over the peaks of her breasts.

No cookie.

I kept doing it, each pass with my fingertips firmer than the last. I spent eight total passes over her breasts with my fingers before I finally ghosted my entire palm over them, light as a feather.

No cookie.

I was feeling a little fucking smug about the whole thing, and the look on my girl’s face told me she was too. I was afraid she was becoming impatient with my pace, but I didn’t want to push it. So I kept doing the circuits, ghosting my palm and applying slightly more pressure than the previous.

I spent nine passes with my palms before eventually, I was actually pressing into them as I moved across her peaks. The whole process honestly probably took an hour and a half.

But the look on her face when she opened her eyes and looked at me sideways told me, *That was no grope.*

So I did the circuit one last time. Slowly rubbing up her arms with my entire palm, easing up to her shoulders and over them to her neck. I stopped at her ears and moved back down, sliding them over her collar bones and chest, over the neckline of her shirt, until they were positioned right over the peaks of her breasts. I held them there.

I could feel her chest rising and falling under my palms as I rested them atop her, but I held them still. For a while. She probably thought that I was easing her into the feel of them on her breasts or some shit. But really, I didn't know what the fuck to do from there.

I eventually decided I had to do something, so I started to apply a gentle pressure, shifting them slightly against her peaks. It still wasn't a full on grope or anything, but I was working her into it. I used my thumbs to massage the sides of them firmly.

No cookies.

I darted my eyes sideways to my girl's face once again. And she was fucking looking at me. Leaning her head on my shoulder and watching me stare at my hands on her tits. And of course, because she was Bella, she was grinning.

It was so fucking unbelievable. This whole week I had been trying to make her smile like that. I was wishing I hadn't thrown out my Scooby Doo pajama pants, and nearly asked Jazz where he got them at so I could replace them.

And all she really wanted was this. Something in her gaze told me that it wasn't just about wanting to be a normal girl. It was about being a normal girl with me. If it was any other motherfucker with his hands on her tits just staring at them, she wouldn't have been smiling like that.

I kept my gaze on hers as I applied more pressure to her breasts. And she arched into them minutely as I cupped them. There were no cookies.

So I did it. I fucking groped her. Pressing into them completely and squeezing them firmly, and never taking my eyes from hers.

No cookie.

And it just made her grin even wider when I did it, and her brain didn't tell her to be afraid. The frustration was gone. Her eyes were clear of any bitterness or defeat.

I was officially fucking smug as I smirked over at her on my shoulder. "See? You can totally handle this shit." I whispered in her ear with a smile.

I continued the groping, massaging her breasts as firmly as I would allow without hurting her. And I was wondering while I was doing it if it was everything she had probably hyped it up to be.

“Do you like it?” I asked in a quiet whisper into her ear. I watched her smile grow wider as she hummed her approval and let her eyes flutter closed. I shifted my gaze once again to my hands that were just fucking shamelessly groping her breasts.

I didn’t stop. I couldn’t when she was smiling like that. I just continued watching my hands as they worked on her peaks, cupping and squeezing, and not feeling like a pervert like I thought I would.

“Do you?” She whispered quietly, not moving from her position on my shoulder. I darted my eyes to hers and nearly fucking snorted. Instead I nodded, and fought against the urge to roll my eyes. What kind of stupid fucking question was that?

Her eyes remained on mine for a few moments as I continued massaging. I had the urge to turn my face into her ear and kiss it. Or maybe lick it a little. Kiss my way down her neck as I fondled her completely. I was trying to push that aside, telling myself not to enjoy it so goddamn much, because it wasn’t for me.

Bella licked her lips, making me dart my eyes to them momentarily before I met her gaze again. “Can you do more?” She breathed, still unmoving. As if she was afraid if she moved she might lose it. It reminded me of our New Year’s kiss when I was afraid to stop kissing her because I might lose the love I was feeling.

Then her words finally sunk in.

I furrowed my brows as I continued my ministrations. “What do you suggest?” I asked cautiously. I wasn’t really sure how well it would work with other things, and I was terrified that the frustration would return.

She didn’t even fucking blush as she gazed at me sideways from my shoulder. “Skin to skin.” She whispered with a pleading look on her face.

Holy fucking Christ.

My breath hitched a little. She wanted me to go under her fucking shirt. And she was pleading.

I sighed. And not because I didn’t want to do it, but because I really, *really* fucking did. And I was trying to make this all about her. Which meant I had to do it. I couldn’t keep rejecting her and live with myself.

With a final gust of air, I stopped my hands completely. And I had no way of knowing whether not it would be worse if it was skin to skin. But there was really no turning back as she gazed into my eyes, silently pleading with me to... want more myself or just give it, I couldn't tell.

I didn't lift my hands completely off of her, and I never shifted my gaze from her eyes. I just slid my hands down over her ribcage and down her stomach to the hem of her little blue shirt. I was trying to work fucking slowly, still trying to keep her relaxed.

I slid my thumbs under first, rubbing the skin on her sides soothingly. She didn't tense up at the feeling or say the word, so I ducked the rest of my fingers underneath. I continued just caressing her sides for a few moments before I slowly began making the climb up.

Her eyes never left mine, and her lips became slightly parted as I slid up to her ribcage. I halted the movement momentarily, afraid that was a bad sign. But she didn't say the word or tense up. So I kept moving. The shirt rode up with me slightly, but it was all fucking wide at the bottom, so it gave me room to move up her stomach without much exposure.

It was probably a fucked up thing for me to think about at the moment, but I could feel her scars. Little raised textures under my fingertips as I glided over them. It felt wrong. That I was feeling hers, and not showing her mine. It was just our way.

I eventually felt the little underwire of her bra. I fingered it softly for a moment with my thumbs as my fingertips touched each other in the center of her abdomen, gazing into her eyes just to make sure she really fucking wanted me to try it. She was still pleading. So I pressed my thumbs deep into her skin and slowly ducked them underneath it.

She tensed minutely. And she didn't say the fucking word. I narrowed my eyes at her, considering if I should stop. But she relaxed herself. All on her own. Breathing deeply in and out again, and once again limp on top of me.

I was still cautious as my thumbs were wedged between her bra and her warm breasts. So I moved them a little. Just to see if it made her say the word or tense. But it didn't. I still gazed in her eyes as I slowly moved them up, wiggling against the constraint of the tight underwire.

I avoided the area where I estimated her nipples to be. Those things were pretty fucking sensitive, and I wanted to ease into that slower. So instead I guided my thumbs to the outer sides, bringing the rest of my fingers up and cautiously sliding them under the bra as well.

Her breath seemed to hitch. And I froze. Not knowing if she was doing it because she liked it, or because she didn't.

But there was no cookie and no tension.

So I kept going, guiding the fingers up to the middle of her chest while my knuckles strained under the stiff underwire, until eventually, I was holding her breasts in my hands.

I stopped, still looking into her eyes to make sure everything was still copasetic. Her eyes were becoming a little hooded, but her breathing remained unchanged. I held them there completely fucking still for a few moments. Getting her used to my touch on them.

Until she arched her back again, into my hands. I looked at her all disapproving. She was trying to fucking push it, and this was something that needed patience. As subjective as it may be.

After a few more moments, I began softly applying pressure, just like I did before, on top of her shirt. And I was really fucking battling not to think of what I was doing. And forcing myself not to think about shit like how fucking supple she felt, and warm, and so perfectly proportioned to my hands it was unreal.

She sighed as she gazed sideways into my eyes with her lips slightly parted. Then she darted them down to her chest where my hands were cupping her completely. And then I kind of fucking panicked for a moment, because I didn't know if actually seeing it would change the effect any.

But instead of tensing or saying cookie, she made the quietest moan I had ever fucking heard and closed her eyes. And I wanted to bang my head against the tree trunk, because if I heard her moans, I'd be done for.

I fought to keep focus. I refused to let myself look at it. So I kept my gaze on my girl's face, shifting my hands and beginning a slow and careful massage. She wasn't tensing up but her breathing was changing slightly. She never said the word though, so I figured it was more of a bodily reaction than a mental one.

I kept rubbing slowly, applying more pressure with every caress. I stopped my massaging to really squeeze them, forcing them up to the center of her chest. Her breath hitched again, making me freeze until I could determine that it was still okay. I fought to keep my gaze on her eyelids, and her slightly parted lips, and everywhere but her chest as I was squeezing her peaks together.

Until eventually I had worked and squeezed all I could without making contact with the most crucial part. I cautiously slid my thumbs from the sides of her breasts to the centers, running them over her nipples, which I was just finding out were fully erect, and quickly sweeping them downwards.

She fucking moaned when I did it. The meadow was so quiet and peaceful. And she filled it with that one fucking sound that would unravel me.

I was so fucking happy that she didn't tense when I did it, and she just laid her head on my shoulder and was actually enjoying it. But I was so fucking gone.

I looked.

I groaned.

I sighed and leaned my head back against the trunk, looking down my nose at my hands inside my girl's pretty blue shirt. I ran my thumbs back up over her nipples, making her breath hitch again. I'm pretty sure she could feel my dick pressing into her as she sat on me. And it really wasn't helping matters any.

I kept looking as I squeezed again. And *fucking Christ*, the scooping neck of her shirt exposed my fingers on her when I did it. I battled further to push down all the lust I was feeling in that moment. Tried not to realize how good they felt in my hands. How I could feel my girl's heart beating with every squeeze and caress. Remembering the feeling of her pressed against me on Christmas Eve, and wishing I could go back to that moment so I could really fucking look at her.

And as I kept squeezing and massaging and running my thumbs over her erect nipples, she would let out tiny moans from my shoulder. I didn't know if she was looking because I couldn't really focus on anything else but the sight of it.

I loved hearing her make those noises. I loved that I was making her feel that way. After the week she had, it made me so fucking elated to give her even the smallest pleasure. And I was on a bit of a smug high for even accomplishing it at all.

And after a moment, I was really fondling her like I meant it. Squeezing and rubbing, and eventually ran my whole palm over her nipples. She whimpered when I did it and bucked her hips up a bit, making me finally lift my head to her neck so I could shift my gaze to hers.

She was looking at my hands when I lifted my head, but she darted her eyes to mine. And she was breathing deeply and her eyes were so fucking filled with lust and need. I'm not sure what mine looked like, but they were probably pretty similar.

I stopped my hands. And I didn't know why. Maybe it was because I thought we would stop. Maybe it was because I wanted to know what she wanted me to do next. But it was probably equal amounts of both.

I didn't fucking know. I didn't plan this far ahead, because I didn't have enough faith in it.

Her tongue darted out to her slightly parted lips and licked them as she gazed at me with those hooded brown eyes. Her chest was fucking heaving under my hands. And my dick was throbbing underneath her.

I was trying to ask her with my eyes, *What do you want?*

I was trying to tell her, *I'll give you fucking anything.*

I needed her to know, *This is for you.*

Half of me was hoping when she opened her mouth, the word 'cookie' would come out. Another, much hormonal, part of me was hoping she didn't want my hands to stop.

She darted her eyes to her shirt and back to meet my gaze, licking her lips again. "Can you do more?" She breathed, gazing fucking intensely into my eyes while her chest heaved underneath me.

You have got to be fucking kidding me.

I had to ask. "What do you suggest?" I asked, in a voice that was far too fucking husky for my liking.

She licked her lips again, and I wanted to ask her to knock it the fuck the off. "Something... lower?" She asked quietly, fucking pleading with her eyes again.

All the air left my lungs in a gust as her words hit me. She really fucking wanted it. She wanted me to touch her... there. And I had no fucking clue how hard that would be, or how long it would take to accomplish it. And my only hope was that it would take me so long, that by the time I did, my fucking erection would be gone, and I could focus again.

She wasn't even blushing when she asked. She blushed when I pulled her fucking chair out for her. But not when she wanted me to touch her between her legs. It seemed so fucking weird to me. And so Bella.

I removed my hands from her bra, never breaking her lust hooded gaze, and slid them down to her stomach. I needed to get an initial reaction, some general basis. Since it was something I had never done before. I slid my hands out of her shirt and over her hips. I guided one hand to the top of her thigh, and used the other to slowly caress the hand on the ground at my side. I used one of my knees to gently nudge her legs slightly parted on top of me.

I rubbed her thigh gently, starting on the top and caressing the side with my thumb, and then moving my fingertips to the inside. Her jeans were unusually thin, and that was probably not going to work in my favor. I held her gaze as I got my initial reaction, sliding my hand up, and gently grazing the seam between her legs.

"Cookie." She said, tensing up minutely and staring into my eyes. I moved my hand back to the top of her thigh.

And I wanted to fucking groan. Because it wasn't nearly as bad as her breasts were. It should have been, at least I'd expect it to be. Of course she had ground against my hard on so many times with it, maybe she was just gradually desensitizing herself. Fuck if I knew.

I continued caressing the top of her hand with mine while I gently soothed her thigh, rubbing up to her hip, and back down as far as I could reach. It took three passes before she was entirely limp again.

I kept my eyes on hers for the second try, sliding my hand up her inner thigh and grazing the seam again.

"Cookie." She whispered with a twitch of her legs. I moved my hand back to the thigh, but she was already limp again. Only a fucking twitch. I still rubbed from her hip to her thigh again before I made my third pass at trying. I slid my hand up her inner thigh once again, grazing the seam lightly.

No cookie.

I went back the other way, grazing it once more. Still nothing. And then I was pretty fucking lost because I had planned it all out for groping her, and this was unexpected. Her eyes were still pleading for me to push farther, and do more.

I fucking sighed right into her ear. *Who's defeated now?*

I slid my hand from her hip to between her legs once more, just sticking to the method I had used before on her breasts, and lightly eased my hand into her center, holding it there, just fucking barely touching her.

No cookie again.

I could feel the heat just fucking radiating. It made my dick twitch. I'm pretty sure she felt it.

I held my hand still on her, not knowing how much to push her with this one thing. I didn't want to see the frustration when another cookie came.

She never gave me the chance to decide. She shifted her hips against it. And me.

Our breath hitched at the same time. And I gave her another disapproving look that clearly said, *Process.*

Her impatience was clear in her eyes, but she remained compliant nonetheless. It had to have been three hours since we had first arrived, fucking battling to keep my girl relaxed so that I could grope her fully. And now more.

I was telling her with my eyes to be fucking thankful we could even get this far as I gently applied pressure with my palm. She twitched slightly again. But it was really fucking unfortunate that I couldn't decipher her reaction as a positive or negative one. When she didn't say cookie, I was fucking praying she was being honest, and not just soldiering on. Though her lust hooded eyes certainly backed her up.

I was still gently caressing her hand on the ground with mine as I moved my other palm against the fabric of her jeans.

Her eyes fluttered closed once again as her breathing grew deeper. I decided to work with smaller areas as I lifted my palm off of her, and used my middle finger to slowly slide up the seam with a gentle pressure. I watched as her eyebrows just barely knit together at the feel of it.

I avoided the most sensitive area once again, and added another finger on my trail back down. She grew impossibly more limp on top of me as I made my pass. I repeated it a few more times, resolved to take it slowly despite her impatience.

I added another finger on my fourth pass, applying even more pressure as I rubbed outside of her jeans, always avoiding the spot I estimated her clit to be. Because I honestly had no fucking clue what her reaction would be if I touched it.

Her breathing became heavier as I added my pinky, finally using all four fingers to stroke my way up and down, always keeping my middle finger on the seam of her jeans. When I added the pinky, she spread her legs further for me, dropping her feet to either side of my calves.

I made more passes with my fingers, a little fucking nervous about the next step as I made her more relaxed by caressing her hand with my thumb.

I could feel every heavy breath she took while she sat on top of me. And my erection was being smashed in between us, in a way that was far more fucking pleasant than it should have been.

I darted my eyes to her throat, where I could actually see her pulse as the pale skin on it rose and fell with each beat of her heart. I was paying it close attention as I lowered my thumb to her jeans and lightly dragged it over her clit.

She gasped and fucking bucked her hips up into my palm, doing a little writhe to find the friction of my thumb, while simultaneously stirring my hard on underneath her. I darted my eyes back to hers where she was looking at me, and gave her another disapproving look. *Not fucking cool.*

She huffed and began looking frustrated again, which I didn't fucking like. "Reflex reaction, Edward." She whispered, closing her eyes again.

Well... fucking duh.

I pressed on, deciding that she was right. Shit like that was probably going to happen, and it was probably best to let her initiate it any ways. So when I dragged my thumb against it once again and she lifted her hips to meet it, I kept my disapproving fucking looks to myself.

I began adding that to the circuit my fingers were making, sliding all the way up to brush against it, where her breath would hitch and she would push forward for more friction, then sliding them back down, and clenching my teeth against what her writhing was doing to me.

I added more pressure on my second pass, almost applying the entire palm as I slid it up. When it touched that sensitive spot once again, she fucking moaned deeply, shifting against it.

I expelled a pretty fucking large gust of air and leaned my head back completely against the trunk of the tree, battling with my own reflex reaction to push back into her as I applied my entire palm and began rubbing her completely.

And I didn't even fucking need to push back into her; because once I began rubbing her fully, she began the writhing shit again. I could feel her hand on the ground fist into the long blades of grass as she breathed deeply on top of me, trying to make more friction for herself.

I closed my eyes and just kept fucking rubbing with my palm, up and down, feeling every curve of her folds over the thin blue jeans. And she writhed more with every pass, moving against me and making me fucking insane as my own breathing sped up against my will.

I sped my movements up; going faster to accommodate whatever the fuck it was she wanted. I didn't know at that exact moment. And as her movements became a fairly obvious constant writhe on top of me, making me stifle groan after groan, I was wondering if it was possible to even make a girl climax through jeans.

And as she began the soft moaning once again from where her head was lolled back on my shoulder, I was wondering if my girl had even ever had an orgasm before. Then my traitor teenage hormonal motherfucker mind began drifting to scenarios on how she would make herself do it.

Against my will and better judgment, I raised my hips, shoving my erection into her as I pushed against her center, and groaned fucking loudly. I froze and clenched my eyes closed further, fisting my hand over hers in the grass and fucking praying for self control as she began panting on top of me.

I pushed my palm back into her and started again. And she was fucking moaning as soon as I resumed my ministrations. Still fucking writhing against me as I rubbed her faster and harder. And I was fucking cursing myself for bringing this goddamn jacket because I was hot as hell, and the soft breeze blowing wasn't nearly enough.

I opened my eyes as I was rubbing. And I don't fucking know why I would, because it was harder to concentrate when I did, but I did it any fucking ways. I wanted to see her face. I had seen my girl so fucking depressed and defeated all week, I just had to see her expression.

I tilted my head down just enough to gaze sideways at her. Her lips were still parted as she breathed heavily, writing with every pass of my palm, eyebrows lightly knitted together with her eyes closed. A soft moan escaped her lips as I stared at her, making me twitch beneath her as I tightened my fist around hers in the grass, never ceasing the rubbing.

Her eyes opened then, heavy and hooded as she darted her them to mine. And the desperation and the frustration were there again as she pushed herself against my palm. But this was different. This was the good kind. She looked at me pleadingly, though I didn't know what she wanted. I took a guess and added more pressure to my palm.

She gasped and writhed harder against it, but she was still pleading for something with her eyes as she gazed at me, panting and fisting harder into the grass. I furrowed my brows at her, kind of fucking panting myself with every writhe against my dick.

She closed her eyes with a whimper, and instead of answering my question, she brought her free hand up, behind her head and to my neck. I was a little fucking confused and wishing she wouldn't move so much, before she slid it up, into my hair.

And she wrapped all her fingers around my messy locks, pulling them into her hand and balling it into a tight, painful fist.

It took my last fucking shred of control, and she knew it would. My girl knew just how to drive me fucking insane. I groaned and moved my face into her neck, kissing it with an open mouth as she writhed above me and pulled my hair harder.

I lifted my hips into her. And I really wanted this to all be about her, and nothing fucking else. So I barely restrained the urge to do it again and again as I listened to her soft moans and whimpers. I licked her fucking neck, all the way to her ear, sucking on that little spot right below it just the way I knew she fucking liked.

It made her pull my hair harder, which made me fist my hand around hers tighter in the grass as she writhed against me.

She whimpered again, tugging her fist out from under mine on the ground. I kept sucking the skin on her neck, only vaguely wondering what she was doing as she lifted her hips higher with a writhe and slid her little hand underneath her. And pressed her palm right into my dick.

I gasped into her neck, halting my movements, and lifting my face up and looking at her wide eyed. *What. The. Fuck.*

She kept her hand still as she gazed at me and we panted at each other. "Please?" She pleaded breathlessly. And the look in her eyes made me want to groan and growl and cry all at the same time. Because I knew that look so fucking well.

She was showing me hers.

She wanted me to show her mine.

As if to emphasize her point, she fisted her hand tighter into my hair, fucking painfully; making my eyes roll back behind my eyelids against my will then moved her palm against my erection. *Fucking Christ.*

I dropped my face back into her neck and groaned into it. "Fucking Christ."

She shifted her hips against my still palm on her center, wanting me to start rubbing it again. I cautiously pressed it into her and did one rub. And just like I fucking knew would happen, she copied my movements, rubbing up my erection between us.

I fucking whimpered into her neck, fisting my hand into the grass where hers once was. And I knew I was going to fucking hell for doing it, but I rubbed again, harder. And just like I knew she would, so did she.

I was so far gone by that point, I resumed kissing her neck and licking while I rubbed her slowly, feeling her doing the same to me, and trying to feel really fucking remorseful for doing it, but pathetically incapable.

I sped my hand up, just fucking rubbing the shit out of everything in the general vicinity. My head was so fucking clouded as I licked and sucked her neck that I couldn't really focus on anything but all of her heat and her little palm rubbing in unison with mine.

She began curling her fingers around me as she rubbed, and I took it as a hint, pressing my thumb into her clit while I rubbed with my palm, and groaning into her neck at the moan it elicited. She kept rubbing me like that, fucking desperately. And I did the same, panting into her neck while she writhed against me. With every tug of my hair, she was trying to push me over the edge, and the pressure was already building, forcing me to fist my hand deeper into the dirt at my side as I rubbed in sync with my girl.

And if she was anything like me, it was definitely fucking possible to climax through jeans. So I worked on her harder, just fucking dying to give it to her, sucking her neck in the spots she liked while she rocked on top of me. With every pass of her palm she was making me moan and fucking whimper into her neck, and tries even harder to get her to that point.

Her moans grew louder and breathless as her face became damp with a thin layer of sweat and flushed a slight red. Her writhes became desperate on top of me against my palm as she panted

through her parted lips. And she was moving against my erection so fluidly, I whimpered into her neck and began moving along with her palm and her writhes. She liked the whimper. She fucking pulled my hair so tightly as she moved desperately against me, it almost made my eyes tear up.

I clenched my fist into the ground further as the tension escalated and I rubbed her furiously. Still, the desperation grew, and so did the moaning. Fucking breathless, frustrated moans that made me suck on her neck harder as I pushed my palm rougher against her, moving it faster, and groaning into her neck as she copied me.

It was becoming a battle to hold it back, and I think my girl knew I was holding it back because she kept pulling my hair and curling her fingers around me tighter. Her little hips rocking as she leaned on my shoulder. And I was so overcome with her smell and the feeling of both our palms that I was so afraid I was going to just fucking explode if she didn't find a release soon. I was pondering telling her something dirty in her ear, because I knew girls liked that shit.

But before I could, her whole body became suddenly stiff on top of me, the fist in my hair painfully clenching around all of my locks in her hand. I panicked, lifting my head from her neck, fucking panting, and looked at her face.

She fucking shuddered, arching her chest up as I rubbed still, though my hand was shaky, wondering if this was a bad thing or a good thing. Then she fucking did it.

Her mouth opened, pouty red lips slightly parting, and emitting the single sexiest fucking sound in the world.

"Edward" She moaned my name. It was a deep moan of intense pleasure that I could only assume was her climax as she trembled on top of me, coming apart in my arms as I gazed at her closed eyes panting. I had seen so many expressions over the past months with Bella. But watching my girl cum and feeling her curl her little fingers almost completely around my erection and roughly stroking me as she did it, undid me.

I dropped my face back into her neck, moaning while I fisted my hand deeper into the earth at my side and falling over the edge, lifting my hips into the palm around my erection while I came right along with her. Fucking exploding into my pants, and not giving a shit at that particular moment. With one breathless gust, I removed my face from her neck and watched the last second of her orgasm.

She came down panting, finally releasing my hair and my crotch, and going limp once again in my arms. I finally removed my hand from between her legs, using it to rub her arm up and down as I tried to steady my breathing, and releasing the ground from my grasp. I wiped my hand off on my leg before bringing it up to stroke her forehead lovingly, feeling the layer of sweat that had accumulated with her desperation.

We were catching our breath and recovering as I stroked her lovingly, and finally felt the guilt of what the fuck I did. I closed my eyes and sighed, letting my head fall completely against the trunk of the tree, and feeling like a fucking dickhead for enjoying it so much when I wasn't supposed to. I felt her grab my free hand and bring it to her stomach where she grasped it in both of hers.

We sat there for a long while, as I stroked her forehead and hair, and she held my hand on her stomach, caressing it lovingly.

Eventually, my girl shifted above me, finally moving her head to turn to face me fully. I opened my eyes and darted them to hers.

And she was fucking *glowing*. Smiling all fucking huge and looking at me like she just won the state lottery or some shit. Basically confirming my suspicions that she had never had an orgasm before. Made sense. I got her first kiss, first drunk, first grope. First orgasm.

But my girl was happy. In fact, she looked downright fucking euphoric, which made me more than a little smug as I smiled wryly at her and straightened out her pretty blue shirt, feeling inclined to declare the experiment a success.

I glanced out at the semi-meadow, which was becoming darkened as the sun was beginning to set behind the clouds. I stroked her forehead once more and planted a soft kiss on it before I helped her up onto her feet. She was still grinning like an idiot, and I'm sure I probably was too, as I removed my jacket and put it around her shoulders. It was getting colder as dusk approached, and she looked thankful for it. I carried her sack for her after she placed the iPod back into it.

As we began the journey back to the riverbank, I turned to my girl at my side. She was swimming in my black leather jacket with her little hand in mine, and I was fucking loving the way she was smiling up at me. "I love you." I whispered sincerely, squeezing her hand for emphasis since the expletive wasn't there.

She smiled wider and stepped closer to my side while squeezing my hand back. "I love you too." She said simply while leaning into me, following me back to the river where we walked to the boat hand in hand, smiling, satisfied, and truly fucking loved.

Defeating the defeat.

Chapter 32. Macadamia Unicorns



When I got home, I flopped lifelessly onto the stool in the kitchen, folding my arms on the cold granite counter top and laying my cheek on my forearms. I sighed. Still grinning.

Holy freaking cow.

I allowed the whole day to replay in my head in perfect clarity.

When he first told me he would try, I was so excited and hopeful. I tried to bite back all the frustration at the fact he had to use a whole ‘technique’ just to do it.

He guided me to his lap, which kind of confused me, because I was hoping for some kissing or something, and the position would have made it very awkward. Instead there were relaxing caresses on my arms and shoulders. The kind where his fingertips left a trail of warmth and tingles up my skin.

The first time he touched me and I felt the panic welling in my chest, I said the safe word. And I was pissed off. Part of me had convinced myself that I was just having a bad day last week when he did it, and it wouldn’t always be like that. He gave me a look that clearly said, *No frustration allowed.*

Thankfully, he kept going. Touching and relaxing until he could finally grope me like every seventeen year old boyfriend should. I wanted to know if he liked it, if I felt good to him. I wasn’t necessarily voluptuous or anything. I was hoping my small b cup size wasn’t disappointing. But he nodded in agreement with me.

His agreement made me want more. Made me want to show him more, and definitely made me want to feel more. And when he was finally able to hold my breasts in his hands with nothing in between us, I was basically melting. I felt him go hard beneath me, and it just made me melt more. So I wanted him to go further, because I was afraid I wouldn’t have another chance to.

I stayed so still in his arms, terrified that if I moved it would ruin his method. It was easier when he touched me lower. I didn't understand why, because it was so much more personal of a space to me. But he was able to *really* touch me. And rub me. And rub me. And *rub* me.

I was already in desperate need of a change of panties when he hit the most sensitive spot. And I was lost, needing to feel even more of it, and having no idea why I was reacting so desperately to it. Then he began granting my unspoken requests, and rubbing it completely, and growing even harder beneath me with my moans.

I knew he was aroused, and still withholding the feeling of any pleasure. And it frustrated me to no end. I began whimpering and silently pleading with him to just let go, and feel it with me. But he didn't. So I pulled his hair, because I knew that would arouse him further. It worked for a moment, as he kissed my neck and raised his hips into me, but he stopped himself yet again.

It really wasn't fair. I was making the most ridiculously embarrassing noises. Just rocking against his palm shamelessly while he remained composed. It wasn't us. So I dug deep down into my confidence and pulled out just enough to touch him. The look on his face as I pressed my hand into his crotch beneath me was really quite priceless. I just sent him a rather pointed glance.
Show me yours.

And he did. He let me touch him in a way I had never touched anyone before. I was so clueless as to what he would like, so I just copied his movements with my palm. And eventually we were working in sync together, moaning and groaning and panting relentlessly as I rocked against his palm. The noises he was making while he licked my neck made me melt even further as I grasped him tightly in my hand. I made sure to rub him just as fast and hard as he was rubbing me. It was doing the strangest things to my body. Making me desperate for more, and wishing I wasn't wearing as many clothes while he was doing it.

Something deep inside of me was building. His groans became breathless grunts into my neck as I stroked him in my hand roughly beneath me, making him copy my movements.

At the time, I had no idea what was happening. But it felt really, *really* good. So I let my body and instincts take over. The ones that made me enjoy his touch instead of cower away from it. Somewhere, deep inside the recesses of my mind, I was feeling utterly ridiculous for reacting so desperately. Embarrassing the crap out of myself as I writhed against him shamelessly; filling the meadow with sounds that were probably quite similar to that of mortally wounded cattle. I didn't realize until it occurred what was actually happening to me.

My whole body stiffened as something inside of me exploded, making me shudder, and then suddenly I was floating. The only thing I could think of was 'Edward', and much to my extreme mortification, I think I probably even said it aloud.

I, Isabella – Crazy Untouchable Virgin – Swan, was having... an *orgasm*.

Though I had never really even considered the possibility of ever experiencing one, I had no idea what it could feel like.

I had heard it talked about so many times. This 'orgasm' thing. Alice praised it like it was a religion. I heard girls talking about it in the locker room like it was the most normal and natural thing to ever experience. Over the past months, I began hearing them develop a rating scale for the things. I got the feeling most of them were embellishing the frequency in which they experienced it... quite a lot. I was pretty sure I had never even come close to having anything like they described.

I also saw movies and shows where women discussed them as if they were some ephemeral narcotic substance; seeking it out desperately, doing all the busy work, and rarely ever being graced with its presence.

It was the topic of many discussions, and every person, man and woman, always held it in the highest regard.

Me?

I mentally manifested the entire concept of the female orgasm into a unicorn.

Yes. A unicorn.

A very pretty, white, majestic, non existent mythical creature that everyone talks about, but you never actually see first hand.

That is... unless that hand belongs to a certain Edward Cullen.

It was like nothing I had ever felt before. Well, technically it *was* nothing I had ever felt before. I wondered if Edward even realized he granted me two pretty white unicorns.

The first time was great beyond all comparison. But then, just as I was coming down, I felt him shudder lightly beneath me and groan huskily into my neck while I had my hand wrapped as far around him as I could through his jeans. Then I felt... it... twitching in my palm while he continued rubbing me shakily and gasping against my skin. And the realization that I was giving Edward a unicorn of his very own made me fall over the edge once more.

And... *God freaking bless unicorns*. I made him unravel like that. Not Jessica Stanley or Lauren Mallory, but *me*.

After we were fully recovered and I turned to look at him, he had his eyes closed. But the expression on his face made me glow. He had a light sheen of sweat on his forehead, matting down a few stray bronze hairs to his skin. And he looked... peaceful. Relaxed in a way that suggested much satisfaction.

It made me smile widely when he finally lifted his heavy eyelids, exposing his shining green eyes. Then he grinned lazily at me. And it reminded me of what I dreamt the smile would be like on his face after I pleased him. *And there it was.*

The sight of it made my heart swell with hope.

My fantasy future with Edward, however ridiculously presumptuous and unattainable it may be, wasn't necessarily impossible.

Just ask our pretty white unicorns.



I had, quite possibly, the goofiest grin on my face all evening. Alice kept eyeing me suspiciously, since she knew I had spent the day with Edward. And every time I would look away blushing, afraid that my goofy grin would give me away.

It's not like I had anything to be ashamed of. We were in love, and still fully clothed. Sadly. I wanted to make him his favorite dinner. Or maybe buy him a new car. I couldn't decide which was more appropriate. Since I was sorely lacking where automobile funds were concerned, I made the alfredo. It just seemed like I should do something special for him.

After all, he only had one.

At nine, I made a new recipe. *Macadamia Unicorns*. I didn't actually have a unicorn shaped cookie cutter, but I added it to my shopping list, in hopes that I would need it again. Sooner rather than later.

Alice was out with Jasper late, so I locked my bedroom door like I had been doing ever since the gym incident. It made me far more comfortable when I was at Edward's and I didn't have to spend my time with him worried about someone walking into my empty room.

I must have looked utterly ridiculous, skipping across the dark yard in my hoodie with my book sack bouncing on my back all the way to the lattice covered wall of the Cullen mansion, ponytail swaying from side to side on my unhooded head the entire way. I rolled my eyes at myself as I climbed up, only vaguely wondering with pursed lips if we could do more of the cookie thing later. As I climbed over the railing I furrowed my brows, wondering if we would even have to use the technique again. And if we did, would it be easier? And how did Edward even come up with such a thing?

Of course every coherent thought escaped me when he opened the door. He still had that lazy grin on his face, as I'm sure I still had my non-semi-post-coital glow. I wanted to snort when I remembered Jasper having the same thing with Alice that first night, and no sex was actually involved.

Edward moved aside to let me in, still smiling wryly at me as I half shuffled, half skipped past him into the warm room. I spun around as soon as I heard the door click; pretty much doing the vibrating thing that was embarrassingly involuntary as I anticipated his kiss. He chuckled and pulled me into him by the waist, enveloping me in his warmth and smell as my hands instinctively made their way to his messy bronze hair and I impatiently pressed my lips to his.

He sighed as he sucked on my bottom lip, pulling me closer to him as I darted my tongue out to deepen the kiss. I missed the kisses. I had been holding back for days because of the bitterness, and the whole meadow incident sorely lacked it. He willingly obliged, parting his lips to allow me entrance and taking me into his mouth, massaging my tongue and humming against it as I pulled his face closer.

I could have kissed him all night, but he pulled away after a few seconds, probably starving. I was wondering if unicorns made him as hungry as my two made me as I unloaded his alfredo onto the bed with a smile, still licking my lips. When I heard his perfunctory flop on the bed I removed my hoodie and shoes, not even bothering with the book as I climbed my way up on the bed beside him. It didn't escape my notice that he had changed his pants.

I smirked. Unicorns can be messy things; I had a little bit of that as well.

I leaned against his shoulder as he began uncovering his meal, trying to stifle my smirk as I fingered the new pair of jeans smugly. I looked up at him as he uncovered the alfredo. His green eyes grew wide at the sight of it, and he mouthed something that looked like "Fuck Me", lowering his face minutely to smell it. I giggled a bit, loving the way he was always so enthusiastic about my cooking, and embarrassingly willing to grant that particular request.

He darted his eyes to mine and smiled at me, picking up the fork and digging in. Confirming my suspicions that he was starving. I gazed at him unabashedly while he was eating, humming and moaning and occasionally darting his eyes to mine and smiling at me. He would get some sauce on the corner of his mouth, and I had to battle with myself not to lean up and lick it off.

While he was eating, I was wondering why I hadn't been invited over for supper with Dr. Cullen, like Esme did for him. It seemed rather appropriate, seeing as how I had never been formerly introduced to Dr. Cullen as his girlfriend. And the one time we had come close, wasn't entirely comfortable or formal by any means.

Once he was done with his alfredo, he turned to me with a smirk. "Fucking delicious." He said simply, placing the empty containers by the bed. I decided it wouldn't hurt to ask.

I cleared my throat softly as he was leaning down to dispose of the containers. "Edward?" I called softly, eliciting a soft "Hmm?" from him.

When he sat back up beside me, Indian style like always, I lifted myself on my knees and crawled in front of him, hoping I wasn't being incredibly rude by making the suggestion all on

my own. He looked at me curiously as I positioned myself on my knees in front of him, leaning back onto my ankles and putting both of my hands on his knees.

I resisted the urge to bite my lip as I stroked his knees with my thumbs. "Is it odd that Dr. Cullen hasn't invited me over for dinner?" I asked quietly, tilting my head a bit.

When he looked at me, the electricity around us began growing and surging. Crackling in the air between us as our gazes met and nearly making my breath hitch. It gave me the most overwhelming urge to sit in his lap. Facing him. I tried to shake it off as he digested my question, looking down at my hands on his knees with furrowed brows.

He slowly lifted his hands from his lap and set them on top of mine, making my fingers twitch as the current of his touch warmed my hand. I panicked for a moment, wondering if I was being inappropriate by doing the casual touching, and seeing no reason why I should. But instead of pushing me away, he grasped my hands in his, glancing up at me from under his lashes and pulling them closer to his body gently. I cautiously inched myself up from leaning on my ankles, wondering if it was some kind of silent question. When I began inching up, he pulled my hands closer to him, never breaking my gaze.

Hoping I was granting his request and not making an idiot out of myself, I sat up straight on my knees and hesitantly crawled to his lap, moving to straddle him just the way I had wanted to. I never shifted my gaze from his, but never fully sat down, in fear that I had misunderstood his intentions. He snaked his arms around my waist and finally broke my gaze, looking right in front of him. And the way I was on my knees basically made him eye level with my chest.

I moved my hands to his hair as the crackling energy escalated, stroking it softly in apology for all the rough pulling earlier in the day. He darted his eyes back up to mine, making my breath hitch as he slowly moved his face closer to my chest.

His intense green eyes bore into mine as he gazed at me from under his lashes. "It's nothing against you. We just don't do the dinner bullshit around here." He whispered, inching closer to my breasts, and making my breath deepen as I gazed down at him.

I fought to remain coherent as he inched even closer, turning slightly to my right breast and never breaking my gaze. "I could do the cooking." I breathed, restraining myself from fisting my hands in his hair.

He stopped as his face was a breath away from my peak, holding my gaze as he leaned forward and barely grazed it with the tip of his nose.

I let out a gust of air. "Cookie." I softly whispered at him as the panic just barely welled in my chest at the feel of it.

He began rubbing my sides soothingly, up and down from my ribs to my waist, still gazing at me and keeping his face close to my chest. "Seems like a lot of fucking trouble." He whispered, still rubbing while I stroked his hair. "Running all that food over here." He continued.

I made an attempt to roll my eyes and shrug. "I could cook here." I whispered slowly, watching as he leaned in once again to my breast and grazed it with his nose. My breath hitched, but I felt fine, so I didn't say the word and I kept stroking his hair while he gazed up at me. "Break in the Cullen kitchen right." I smiled, proud of myself for not having to stop him.

He leaned in once again to my breast and gently nuzzled it with his nose, making me sigh as my eyes fluttered closed. I wanted to grip his hair and just plunge his face into my chest, but I was afraid if I did, he would stop altogether, so I restrained myself, and remained perfectly still.

"Hmm." He hummed quietly as his nose remained on my breast. "How could you live with yourself?" He asked softly in an oddly sad tone, and began rubbing a circle around my nipple slowly with the tip of his nose. I furrowed my brow at his sad question and tried to remain coherent, but hardly capable. "Just fucking barging in here and defiling the clean and virginal Cullen kitchen like some goddamn savage?" He whispered, stroking my ribs with his thumbs and nudging my breast once again softly.

I opened my eyes then to look down at him, where his intense green eyes gazed up at me from under all those dark thick lashes. My chest was heaving into his nose with every breath as I fought for self control. I was no idiot. That question wasn't about the kitchen.

I wanted to snort at him; using blatantly obvious sexual innuendo in the form of metaphorical culinary discussion.

I was definitely rubbing off on him.

I sighed as I realized he didn't want to 'defile' me. "The kitchen loves me." I frowned, weaving my fingers deeper into his soft hair, never breaking his gaze and breathing deeper than necessary... just to feel his nose push into me more. "I love the kitchen." I continued in a whisper, leaning slightly closer to his nose and making his gaze momentarily shift to my breast and then back to my eyes. "And trust me, Edward." I tried my best to sound confident and sure as he gazed up at me. "The kitchen really, *really* wants it." I breathed, giving his hair a gentle tug with my fists to show my conviction.

Edward

WIDE AWAKE

I fought to keep my eyes open as her little hands gently tugged my hair and I gazed up at her from her breast. My mind had been in the fucking gutter all day long after the meadow. Thinking about her breasts in my hands and my palm in between her legs, and not to even mention all those sounds, or my name rolling off her tongue as she came for me.

I was completely prepared to swallow all that shit down when she came, and even while I was eating. But I wasn't prepared for the feeling that coursed through me as she sat in front of me on the bed. I wanted to pull her onto my lap and feel her up again. I wanted to throw her down and lay on top of her, between her legs and feel them just wrap the fuck around me as I kissed her senseless.

It made me so goddamn nervous, because this was *my girl*. She slept next to me every night in this bed, and our relationship had obviously escalated to a new sexual level. It was staring us in the face as the atmosphere between us became charged and warm.

It wasn't like we could rewind and forget about it. And if I was being honest with myself, I didn't really want to. And it was already painfully obvious that the sentiment was shared rather mutually.

The kitchen metaphor was my last attempt at voicing my guilt for the entire fucking urge. She was right that we loved each other. That shit was solid. And she wanted it. Really, *really* wanted it. I didn't miss the emphasis there. But that didn't mean we could just fucking plow ahead like an Alice and Jasper. I had to be more responsible with my girl than that. The desensitization was a process.

I expelled a rather shaky breath as I leaned into her breast once more with my nose, gazing into her big brown eyes and slowly tipping my head up so that my lips barely rested on the peak. "You should probably ease the kitchen into it." I whispered against her breast as I held her sides and rubbed them soothingly with my thumbs and fought against the urge to just wrap my mouth around her breast. "One step at a time and all that bullshit." I breathed, kind of fucking pleading with my eyes for her patience. It was obvious the technique was breaking her barrier. But slowly.

She sighed, making her breast momentarily leave my lips, and gazing down at me with a small smile. "I'm sure the kitchen would be comfortable with that." She whispered while stroking my hair.

I rolled my eyes and smiled against her breast, getting pretty fucking tired of the kitchen metaphor. I grasped her sides and leaned away from her chest, using my strength to nudge her sideways off of my lap. She eased down onto the bed beside me, looking at me forlornly as she left my embrace. But I fell back onto the mattress, lying with my head on the pillows. I reached forward, pulling on her hand and bringing her down beside me gently.

We turned to each other, much like we did when we went to sleep. She glanced at me curiously as I lifted my hand and cupped her little warm cheek in my palm, rubbing it with my thumb, and scooting closer to her.

I kept my gaze on her big brown curious eyes as I leaned in to put my lips on hers. She didn't ask any questions, of course. My girl fucking *loved* kissing me. I sighed against her lips, taking her bottom in between mine just the way we liked, and sucking gently. The soft slow kisses were divine. Warm and damp as she pressed her little body against mine. We kissed soft and slow like that for a while, a lot like we did on New Years. Just enjoying each other's lips with loving caresses and sighs.

I allowed the kiss to slowly escalate, introducing my girl to the teenage hormonal motherfucker inside of me in gradual doses as I pressed against her lips more firmly, bringing her face closer to mine as our breathing deepened. She pushed her tongue into my mouth, sighing as I massaged her tongue with mine gently at first.

I stroked her cheek as I made to deepen the kiss, tilting my head against the pillow and leaning further towards her to thrust my tongue into her mouth with more urgency. She made a little mewling sound that made my blood boil as her hands made their way to my hair. Tugging lightly while I pushed against her tongue. *Always with the fucking hair pulling.*

I allowed it to escalate further as I pressed into her body and shoved my tongue deeper into her mouth. It didn't take her long to fist those little hands in my hair completely, pulling me closer and gasping at the feel of my erection pressed against her. Her tongue became more fervent against mine as she pulled me closer and began panting into my mouth in a way that made me moan.

After a few moments of the urgent kissing, she hitched her leg over my hip, shifting against me and moaning breathlessly into my mouth as her grip on my hair tightened. Usually I would have pulled away or stopped her, but that shit wasn't going to get us anywhere. Unfortunately, we were already panting into each other's mouths, so I pulled away, leaving us both gasping for air as I began kissing my way down her jaw and throat. She grasped my hair tighter, pressing me into her neck as she tightened her leg around me to bring me closer. I licked and kissed her neck until I heard her breathing return to normal. Then I just fucking worked my way back to her mouth, without even opening my eyes, and began kissing her again, letting her thrust her tongue in between my lips once more and massaging it with my own as she pressed my face closer. I was doing my best to let her lead, but resolving to leave the exact pace of it to myself.

Okay, so there was no fucking precedence that I could find on desensitization for... sexual relations. No literature or reference for me to study on that particular topic. And whether it happened tomorrow or two years from now, my girl and I were definitely wanting some sexual relations. So I just started where all normal teenage hormonal motherfuckers our age usually began.

I made out with my girl.

For three fucking hours.

And not the sweet loving kind we had on New Years either. The love and sweetness was still there as I stroked her cheek and she caressed my hair, but there was lust in these kisses. A whole shit load of it.

She pressed herself so completely against me as she battled with my tongue that I could feel her breasts on my chest, which just made me groan into her mouth. I kissed down and up her neck plenty of times, and she fucking liked it. Moaning and humming and pulling my hair as my erection grew impossibly harder between us. She liked that shit too, occasionally shifting against it and making me groan into her skin and mouth breathlessly. I didn't grope her breasts, resolving to keep shit light and ease her into it at first.

And when we began growing tired, I let the kisses lose their urgency gradually. Our fervent kisses dwindled to sweet, slow, wet, breathless pecks on red and swollen lips as we both opened our eyes at the same time, spending a few more moments doing the sweet, loving kisses as we gazed into each other's eyes.

And just like that, without even having to say 'cookie' or me having to pull away from her, we both knew it was time to go bed. The corners of our lips lifted into small smiles as we extracted ourselves from each others' grasps and finished our nightly routine. I was expecting some frustration at the simplicity of the whole thing. Just kissing and no fucking groping or orgasms. But there was none to be found when we finally slipped under the covers and assumed our sleep position.

Patiently horny.



I held the bag in my hand and fucking frowned at it, running my fingers through my hair and glancing at my girl dismally as she stood by my bedside table.

I mean, it was her first orgasm. Pretty significant shit. After our day in the meadow, I had mentally prepared myself for all kinds of cookie names. I was so fucking creative too.

Oatmeal Orgasms, Explosive Cream Puffs, Euphoric Pecan Palms, Satisfaction Sugar Cookies, Peanut Butter Change of Panties.

Of course, as my smugness grew, the names did too, and the recipes began sounding horrifically disgusting.

Double Raspberry Walnut My Boyfriend Is So Fucking Skilled That He Got Me Off Through My Jeans With One Hand Cherry Chocolate Chip Delights.

Nope. None of those things. Goddamned *Macadamia Unicorns*. And they weren't even shaped like unicorns.

Yeah. Total pride fuck.

I quirked an eyebrow at her from the headboard as I ran my fingers through my hair. "Unicorn?" I asked dryly, trying to mask my injured dignity as her face slowly transformed into a smirk.

She snickered lightly while pulling her hair back up into a ponytail. "It's a euphemism of sorts." She blushed, looking down and picking up her bag.

The blush gave it away. But I furrowed my brows at her as she straightened up, wanting to know the connection between orgasms and unicorns.

She rolled her eyes at me and slung her bag on her back "Don't ask." She muttered, shaking her head and walking out the door.

I had the cookies for breakfast. But in my mind I gave them my own goddamn name. Because unicorns just didn't fucking work when it came to sexual overtones.



Bella came over at four to begin dinner. I had already explained the whole charade to Carlisle, who was all too fucking willing to sit at the table with my girl for an hour. I let him give Emmett the politeness speech as I grew nervous over the whole thing.

She smiled brightly as I opened the door, hastily reaching to remove the brown paper bag from her arms. She wore her hair natural today, which I liked. Because my girl was naturally beautiful. I stepped aside to let her enter, smiling at her as she passed me wearing a brown sweater that made her eyes sparkle.

I rolled my fucking eyes as I kicked the door shut. *Brown sweater that made her eyes sparkle.* I mentally mocked myself as I led her towards the kitchen. I wasn't lying when I said it was clean

and virginal. I think the only thing ever cooked on the stove was hot dogs. And I use the term 'cook' very fucking loosely.

When we entered the kitchen, I implored her to work as if the kitchen was her own. No need for my girl to feel all fucking uncomfortable going through our shit all evening. She was already going out of her way enough.

I deposited the brown bag onto the counter and jumped up on top of it, leaning back against the cabinets and glancing in the bag curiously as my girl inspected the room with pursed lips, likely searching for pans or some shit.

She was being a little extravagant with the meal. Steaks, potatoes, corn, and bread. I watched her in much interest as she began unloading the bag and preparing the steaks. She worked through the kitchen fluidly, as if she already knew where everything was located.

I just leaned my head back against the cabinets behind me with my hands stuffed in my pockets, studying her as she worked on the meal. She always did the cutest shit when she was cooking. Little things like pursing her lips when she was cutting vegetables, or the way she mindlessly hummed whenever she stirred something in a pot.

Eventually, I grew tired of just watching her work, and I wanted to help. Which did not go well. I had to fucking beg her to let me do the bread.

"I can't possibly fuck up bread, Bella." I sighed in exasperation as she cradled the large loaf in her arms like I was trying to murder her first born or some shit.

She bit her lip and eyed me where I sat on the counter skeptically. I rolled my eyes as she hesitantly handed over the loaf and a knife to cut it with. I smirked, jumping down from the counter and placing the loaf on the cutting board. She watched anxiously as I began slicing the bread with furrowed brows. It's a lot fucking harder than it looks. I mashed the bread with the first cut, pursing my lips at it and trying again.

I watched in much amusement as she fucking cringed with every cut I made. I didn't get three slices cut before she grimaced and stopped my hand, gently prying the knife from my grip and nudging me out of the way with her little hip. She smiled nervously at me as she glanced back down at the cutting board.

I snickered, watching her face grow visibly relieved as she saved the loaf of bread from my gruesome assault. Definitely anal retentive in the kitchen. *So fucking cute.*

That was my last attempt at being kitchen helper, but I did set the table. She inspected my work with a tight smile, leaning up to give me a kiss on the cheek as I went to go fetch Daddy C.

I felt more than a little indignant when I returned to the dining room and found all the forks had been moved to the opposite sides of the plates. Like it fucking mattered where the forks went. I rolled my eyes and pulled her seat out for her as Daddy C. entered the room, followed by Emmett.

We had a uselessly long dining room table, so I kept them at one end and Bella and I at the opposite to make her more comfortable.

You'd think those two motherfuckers had never eaten steak before the way they eyed the beef on the plates in front of them as they took their seats silently. Fucking salivating. I took my place by my girl and kept an eye on her as we all began eating.

The beginning of the meal was hardly unpredictable. Carlisle praising her cooking skills and thanking her profusely for the gesture while Em just grinned at her widely and began stuffing his face. I would have bitched at him for being rude as hell if I didn't think my girl loved seeing people eat her food like that.

The steak really was fucking delicious, but she looked so goddamn tense as she sat rigid in her chair and cut her steak, nodding timidly at Carlisle's generous thanks, and never saying a word. He glanced at me warily as he ate with cautious movements. I just reached my hand up and slid it under her hair, rubbing her neck the same way we did in the cafeteria. And just like then, her whole body visibly relaxed as she sighed and began eating more comfortably.

"It's really no problem Dr. Cullen. I love cooking." She said quietly as she put her fork into her mouth and smiled at Carlisle.

Carlisle's eyes grew wide for a moment as he took a large swallow of his drink and eyed me curiously. "Please, call me Carlisle." He smiled, putting down his drink and gaping at my girl in a way that made me want to fucking throw my food at him.

"Carlisle." She nodded with a small smile as I stroked her neck and narrowed my eyes at Carlisle. His curiosity was really fucking rude. We all fell silent for a long while as we ate the delicious meal comfortably.

Emmett didn't much care for silence. "So, Bella." He chewed as my thumb glided over Bella's nape softly. She looked up from her plate and smiled at him a little as he took a swallow from his drink. "I loved your cookies today." He winked. *Fucking winked.*

I fought back a glower as I popped the fork into my mouth. Not liking any other motherfucker winking at my girl, and feeling utterly ridiculous for reacting that way with someone like Emmett. She just smiled at him and muttered a small thanks, blushing.

He grinned back at her as Carlisle watched the exchange. "So, you like unicorns?" He asked, basically making me stifle my snickers through my napkin as my soft caress on her neck faltered

momentarily. I was expecting her to blush more, or maybe choke on her food as she swallowed. But she surprised me yet again.

She fucking smirked. “Very much so.” She slid the fork into her mouth as I fought back a cough, and took a large gulp of my drink.

I couldn’t fucking help it. “Someone gave her one recently.” I grinned, setting my glass down and glancing sideways at her as she chewed, still biting back the massive snicker building in my chest.

She smiled at Emmett as he attempted to remain interested in a conversation regarding something as fucking stupid as unicorns, and shrugged casually. “Two actually.” She replied sweetly as she speared a piece of steak.

I raised my eyebrows at this really fucking particularly intriguing piece of information. “Is that a fact?” I asked incredulously.

She turned to face me then, reminding me that I was supposed to be stroking her neck and nodded with a timid smile, still blushing a little. We turned back to our plates as Em and Daddy C. glanced at us confused.

I smirked down at my steak.

Fucking smug all over again.

Chapter 33. Berry Tasty Nibbles

Edward WIDE AWAKE

It was like we were in our own bubble when we were together. And I know that shit sounds so fucking cliché, but it was true nonetheless. The bubble made my girl feel safe, and it made me feel soothed. Giving us each a purpose and making us both feel loved as we walked the halls of the school. It wasn't necessarily impenetrable, but for those small moments where it remained intact we were perfectly happy.

Rose and Emmett came to our table that first Monday back. Brandon and Rose kept fucking chattering away about the most useless bullshit while Emmett made the occasional crude remark and Jazz snickered alongside them.

But me and my girl were in a world all our own, not really giving a shit what was going on around us. She moved her chair closer to me that day. So close that she was nearly in my lap. I fucking loved it; putting my arm around her shoulder and letting her lean on me while I breathed in all the flowers and cookies in her hair. She still rubbed my knee and I still caressed her neck while we ate our cookies in complete silence. We didn't have to look at each other or fucking prattle in each other's ears. We were saying everything that needed to be said with simple touches.

It was little moments like those, where everything else existed, yet it didn't. I'm sure we were both vaguely aware of the way everyone else at the table began stealing curious glances at us and our casual intimacy. But that kind of shit didn't penetrate the bubble.

In the halls, my girl was still nervous and anxious. But I could dispel it with a stroke of my thumb on her arm or hand as I walked with my arm draped across her shoulder. She eventually slid her arm around my waist, returning the embrace and relaxing into me as we made it from class to class.

The halls were where the bubble was most thin. People were always walking too fucking close, or saying something offensive about one of us, and making me wish I could just let go for one second and give them all what they deserved. But Bella always soothed that rage inside of me, squeezing me, or telling me she loved me. It was weird how we worked like that. Weird and utterly fucking perfect.

We did every Bio assignment together. We didn't really care if it was meant to be individual work; we still moved close to each other and went over everything as a pair. I would make her laugh quietly when I made a spontaneous derogatory remark on some of the very unflattering photos of the reproductive frog organs. She would make me snicker when she furrowed her brows and tilted her head at the book, trying to find out where the organ was. Then blushing afterwards.

She never fucking told me about gym or what happened after I dropped her off at the doors. But she always came out smiling when she saw me waiting for her. I offered to drive her home a few times, but she seemed to like having the free time with Brandon, so I'd always walk her to the car and open the door for her.

I'd spend the evenings with Carlisle in his study. Usually we'd just play a game of chess or debate certain medical topics that had recently become of interest to me. He loved that shit. Whenever I would touch on a topic in the medical field, his eyes would light up and we'd spend fucking hours talking about it. I kept the subjects of the conversations completely neutral. He was curious about my girl, but he would restrain himself from asking me any questions directly related to her condition. That's how Daddy C. worked. He couldn't fucking help himself when he saw someone he thought he could help. By then end of the night, he would chuckle at me and shake his head. He usually beat me at chess.

And the nights. Well the nights were always the fucking best with my girl. And not just because we were making out, or using the dirtiest method of desensitization never documented. But because we didn't need the bubble when we were alone in my room. We just fucking... were. Normal and comfortable.

She'd lean against my shoulder and watch me eat with a smile while we talked about the shit that happened that day.

And afterwards... well...

Those first couple nights, I kept shit super simplistic. Just making out with her until we grew tired like we did the first night. I'd let my hands wander over her less sensitive body parts. Arms, back, sides, thigh, stomach. Just simple shit. She always liked it when I touched her. She would let her little hands wander on me to. She loved rubbing my chest and sides. And of course, pulling my hair.

The third night of the desensitization, we had just lain down and began kissing like the two previous nights when I discovered that I needed the safe word too. I kept us on our sides as our tongues battled for dominance and she pressed her body closer to mine. I slid my hand from her cheek to her shoulder and down her arm as she grasped my side tightly, pulling me closer to her.

As usual, I let the kiss gradually become more urgent. And as usual, she hitched her leg over my hip and shifted against me, eliciting a breathless moan from me. She always fucking loved hearing me make sounds. I never held back on that shit. She panted into my mouth as her little hand worked its way up my side and to my neck. I knew what was about to happen, but was too involved in pulling her thigh closer and plunging my tongue deeper into her mouth to stop it in time. She weaved her fingers through my hair and pulled it into a tight fist, crushing her face to mine further.

I hissed into her mouth and yanked myself away. “Fucking cookie.” I nearly shouted breathlessly as my eyes popped open to meet her shocked gaze.

She made to pull her leg away, but I held it firmly with my hand as her fist finally let my hair go and she gazed at me quizzically.

I sighed at the relief and looked at her apologetically. “Hair.” I breathed, rubbing up her thigh slowly as she stroked my hair softly with her fingers.

She frowned at me, still a little breathless. “I’m sorry, I thought you liked that.” She whispered, moving her hand to caress my cheek lovingly.

I restrained a massive eye roll. “Yeah I do.” I whispered truthfully while gazing into her hooded brown eyes. “Just give the scalp some recovery time.” I explained with a grimace as my scalp throbbed a bit. Three straight nights of constant pulling is some painful shit.

“Oh.” She breathed in understanding, moving her hand to caress the nape of my neck as I continued rubbing up and down her thigh softly. “Well...” She whispered with an oddly curious expression. “What else do you like?” She asked, licking her lips as her breathing returned to normal.

I halted my hand on her thigh, just using my thumb to caress it as I gazed into her eyes. I was thinking this kind of shit was important. The whole honesty thing on what we did and didn’t enjoy. So I fucking told her. “You know that shit I do to your neck?” I whispered softly as she caressed my nape with her little fingers. She smiled a little and nodded, but I still felt compelled to show her.

I broke my gaze from hers as I moved my lips to her jaw and trailed them down to her throat lightly. I began kissing my way up to her ear slowly. She sighed and leaned her head further into the pillows to give me better access as I darted my tongue out to lick and suck her skin, all the way to her little earlobe, making her shiver a little.

She shifted her face into the crook of my neck, using her lips to kiss it softly, which she did sometimes. But this time she darted her tongue out and licked it. I sighed into her skin as her warm tongue met my neck, and resumed rubbing up and down her thigh. She fucking hummed

as she kept licking my neck, occasionally sucking a little bit up to my ear and making me push my hips into her minutely as my breathing sped up.

When her lips met my ear, she gently grazed my ear lobe with her teeth, making me shiver against her. “You taste good.” She purred quietly into my ear.

I expelled a shaky gust of air and wrapped my fingers around her thigh tightly. That was quite possibly the sexiest fucking thing I had ever had whispered in my ear. Not the dirtiest by any means, but *definitely* the sexiest. I wanted to tell her to use more teeth, but my scalp told me to shut my goddamn mouth. So instead I plunged my lips into her neck and returned the favor by licking and sucking gently as I rubbed her thigh. I wanted to ask her what she liked, but figured she wouldn’t have any clue until it happened for the first time.

When we worked our way back to each other’s lips, I decided to start desensitizing one spot I had never tried before. After a few moments of kissing I pulled away breathless and kept my gaze on her hooded eyes as I slowly slid my hand up her thigh.

Her eyes held no protest as I decreased the pressure of my palm and lightly ghosted it over her ass cheek.

She tensed slightly, and I knew it was coming. “Cookie.” She whispered, still caressing my hair sweetly and licking her lips as I began rubbing her thigh once again.

It only took two tries before I was cupping her ass and pressing her into me, eliciting a soft moan from her as we resumed the kissing.

That was just the process of the whole fucking thing. And three nights later, I was able to grab it without even a thought of a cookie from my girl. It made her smile into our kiss.

We began trying the groping thing the next night. Her breasts were always the worst. We didn’t get past the cookies before we got tired and went to bed. I was afraid it would make her frustrated, but I could see her having faith in the technique as we nuzzled each other sweetly and drifted to sleep.

We pushed on, night after night. I’d always stop kissing her to do it, so she could say the safe word. I began rubbing her sides to relax her instead of her arms. It seemed to be more effective. Then I’d graze her peaks from her stomach to her throat. It always took so long that there would never be a full grope by the time we went to sleep. I was almost happy for it. I was scared shitless that once I started groping her in my bed, I’d lose my self control and let her set the pace. And my girl was fucking impatient as hell.

And every morning, I would spend longer and longer in the shower to relieve all that sexual tension that I had allowed to build in the bed the previous night. Really, I didn’t mind going so goddamn slow. In fact, I much preferred it. It felt like I was doing something the right way for

once. Doing right by my girl. It made the painful throbbing erections worth it. And every day I stepped out of the shower and saw her little blue toothbrush next to mine, I would smile like a fucking idiot.



School always pushed us to the edge every day. Walking through the halls with all the people and holding my girl to me tightly as we weaved around them. She would keep her cheek pressed into my side as she stared at the floor. I wanted her to hold her fucking chin up and look them all in the eye. But she couldn't. So I did it for her.

And I was usually glad she wasn't looking up and seeing them, because some of the looks I got were utterly fucking ridiculous. I'd spot Stanley every day before Bella's gym class glaring daggers at her as she walked in the doors. It made my fists clench.

Lunch became progressively more... interesting. It all started that first week when Jazz began talking about a book that Bella had read. Some fucking historical biography or some shit. It perked her interest as she caressed my knee and offered her opinion of it timidly. And they began talking about it while we all ate our cookies and I had my arm around her. It was the first time we had spoken to anyone else at the lunch table.

Somehow, Rosalie entered into the conversation, shocking us all more than a little with her intellect on the subject. She rolled her eyes and flicked her blonde hair back while leaning across the table and chatting to my girl about it some more. I stayed silent as I stroked her neck and listened to the conversation. She was quiet, and timid as fuck, but she talked nonetheless.

Emmett and Jazz were getting along more than I thought possible. Telling crude jokes to each other and laughing some days while Rose and Brandon rolled their eyes in exasperation. Bella and I would just caress each other softly and occasionally snicker at the jokes. I wanted her to offer them the filthy nun joke, but I knew she would just blush and hide under my jacket.

It grew even more interesting into second week. Brandon was talking about a new band that she loved while we all sat at the table and ate our cookies. Sitting next to Jazz and doting over the music like it was the next coming of Christ or some shit. I fucking hated it. So I snorted at her. Jazz watched in amusement as I thoroughly insulted the band she loved so much.

She just turned to face me with an arched eyebrow. "So tell me, Oh Master of All Things Musical." She said to me dryly from across the table, earning her an eye roll as I stroked my girl's neck. Bella sighed and shook her head while slumping further into my side as Brandon continued. "What is 'acceptable' music to someone like you?" She asked with air quotations.

Jazz and my girl simultaneously groaned as I smirked at her cockily. That smirk began the longest conversation I've ever had with Brandon. I told her what I felt was acceptable music, and much to surprise she told me her idea of acceptable music. Her musical taste wasn't all

shitty, but she had some skeletons in her iPod closet. Everyone at the table looked at us in shock when we actually agreed on something we both liked. And by the end of the hour, Brandon wasn't glaring at me anymore. It didn't make us eternal BFF's or any shit like that. But she did smile wryly at me as she walked to class hand in hand with Jazz.

Bella was so goddamn happy about the two of us getting along that she smiled all through Bio, even though our assignments were on flesh eating bacteria. I made a silent promise to myself to try harder with Brandon if it was going to make her happy like *that*.



There were some nights we didn't just attack each other like two hormonal teenage motherfuckers. Some nights were darkened by the reality of our ghosts.

One particular evening, I was with Carlisle in his study playing a very humiliating game of chess. And he brought up my mother. Really fucking subtly. Completely out of the blue, just sitting in front of the chess board across from me and trying to guess her age with a cautious glance in my direction from under his lashes as he took my rook.

And just like always when someone brought up shit like that, the memories came. Even though I tried my hardest to swallow them down and let them go, they still possessed my mind and made me clench my fists.

I just stood up and walked out of the room, pissed off, and refusing to speak with him about something like that. That one little mention ruined my entire night. I think Bella knew as soon as I opened the door that I was off.

I ate quietly, waiting to get my sketchbook out and lay one particular memory down on paper to get it out of my fucking head for two minutes. But instead, she made me lay down facing her as she stroked my hair softly. It made me sigh. She began asking me questions about those memories that I tried so hard to keep away.

Something about the way she held me and whispered to me made me open up completely to her; tell her shit that I couldn't even think about during the day around other people. Shit that took me back years in time, to a little house in Chicago.

I wanted to be pissed at her for asking me those things and forcing them out of my head with her silky voice and mesmerizingly loving brown eyes. But I couldn't. Because telling her was even better than just drawing them, and when I woke up the next morning, I could focus again.

Just like me, sometimes my girl was having a shitty day too. It was always so fucking obvious to me when she walked in with a blatantly forced smile. She would grow quiet and withdrawn as I ate my meal and stole concerned sideways glances at her as she leaned against my shoulder.

Afterwards, I'd just pull her into my lap and hug her. Begging her softly to tell me what was wrong. She usually did.

One particular time, it was something small that confused the shit out of me. How she had to say no to Brandon when she was asked to go shopping. One other night, it was something far more obvious. She told me she had seen Esme and Brandon lying on the couch together reminiscing about Brandon's childhood. She agonizingly declared it a 'Mother and daughter moment'. And I could sympathize with her so fucking completely. That was the biggest reason I rarely went to Jazz's house. He and his mother were always very close.

My girl cried that night. It broke my fucking heart as I rubbed her back soothingly and rocked her in my lap. Usually it was the bitterness of her condition or an episode that made her cry. I had rarely ever seen her cry over that particular thing. She wept silently on my shoulder for over an hour as I held her.

We could just tell when we needed a night to live the reality of our existences. Just a few fucking hours to wallow in the darkness and allow it to spill over. It was a weird kind of intuition.

Those dark nights always made the following nights brighter though. Because all that shit was out and gone, and we could just be together without thinking about it. We could smile and laugh again as I ate my meal. And afterwards, we'd eagerly continue where we left off with the desensitization process.



On the twelfth night there was progress. We were making out like always as she hitched her leg over my hip. I had been quite shamelessly groping her ass as she licked and sucked my neck. Making my groan into hers. I had the most overwhelming urge to roll her onto her back. Instead, I decided to roll onto mine, bringing her on top of me as our lips met again. It was the first time we had changed positions from our sides.

She moaned breathlessly, pressing herself against me and grinding against my erection with a gasp into my mouth. I groaned and grabbed her ass tighter, only mildly encouraging the act as she did it once again. It was fucking sexy. But after a few moments of battling with each other's tongues, I sat us up, breaking from her lips panting and beginning my attempts at touching her breasts as she weaved her fingers through my hair and licked her lips. There was rubbing and caressing and so much relaxing that she rested her forehead on mine and closed her eyes as I began grazing her peaks.

That was the first night I was able to do it. There were two cookies. We usually got to four before we got too tired to continue. I let my hands remain motionless on her breasts with the last successful attempt. She still had her forehead resting on mine when the corners of her lips turned up into a smile of triumph and she finally opened her eyes to gaze at me.

She crushed her lips to mine, pushing her chest into my hands and willing me to grip them more firmly. And I did. I also groaned into her mouth as I began groping her and pressing against her tongue. Just fucking praying that she wouldn't start writhing against my erection as she straddled me.

We stayed up a little later that night. I knew she wanted to feel it for longer. Her victory, and the proof that the process was working. So I continued massaging and pressing against her peaks as she licked and sucked her way up and down my neck and back to my lips breathlessly.

I eventually let the kisses dwindle to soft slow pecks as I decreased the pressure on her breasts with my hands, and finally removed them to stroke her cheeks and hair. She understood what I was doing, and eventually climbed off of me with one last kiss, and a smile that made me chuckle.

She was still smiling into my chest as she hummed me to sleep and I smelled all of her flowers and cookies in her hair.

It was a good night for my girl. And I did get to grope her, so really, I couldn't find any room for complaints either.



I began changing positions up, trying to find the one she liked the best. I learned so fucking much about my girl. Little things that were important. She liked it when I nibbled her ear lobe gently. And in return, she'd nibble mine, and I'd groan into her neck. There were also things that made her say the safe word. Shit that I didn't expect.

One night I had chosen the position where I was on top. She seemed to enjoy it a lot as we fought against each other's tongues breathlessly and she shifted her little hips against mine. Then she began pulling my hair. My scalp was sore from the previous night, and I really didn't want it so soon. But instead of saying the safe word, I reached my hand up and grabbed her wrist, tugging it gently away from my hair and sighing in relief as I lowered it beside her head. I don't know why I did it, but I kept hold of her wrist as I broke from her lips panting and began kissing my way down her neck as she writhed against me. Then I lifted her wrist over head and held it tightly above her.

She stiffened underneath me, ceasing her writhing. "Cookie." She choked while tugging on her wrist.

I let go of her wrist and shot up so fucking fast that it made my head spin a little. I panted as I sat on my knees between her legs, rubbing up and down her thighs and glancing at her apologetically as we caught our breath.

I ended the night there, feeling really shitty for doing something as stupid and careless as trying to assume a position of dominance over my girl. I should have known that it would make her uncomfortable.

I was careful after that, usually allowing her to remain on top of me, and trying to show her subconscious that she was, in fact, the dominant one. And the groping continued. She was always so fucking eager for the process to start every night, sometimes breaking away from my lips and silently begging me to begin before I was ready.

The cookies and relaxing became gradually less and less time consuming, giving us more time every night to enjoy the feel of her breast in my hands. It didn't escape my notice that she began wearing lighter sweaters.

It was nightly battle with her mind's will, and we were steadily breaking down that barrier with every touch and grab. Panting at each other, and hornier than all hell as we kissed relentlessly and pulled each other closer with moans and groans. The process was slow as fuck. But we eventually made it.

Thirty days. One whole month of the process on her chest. And I was finally able to grab them in my hands without one cookie what so fucking ever.



I was straddling his lap, leaning my forehead against his with my eyes closed completely relaxed, and trying with everything in me to contain the massive squeal that was in serious danger of bursting forth. He was groping my breasts without needing the technique. And there was no panic or discomfort of any sort.

I couldn't help the wide grin that slowly spread on my face as he gripped them more firmly. He chuckled softly in front of me, washing my face in his warm breath as he massaged my breasts. I sighed and opened my eyes, meeting his gaze as I stroked his hair softly.

I felt so alive. So victorious and triumphant as I crushed my lips to his eagerly and pressed his face closer to mine. He smiled against my lips and eased himself back onto the pillows, bringing me down with him as I plunged my tongue into his mouth and he continued squeezing my breasts.

It had to have been the best night of the whole month. A ridiculously difficult hurdle. And if my butt was any indication of what the technique accomplished, then we wouldn't need it for my breasts anymore. And that thought made me skip to the bathroom when it was time for bed.

It had been a long thirty days. I had been counting, and mentally documenting every detail of every night inside my mind.

Edward was a freaking saint. Because my self control left the room twenty eight days ago. I borrowed his most of the time, using it to restrain myself from touching him the way I did in the meadow that day. Edward had my safe words to keep him in check every night. I didn't have that luxury. There was nothing stopping me from touching him and hearing those sounds again. Dignity and virtue were sorely overrated.

I could feel him against me every night when we got into bed. He was aroused. Because of me. Every night. Even the nights we didn't make out and we just talked about things that made us cry. We were still turned on by the feel of each other when we pressed our bodies close under the covers.

I was wondering how he handled it. All the pent up sexual frustration that it all caused. I certainly couldn't complain because he was doing it all for me. Because of me. But I was curious as to how he could even function some nights. I had so much trouble pushing the lust back most times.

Of course, there were nights where the lust was pushed back all on its own. Sometimes I'd be down when I came over, obsessing over something that had happened that day. And he would just hold me and let me cry. Listening to my problems, no matter how trivial, and always making me feel better by the end of the night.

The days at school were still hard to get through. But having Edward by my side at every possible moment made it bearable. He walked with me through the halls, glaring at people, and sometimes tensing up over something that would upset him. I'd just squeeze his waist tighter and whisper that I loved him to the floor as we walked. It seemed to relax him.

Lunch became my favorite time of the school day. I was able to scoot as close to Edward as I wanted with my hood down as he put his arm around my shoulder and I stroked his knee. Jasper, Rose and I could talk about historical biographies. I was more timid about talking directly to Jasper, but I did have a good time talking to Rose. It always bothered me that we lacked any common interests, yet still called ourselves friends because of our mutual association with Alice.

I began making her a bag of cookies that first day I spoke to her. She was snarky, and she disliked my first and second favorite guys. But she was the closest thing I had to a girl friend that wasn't in direct blood relation to me. And I didn't want her to feel left out when we all had a bag of cookies and she didn't.

The next day when I gave her the cookies at the lunch table, she made a comment about how they would make her fat. But I could see the corner of her lip twitch as she opened the bag and began eating them with the rest of us.

I nearly crapped myself when Edward and Alice began talking. I was so scared when it all began, wishing I could disappear into Edward's leather jacket as I anticipated World War Three of the Forks High lunch room. But instead they compared mutual musical interests. It was appalling. It was divine. Watching them agree on something without grudges or glowers. They smiled at each other every time they hit on something the other liked. Even flesh eating bacteria couldn't ruin the mood it put me in.

And at the end of the day when I got into the Porsche with Alice, she actually complimented me for finding a man with good taste in music. I gaped at her as she smiled on the drive home. I had been wondering what would break her for weeks. And that was it.

And every other day after that in the lunch room, Alice wouldn't glare at Edward. Instead she would occasionally ask him a question about some new album, or insult his clothing. For Alice, that was a good thing. I told him so as we walked to Biology, just so he would understand how endearing her clothing ridicule was. It made him chuckle and shake his head as I squeezed his waist tighter with a wide grin.

I never let gym get me in low spirits. No matter how often Jessica would glare at me or James would hide from me, I tried my best to shake it all off. Counting down the minutes until the bell rang and I could walk out the doors to meet Edward, who was always waiting for me with a crooked smile.

The rides home with Alice became more comfortable as I was finally able to gradually introduce my relationship with Edward into our conversations. I always kept the topics light; his favorite kinds of cookies, how much he liked my cooking, how sweet he always was as he held me in the halls. I was afraid to touch on something that might upset her. Anything regarding physical intimacy beyond what she had already seen from us.

I think she probably knew, but never pried past what I willingly offered to her. Maybe one day I would be able to talk to her comfortably about those kinds of things. I hoped I would.

When we got home, I'd usually sit with her in her room and read some of her ridiculous girly magazines while she did her homework or picked through her closet. She'd always smirk when she saw me reading, probably thinking her femininity was rubbing off on me. Which was such a lie.

I still allowed her to dress me up every weekend. And I was more than glad that she kept things mostly conservative, though something told me she was easing me into her idea of fashionable. I still used up my veto on her first pick of every Saturday. I think she planned it like that. Tricky pixie.

And every night I would make supper for the three of us. Esme would smile while we all discussed our day. I got the feeling Alice was more comfortable discussing things like Jasper around me since I had some information of my own to offer where the subject of boyfriends was concerned. Not that I usually did.

I'd get impatient for ten, always making cookies and lining up the eight bags on the counter afterwards. I was up to using four cookie sheets every night. I loved it. Having so many people to share my creations with. It was only mildly embarrassing that I gave them all a private insight to my day when I named them. Especially when the names were something like, *Berry Tasty Nibbles*. Of course only Edward and I knew the exact context of that name. He liked it when I used my teeth. He probably thought I didn't know, but I could tell whenever I would graze his earlobe with them and he would shiver.

I was saving that particular piece of information for desperate measures. When I needed to challenge his control and I couldn't pull his hair. It was probably a little conniving of me, but I locked it away for further use.

When I climbed up the lattice and to his door at night, I was always anxious. Nervous that something had happened during our time apart and he was lost in his memories again. I'd be tapping my foot anxiously when he'd open the door. I'd check his forehead first and foremost before anything else.

It was all because of one night in particular when I came over. I could see the crease in his forehead and knew that he was troubled. It was unexpected, because he had been fine at school earlier in the day. But I knew his behavior well. It was the same way he acted that night Esme asked about his childhood.

He ate quietly, casting glances at the spot he kept his sketchbook. But when he was done I didn't allow him to get that far into his wallowing.

I did the same thing as that night he came over for dinner. Pulling him down beside me on the bed when he was done eating and stroking his hair softly. I asked him to tell me about his mother. And just like before, he got a flash of pain in his eyes as he closed them. And when they opened again, he had once again transformed into the innocent and vulnerable Edward that was so alien to me.

He began twirling a lock of my hair around his finger behind my back, exactly like last time. He smiled wistfully as he retold the events of one of her birthdays when he was a child. How he made her a birthday card, all by himself, with construction paper hearts and balloons. He smiled wider and shook his head as he told me about how he got the glue all over the kitchen table and used his shirt to wipe it up with.

He seemed so proud of the card he made as he described it to me in perfect detail while twirling my hair around his finger and gazing at me wide eyed. Green and pink with black

marker. The first three hearts were crooked, so he folded one of the pink construction paper pages in half and cut a half heart out of the center. When he was done and unfolded it, it was perfectly symmetrical with one lone crease down the middle.

He began twirling my hair faster as he grinned and told me about how the same process didn't work with the green balloons, and it took him more time to get them just right.

I chuckled softly as he relayed the mental debate he had over whether or not to add glitter to it. His eyes grew wider and more innocent as he explained giving it to her.

I could see it in my mind as he told it. Little Edward all excited and happy as he shoved the card in his mother's face enthusiastically, while the inside of his shirt stuck to his skin from the glue.

His smile grew wider and more wistful as he described her reaction to it. Happy and glowing. Just as proud of him as he was of himself.

He told me she set it beside her bed that night, and then she went to hum him to sleep with a wide smile and planted a sweet kiss on his little cheek.

He smiled with a sigh as he twirled my hair. "I wonder what ever happened to it." He mused in a soft whisper. And as he tried to remember while gazing into my eyes, his whimsical smile slowly fell. His eyebrows knit together as his agonized green eyes filled with tears and he opened his mouth, only to close it again.

He began twirling my hair more furiously around his finger and furrowing his brows further while he kept opening and closing his mouth. As if he knew what happened to it, but couldn't force the words out.

And when the tears finally spilled over onto the pillow, I plunged my face into the crook of his neck and hugged him tightly. Holding him while he cried silently against my shoulder and battling with urge to cry myself as I held him.

Something about the story was unbelievably sad to me, even though it was a happy memory for him. Something about the construction paper birthday card that made my heart clench as I fought back tears and stroked his hair. Something more than just the fact that the card probably burned in the fire.

It was the pink heart with the crease down the middle.

It was supposed to make the heart perfect, but it marred it. The heart was still technically physically whole. But the crease split it into two separate pieces.

He put so much time and effort into it. The smallest of gestures that made him proud and excited as he handed it to his mother on her birthday.

He did it all for her. The woman who hummed him to sleep every night and allowed him to soil his good clothes while he dug holes in her garden every summer. He gave her all of his love, as any child would to their mother. Unconditionally and without any questions or reservations. He folded his pink construction paper heart in half to make it perfect for her.

And as I felt his agony seep through the shoulder of my sweater, I wanted to find her and plead with her to tell me what happened. I wanted to ask her how she could do it to him. This beautiful soul that just wanted her love and acceptance. I wanted to look her in the eye and try to understand what could possibly make her turn away from him.

But the mental image of Edward's folded pink construction paper heart gave me the strongest urge I had ever felt in my entire existence.

I wanted to track her down and spit in her fucking face.

Chapter 35. Valentine Pineapple Pairs



I reached my hand down to my knee and scratched it in contempt while Alice twirled a large lock of my hair around the curling iron and chattered at Rose who was flipping through a magazine on her bed.

I was fairly positive she had been planning to put me in this outfit for as long as she had been planning her special night with Jasper. She actually pulled out the leather pants the day prior just to make me spend my veto. That should have been a big red flashing sign. That and the fact that February Fourteenth fell on a Sunday this year.

She seemed oddly relieved hours earlier when I informed her that Edward and I didn't have any plans for the night. That was a complete lie of course. I had already made a fairly extensive menu in lieu of an actual gift; considering the reaction my last attempt at gift giving received.

Sadly, my lack of plans with Edward gave her the green light for this outfit. The shirt was a dark, scarlet red, with a square neck line that was so low on my chest that the top of the ridiculously lacey red push up bra/Chinese torture device she forced me into would peek out if I even moved the wrong way. And then there was always the red tiered knee length skirt. I was fairly convinced that Satan himself constructed it out of the itchiest gauzy material 'unsuitable to be worn with leggings'.

In reality, it was better than the one she had originally intended for me to wear. She had held up a horrifically pink mini skirt enthusiastically before I promptly refused it. She pouted until I explained the logic behind my refusal with a grimace. Her pout turned into a frown and an apologetic glance as she realized that the mini skirt would expose one of my larger scars.

I was hoping the whole awkward experience would save me from having to wear a skirt at all. I was sorely mistaken.

I had to watch her and Rose gush and coo about how 'adorable' I looked as they made me do a little grudging twirl in the middle of Alice's room. Adorable. It was a new low. I began feeling

more and more like one of those poor dogs you see in public. The ones wearing fluffy pink tutus and miserable expressions as their owners paraded them around with a grin.

I shifted my bare legs uncomfortably while I grimaced at my cleavage in the vanity mirror and sent Alice's reflection a pointed glare.

Valentine's Day was officially my least favorite holiday. And as soon as she walked out the door at six, I was returning to civilian clothing. My hoodie had never seemed so inviting.

Admittedly, however, I was quite enjoying an afternoon with 'the girls', feeling normal with someone other than just Edward for a change. It was rather refreshing to hear them gossip and talk about usual girl stuff like I was one of them.

Alice wrapped another lock of my hair around the curling iron, "So when I finally got the manager on the phone, I insulted her low inventory and brainless employees." She grinned while glancing over her shoulder at Rose, who was still flipping through the magazine on the bed. "Needless to say, I got the Princess Leia costume two days early and thirty bucks cheaper." She snickered softly while moving on to another strand.

Rose and I both cringed simultaneously at her mention of the costume she was wearing for Jasper. It was very particular to a fantasy of his, and she had spent hours online ordering and perfecting every detail to surprise him with.

I could never watch Return of the Jedi again.

Rose sighed and flipped a page of the magazine while she lounged against the headboard of the bed. "You're too extravagant. Em's perfectly content with ten minutes on my knees." She smirked at the magazine page.

Alice rolled her eyes at Rose's reflection before furrowing her brows at a lock of my hair that wasn't curling to her liking. "Not all of us can be so profoundly talented at the art of fellatio, Rose." She mumbled distractedly while shaking her head and redoing the lock of hair.

Rose scoffed. "If I were so talented it would only take five minutes." She quirked an eyebrow, finally looking up from the book to see Alice. They both snickered while Alice pulled another lock of my hair and shook her head with a grin.

Rose met my gaze in the reflection of the mirror. "Take notes, Mary Sue." She winked suggestively with a twinkle in her bright blue eyes. I blushed a bit as I quickly shifted my attention to my lap. I would never understand how they could be so casual about discussing those kinds of things. I couldn't even talk about kissing Edward without turning the shade of my skirt.

Alice chuckled softly from behind me while freeing another curl from the hot iron. "She'd only need them if she did that kind of stuff." She mumbled while she pursed her lips and furrowed her brows at another stubborn lock of my hair.

I glanced up at her reflection in the mirror, slightly offended. "How do you know I don't?" I asked, slightly resentful of her condescending tone.

She snapped her head up from my hair to meet my gaze in the reflection of the mirror. "I thought you and Edward weren't having sex." She asked with wide eyes.

I bit back a grimace and shifted my gaze back to my lap. "It's not the same thing." I muttered while picking at the itchy red material of my skirt.

Alice scoffed and freed the lock of hair. "Semantics, Bella. The only reason to put a dick in your mouth is because you want it somewhere else." She said a bit harshly while roughly tugging another lock of my hair into the curling iron.

I heard Rose snickering from the bed as I looked up to meet Alice's gaze once again. "So what if I do?" I snapped at her. It wasn't any of her business, but I was tired of being treated like a child.

Alice pulled the lock of hair from the curling iron and narrowed her eyes at me. "Trust me. You don't." She replied curtly, looking far angrier over the topic than absolutely necessary for any third party to be.

I gaped at her. "Are you expecting me to be a virgin forever?" I asked incredulously, utterly confused at her reaction.

Alice glowered at the lock of hair in the iron without meeting my gaze. "When it's Edward Cullen you want to do it with, yes." She answered sharply while Rose continued flipping through the magazine indifferently.

I was appalled as I continued staring at her slack jawed. "Tell me I'm not getting an abstinence lecture from Princess Labia." I blurted in disbelief, earning a hearty snicker from the bed where Rose sat.

Alice yanked my hair out of the curling iron and put her hand on her hip. "Jasper and I are different." She raised her eyebrows at me in the reflection of the mirror.

"How do you figure?" I scoffed as her ridiculous double standard flared my annoyance.

She rolled her eyes, picking another lock of hair from my head and twirling it around the curling iron. "For one, Jasper isn't a complete dickhead." She fingered the lock angrily while Rose snorted in disagreement from the bed.

I sighed as my face fell and my shoulders slumped. "I thought you and Edward were getting along." I said in a sad voice. I was really getting attached to the idea of them being somewhat friendly.

Alice shook her head as she freed another curl. "Just because he has decent taste in music doesn't mean I'm willing to sit back and watch him ruin my cousin." She spoke through clenched teeth as she picked up another piece of hair and began twirling it around the iron.

I shook my head despite the constraints of the curling iron. "You're so wrong, Alice." I whispered, trying desperately to push back the anger building inside of me. I watched as she dropped the lock of hair and her face fell from the angry expression to one of concern.

"Okay." Alice sighed, depositing the curling iron and standing beside me with her hands on her hips. "Tell me this." She continued with a serious expression. "What will he say when he sees your scars?" She whispered quietly while gazing into my eyes through the reflection of the mirror.

I balled my fists tightly on my knees as Rose glanced up from her book cautiously at the scene unfolding before her. "You don't know him at all." I shook my head once more at her insinuation. I wanted to tell her he'd already seen my scars, but figured it would only fuel her anger.

Rose sat up straight on the bed, gaining my attention as she stared at me grimly. "I know Edward more than I'd like." She said quietly, looking almost apologetic. "He can be cruel and harsh and selfish." She concluded in a spiteful tone.

I swung my head around, making all of my newly curled locks bounce around my face. "You know an Edward that you both created out of convenience." I spat at Rose as she sat on the bed looking pretentious and utterly annoying. Their assumptions were all half made, never thinking to look past his actions or question his intentions.

Alice huffed, making me shift my furious gaze back to her as she spun around and walked away from me. "Fine." She threw her hands up in exasperations before she spun around to face me with a very un-Alice like sneer on her face. "But when Edward Cullen goes around telling people about how he made it with the freak next door, don't come running to me." She spat while flopping down on the bed next to Rose who looked taken aback by her outburst.

I blanched, recoiling as if she had just physically struck me while she crossed her arms over her chest unapologetically and glared at me with narrowed eyes. Half of me wanted to cry, and the other wanted to fly over to the bed and slap her across her condescending little face.

I did the next best thing.

I stood up from the vanity and turned to the door, walking towards it while the stupid red fabric of the ugly gauzy skirt scratched against my skin. I paused at the doorway, blinking back tears of both hurt and anger as I turned to face her and Rose sitting on the bed.

I eyed them through somewhat blurry eyes as they lounged beside one another. They were the epitome of what I put up with every day, and I cursed myself for allowing them to treat me as if I were the same for two hours. I wanted to make them feel awful.

What I was about to do wasn't fair to Edward, But what they were doing was far worse.

"Edward is fucked up." I stated in a quiet voice that was far steadier than I felt. I ignored Alice's obvious nod as she raised her eyebrows in agreement. "But you would be too if you had to watch your father burn to death in house fire when you were just a child." I spoke hurriedly as the words felt like flames escaping my throat.

I enjoyed the way their eyes widened as I continued spitefully. "And you'd be even more fucked up if your mother discarded you like a piece of trash after it happened." I narrowed my eyes as my voice faltered with the memory of the paper heart.

Alice's arms slowly fell from her chest to her sides as she and Rose stared at me with shocked expressions.

I was hoping they were already feeling awful as I prepared myself for my next words. "But people like you are more fucked up than Edward has ever been." I spoke through clenched teeth once again as the tears threatened to push their way through my eyelids. "Because you're too busy being superficial drama queens to notice anything else." I continued as I blinked the tears back furiously and used my blurry vision to stare Alice down with a sneer that matched her previous expression. "And he's the only one in this whole town who has never treated me like a *freak*." I spat the last word at Alice venomously.

I didn't wait for the reaction I had intended as I spun around and stormed out of the room. Because as soon as that word had left my mouth, I knew there was only one person who could erase its bitter aftertaste.

I ran down the hall and to the living room, grabbing my hoodie from the couch and throwing it on carelessly as the tears finally spilled over and trailed down my cheeks.

I swatted them away in annoyance and slid my bare feet into my bulky rain boots before I bolted to the door, swinging it open and slamming it angrily behind me. I took a moment on the front steps to realize I couldn't climb the lattice in the light of day as my tiered skirt billowed in the cold breeze. I bounded down the steps and decided to just go to their front door for once.

I didn't even bother drawing my hood up. All of my curls blew away from my face as I ran across the yard to the Cullen house, sloshing and stumbling my way through the remnant puddles in

the grass while the cold wind whipped at my hair and made my damp face and bare legs sting with cold.

I hastily jumped up the steps to their large white door, using a tight fist to bang on it loudly while still trying to force the bitter tears away from my eyes. The chances of Edward being the one to answer the door were slim, so I stepped back, wringing my hands and waiting impatiently for someone to answer. And just as I was about to begin banging again, the door opened.

Emmett stared at me wide eyed from the doorway as I began pulling at the ends of my hoodie sleeves nervously.

“Edward.” I choked, hoping no more explanation was needed as anxiety was added to my already growing list of overwhelming emotions.

He knit his eyebrows together and stared at me blankly for a moment before finally nodding. “I’ll go get him.” He replied quietly with a glance over his shoulder before shifting his attention back to me. “You can come inside and wait?” He asked uncertainly with a concerned expression.

I nodded quickly, still picking at my sleeves, and feeling endlessly relieved when he simply disappeared into the foyer, leaving the door wide open for me.

I waited a moment before stepping into the doorway, not hesitating to quietly shut the door behind me and walk forward into the foyer. The Cullen house was quiet as I stood just short of the entry way to the large, bright living room and pulled at my sleeves while waiting anxiously for Edward.

I had never just shown up before, and I was hoping he wouldn’t be upset as shifted my bare legs uncomfortably, finally realizing what I was wearing and becoming more agitated as I gazed down at my pale, somewhat scarred legs for what seemed like an eternity.

The sound of footsteps made my head snap up as Edward appeared in the living room. He was wearing a dark shirt and jeans while he ran his hand through his messy hair with an annoyed expression and made his way to the foyer with his face pointed downward. When his green eyes finally met mine, they widened and he froze just short of the foyer.

I didn’t wait for him to come to me, I just cleared the distance between us as he eyed me in confusion; running at him and throwing my arms around his waist in a desperate embrace. I plunged my face into his chest and breathed in deeply while I squeezed him.

He slowly returned the embrace after a moment, wrapping his arms around my shoulders and stroking my curly hair while lowering his face to the top of my head.

He breathed in deeply, much like I was doing as I squeezed his waist and clenched my eyes closed tightly. "What happened?" He whispered into my hair worriedly while softly caressing the curls flowing down my back.

I shook my head against him as the memory of the argument made the tears spill over once more. One lone sob escaped me before I could gain control, squeezing him tighter and willing his presence to ease the bitterness that awful word poisoned me with.

He didn't ask anymore questions. Just stood in the foyer and held me while I cried silently into his chest for ten minutes straight. I kept gulping in his scent greedily, allowing his caresses to sooth me completely before we heard a soft knock on the front door behind us.

He lifted his face from my hair as the door opened behind me, but I didn't let go of his waist as I nuzzled the warmth of his firm chest softly.

He snorted as he gazed over my head at whoever was standing in the opened doorway. "I should have fucking known you two had something to do with this shit." He spoke harshly as he bunched one hand into my curls gingerly.

I heard a quiet sigh from behind me as Edward massaged my scalp gently. "Bella?" A soft, high pitched whisper alerted me to Alice. My jaw clenched as I squeezed his waist tighter. I heard the same sigh from behind me once again. "I'm really sorry." She apologized in a voice that seeped with genuine regret.

I was going to answer before I felt Edward sigh deeply and grip my hair tighter in his hand.

"Take a fucking picture, Hale." He spat to the space behind me where I assumed Rose was standing with Alice.

I grimaced, realizing that they were likely gaping at Edward and making him uncomfortable after learning the truth about his past. "I'll be home in a minute." I mumbled into his shoulder quickly, willing them to leave before he got suspicious of their actions.

The foyer was quiet for a few moments before I could hear them shuffling towards the door and exiting quietly.

I sighed into Edward's chest as I loosened my grip around his waist and pulled away to look at his face apologetically. "Sorry to just barge over here." I mumbled regretfully while he eyed me cautiously.

He rolled his eyes and shook his head at me. "That's bullshit. You can come over whenever you want." He removed one of his hands from my curls to gently wipe away the remaining tears from my cheek with his thumb as he gazed down at me lovingly.

The love in his eyes erased most of the bitter aftertaste, but I needed one more thing before I could go back home and face those two. So I bounced up on my tip toes and pressed my lips to his, moving my arms from his waist to wrap around his neck tightly as I crushed my lips to his firmly.

He hummed, tangling his hands into my hair and moving against my lips in a soft and sweet kiss.

I smiled against his lips as the small gesture made me feel impossibly better. He smiled back against my lips and pulled away, turning his head around the foyer and glancing over his shoulder before turning back to me and using one hand to sweep the hair from my neck.

My breath hitched as he leaned into my neck and planted a soft kiss right below my ear. "By the way..." He breathed into my neck, trailing his lips up to my ear and grazing my earlobe. "You look so fucking sexy in that skirt." He whispered seductively into my ear while he used his hand to bunch my curls into his palm.

I bit back a moan at his seductive tone as my eyes fluttered closed. Sexy. Not adorable. I was going to kiss all the way up his neck relentlessly before I felt him pull away from me. I opened my eyes to meet his sparkling gaze as his lips slowly turned up into a smirk and we released each other.

I smiled back widely before I turned to exit. Deciding that skirts were the most genius article of clothing Satan himself had ever invented.



Even though I felt bad about storming over to the Cullen house unannounced, I was thankful that I felt better, and I wouldn't have to spoil our night with my awful mood.

When I got home, I went straight to Alice's room. In reality we had both over reacted because we cared greatly about two different people. And that was the gist of the whole argument. Alice just cared about me, and she didn't know Edward well enough to trust him with that piece of my innocence. I supposed if I had been in her shoes I might have had a similar reaction. I was wondering how she would react if she knew how shamelessly I had been throwing myself at him for the last two months.

When I reached her open doorway, her head snapped up from Rose's shoulder where they sat on her bed. My face fell when I realized she had been crying. She sniffled as she gazed up at me with wide remorseful brown eyes from the edge of the bed where she sat.

I sighed as my shoulders slumped and I shuffled my way to her bed, flopping down beside her and throwing my arms around her neck wordlessly.

She pivoted toward me and returned the embrace strongly, her little arms nearly crushing my ribs as she sniffled into my shoulder. "I'm so sorry, Bella. I didn't mean it." She apologized sadly, squeezing me harder.

I attempted to sigh. "It's okay." I forgave her in a strained voice as her constriction of my torso became nearly painful.

She sniffled softly and loosened her grip slightly without letting me go.

Rose sighed from the opposite side of her, gaining my attention as I eyed her from over Alice's shoulder. "Yeah." Rose stated in an uncomfortable tone while picking at her long manicured nails. "I guess I am too." She shrugged one shoulder indifferently as she stared intently at her hand.

I smiled at Rose's attempt at an apology, and quickly forgave her as well.

It really was like being a normal girl for a day. Boys, gossip, hair and cleavage, bickering, and awkward apologies and all.

We all lounged on the bed after that, scooting up to the headboard while Alice rested her head on my shoulder and I rested my head on hers. Rose continued flipping through the pages of her magazine as we all remained quiet for a few moments.

Alice's hand found mine resting on the pretty red skirt as she grabbed it inside her smaller hand. "Did all that stuff really happen to him?" She whispered softly, playing with my fingers as I stared at one of the posters on her wall and nodded curtly, hoping she wouldn't inquire any further into his past. I was already feeling guilty enough as it was.

She shook her head against my shoulder, tickling my ear with her spiky black hair. "That's just awful." She breathed sadly as she stroked my hand with her thumb.

I didn't say anything regarding how awful it actually was as the room was filled in a grim and stifling silence. I figured we were all likely considering the events of Edward's traumatic childhood. It was one of those defining moments where the mood of the entire day could be completely and utterly spoiled by the cloud hanging over the situation.

God bless Rosalie.

She huffed and tossed the magazine across the room, startling Alice and I as we shifted our attention to her. "This is why I never talk to girls about blow jobs." She spoke in annoyance as she darted her eyes back and forth between us. "Someone always ends up crying and running away from me." She sniffed indignantly.

Alice and I both stared at her blankly for a moment. And then we both began snorting and chuckling at her statement as she rolled her eyes and relaxed back against the headboard, victorious in dissipating the gloomy atmosphere.

We picked up where we left off as Alice shooed me into the vanity seat and resumed curling my hair. In an attempt to give Rose a better experience, I boldly brought up the subject of fellatio once again while staring intently at my lap.

Alice grinned and shook her head at a lock of my hair as Rose enthusiastically explained the entire disgusting process to me. I was possibly a little more interested in the whole thing than entirely necessary. I was quite sure I could never do the things she was describing to Edward. He had only been able to grope me without using the safe word for a week. I was still working up the nerve to do something as brave as removing my shirt so he would touch my skin again.

After Rose had smugly described her every seductive tongue technique in excruciating detail and a few other specifics that I couldn't even repeat in my mind without turning the shade of my clothing, I sat completely silent in the vanity seat. Awestruck, and more than a little appalled as I gazed at her wide eyed through the mirror.

Rose and I were both quite pleased when Alice merely snickered at her lesson while doing my hair and shaking her head. She didn't object to me knowing about it, and she certainly didn't seem surprised by the details given.

Neither of us ran away crying.

Though I must admit, the instinct to do so was definitely there.



Esme arrived home at four, scurrying around the house hastily as Rose, Alice and I all eyed her curiously from where we sat in the living room. They had somehow talked me into a Valentine's Day movie marathon while waiting for six-o'clock to arrive so they could both go spend the night with their respective significant others.

It was quite classic, the plan they had concocted. Rose was sleeping at our house. Alice was sleeping at hers. Or at least that's what their parents thought.

The only explanation Esme offered as she finally stood before us breathless was that there was an emergency at the office that required her immediate attention, and she'd be home before midnight.

It didn't escape my notice that she was wearing her long trench coat and her diamond earrings while her hair was perfectly styled. I was wondering if Dr. Cullen had a work emergency as well as we all assured he we could fend for ourselves for the evening.



Alice and Rose left at six, leaving me alone in the quiet house as I happily began preparing Edward's large Valentine's Day meal. It was rather time consuming, taking me three hours to make everything from scratch, even though I had already prepared some of it earlier in the day. I furrowed my brows at the various mixing bowls and pans used to prepare the chicken pot pie, homemade macaroni and cheese, which he seemed to favor greatly at Thanksgiving, and a dessert of banana pudding. I usually didn't bother with dessert when I brought Edward food at night, but it was my only Valentine's Day gift, so I eagerly went slightly extravagant with the whole affair.

I still made my *Valentine Pineapple Pairs* at nine, working a strategic placement of the cookie sheets inside of the already occupied oven rather successfully.

And by ten, I had so many containers filled with food that my back sack was straining against the zipper as I swatted my curls away from my face and forced it closed with a triumphant grin.

So, I kept the red gauzy, knee length tiered skirt on. And I realized I was only doing it because Edward thought it was sexy, and it felt scratchy against my legs, but it was more than worth it. It was also quite possible that my chunky boots and black hoodie didn't go with it at all, but I didn't care as I slung my bag onto my back and locked my bedroom door securely.

I took one more trip around the house, making sure it appeared as though I had gone to bed before finally stepping out the back door. My curls once again whipped around my head as I stalked across the dark yards carefully and eventually began climbing the familiar white lattice up to Edward's balcony.

The full bag bounced on my back as I finally made it over the railing, finding my footing on the balcony silently with a victorious smirk as I raised my fist to the door and tapped quietly.

Edward was waiting for me like always as he opened the door, standing in the bright room and gazing into my eyes with a crooked smile as I entered. *No crease.*

I was once again thankful for my better mood as I turned to face him when the door closed. Because the moment he turned the full force of his intense green eyes on me, I felt at home. Alone in the room with Edward. With no creases or bitterness as he pulled me to him and kissed me softly on the lips.

Just as I was about to tangle my fingers in his hair and deepen it, he brought his hands up to my shoulder and slipped the straps of my bag off while pulling away from my lips.

He quirked an eyebrow at me. "Are we hording away for the winter or some shit?" He asked as he pulled the heavy, bulging sack from back. "Not that I would object or anything." He winked. *Winked.*

I rolled my eyes as I pried the bag from his grip and made my way to the bed. "It's a special occasion." I shrugged nonchalantly as I unzipped the bag and produced the thin blanket I had brought. He glanced at me curiously as I spread it out on top of the bed with pursed lips and began unloading all of the many containers.

His eyes grew wide as the pile of containers grew. "You do realize that one person can only eat so much food." He murmured while he furrowed his brows at the bed.

I rolled my eyes again as I removed the two cans of sodas from the bag and kicked my boots off. "Yes, but I made food for *two* people." I replied with a smile as I handed him a soda.

Understanding finally crossed his features as he nodded at me with a smile. I had never actually eaten with Edward in his room before, having usually eaten with Alice and Esme earlier in the evening. But tonight was different.

Edward's eyes slowly wandered down my body to my bare legs for a split second before he quickly diverted his gaze to the containers on the bed and flopped down at the edge of the blanket.

I turned around to remove my hoodie, feeling anxious about the top I was wearing as I pulled the hoodie off and glanced down at my chest dubiously. It was like the cleavage had become impossibly more obscene over the last four hours.

I adjusted the fabric to cover the red bra as I heard the sound of a can being opened behind me. I took a steadying breath as I began regretting my decision not to change clothes. I could feel the heat creeping up my face as I slowly turned to face Edward on the bed.

He had the can of soda up to his mouth as I turned to face him and tossed my hoodie on the end of the bed. His green eyes grew wide as they finally settled on my chest. His hand slowly lowered the can from his mouth as I climbed onto the bed, blushing furiously as his eyes followed my cleavage and he gulped thickly.

He quickly shifted his eyes to the blanket, running his free hand through his hair as he blindly set the can on the bed side table. I settled in front of him with my legs wrapped around me in an attempt to be lady like with the whole skirt situation as I reached for the containers and uncovered them, distributing them evenly in front of each of us.

He kept his eyes on the dishes as he smiled down at them, picking up the fork and digging in enthusiastically.

I smiled as he hummed in appreciation and began eating myself while listening to his content sounds. The chicken pot pie was definitely a winner, tasting quite delicious with the macaroni and cheese as we ate in silence for a while.

Edward reached over to the night table and picked up his soda, finally darting his eyes up to meet my gaze while I smiled at him. "So..." He started quietly as his gaze wandered down my neck then suddenly to his food while he furrowed his brows lightly. "Did you, uh... go anywhere today?" He asked while bringing the can to his lips.

I pursed my lips and tilted my head slightly. "Just here." I replied honestly, sliding the fork into my mouth as he lowered the can from his lips and set it back down. An oddly relieved expression crossed his face as he nodded and resumed eating.

Edward

WIDE AWAKE

Thank fucking God. Because her tits were nearly spilling out of that dark red top. I didn't personally have any complaints with looking at them myself, but I was afraid I would have to commit a small murder spree where any other motherfucker's eyes were concerned.

I knew my girl better than that though. She was still blushing like crazy as she ate her meal silently in front of me. I allowed the hormonal teenage motherfucker inside of me to eye her bare legs as they wrapped around her and tucked under the frilly red skirt that spilled onto the blanket beneath us.

I couldn't even allow my eyes to wander to her chest, because I wouldn't be able to look away quickly enough to assure her comfort. Fucking Brandon and Rose dressing my girl up like a goddamn doll and somehow hurting her feelings in the process.

I was pissed off when Em came banging at my door with a vague explanation that I had a visitor. I'm not sure who I was expecting, but when I saw Bella standing in the foyer with red puffy eyes, I was slightly panicked.

Then those two showed up, pretty much answering my every question as my girl cried on my chest. Not to even mention the way they were both just fucking gaping at me while I stood there trying to comfort her.

So I was more than relieved when she showed up at my door without any forced smiles or bitter attitudes. And truthfully, she really did look fucking sexy in that skirt. And then there were always the shiny fucking curls flowing down her back and bouncing as she climbed onto the bed. Bouncing around her chest as she leaned over just enough to give me a full view of... fucking Christ I had to stop thinking about it.

I ate the delicious pot pie and macaroni and cheese as I moaned and hummed, making my girl smile with every bite, and forcing my attention on anything but the breasts. I had been holding

them in my hands for almost a week with no signs of the safe word. There was no excuse for me to be staring at them like I couldn't be touching them every night.

I was rather surprised to find that she had also brought dessert. I didn't usually get such extravagancies at my nightly meal. It was fucking delicious.

She began growing more comfortable as she asked me about my day and ate her pudding with a smile. I shrugged, really fucking lacking any exciting details where my day was concerned other than her showing up. I told her so. She glanced at me apologetically, sliding the spoon into her mouth. I watched shamelessly as she wrapped her lips around the upside down spoon and slid it out slowly.

I furrowed my brows and shook my head slightly, trying to get my mind out of the fucking gutter for ten minutes as we ate the remainder of our meal.

When we were both finished, I began covering the dishes, a little impatient to thank her properly for the whole thing as I discarded them carelessly onto the floor and turned towards her with a smile. She usually was the one to initiate first contact at night when we made out, or desensitized, or what the fuck ever you want to call it.

But I was obviously the eager one as I leaned forward towards her, lifting my hand to her neck and pulling her face towards mine while struggling to keep my gaze on her sparkling brown eyes. She sighed at my touch as she willingly met me halfway across the space and pressed her lips to mine gently.

Gentle was great and all, but I was a little more enthusiastic as I took her bottom lip into my mouth and sucked on it... one notch above gentle. She seemed to be restraining a smile as her hand found its way to the back of my head, tangling into my hair as she pressed her face closer and darted her tongue out, dragging it across my top lip.

I took her into my mouth without hesitation as I lifted my other hand to plunge into all of her shiny fucking curls and pressed against her tongue with mine.

As we usually did, our tongues pressed and fought as we both began pulling the other's face closer and tilting our heads to deepen the kiss. She tasted impossibly sweeter as the remnants of the pudding in her mouth made me shove my tongue deeper into her, earning a breathless moan from her as she lifted herself slightly to get closer to me.

I drew my tongue back from her mouth, pulling away from her lips and leaning back enough for her to sit in my lap like she liked. And I was really looking forward to that shit as she got up on her knees and cleared the space between us by moving to straddle me.

And I fucking groaned aloud as her chest entered my view against my will, forcing my gaze on it as she ran her fingers through my hair. Her breasts were mashed together and...up, forming the

most delicious looking cleavage that any red shirt had ever seen. And if any other motherfucker ever saw it bare like that...

I brought my hands to her sides, rubbing them slowly while easing her to sit fully on my lap. Her brown eyes were already hooded with lust as she finally rested on top of me, breathing a little heavily and running her little hands through my hair in a gesture so relaxing that my eyes wanted to close. I sighed as she licked her red lips, moving one hand from her side to cup her cheek.

This shit was getting out of hand.

I had to beat down the hormones for a moment as I gazed into her eyes and caressed her cheek softly with one hand and rested my other on her hip. "I have a present for you." I whispered inches from her face, staring into her eyes as they stared back at me blankly.

She halted her movements in my hair as she blinked at me. "Valentine's Day was created by greedy executives at greeting card corporations to boost a low first quarter sales trend." She whispered in a sharp, matter of fact voice.

I quirked an eyebrow at her. "Just when I thought you couldn't get any fucking sexier, you go talking dirty to me about first quarter sales trends." I smirked sarcastically while I rubbed her hip with my thumb. It was more of a question, as I didn't quite comprehend her cynicism.

She got my point as she sighed softly, hunching her shoulders and stroking my hair once again. "I didn't get you a Valentine's Day gift." She frowned in a remorseful tone.

I snickered softly at her attempt to ease her guilt. "I didn't get you one either." I stated honestly while rubbing her cheek softly with my thumb. She eyed me with a confused expression as I rolled my eyes. "I just so happen to be giving it to you on Valentine's Day." I shrugged, sliding my hand from cheek to her neck as I swept her curls back. She looked pleased as she smiled at me and nodded.

I chuckle as I rolled my eyes once again. "Close your eyes." I ordered softly, because I was about to eye her so fucking shamelessly that I couldn't bear to be seen doing it. She complied, allowing her eyes to flutter closed as I reached to the bed side table and slid the drawer open, having to lean over a bit to reach inside.

When I pulled out the item, I closed the drawer, finally allowing my gaze to lower to her chest as I rubbed her hip. It was just so fucking sexy that I stared at it for a moment before I remembered what I was doing.

I shook my head once more to rid it of the hormones before I lifted the necklace to her throat, wrapping it around and furrowing my brows at the difficulty of clasping it behind her.

When it was finally secured, I slid my fingers down the length of it until they rested on the silver pendant that was now hanging on her pale chest. I smirked, happy that I finally had something on my girl. I had her ring on me after all.

And the gesture wasn't entirely possessive. The pendant reminded me of her when I spotted it, and I knew I wanted it on her. Two horse heads facing each other in the shape of a heart. Their manes flared out to the sides in a delicate yet bold filigree.

She opened her eyes as I removed my fingers from her skin, looking down to inspect it while her curls created a veil around the sides of her face. She dropped a hand from my hair, using it to finger the silver pendant softly. "All the pretty little horses." She whispered down at it with a smile before glancing up at me quizzically.

I nodded. Shit like that used to remind me of something else. But nowadays that song only reminded me of my girl, laying in bed next to me and humming me to sleep. She smiled brightly and leaned in to kiss me on the lips sweetly.

I sighed as her warm lips met mine, wrapping my arms around her waist and pulling her closer as her hands slid up my arms and neck and returned to my hair. She pulled my face to hers tightly, tilting her head and gently forcing her tongue back into my mouth with a sigh.

We resumed where we left off as I pushed my tongue into her mouth eagerly, hugging her waist tightly and growing harder at the feel of her cleavage pressed against my chest. My breathing deepened as I tried to stifle the surge of lust by moving one of my hands up her back to stroke her hair gently.

My girl never was fond of stifling lust. She pulled my face closer, tilting her face further to plunge her tongue deeper into my mouth. There was still a remnant of the sweet taste in her mouth, making me lick and suck on her tongue as she shifted her hips against me with a moan.

I groaned breathlessly into her mouth, moving my hands to her hips and holding them firmly, willing her to stay still as I battled with her tongue. It was too early for that shit. I could feel her fingers begin to weave in my hair, but was both disappointed and relieved when she didn't make a fist and pull it.

We began panting into each others' mouths as we both pressed ourselves closer, our tongues battling for dominance as I held her hips and rubbed them with my thumbs.

After a few moments of breathless kissing, I pried my lips from hers, moving them down her jaw while gulping in her scent, and fucking dying to keep going until I reached her breasts. The silver chain of her necklace helped me bat down the surge of lust as I kissed and licked my way up to her ear.

She panted into the crook of my neck, arching her chest into me in a silent plea that I knew all too well by then. She fucking wanted it.

I halted my lips on her neck, still panting a bit as I moved my hand from her hair to her side slowly, rubbing up and down in a relaxing gesture that probably wasn't needed for her anymore as we both rested our face in each others' necks.

She sighed into my skin as I began moving my hand to her front, sliding it up her ribs in between us and halting just before it reached her breasts. I gave her a chance to protest as I rubbed her stomach softly with my thumb and breathed against her neck.

She answered with another slight arch, answering my question and willing me to continue. I didn't hesitate to move my hand up and cup her breast with my palm, halting the movement momentarily to make sure the safe word wasn't coming.

It never did of course. The technique was solid.

She sighed against my neck again as I began massaging her peak with my palm, moving my lips against her neck slowly once again, and stifling a massive fucking groan as my fingers touched the skin peeking out of the top of her shirt.

She moaned against me, shifting her hips once again as she began licking my neck. My head was so clouded with lust as I squeezed her peak in my hand that I didn't even give a shit when she writhed against me. I just kept kissing her neck, pausing at her earlobe to nibble it gently, just the way she liked.

I could hear her breath hitch in my ear as she lowered her lips to my neck once more; kissing it with an opened mouth and pressing into my skin with her teeth as she finally fisted her hand into my hair.

The dual sensation of her teeth and her fist made me groan huskily into her neck as I squeezed her breast harder. I should have fucking known the teeth thing wouldn't slip by her. And to do it with hair at the same time...

I growled into her neck and used the hand that was still on her hip to push her roughly against my erection. She moaned loudly, still holding my skin in her mouth as she bit down harder. Fucking ruthlessly.

It made me grunt as I squeezed her tighter, restraining the urge to raise my hips into hers. I clenched my teeth while holding my lips against her warm skin and breathed raggedly into it.

She finally released my skin, surprising me when she pulled away, sitting straight on my lap as we both gasped for air and eyed each other through lust hooded eyes. She licked her swollen

lips; dragging her hands away from my hair and down my arms as I lowered my hand from her breast in confusion and worry.

Her only answer was to bring her hands to the hem of her shirt, tugging it lightly while holding my gaze as she began lifting her hands up and bringing the shirt over her chest. My eyes widened as we stared at each other. I was fucking begging her with my eyes.

Don't fucking do it.

Please fucking do it.

She did it. Lifting her hands over head and completely removing the red shirt in the process. Our gaze broke momentarily as the fabric masked her face, but I didn't look. She kept her eyes on me as the shirt was lifted from her face and head. Her shiny fucking curls lifted with it, bouncing all around her shoulders and chest as she freed the locks and tossed the shirt aside, still staring into my wide eyes.

I wanted to look so fucking badly. So, of course, I didn't. I kept my eyes on hers and my hands to myself as I gaped into her eyes. This was so far from Christmas Eve. This was sexual, and she was discarding clothing in front of me. Fucking begging me to look as she gazed intensely into my eyes. But I was kind of fucking frozen as I stared at her in shock. Wondering how she even worked up the nerve to do it.

She furrowed her brows at me, darting her eyes down to her body and lowering her head to inspect what I wouldn't.

And when she finally looked up to meet my gaze again my heart fucking broke a little. She looked so goddamn ashamed and bitter as she shifted her eyes around uncomfortably. I panicked, doing the only thing we ever did in these kinds of fucked up situations.

I showed her mine.

Bringing my hands to the hem of my shirt and lifting it over my head without a second thought. I tossed the shirt aside and grabbed her face in between my hands, pressing my lips to hers and kissing her softly in apology for the fleeting dickhead moment. I probably should have just looked.

She sighed against my lips, relaxing as she brought her hands to my bare chest and slid them up to my shoulders. I pulled away while still holding her face in my hands and watched as her eyes opened. And I finally fucking looked.

I darted my eyes downward, exhaling shakily as I stared at her breasts. The bra was red and lacey, and looked gloriously uncomfortable as it strained against her breasts and mashed them

together. I dropped my forehead to her shoulder, lowering a hand to trail lightly down her cheek and throat, over her fucking sexy collar bone, and down to one breast.

I watched shamelessly as my hand cupped her breast once again, biting back a groan as I watched her pale skin swell from over the red lacy bra as I squeezed it gently.

She sighed again, dropping her forehead to my shoulder as I watched my hand grope her, slightly mesmerized, and desperately fucking aroused as I massaged and squeezed, dragging my thumb over the peak and earning a quiet moan from my shoulder.

She shifted her hips against me again, making my breath hitch as I clenched my jaw tightly and tried my best to massage her gingerly.

A large gust of air escaped her as she tangled her hands into my hair. "How do you stand it?" She asked in an oddly strained voice.

I dragged my thumb over her peak once more while furrowing my eyebrows and trying to concentrate enough to answer. "Stand what?" I whispered while pushing my palm into her breast.

She sighed, massaging my scalp in unison with my hand. "You know..." She whispered vaguely. "Doing all of this without..." She paused as I slid my hand from her breast to her cleavage, trailing my finger down the middle of it and making her breath hitch. I was going to ask her what the fuck she was talking about before she finally clarified. "Without having any..." She paused again, as I felt the heat of her forehead against my bare shoulder. "Unicorns." She breathed with what felt like a grimace.

One lone chuckle escaped my lips as I moved my hand back to her breast, still amused by the euphemism. "I have my own daily unicorn." I whispered with a smirk, shrugging my free shoulder casually while dragging my thumb back over her peak. I didn't see any reason to hide that shit from her. It's not like it was some big fucking secret that a teenage guy would do that. Some probably far more often than me.

She lifted her head then, finally breaking the trance her breast had on me as I lifted mine and gazed into her brown eyes quizzically. "Really?" She asked with a curious expression as she stroked my hair softly.

I scoffed, still massaging her breast gently. "Of course. I'd fucking explode if I didn't." I said honestly, fighting back a cringe at the thought of one whole month with no release whatsoever. I watched as she pursed her lips and furrowed her brows at me. "Everyone does it, it's perfectly fucking normal." I defended myself hastily as her expression slightly alarmed me. I wasn't willing to feel ashamed for it.

She quickly shifted her gaze away from me, darting it around the room with a semi grimace on her face. And I nearly fucking snorted. Because it was painfully obvious that she didn't. I couldn't see why not. Who wouldn't want a lifetime supply of... unicorns on hand. *Pun definitely fucking intended.*

I was also a little bit sympathetic, understanding why she was always so goddamn eager. She didn't have a morning shower routine. It must have been driving her insane every night.

I sighed as I moved my hands to her sides and rubbed them softly. "Haven't you ever tried?" I asked quietly, trying to push back all of the images that flew into my head at the thought of it. "Touching yourself the same way I did?" I clarified when she still didn't meet my gaze.

She finally looked into my eyes, flaming fucking red and halting her hands in my hair. "It wasn't the same." She breathed with a grimace, shifting a little uncomfortably in my lap, and stirring my erection once again.

Well, no fucking shit.

I felt oddly responsible for her sexual frustration as I frowned at her and caressed her skin gently.

There was only one more place to desensitize, and I didn't get my girl a real Valentine's Day gift.

I supposed, as I gazed into her brown eyes lovingly, that nothing said Happy Valentine's Day like a big shiny fucking unicorn.



I stared into his hooded green eyes, sitting on his lap, in nothing but a skirt and a bra while my fingers meandered through his messy bronze hair. It felt like silk between my fingers as I combed it back lazily from his smooth forehead.

He dragged his tongue across his red, swollen top lip as I shifted slightly on top of him. I couldn't really help it. I could feel him so much closer through nothing but my panties as my skirt spilled out over his lap and the air between us surged and crackled with an unfathomable charge. It was something I hadn't taken into account, and the feel of it made me ache for more.

The need to feel something... anything was so overwhelming that I sucked my bottom lip into my mouth and bit it. Hard. To stop from writhing against him.

I should have known that he'd be... giving himself unicorns, but I had never really thought about it. And if I had a lick of sense... I probably shouldn't be thinking of it at all. Especially right now as I straddle him topless and hopelessly aroused. With no chance of getting a unicorn myself.

Of course I was appropriately mortified by even admitting I had tried. Only once. And I didn't get far before I felt ridiculous and frustrated. And I had to admit it to Edward himself, which made me feel utterly horrified. And still, hopelessly aroused when I thought about how I shouldn't be horrified because he did it too.

Then it was just full circle, sitting in his lap with the pretty horse necklace he had given me hanging around my neck and my scantily clad bottom sitting in the gap his crossed legs had created. It was the sweetest kind of torture, staring into his eyes and growing wet between my legs as I stroked his hair and pressed my teeth harder into my lip to restrain myself from finding friction. He had no idea what he was doing to me when he looked at me like that. Hooded. Lust. Want. And yet, still... concern and love.

He darted his eyes to my bottom lip as his warm thumbs twitched on my bare sides. "Do you want me to do it for you?" He asked in a calm whisper, never breaking his gaze from my lip as I bit it.

It took a moment as I stared at him longingly to realize what he was even referring to. Because my head was so clouded with uninvited visions of him touching himself. And touching me. And rubbing me. Which finally gave his question meaning.

I painfully yanked my lip from teeth as a large gust of air escaped in a near hiss and I clenched my jaw. "Please." I ground out, battling with the urge to fist my hands into his hair as I massaged his scalp. It was pathetic for me to beg for it, but I didn't care. Because the thought of his hands on me one more time trumped any reservations I may have been feeling.

His thumbs pressed into my sides as he met my gaze. The need was there for him too, though he tried to hide it. I could see it in his green eyes as the muscles in his jaw contracted slightly. He sighed deeply through his nose, as if he were steeling himself for his actions. And all I could do was plead with my gaze as my hips moved against my will yet again. I forced my eyes shut and weaved my fingers across his scalp roughly.

He gripped my sides tighter. "Above or under?" He asked in a voice less controlled as I felt his thumbs twitch again.

I opened my eyes as I convinced myself that I was breathing steadily through my nose. And his gaze was casted downwards into my lap. I followed it there, landing onto my red gauzy skirt that was ruffled between us. And I wanted to moan, and laugh, and hug him. Because I was just so freaking thankful that under was even an option. "Under." I breathed in certainty. *Definitely under.*

His whole hand jerked lightly on my side as his jaw muscles twitched from underneath his skin. I was equally as excited with the notion that I would be able to touch him again. With that particular thought in mind, I lowered a hand from his hair to his bare stomach, fingering the softly scarred skin below his belly button where hair would normally linger for a guy. I watched as his gaze slowly climbed up from my lap to my bare stomach, to my red bra where it lingered momentarily, then further up to the necklace hanging above my breasts, to my throat, to my lips, and finally rested on my eyes.

"This isn't fucking about me." He said in a tone that was meant to sound final. As if he were convincing both of us. It was a look and tone I had come to know rather well. And my face fell a little when I realized he wouldn't let me touch him too. I was much looking forward to that part. But I couldn't possibly object. I needed it far too badly to claim any high ground where desperation was concerned. So I grudgingly nodded, moving my hand back up to his hair and pathetically incapable of opposing his orders. He had the power.

His face remained perfectly composed as one of his hands began the descent down my side rigidly, leaving a warm trail in its wake as it descended to my hip and faltered momentarily as it met the itchy material of the red skirt against my thigh. I stared into his green eyes as my stomach seized in anticipation and my fingertips resumed kneading his scalp; feeling his hand move down my thigh stiffly, halting once he reached my knee resting on the mattress against his hip, and winding around to slide to the bare skin of my calf.

I ground my teeth as he ducked his hand underneath my skirt, his other hand on my side twitching again as he began the slow ascent up my leg. I could feel his breathing change with mine as his smooth, warm palm glided upwards to my thigh. My fingers in his hair jerked and faltered in my massage as the dark green of his eyes became lightly glazed over and his thumb pressed into my side.

Through my periphery, I could see his chest moving; heaving with his breaths as they changed and deepened. I wanted to press my breasts against him and match his breaths with my own as I felt his palm drift upwards slowly. I could feel the cool air drift up my skirt as its gauzy fabric bunched around his forearm, exposing my knee as I gripped the knuckles of my fingers together almost painfully in his hair. He was going too freaking slow, and my eyes must have shown my impatience. Because the trail veered to my inner thigh as it crept up, and I finally felt his thumb come to rest just below the elastic of the red, lacy panties in between my legs.

Thank God for Alice's matching underwear rule.

My stomach tightened in impatience as we stared into each other's eyes. He was blatantly trying to maintain a controlled expression as his thumb softly caressed the sensitive skin where it rested, giving me a light shiver as tingles rested at my center.

The room was so quiet that the only sounds permeating the atmosphere were my ragged breaths as I ground my teeth together, and the sound of a light patter against the roof as the rain began to fall outside.

I could see Edward's throat jump as he swallowed and held my gaze. And right before I thought I might just scream for him to do it already, the thumb on my thigh suddenly left my skin and skimmed the fabric of my panties.

I exhaled sharply as my hips involuntarily jerked and I gripped his hair tighter in between my fingers. "Cookie." I breathed tersely through clenched teeth. And I wasn't tense because of the minute amount of panic that rose inside of my chest, but because I had to wait to feel it again.

His expression never changed as he moved his thumb back to its position, rubbing the skin gently as I tried desperately to calm my ragged breaths.

His intense green eyes never left mine as I relaxed as much as physically possible under the strain of my need and used my fingers to once again comb his hair back from his forehead soothingly. I don't even know who I was trying to soothe by the gesture, but the feel of his hair relaxed me more.

I could see the second time coming as his throat jerked with another quiet swallow, unintentionally alerting me. I was rewarded when his thumb finally lifted from my thigh again and grazed the soft, covered flesh once more.

Edward's face was washed in my breath as my lips parted in an uneven sigh and my shoulders collapsed. The most embarrassing sharp purr sounded from the back of my throat as I pushed farther into his thumb and tangled my fingers deeper into his hair without needing the safe word.

I watched a fine crease form between his eyebrows as his eyelids slid closed and he finally lifted his entire palm to press into me.

A deep, throaty moan slipped from my lips as I felt his warmth against me; my curly hair falling around my bare shoulders with a tickle to my stomach that made me shiver. All I could do was allow my forehead to fall against his as my chest heaved, my breasts barely touching his chest with every deep inhale. My fingers in his hair weaved lazily as I sighed and writhed against his still palm willingly.

I was rather surprised to hear his soft groan as he pushed back into my writhe. I was hoping the dampness between my legs wasn't seeping through the thin fabric as I shifted against him once more, biting my lip and watching his eyes shift slowly behind his eyelids.

I wanted to feel myself flush against him, feel his heartbeat and determine if it was racing like mine was. So I tried moving closer to him. Close enough to just barely push my breasts against him, but far enough away to give his palm space to move unrestricted. The need was building inside of me in overwhelming amounts as I was surrounded and covered by Edward and his scent. A desperate, high pitched whisper escaped from my lips as he moved against me and I watched his eyelids longingly. Wishing that he would look at me. Wishing that he would enjoy it half as much as I was.

Wishing that the panties I was wearing were thinner, so I could feel his hand against me completely.

He exhaled raggedly into my face as his palm began moving against me harder, I wasn't pulling on his hair or biting into his neck to break his carefully crafted will and control. I couldn't, because I was so afraid of him stopping as I continued writhing against his palm and watching his eyes dance behind his eyelids. Bathing his face in my uneven pants and sighs as he remained completely still with the singular exception of his hand. I was fairly positive he could feel the dampness by that point.

Suddenly, the movement of his hand changed as his thumb gently pressed into my most sensitive area. I whimpered loudly against his forehead, pushing back against it as I bit my lip painfully in between my teeth.

Without any warning, his eyelids slowly lifted. They gazed back at me with a very particular glint, making me whimper once more. His lids were heavy and hooded, and his glazed, green eyes were unusually darkened. And as if he knew just what the whimper meant, he suddenly sprang to life. A large gust of his warm breath met me as the hand on my side shakily slid up and underneath my hair to grab my breast.

Before I could even react, he crushed his lips to mine, forcing me to release my bottom lip from my teeth as he sucked it into his mouth and ran his thumb across the peak of my breast coarsely.

I moaned against his lips, finally fisting my hands into his hair as I forced my tongue into his mouth fiercely. A gritty sound came from the back of his throat as he tilted his head, plunging his tongue deeper forward into me as his palm moved between my legs with more rigidity.

His hands trembled, and I grew warmer at the feel of it. He was holding back. He was letting go. And I didn't know how much he was letting go, but it was enough to make me melt even further into his touch as our tongues fought against each other eagerly.

The taste of him in my mouth was intoxicating as we pushed and pulled and shifted and gripped. It was wet and warm, and embarrassing when I moaned into his mouth against my will. It was different from the meadow, because I could feel him squeezing my breast and panting into my mouth. He wasn't making all of the sounds I was dying to hear. But he was letting go. He could have stopped and stiffened and pulled away as we both grew impossibly more aroused under my red tiered skirt.

Like he always did.

But he didn't.

And the kisses and touches grew more urgent as he gasped huskily and fought against my tongue with trembling hands enveloping me.

But I wanted to feel more, and nothing was stopping us from both getting what we obviously wanted. Nothing except for Edward. I was going to have to take the initiative. He would never allow it to escalate past a point he felt I may not be ready for.

Which made him sweet and caring and loving. And sometimes those things also made him a dumb shit.

There was no way I could force the question verbally out of my mouth, and I knew that the only way I could make the request was through actions. So I released his hair, sliding my hand down his stiff and ridiculously tense shoulders as he pushed further into my face breathlessly and palmed my breast and center gloriously roughly. The muscles in his arm were rigid and taught as I lowered my hand to his waist.

I grabbed at the waist of his dark jeans, dipping my fingertips inside and pulling it towards me as I panted into his mouth and pushed myself closer to him in absolute desperation. It seemed to excite him further as the gritty sound reemerged from his throat and he gripped my breast harder.

I pressed my thumb into the button of his jeans, grasping it tightly as I used my fingers to unbutton them in one swift motion.

I stopped as he yanked his face away from mine and halted his movements against me; my fingers lingering on the cold metal of his zipper. I opened my eyes and gazed back at him dubiously.

The look on his face and in his lust hooded eyes as we huffed and wheezed centimeters from each other's face must have mirrored my own. His eyes were impossibly darker as a few wayward, disheveled bronze locks fell haphazardly onto his forehead.

I brought my swollen lip once again in between my teeth while gazing into his dark eyes, and pulled down the zipper with uncertain movements. His eyelids grew heavier as his jeans became completely opened by my fingers and I felt his hand loosen on my breast.

I searched his eyes carefully as our chests heaved; the back of his hand touching his own chest with every puff and pull of charged air between us. The fingertips situated between my legs twitched minutely, but his eyes held no protest as my fingertips hooked into the waistband of his boxers, lingering precariously between the warmly scarred skin of his stomach and the elastic while I awaited a mimicking action.

He must have known my intention all along, because he decreased the pressure of the palm in between my legs and trailed a fingertip to the edge of the fabric, halting over the elastic and the sensitive skin where my thigh met my center. My breathing became more rapid in unison with his as we stared and panted and my hand finally dipped down into his undone pants.

There was hair and warm and soft and my hand unsteady with double motive as I plunged into the boxers deliberately. My fingertips finally found him and skimmed the heated skin of his

erection softly. And I resisted the urge to smile at the feel of how aroused he was as his gaze left mine with a sharp inhale.

His face contorted slightly as the hand on my chest fell from my breast to the blanket at his side. "Shit." He breathed as his gaze shifted around the room behind me. I furrowed my brows, trying to decipher the expression on his face as I used the back of my fingers to lightly caress him, somewhat curious as to the feel of it on my fingers. It was as close as I'd ever come to even seeing one.

I felt the blanket below my knee being pulled as he gripped it inside his fist. I kept rubbing softly with the skin of my fingers as his dark green eyes danced around the room over my shoulder, refusing to meet my gaze as the muscles in his jaw constricted and tightened.

I wasn't sure whether or not I should panic that he wanted to pull away, but it was too late for me to turn back. So I moved my hips against his palm, willing him to uphold his end of the bargain as my hand moved gently beneath the denim of his dark jeans.

His gaze finally lurched to mine. And he looked so... agonized with his eyebrows scrunched together, forming a deep groove in between his eyes. I was waiting for him to do something as I caressed him gently and stared fixedly into his dark green pools of confliction.

Finally he sighed, long and deep. And his face became impossibly more confusing as his fingertip lightly traced the elastic of my panties and made a delicate shiver resonate through my legs. I could almost see the battle raging in his head as he struggled with whatever it was that was bothering him.

Edward

WIDE AWAKE

I was so fucking gone. I tried. I really, really tried. I closed my eyes and repeated the periodic table of elements inside of my head. But that just reminded me of science, which reminded me of Biology, which reminded me Bella, which reminded me of my hand in between her legs as she rocked in my lap and whimpered for more.

I could feel her growing wet through the lacy material, and it wasn't helping matters any. So I decided to just give in a little bit. It couldn't hurt to just kiss her... and grab her tit a little. She'd fucking like it. She'd cum quicker. I could go into my bathroom and stroke myself for five

minutes while she came down. Then we could go to sleep, and it'd be no big deal.

But it got worse. Impossibly so. Instead of just feeling the evidence of her lust in my hand, it was in my face, and on my chest, and inside my mouth, and grasped inside my shaking palm as I fought to hold back and hang on. It was utterly and fucking deliciously reprehensible how the whole thing made my dick so hard.

I don't know why I let her do it. Maybe I wanted it so badly I had convinced myself that it was for her sake. But I allowed her to undo my jeans and put her hand inside. Because there was a particular motivation behind her actions.

I showed her mine because I wanted to feel hers too. Or maybe that was only one more fucked up justification for it. It didn't really matter because I let her do it anyways.

And when I felt her fingers on me finally, I felt really shitty. Because it felt so goddamn good, and I wanted her to do it harder. I was searching the room, looking for anything to keep my attention away from the way it felt. Because it was wicked and indecently obscene to feel her soft against my hard.

But then she moved against me. Reminding me of what she wanted and reminding me of what I wanted. The battle against the teenage hormonal motherfucker raged in my mind as I gazed into her brown eyes, swimming with need and want and love and intent. I could have stopped her and pulled her hand out of my pants to do it. She could still have what she wanted. I could still feel her without the boundaries of the thin lace. I could do it without her hand on my dick at the same time.

Or I could just fucking enjoy the shit out of it.

No, Edward Cullen wasn't here anymore. I was officially, full on, hormonal teenage motherfucker.

I hooked my finger into the elastic and plunged it through to the other side, making her gasp as I slid it downwards and felt all of her slick arousal against my knuckle.

She moaned. Fucking loudly as her lips parted and her forehead fell against mine once again. I was still panting, feeling her fingers trace up and down my length as I made another pass with my knuckle. She sighed and pushed into my finger, making me groan as I just fucking pulled the panties aside and brought the rest of my fingers to her flesh.

The fists in my hair tightened, making my eyes roll back into my head as I used my fingers to run up and down her slick folds slowly. It was hot and wet and soft and her sweet breaths in my face as I caressed her. And she really was... *so fucking wet...*

"You're so fucking wet." I groaned involuntarily at the increased feel of her arousal against my fingers. This was always an issue with the hormonal teenage motherfucker. No brain filter whatsoever. I gazed back at her warily from where our foreheads rested against each other.

It was dirty, and utterly debauched to say that kind of shit to my girl. So, of course, she hummed and ran the back of her fingers against my erection firmer as we stared into each others eyes. I clenched my jaw tightly, rubbing her folds as hard as she rubbed me, just like that day in the meadow because we were both too fucking chicken shit to say what we needed aloud.

And when my fingers reached that sensitive bud, I brushed it with my thumb, which made her gasp and buck into my hand. I was rewarded when she ran her thumb over the tip of my erection, making my jaw clench even tighter.

I wanted to tell her she was doing it all wrong. Lead her hand to wrap around it tightly in her palm instead of using the back of her fingers. But I couldn't possibly do something so shitty and disrespectful like that. So I kept running my fingers along her as she caressed me, keeping my mouth shut and enjoying the feeling of it as she bathed my face in her warm breaths.

Of course, I underestimated my girl.

Because she fucking knew how to do it. She was just saving that shit.

When my fingers made an elongated pass towards her entrance, her palm shifted inside of my pants. She eyed me pointedly, licking her lips as she grabbed my erection in her hand and wrapped her little fingers around me tightly. My shoulders fucking quivered.

My fingers froze at her entrance as my stomach tensed and I gripped the blanket at my side harder. She was so fucking warm around my dick, making my eyes close as she took one gentle and long stroke up my length.

Intention can be a very subjective thing in most cases. But not this one. She wanted my fingers inside of her. And the thought of it combined with the feeling of her palm wrapped around me

made me groan as my fingertip made a light circle around the slick location in contemplation.

My girl knew just how to make that contemplation easier too. Because the grip of her hand tightened with another pump around me, making me grunt as my face contorted and hardened. She had no fucking idea what she was doing to me. Or maybe she did. Either way, it broke me.

I opened my eyes as my fingertip barely entered her and I held her gaze; distractedly bracing myself for a cookie, or a scream, or a cry, or something.

Her jaw went completely slack as her eyes fluttered closed. I figured it was okay to continue, so I gently slid my finger inside further; penetrating her as much as my paranoia would allow. She was all slick warmth and tight as I stopped and awaited her reaction to the feeling.

She panted and the fist in my hair actually loosened a bit as she pumped me once more. It was all the approval the teenage hormonal motherfucker needed. I began pulling out and pushing in while she gasped and pumped my erection in her little palm.

It was so fucking... warm and wet and flowers and cookies and more warm as I finally crushed my lips to hers and swallowed the moan coming from her mouth when my thumb found her clit again.

She was everywhere, and I don't know when it happened, but my hands were shaking again as I shoved my tongue into her mouth, trying to be gentle as I pumped my finger in and out of her while she moved in unison with me.

The hand that was fisted in the blanket at my side came up to her neck, and I pushed her face closer to mine. It was a fucked up notion to be running through my head as I kissed her roughly, but I thought about how everyone else was doing shit like this at that very moment. Jazz and Brandon, Rose and Emmett, and I was sure even Daddy C. was lying somewhere next to Esme. No one does paperwork on Valentine's Day.

And I was with my girl. All coupled up and basking in that shit, because even though I never realized it until I met her, it was nice to have somebody too.

She moaned into my mouth as my finger slid in and out of her. Her tongue was ruthless, and the sounds I was making were becoming more and more guttural as I pressed her face to mine harder and felt her stroking me.

I wanted to push her back and lay on top of her and fucking thank god that I could be inside of her without the safe word. Then she began rocking again, pushing my finger in deeper and whimpering as her teeth grazed my lip.

I added another finger in hopes of sating her need, sliding it in alongside the first one as she pulled my hair again. I was breathless, and my chest was heaving and burning, so I yanked my lips away and plunged my face into the crook of her neck while we worked furiously on each other.

As I panted into her neck and felt her gasping into mine, the addition of the second finger reminded me of how tight she was. It was tight and slick and hot... *and I couldn't fucking wait to feel it around my dick.*

"I can't fucking wait to be inside of you." I groaned breathlessly into her neck, wishing the teenage hormonal motherfucker would shut the hell up as her hand tightened around my erection. I battled with the urge to sink my teeth into her neck to keep my mouth shut. I couldn't say shit like that to my girl.

She panted into my neck as my hand shook and tangled into her curls running down her back. "Do it." She whimpered, stroking me harder while I brought her shiny curls to my nose. I needed to breathe it in to gain some type of coherency. Because those words wouldn't be my saving grace.

I kept my fingers moving as fast as she was stroking me, and there was a bright, burning beacon in my vision. It led straight to the dresser across the room. To the second drawer, below the third row of t-shirts and the uncomfortable ankle socks that I never fucking wore. To that box of condoms nestled underneath that were trying to convince me it was okay, and that I could do it. They were telling me I would still be acting responsibly, and she wanted it. They fucking taunted me. They were all I could think about, and I clenched my eyes closed as I felt her teeth sinking into my neck. Pushing me and pulling me into doing something she likely wasn't fucking ready for.

I breathed deeper into her curls, letting her flowers and cookies remind me of why this was so important. It was too spur of the moment, driven by lust alone as I pushed my fingers into her. It would hurt, and she would bleed, and I had no fucking idea what it was like to do that to a girl. To my girl. And I couldn't bear to see her regret it in the morning as she lay beside me, sore and deflowered, and so fucking tainted by the teenage hormonal motherfucker...

I shook my head. Vehemently against her shoulder. And that was the point where I stopped enjoying it so much. I remembered this wasn't about me. I was getting my girl off, and then I was doing mine myself.

She whimpered at my refusal, rocking against my finger and finally letting the skin of my neck go as I pressed into her sensitive bud once again. I needed her to cum quick. So that she wouldn't tempt me any fucking further than I already was.

"Please." She begged desperately as she fisted my hair roughly. Fucking begging to feel my dick inside of her and making my teeth grind as my fingers moved more purposefully. I shook my head again, panting through my nose and bunching her curls up into a trembling fist behind her back. Trying to focus on anything else but her palm around me pumping fervently and that box of condoms nestled in my dresser.

She growled, frustrated and impossibly more desperate and pushed herself lower into my lap so that I entered her further. I knew her frustration was growing every second she wasn't reaching her climax, and my time was running out. The dresser suddenly appeared so much closer to the bed.

She shook her fucking head against my neck, ceasing her rocking and writhing while she gasped into my skin. Her body and hands went still as my fingers kept working.

She pleaded once more in a husky whisper. It pissed me off. Because she was delaying it so that she could convince me to fuck her. That one goddamn word that was going to break me if she didn't just cum already.

I was thankful she stopped stroking my dick, but it didn't stop my fingers and thumb from their urgent efforts. I breathed raggedly into her neck and shook my head again, pumping in and out of her and moving my thumb intently. But she still wouldn't move with me, and I could feel her tensing against the pleasure of my hand, staving it off in silent resistance.

"Let go." I panted huskily into her skin while my fingers made their movements and my fist shook in her soft hair. She whimpered again, shaking her head and pulling my hair in her fist tightly to break my resolve.

I clenched my jaw painfully as I brought my lips up to her ear, annoyed and fucking pissed off. "Goddamn it, Bella." I hissed through my teeth, feeling her tits against my chest and her little

hand wrapped around my dick and growing agitated as I fisted her hair tightly. “Fucking cum for me.” I growled, plunging my fingers deeper and curling them in while my thumb rubbed her clit harshly.

It worked. I felt her constrict around my fingers as her body became rigid and her fist tightened painfully in my hair. I regretted not being able to see her face as she buried it into the crook of my neck once again. I felt her tongue on my skin as she made the sexiest cry into it with her hot and wet open mouth. It might have been an actual word, but I couldn’t tell. A shudder resonated through her body as I felt her dripping down my fingers. And with one final writhe and whimper against me, she was panting and gasping and collapsing lifelessly in my lap.

And I survived. Sighing into her curls and removing my fingers from her. She was entirely fucking limp on top of me, with her hand still in my pants. So I brought a hand down and yanked her wrist out and away from my erection successfully. So fucking glad that I beat the hormonal teenage motherfucker.

I laid us back, letting her fall completely on my chest and straightening my legs out. I was ignoring the way her chest felt against mine as I brought my arms around her and stroked her hair tenderly. She was still panting, resting her cheek on my shoulder while she remained lifeless and... probably pretty fucking satisfied. It wasn’t a double like last time, but I did manage to get her off against her own will. I figured that was probably something to be pretty fucking smug about.

Of course I couldn’t really think of anything like that, because I was still restraining the urge to push my hips into her as she lay on top of me. I kissed her head affectionately, closing my eyes and batting down the hormones. And... kind of fucking impatient to take care of myself because there was no way in hell I was pitching this tent until morning.

Suddenly, Bella shot up from my chest, making my arms snap off of her back as she glared down at me. Her face was red and flushed, and her curls were tangled as they flowed down her shoulders and rested on her heaving breasts where her necklace rested just above her cleavage. I stared at them a beat longer than entirely fucking necessary before I quirked an eyebrow up at her quizzically.

She shoved her palms into my shoulders sharply, making me bounce on the bed for a second as I furrowed my brows in confusion. “What the hell is wrong with you?” She asked incredulously as I instinctively brought my hands to her waist. She looked a little pissed, and maybe, as I saw her eyes cast slightly downward, a little fucking... hurt?

My eyes widened and I lurched up along with her, bringing her into my arms and completely mortified that I had somehow hurt her by doing all that shit. I knew it would come back to bite me in the ass as I cupped her head and brought her cheek to my shoulder.

She huffed, raising her palms to my shoulders and pushing me away gently. Which really fucking made me panic as I let her go and slid my hands down her bare sides nervously.

She frowned as she gazed at me, running her little hand up and down my chest softly. “What are we waiting for?” She whispered, bringing her bottom lip into her mouth and biting it. Still flushed a light red and not helping with the erection situation in the least.

But then I realized what she was so upset about, and I rolled my fucking eyes, flopping down onto the bed again, and trying to calm my heart rate since she wasn’t completely disgusted by how far I went. Instead she was upset I didn’t go farther.

I sighed as she frowned down at me, trying to keep my gaze away from her chest and on her big brown eyes. “The right moment?” I said hesitantly while shrugging one shoulder and clenching my teeth a bit at the way she was straddling me. It wasn’t a good position for keeping the hormonal teenage motherfucker at bay. Especially with the direction this conversation was heading.

She rolled her eyes as her hands rested on my stomach. “It’s never going to be the right moment.” She said in a tone that suggested much annoyance. Her eyebrows furrowed in frustration. “Especially if you’re too busy convincing yourself it’s not the right moment to ever recognize it.” She raised her eyebrows at me expectantly.

I weaved around that reasoning to the more important point as she stared down at me. “You’re not fucking ready.” I said matter of factly. And I didn’t mean she wasn’t ready for sex, because it wasn’t my place to make that assumption, though I was fairly fucking confident she wasn’t realizing the pain involved. But she definitely wasn’t ready for the teenage hormonal motherfucker.

My comment seemed to fuel her agitation even more as I watched her jaw tense and her eyes narrow. I braced myself for the frightening kitten. *Don’t fucking laugh...*

She jutted her chin out and rounded her shoulders back, making her breasts poke out as my eyes involuntarily darted down to them. Heaving behind her shiny curls as her pale, pink flesh swelled from over the red lace. She had one jagged scar below her breasts, longer and deeper

than the rest of the smaller ones that led one's vision right up to her cleavage from her stomach. It was taunting me from above and below. My fucking fingers twitched.

"I'm so tired of that crap." She growled, forcing my eyes to hers and away from her tits and scars as she glowered down at me. I quirked an eyebrow at her again. For someone who was just graced with a delightfully satisfying unicorn after a month of continually mounting sexual frustration, she was acting pretty fucking moody.

She huffed, blowing a few strands of hair up and away from her face. "Everybody treating me like a damn child." Her hands flew up in the air in a gesture of exasperation. *Frightening kitten indeed...*

She continued, shifting her eyes around the wall behind my bed and seething. "Always pegging me for poor little Bella who can't grow or make decisions for herself." She spoke through clenched teeth with her hands fisted at her sides. "I hate being treated like a child." She growled once again, narrowing her eyes as her fury grew and escalated.

I sighed. Long and deep and rather agonizingly as I brought my hand to my hair and combed it back from my forehead. Those words ate away at my fucking heart. "Is that why you're so goddamn eager to do it?" I whispered grimly while massaging my sore scalp; "To just prove them all wrong?" I accused, feeling fucking devastated at the thought of it, but knowing my girl well enough to think it. She always wanted to be treated normal, and the lengths she would go to fill that void were often fucking ridiculous.

Her eyes widened and her jaw fell at my assumption as she gaped down at me with parted lips and a shocked expression. Either because I was so fucking spot on about it or so entirely wrong. Her face suddenly fell and casted downwards as her hands came up to rub my stomach; her long dark curls tickling my scarred flesh as her shoulders slumped. I gripped my fist in my hair, fucking terrified that I was striking a chord and praying she would just lie to me if it were true.

She sighed, peeking up at me through her lashes with a pained expression, but I didn't let go of my hair as she slowly eased down onto my chest, pressing her warm breasts against me and letting her cheek fall back to my shoulder. The cold silver of her necklace shocked my overheated skin as it became wedged between us.

Her little hand came up to pry my fist loose from my hair as I stared up at the ceiling dismally. "That's not it." She whispered while working to free my grip. I let my hair go, dropping my arm to my side once again as she stroked my hair gently with her fingers. And I really wanted to

believe her, but nothing else could explain her constant scrambling pace to some non existent finish line. The way she always fucking pushed me farther instead of just taking shit slow.

The room was silent for a long while, and I felt so shitty as I stared up at the ceiling and felt her heart beat against mine. Because even as the possibility still made my chest ache painfully, my dick was still throbbing and hard and begging for me to push into her.

I felt her sigh again as she brought a finger to my arm, tracing a lazy line into my skin. "*Je manque toujours de temps*" She whispered softly in something that sounded like French. And I was going to have to excuse myself if she started talking all fucking sexy in foreign languages and shit.

But she sounded really sad so I just shifted my head to quirk an eyebrow down at her questioningly from where her cheek rested on my shoulder.

She never met my gaze as her finger glided up and down my arm and her curls spilled over my chest in waves. "My mom used to do the craziest stuff." She sighed with a small smile flirting at her lips, tickling my arm with her fingertip. "She'd take classes for stupid things like Tai Chi, and pottery." She rolled her eyes a little, but she was still smiling. It was obviously something endearing. And I had never heard much about her mother aside from her death. So I listened pretty fucking intently as she spoke.

"She was always trying to drag me along to classes." She shook her head gently against me as her finger weaved over my skin. "Especially French." She chuckled quietly. And I fucking chuckled too, making her bounce on my chest a bit. I didn't get the joke, but it was just instinct to laugh when my girl did. I brought my hand up to caress her hair as it spilled over my chest and onto the blanket.

Her eyes darted up to mine. "She thought it would be 'cool' for us to have secret conversations that no one understood." She explained with a soft snicker, shifting her gaze back to her finger as it traced a circle on my shoulder.

Her snickered died off as her fingertip faltered in its movement momentarily. "I refused to go." She whispered in a troubled voice with an infinitesimal grimace. I frowned at her and brought my arms around her waist while she tickled my shoulder. "She was so disappointed when she ended up going alone, and I felt terrible for it." She continued, still fucking troubled, and making me hug her tighter because I didn't like that shit.

She smiled after that though. Secretive and scandalous as she darted her eyes back to mine. "I

ended up learning French anyways.” She smirked up at me as her hand finally rested on my arm. “I spent months learning through books and the internet just so that I could surprise her.” She chuckled with a gleam in her brown eyes that made smile back. That sounded like some shit I would do. Sneaking around and learning shit from books for the person I loved. Tit for tat, yet again.

She rolled her eyes as she gazed up at me. “I was planning for something big and public when I finally showed her.” She said with a wry smile. “Maybe insult the barista that always got our drink orders wrong and just... hope that she didn’t know French.” She giggled. *Fucking giggled.* And I snickered with her. How could I not.

Her giggle died down and she sighed. Sadly. Once again. Making my arms tighten around her as her eyes left mine and her finger returned to tracing its lazy pattern on my flesh. “I was waiting for the right moment to show her, Edward.” She whispered in the same troubled tone that made my heart clench. “But I waited too long for it to come.” She smiled sadly as her gaze returned to mine, all fucking wide and swimming with sadness. “And now she’ll never know I can speak French.” Her eyes darted downward once again as she her finger trailed to my collar bone and sent a shiver up my neck.

“Je manque toujours de temps.” The words fell from her red lips in a soft, reverent whisper. As if they were words to live her life by. Her eyes once again returned to meet my gaze as she answered the question that was burning on the tip of my tongue. “My time always runs out.” She breathed in English, her finger pausing on my skin and her eyes intense as she bore her gaze into mine. “Happiness is fleeting.” She whispered with a desperate plea in her sad eyes.

And I just fucking got it. If anyone in this whole goddamn town could get it, it was me. My girl was happy, for the first time in a long time, and she was scared shitless it wouldn’t last. And she’d never get that chance to cross the non existence finish line feeling this same way.

I knew, because in reality, it was the same way I felt. Just fucking waiting for something to come along and ruin it all. Because I was just so accustomed to shit like that happening to me. Happiness is fleeting.

I was relieved at least that the motivation behind it wasn’t a part of her never-ending quest for normalcy. I didn’t know if her reasoning made it right, or made her ready. There was so much shit I didn’t know. Too much. But the facts were there, staring me in the eye as she lay on my shoulder and gazed up at me. Love. Want. Happiness. And fear that our time would run out.

The teenage hormonal motherfucker didn't have shit on that.

"Okay." I sighed. Then as her eyes grew wide, I clarified. "Not tonight." I added hastily, pausing, and then rolling my eyes. My erection was going to make me pay for that shit later, but I needed more time. "A few more days maybe." I shrugged, furrowing my brows in contemplation, and not liking setting a planned time for something like that.

And thank fucking god, she understood my dilemma.

She smiled up at me, moving to cross her arms against my chest and resting her chin on them. "If it feels right." She nodded against her arms with a wide smile and shining eyes that made the electricity around us surge once again. I smiled back, tangling my fingers into the hair on her back, and just fucking happy to see her smiling.

She suddenly shifted on top of me, as if she were uncomfortable. And I hissed; bringing my hands to her waist and gripping her hips firmly while my teeth audibly clicked and ground against each other. I wanted her to stay fucking still. Or... possibly do it again. And again. And again.

Her head suddenly lifted from its spot as her eyes shone with some unfathomable excitement. "Do you trust me?" She whispered in a hurried voice while bringing her palms to rest on the mattress beside my shoulders.

I furrowed my brows and gripped her hips tighter as the new position made her press against me more. "Of course." I shrugged, still grating my teeth and fucking impatient to get her off of me so I could disappear into the bathroom for ten minutes.

A small smile flirted at one corner of her lip as she began lowering her face to my chest, casting it downwards and making her curls tickle my abdomen once again. She glanced up at me with a sparkle in her eye as she pressed her lips to my flesh tenderly. She could have moved to the other side and kissed the flesh that wasn't fucking scarred and grotesque, but she didn't. She began planting more on the marred skin of my chest, making my eyes flutter closed as my hands slipped off of her hips so she could move to the patch on my stomach.

My girl didn't find that shit disgusting. She loved my scars because they were a part of me. And I knew, because I felt the same way when I stared at her stomach and chest earlier. Wanting to kiss each and every tiny one, and make the bitterness they caused just fucking disappear. I sighed as she reached my belly button, bringing my hand up to caress the top of her head

gently as her warm lips kissed a trail down my stomach. Past my belly button, and to my waist where I felt her fingers hook into my boxers once again.

My eyes shot open and I lurched up onto my elbows. Finally realizing that my jeans were still undone and she was trying to put her fingers in there again.

I gazed down my body at her while her fingers remained in the waistband of my boxers. She slowly lifted her face from my stomach to meet my gaze. Slowly and timidly. And... fucking blushing as I gaped at her. "What the fuck are you doing?" I asked, regretting my lack of earlier questioning when I told her I trusted her.

She grimaced, closing one eye and glancing at me warily from where she sat straddling my thighs. "Fellatio?" She asked in a tiny voice, shrugging one shoulder in uncertainty.

My eyes grew wide as I stared down at her, fucking incredulous and wishing my dick wasn't twitching as the word fell from her lips. "I don't fucking think so." I said in my most believable tone that rang with finality. Because, really, how final can one be when turning down a blow job? And as I thought about how disgustingly degrading it would be letting my girl do something like that, I decided, I could be pretty fucking final.

Her face fell as she leaned over me and sat up on my thighs. At first she looked sad. But then she looked pissed. She pushed her chin up, narrowing her eyes at me, and bringing out the frightening kitten once again. I wasn't fucking laughing.

She glowered at me as her finger remained hooked in the elastic and the other gripped my thigh. I was once again reminded of her very shirtless breasts as they heaved and strained under the red lacey bra. "You let Jessica Stanley do it." She replied curtly, making my eyes dart away from her breasts as they widened in disbelief.

I wasn't aware she was so well informed on my sexual history. But the look in her eyes as our gazes met made me want to groan, and cry, and beat my head against the goddamn wall. She was trying to mask her offense with anger and annoyance, but I could tell. Because the bitterness was laced with the hurt that I'd let Stanley suck my dick and not her as her gaze left mine and shifted around the room.

It was like... oral bribery or some shit. And not even for her. I was quite possibly the only teenage hormonal motherfucker on earth being guilt tripped into receiving head. *Unwillingly...*

...Mostly.

I groaned, flopping back down onto my back and raking my fingers through my hair as I stared at the ceiling. I took deep breaths to calm myself. Because I had the feeling the guilt of making her feel inferior and bitter, and fucking hurt would surpass the guilt of having my cock in her mouth for a few minutes. At least I hoped so as I brought my arm over my face and covered my eyes with a sigh.

I lifted my other hand out above my stomach and swept it across the space above my crotch grudgingly. "If you really fucking want to..." I offered in a strained whisper. My hand fell heavily at my side as I awaited her actions. Trying not to feel so goddamn excited about it as I finally felt her fingers lightly tracing the elastic waistband.

She ran back and forth across my stomach slowly a few times before I felt her fingers hook into the waistband with a little tug on each hip. I exhaled raggedly, pressing my arm harder into my eyes as I lifted my hips for her to pull down my jeans.

I couldn't fucking watch her hands tug them down gently as my breathing sped up and I felt the jeans descend enough for the cold air of the room to meet my bare erection. I lowered my hips when I felt it, taking notice of the complete silence in the room as she likely stared me down. As if my dick could actually feel her gaze on it, it ached impossibly more for her touch. I kept taking deep breaths as my arm pressed into my eyes and moments passed without incident.

I was kind of fucking hoping she was changing her mind. And just as I was considering lifting my arm to pull my pants back up, I felt her little soft hand wrap around me.

I jerked, and my legs tensed underneath her as my jaw clenched at the feel of her palm around me. She remained silent as her hand took one soft stroke and rested at the base of my length. My chest began heaving in anticipation as the hand at my side grasped the blanket.

I'm not sure what I was expecting. Maybe a test lick or some shit to ease herself into it. But she didn't do that. One second my erection was feeling the cold air of the room, and the next it was being plunged into her hot, wet mouth.

I gasped as my body jerked once again and my fist gripped the blanket tighter. "Fucking Christ." I grunted through clenched teeth, pushing my arm into my face and trying to overcome the complete shock of her just fucking... diving in head first. Literally.

My pants came as hisses through my teeth at the feel of her lips wrapped around me tightly. It was so fucking warm as she began sliding them up my length and I fisted the blanket painfully to restrain from plunging my fingers into her hair roughly. If I didn't know any better I wouldn't even think she had teeth at all.

When she reached the tip, she did something with her tongue that made me fucking whimper throatily and lift my hips into her slightly. I clenched my teeth tighter while I panted, thrashing my head sharply twice to stop myself from doing that shit.

She didn't fucking care, in fact, she moaned softly as she began taking my length into her mouth once again. A low gritty sound came from my throat as I twisted the blanket and leaned my head back. Battling the urge to watch her do it as her lips worked their way down. So fucking far down that it made me grunt again when I felt the back of her throat.

And when she worked her way back up, she did that thing with her tongue once more that made me whimper and writhe as I twisted the blanket. I wanted to be disturbed that my girl was so goddamn good at doing this, but her lips and tongue effectively drove every coherent notion from my mind as they began working their way down me again.

Her palm was still wrapped around the base, squeezing firmly as her ass rested on my tense legs and she set her pace. Fucking excruciatingly divine as her lips slid and she used the most gentle of suction. Like it was a goddamn science or some shit.

She set a steady rhythm with my hissing gusts and occasional whimpers and grunts as I grasped the blanket tightly and pushed my arm into my eyes. My toes began curling and I just fucking knew this wouldn't take long as my head began thrashing again.

I was right as her rhythm became faster, and she continued moaning around my erection with my every whimper and guttural grunt. My hand released the blanket as my side as I lifted it up, trembling as it found the top of her head bobbing up and down, and tangled into her hair. I justified I was only doing it for when I came, so I could let her know.

But the feel of her shiny fucking curls as I grunted huskily through my clenched teeth just increased the mental image of the whole thing when my erection hit the back of her throat once again. And I could feel it coming, building inside of me and working up to one fucking glorious unicorn as my shaking hand found her ear through her hair and tugged it gently.

But she wouldn't fucking stop her lips as they slid up my length, tonguing my tip once more and

making me groan loudly before she plunged it back into her mouth.

My head thrashed more. "Off." I grunted breathlessly though my teeth, tugging her once again as my toes curled in further and my eyebrows furrowed in concentration against the feeling until it was safe to... arm the photon torpedoes and fire at will.

Her two quick, sharp grunts of objection were all I got as she worked her way back up tightly. I dragged my arm harshly off of my face as my eyes flew open and darted down to hers incredulously.

Of course that's where I fucked up. Because it was vision to behold. All of her shiny curls were cascading down over my bare hips and mingling with my pubic hair as she grasped me in her hand. My hand was still on her ear, tugging distractedly while my vision locked onto the point where her swollen red lips met my erection. Slick and shining with her saliva as she looked up at me through her lashes. And her stare was so fucking intense that my face contorted with another grunt as she lowered herself onto me and into her mouth entirely. I clenched my teeth harder, still hissing in pants and desperately fucking aroused at the sight of my girl sucking my dick.

I tugged once more, trying to get her the fuck off of me before the sight alone made me explode. She gazed up at me pointedly with a momentary pause before she slowly made her way back up. But this time I felt her teeth. Lightly grazing and scraping me on her way up to my tip and making me shudder against the strain of holding it in when she did something so goddamn deviously intentional. She knew I loved the teeth.

And I couldn't hold it once the tongue thing came into play again. My hand plunged into her hair, wrapping around the back of it as my shoulders stiffened and my eyebrows hunched downward. Against my own will, my hand guided her back down as I threw my head back into the pillow and groaned, low and gritty through my clenched teeth with a violent shudder that made everything burst forth.

I came into my girl's mouth, gasping and groaning and feeling her throat swallow it down as I trembled beneath her and my eyes rolled back into my head. It lasted for fucking ever as she sucked her way back up my length and cleaned me up diligently. I shuddered more with every sweep of her warm tongue.

And when I finally came down from the blinding ecstasy of it, I was fucking lifeless. My hand slid from her head heavily as my chest heaved and it flopped at my side limply. She removed me

from her mouth with one final suctioning motion, finally freeing me from her hand as my eyes remained closed. She sat up on my thighs as I caught my breath, and we both remained still for what felt like hours.

After so long, I felt her little hand come up to stroke my bare hip gently. But I couldn't fucking move or open my eyes as I fought to regain my steady breaths.

Her hand slid down and to the waist of my pants around my upper thighs. She hooked her fingers into them once more at each hip, tugging them upwards as I fought against the weight of my exhaustion to lift my hips up for her to cover me.

When the jeans were finally pulled back up to my waist, I flopped back down, allowing my eyes to open as my gaze darted to hers. I was a little fucking horrified that I came in her mouth. It was disgusting and degrading. And her choice as she refused to let my dick go. I couldn't exactly be bitter or anything, but I didn't feel good about it.

I was going to make that clear in my gaze as I stared up at her, but she wasn't looking at me.

She was looking at the alarm clock on the bedside table with the smuggest fucking smirk I had ever seen any girl wear. And I knew that smug smirk. I had worn it before.

And I felt compelled to defend myself as I finally realized what she was doing. She fucking timed me. I'm not sure how quick I came, but I was utterly confident it didn't paint my endurance in a very positive light. I wanted to tell her it was all the foreplay, and un-emasculate myself when I fucking swore to my girl I wasn't a premature ejaculator.

But I snapped my jaw shut as her smug gaze finally met mine. She fucking glowed with pride, and I couldn't fuck with that shit. So I grinned at her lazily, probably glowing a little myself, because even though my only basis for comparison was Stanley, I was fairly sure it was the best blow job ever.

She leaned down over me, still beaming as she planted a soft kiss to my cheek and leapt off of the bed, snatching up her bag and fucking skipping to the bathroom to get ready to go to sleep. I was thankful because I really needed the sleep after that shit.

I sighed deeply, bringing up a hand to run through my hair drowsily as she got ready in the bathroom. I refused to beat myself up over anything that made my girl smile like that. And at the end of the night after I dragged my tired ass into bed, I caught one last glimpse of it before I laid down and turned off the lamp. I scooped her up and squeezed her tightly against my chest

as I plunged my nose into her hair with a deep breath and a sigh as she began humming my song and stroking my hair. She hummed delicately in a tone more upbeat than usual, making me smile into her curls as my eyes fluttered closed.

Before the darkness took my consciousness into a deeply satisfied slumber, her words returned to me in the gentle background of her tender humming. That same softly reverent whisper falling from her red lips echoed in my ears and settled over my being like a fragile caress to my weary form.

“Je manque toujours de temps.”

Chapter 37. Mysterious Mousse Melodies



Five days since Valentine's Day.

Five beautifully perfect days and nights where everything fit, and everything fell into place with an unbelievable precision and grace. Edward and I were smug and smitten with rarely an issue arising. It was like floating on a cloud.

And now there were tears trailing down my red cheeks as I sat on my bed - inside the room I never used - and watched Esme pace in front of me with her head down and her brows furrowed deeply. I shifted my gaze down to my lap, noting the blue flannel pajama pants I hadn't even removed yet, and bit my lip hard to suppress the sob threatening to escape.

I was wondering where everything went so terribly wrong.

This whole mess must have been my entire fault. Edward was probably beating himself up about it at that very moment as he sat next door, but he wasn't the one to blame. Maybe no one was to blame. Maybe it was just another one of those cosmic events that sought me out to destroy my serenity. As if the universe could see how happy and content I was, and it decided that just wouldn't do.

I sighed deeply into my lap and eased myself down onto my back, lifting my hands up to cover my face while I allowed my thoughts to drift to the morning after Valentine's Day.

There's nothing like waking up next to the person you love after a long night of unicorn induced coma. There was no awkwardness between Edward and me. Just sleepy eyed glances and lazy grins as we kissed at the doorway and out tongues intermingled languidly. Comfortably.

Alice drove me to school, offering me the PG version of her night with Jasper, which ended up being no more than three sentences. I was guessing the MA rated version would take hours to recite because she looked downright exhausted, likely having stayed up the entire night and come home so early for the sake of appearances.

When we arrived at school, Edward stood casually against his car waiting for me, sending me a lopsided grin as he pushed off his door and strode lithely to me.

He had a little scratch on his nose that made me quirk an eyebrow at him before he put his arm around my shoulder and blanketed me in his electricity. He just narrowed his eyes in Jasper's direction and walked me to class.

Despite the, apparently Jasper induced nose graze, even Edward seemed... happy as we walked the halls. It was a subtle thing that the casual observer wouldn't take time to notice, but he wasn't glaring at anyone. He was just looking straight ahead and steering me around them silently.

Lunch that day threatened to ruin the perfection streak, however. Edward had walked me to the lunch room like he always did. But as we reached the table where everyone else was already seated, all eyes turned to us.

Emmett arched one dark eyebrow while his arm hung lazily over Rose's petite shoulders. "What happened to your nose?" He asked in a generally curious tone, leaning his chair back on two legs precariously.

Edward grunted and sat us down in our usual spot, narrowing his eyes once again at the individual occupying the seat in front of him. "Fucking Jazz's stupid ass." He grumbled, glowering at Jasper while I moved close to his side like always.

Suddenly his whole body stiffened, gaining my attention as I peeked up at him and removed my hood. He groaned softly, leaning his head back and closing his eyes, as if he were bracing himself for something.

And when nothing happened, he opened one eye, casting it at Rose, who sat reading a book and tapping a pencil on the wooden table top in a gesture of boredom.

He snorted. "What the fuck, Hale. I basically handed you that one on a silver platter." He asked incredulously while his hand came up to stroke my neck tenderly. He eyed her in confusion for a moment before she finally met his gaze.

She simply shrugged. "Too easy." She sighed indifferently.

I was nervous then, because I knew Rose. There was no way she'd pass that one up in a million years just because it was 'too easy'. It was a beautiful setup. And she passed on it because she somehow felt differently about Edward. And I was the reason for that.

He looked skeptical, but relieved the joke was left alone. Emmett appeared to be having a harder time with restraining himself, but did nonetheless as we all sat and ate our cookies in casual conversation.

It was a close call, and later that day when I got her and Alice alone, I told them in so many words to stop acting so weird around him. I knew what it felt like to be treated differently because of my past, and I refused to watch it happen to Edward too. I think Rose and Alice understood where I was coming from.

That night, the wait began for the right feeling to arise. Not the right moment, or place, or reason. All of those things already existed for us. We were just waiting for it to *feel* right. Monday night was not that night. I think we were probably too tense and anxious about it feeling right to actually experience it. And we were okay with that, just going to bed instead of fooling around and trying to force it.

It didn't ruin the feeling of perfection the following day as we walked the halls arm in arm and ate lunch with the group. It just was. And Tuesday night, when I climbed up the lattice with a sore neck from a rather unfortunate and clumsy incident in gym, we knew it still didn't feel right.

So instead of fooling around, Edward pulled me up against him with my back to his chest, and gave me the most Edwardly neck massage I could have ever hoped for. He leaned against my ear and chuckled when I hummed and moaned and melted into his warm touch.

I couldn't help it. It was the only massage I had ever received. Women could still touch me while I lived in Phoenix, sure. But what woman wanted to give a seventeen year old girl a neck massage or a hug, or a kiss? After I moved in with Esme, I'd get the occasional sporadic hand pat, but before Edward, it was so rare for me to have any affection at all, let alone the lingering, massaging kind.

I told him so when I began feeling rather mortified by my dramatic reaction to his sensual ministrations.

His hands halted on my shoulders and I could feel his hair tickling my ear as I lounged between his legs on the bed and made my confession. "That's pretty fucked up." He whispered in response, turning his face to the side of my head and kissing it tenderly...affectionately before resuming the rubbing.

I was going to shrug and make it seem less so by saying something like 'I never preferred it anyways.', but he would never buy it. Because it was a lie.

Wednesday night was spent doing a lengthy Biology project that we had both been avoiding like the plague since the previous week. Textbooks and assignment papers were strewn across his large bed carelessly while we lay side by side on our stomachs, so close our arms were touching. We flipped through the pages of our shared textbook and wrote our papers in silence; occasionally lifting our bare feet in the air and tangling them between us with quick sideways glances and small grins as I chewed the end of my pen and leaned closer.

It was so disgustingly cheesy, I blushed.

I loved every second of it.

I was so positive Thursday night was going to be ours. Edward seemed fine all day in school. Better than fine, actually. He smiled nearly every moment I was at his side. He even contributed a dirty joke at the lunch table. His comfort took everyone by surprise as he stroked my neck and snickered in unison with Emmett and Jasper.

But when he opened his balcony doors for me that night, he looked... off. There was no crease between his eyes, so I knew it wasn't related to his past, but there was an obvious change in his mood from earlier in the day. The misty breeze fluttered through his hair gently, and the soft contrast it gave emphasized the air of tension about him. The muscles in his arms were taught and twitching and his jaw appeared clenched as he offered me a tight grin that didn't reach his eyes. The flare in his nostrils and the way he breathed deeply, as if trying to calm himself made me realize that this was *anger*. In fact, all of those signs coupled with the dark flash in his green eyes as he gazed at me signaled downright infuriation.

I peeked at him warily as I made my way past his rigid form and into the warm room. There were no words spoken, and he barely looked at me as I unloaded his food and removed my hoodie glumly.

He ate as if he didn't have an appetite, and he gripped his fork with an unnecessary amount of strength while his eyes remained tight and darkened with an ire I was oblivious of. The climate of the room was darkened and tense with the unease of the unspoken hostility he was seething. It made me so anxious with its inflection that I restrained myself from leaning on his stiff shoulders as I usually would.

He noticed this after so long, and the way he sighed heavily without meeting my gaze and draped his arm across my shoulder... affectionately reassured me that this anger wasn't directed at me.

I was awfully tempted to pry for some explanation as I gazed at him in utter confusion, but I knew as soon as he finished eating and got ready for bed that I wasn't privy to this particular knowledge. So I let it go and tried to ease him with my soft caress as we lay in bed and prepared for sleep.

It was gone by the following morning as he kissed me by the door, so I reasoned that it must not have been so bad. Though, deep down I knew, Edward was the type to hold grudges and if it were a particular individual he was so belligerent with, they wouldn't get off so easy.

But, that day, his anger was gone as he smiled crookedly at me in the parking lot of the school. And as such, the day was unhindered for the most part. But, there was this little issue I was having as I walked the halls with Edward.

A song. One of those irritating tunes that linger in your periphery no matter the lack of attention you grant it. The worst part was... I couldn't figure out what song it was. There were no words, just little fragments that danced around in my head. It pestered me through every class and assignment.

On the ride home with Alice, I had become rather peeved with it; flipping through the radio and choosing some vulgar gangsta rap in hopes it would drive the song away. Because I was thinking... gangsta rap tends to do that. But even as Alice grimaced and drove faster through the booming bass of the song, I realized there was no hope.

Now the sweet little tune had just acquired lyrics about bitches and hoes as it echoed in my brain. It would have been humorous if it weren't so freaking annoying.

It lingered the entire evening as I cooked and baked my *Mysterious Mousse Melodies*. It had somehow wiggled its way so far into the significance of my day that it had become a cookie name. It was even there as I tapped on the glass balcony doors to Edward's room. Even my concern that his rage would reappear didn't force it away.

He seemed fine that night however. No creases or tension as I walked into the room with a relieved, albeit distracted smile. I read while he ate, deciding that the suspenseful climax my book had reached would keep my thoughts occupied.

But it was still *freaking* there.

My eyes slowly drifted to the wall across the room as I gazed off into space and tried with more effort to place the name of the annoying tune. Surely, once I knew what it was called the lure would disappear?

It was then that I began humming it aloud. I'm not sure what compelled the notion that hearing it aloud would help any, but I did it. I pursed my lips while I hummed quietly, occasionally furrowing my brows and tilting my head once I hit a note that seemed familiar to me. I was so lost in my attempts to mold it into something comprehensible that I hadn't even realized Edward could hear me.

My eyes slowly drifted to his, finally remembering his was in the room as well. But once my gaze landed on his face, my gentle humming was halted abruptly.

Edward was... glaring at me. Those dark green eyes narrowed as he put the cover on his container and tossed it aside wordlessly. My heart lurched and my stomach churned.

This anger was directed me.

Esme's distressed sigh brought me back to the present as I lay on my bed with my palms covering my tear stained face.

"I want the truth, Bella." She spoke in a firm and authoritative voice as she stood in front of my bed. A voice that I had never heard Esme use before. It made the tears emerge once again as I slowly sat up and slid my hands away from my face.

She didn't look angry, or even annoyed that she had been awoken so early on a Saturday morning.

She just looked... hurt.

"It's not his fault." I choked in a moment of desperation. That was the truth. But at the mention of Edward, her eyes flashed with a fury that made my hands wring nervously as I gazed at her. Her delicate, pink silk pajamas quivered as she clenched her fists at her sides.

This anger was directed at Edward.

But suddenly, her face fell and her shoulders hunched downwards. "This was my fault." She whispered remorsefully, shuffling to a chair that rested in the corner of the room. My face fell at her retreating form. She sounded so... defeated as she confessed her guilt.

"I should have seen something or..." She trailed off in a pained voice as she flopped into the chair and cradled her face in her hands.

I shook my head vehemently. "No, Esme." I pleaded in a shaky voice as the tears trailed down my cheeks. She was determined to blame everything on herself, and I refused to allow the unnecessary guilt to plague her.

She simply sighed as her face remained obstructed from my view. "If your mother were here to see how monumentally I have failed, Bella..." She mumbled into her palms, trailing off into a soft, muffled sob.

And then my heart sank impossibly further when I heard another, louder sob escape from between her long fingers. Because I knew in that moment I would never be able to convince her otherwise. Where matters of my mother were concerned, she saw no reason. I knew the feeling well because I reacted similarly at the thought of disappointing her memory.

So instead of insisting she was wrong, I just closed my eyes and hung my head.

I was making her feel like this. I was causing this pain and remorse and utterly misplaced blame. I loathed it with a passion. It was then that I remembered exactly why I had decided to remain in Phoenix. This was what I had been trying to avoid all along. Just shoving my way into their happy lives and ruining it without effort. It made bile rise up into my throat every time she sniffled from the chair across the room.

Moments passed as she cried in the corner and I hung my head in shame. Long, dreadful moments where I began contemplating if it were even possible to clean this whole mess up.

I knew it wasn't.

Without warning her head finally snapped up from her hands. She breathed deeply, wiping away the remnant tears as her posture transformed into one of defiance and confidence; shoulders rounded and back straightened.

"Things are changing around here." She nodded conclusively with a residual snuffle as she rose from the chair and took the five steps to my bed. "I have been far too lenient with you because I was convinced that it was for the better." She stood in front of me now. But she didn't look angry or disappointed or hurt anymore. She simply looked determined.

"But now I see how terribly wrong I was." She sighed as she took a seat on the bed next to me. I hung my head once again in shame at making her second guess her own instincts. Because they were right the first time around and I hated to see her restructure her own beliefs over a misunderstanding.

She turned her face to look at me then, but I merely peeked up at her meekly through the shield of my damp, disheveled hair. "You're not seeing *Edward* anymore." She emphasized his name in a disgusted tone that made my heart feel like it was imploding painfully inside of my chest.

She was misunderstanding *everything*, and there was no way to convince her otherwise.

I was right. There was no fixing this mess.

She spent thirty more minutes at my side reciting additional rules and restrictions, but I could barely understand her. Because the sobs overtook me with a violent intensity as I curled into a ball atop the blue comforter and clutched my hair while I waited for her to finish her speech.

She kept saying the same thing over and over again.

"This isn't a punishment." And "I'm not punishing you." And "This doesn't mean I'm blaming you."

It felt like it. It felt like she was taking away everything I loved to protect me, and it was only going to cause me more hurt in the long run. I knew it didn't matter. The same things kept fluttering through my mind as I lay on the bed and wept.

She doesn't understand. And, There's no convincing her otherwise. And, There's no fixing this.

The room was illuminated in a dark grey morning light as she stood in my doorway and watched me cry as silently as my anguish would allow.

“You may not see it now, Bella.” She whispered gently as she began closing the door, the bright light from the kitchen disappearing into a subsiding sliver that crept across the walls. “But this is for your own good.”

Then the door was closed, and the room was too dark. My body trembled with my hysteric sobs as I slid under the blue hues of the blanket and lifted it over my head to obstruct the view of the closet door that loomed heavily across the room.

Five days was all it took for my time to run out.

Edward

WIDE AWAKE

It was a stare down of sorts. Both silently waiting for the other to go off on the inevitable tirade that had been building for twenty minutes. And three months. And four years.

I wasn't fucking breaking.

He must have known.

So instead we sat silently as the clock in the study ticked the seconds away and we gazed and stared at each other over the large desk between us.

The air in the room was thick with tension as I remained completely still in the stiff leather chair and penetrated Carlisle's calm, blue eyes with a blank stare.

I was already pissed off at him long before this whole mess happened. I had a feeling this confrontation could go many different ways. I could open up and do the honesty thing and hope that it would be enough to get me out of the massive heap of shit I was wading elbow deep in.

That's a long shot.

I could hold various indiscretions over his head and try to force his compliance to my own logic. I called that one the 'dickhead tactic'. I was saving it for a last resort because being a dickhead rarely got me anywhere worth being.

That's enlightenment.

Or, I could just sit here in this chair and stare at him blankly until he speaks first. It was deflating and more touch and go than I usually felt comfortable with, but I wasn't an idiot. Anything that came out of my mouth was going to be wrong and fucked up in his eyes.

That's just the reality of being an asshole manipulator.

So moments passed in the large room as we breathed steadily and listened to that annoying clock on his desk. I wanted to throw it out the goddamn window. But... I had already ruined a perfectly good chess set on Thursday, so I restrained myself.

The argument two nights prior just made the whole room even heavier with tension and unspoken accusations. Carlisle was being a nosy motherfucker lately. I didn't like it. I was private and I had a part of myself that I didn't ever let him see. I wasn't doing it to be a dick or anything, it's just how I worked.

But he would push as we played chess at nights. I spent time with him to just... bond or some shit. It sounded stupid in my own head, but I wanted a closer relationship with Carlisle. I wanted to be better for him, to show him I could normal and fun... like Em.

We'd have fun most nights, just bullshitting about some medical topic or laughing about the happenings of the Forks medical elite. But there were times he would pry. And it was becoming more and more frequent.

Thursday night was one more example of his fascination with the details of my private life. He wanted to know about my girl. About the shit we talked about. Our private conversations.

And from the way he spoke so evasively, I couldn't deduce if he was more interested in what I told her, or what she told me. Not that it mattered. Wasn't any of his fucking business either way. So I cut the shit and told him so.

He sighed deeply while removing his glasses and leaning back in his chair. "Why can't you just talk to me?" He asked in a pained voice while he gazed at me.

That was where the whole argument began. It wasn't enough that I could talk to Bella and be happy and content. He always wanted more from me. More information about my mother, or more information about the fire. More specifics on Bella's condition, more details about what happened to her.

I fucking lost it. I probably could have just stood up and left the room like I usually did when he prodded into my private shit. I think he was probably expecting me to do just that. Needless to say, I surprised him quite a lot when I sent the chess board flying across the room and glowered right into his eyes.

I leaned over the table between us, sweeping off the pawns and rooks that had landed haphazardly across the surface. "Back. The. Fuck. Off." I growled, slamming my palm on the table to punctuate every word as I seethed at him. I wanted it to end. The questions and the subtle hints as I tried to enjoy my time with him. It just ruined it. And I was admittedly a little hurt that it wasn't enough to just be able to have the three comfortable hours of time alone together.

That pretty much ruined my entire night. And the more I sat in my room and stewed over it, the more pissed I became at him for always wanting more. For not being enough for Daddy C.

I was probably being a complete prick when my girl came that night, so I tried as hard as I could to beat the rage away and enjoy my time with her. I put my arm around her, just so she knew that I wasn't pissed off at her as the hostility in my posture was probably pretty evident. It would have been smart for me to just explain the whole argument to ease the concern I saw in her big brown eyes, but I didn't want to make her uncomfortable by admitting that Carlisle had some kind of sick and twisted fascination with our situations.

So I just went to bed and let her love and caresses soothe the anger that welled inside of me. And by the time I woke up next to her in bed, I was able to smile and kiss her sincerely as she exited the room.

The week had gone by with rarely an incident to fuck up my mood. I was happy. I was really goddamn happy with my girl. And the way she smiled and laughed as we walked the halls of the school together made it quite clear to me that she was happy too.

Even lunch was no big deal to us. Sometimes I'd get an odd look from Alice, or Rose, or Em, but it wasn't enough to really bother me as I stroked Bella's neck and ate my cookies. I actually managed to escape one painfully obvious jest at the expense of my sexual orientation towards Jazz. And from Rosalie Hale nonetheless. I was a little fucking stunned... and glad that I finally had a girlfriend to dispute those claims. I even joined in on conversations when I felt I had something useful to offer.

Something useful or something ridiculously filthy to trump their lame ass jokes with.

The nights were always a little unpredictable. It was still understood that we were going to... make love. The first night she came after Valentine's Day, I was so fucking nervous about having to turn her down. Because I wasn't ready to do it yet.

Fortunately, my girl seemed to be having her own anxiety over the matter, which made me far more relieved than it really should have. I just couldn't bear to see the dejection on her face when I pushed her away.

Then Tuesday she was hurting from some freak gym accident that had me nervous as hell until she assured me it was entirely self-induced.

But she looked so uncomfortable as she sat on my bed and rubbed her neck while staring down at her book silently. I offered her a neck massage. And to most motherfuckers, that'd be a shady and selfish attempt at seduction or something. But I just didn't like seeing her uncomfortable.

She agreed with a large grin, allowing me to pull her against my chest as I swept the hair away and over her shoulders. I smelled it while I rubbed and kneaded her tense muscles gingerly yet firmly.

The sounds she made spurred me on as she relaxed against my chest and emitted purrs and moans and hums. It sounded really erotic as I leaned into her ear and breathed her in.

But it didn't get my dick hard like it normally would have.

It just made me smile.

She stiffened suddenly, opening her eyes to look at me sideways. "I've never had a massage before." She admitted timidly while I worked my way down to her shoulders. I snorted at her, asking how that was even possible. To never have had a massage before.

Then she told me that before I had come into her life, it was a rarity for anyone to show her affection.

At all.

It was pretty fucked up.

I told her so, and I made sure to kiss her as tenderly as I could because if I was the only one who could do that kind of shit for her, I was going to do it as often as possible.

Wednesday was another weird night where we were together but conveniently occupied. The Bio paper was due the following day, and we had been spending so much time anticipating... other things that we had neglected it.

We lay side by side that night, and even though we were doing, quite possibly the most boring and unromantic assignment on amoebas ever, I still tried to be all affectionate to my girl. With my feet and arms and sideways smiles as we played footsie in the air. We were becoming one of those gross couples that often made me consider regurgitation.

I kept doing it because it made her smile as she chewed her pen and blushed sideways at me. I wanted to snort. She blushed at playing footsie, but she could put my dick in her mouth with no reservations.

That's my girl.

The memory almost made my lips twitch as I stared at Carlisle from across the desk. That goddamn clock broke me out of my good memories and into the here-and-now as we continued the stare down. Both of us silently refusing to break. My mouth was so goddamn... dry and I was trying to exude this whole cocky confident posture as I sat entirely still in the stiff leather chair.

But truth be told, I was fucking terrified.

Carlisle broke first. "You were sleeping with Bella." He stated flatly; his hands clasped in front of him on the desk and a completely blank expression covering his face. I imagined this was what he looked like when he told a patient they were dying. I fought against the bile rising in my throat.

"I can't sleep *without* Bella." The honesty thing seemed like a good route. For now.

He shook his head slowly. "How did she get into your room?" Still blank.

I looked away then, because I couldn't bear the accusation in his eyes when I admitted it. "She climbed the lattice up to my balcony." I replied grimly. Honestly.

It was silent as I stared out the window. The sun was just barely rising and... fuck. I was thirsty as hell and the chair was becoming more uncomfortable with each tick of that goddamn clock. I refused to squirm under the penetration of his stare.

"How long." He whispered curtly.

I fucking sighed, reconsidering this honesty thing because my answer wasn't going to go over well. "Since Thanksgiving." I mumbled dreadfully. Honestly.

He made the oddest choking sound and I could just imagine his chin falling as he gaped at me from across that desk. I remained still and stiff.

"Why, Edward?" He asked in this miserable voice that was entirely inflected with hurt and confusion.

I snorted. "Like you fucking care what I have to say anyways." I chuckled humorlessly and shook my head as I kept my eyes locked on the scenery behind the window. Gray.

"I do care." He whispered again, still sounding hurt and making it more difficult for me to remain still.

And I knew he *cared*. Fundamentally he did. But nothing that came out of *my* mouth was going to make this situation any better.

On the other hand, nothing I said could make it any worse. And all of the fucked up scenarios left brewing ignorantly inside of his curious mind were likely far worse than the truth of the matter.

So I said, *fuck it*.

I told him everything.

Because the honesty was all I had going for me, and I was praying the satiation of his constant curiosity would buy me some kind of 'Get Out of Jail Free Card'.

So I told him about the 'nightmares', nearly snorting at the word, and I never met his gaze as I repeated our nightly routine in an emotionless, monotone voice.

The balcony, the dinners, the reading, the sketching, the bathroom, the caresses and the way I held her to make her feel safe. The motherfucking lullaby. The sleep and the way we woke up rested and happy. How she'd climb down and the next night we would do it all over again.

Honestly. The entire story and recollection of our nightly events.

Well... I left out the whole desensitizing thing. It was just fuel to the fire that was already raging between our two houses.

But the fact remained... the story of our sleeping habits was everything he had been dying to know without even fucking realizing it. And I was so pissed off and bitter that I had to confess it under pressure that I couldn't look him in the eye.

The room was quiet for so long, and my fingers twitched and my mouth was just so... fucking dry. I wanted some water, or just anything. Mostly Bella. I needed to know if she was okay. More than I needed this conversation or his understanding. I just needed to make sure my girl was alright.

Carlisle sighed as I kept my eyes fixed on the window. "You never told me about these nightmares, Edward." And he sounded so goddamn... accusing that I finally darted my gaze to his.

I was pissed off. "I don't have to tell you everything." I spat venomously as my eyes narrowed. "And what the fuck were you doing-"

He cut me off before I could even finish with a slam of his fist on the wooden desk top. "This is my house." He sounded firm and all fucking defiant... and it made me want to laugh at him. Instead I knew I had to pull out another tactic.

The worst and most degrading tactic of all.

I let my face fall and soften. “Just turn your head, Carlisle.” I said in a low voice as his eyes widened. This was something that probably wouldn’t work, but I had been considering it for the last hour.

I leaned forward, closer to him as he gaped at me. “Just look the other fucking way and make shit so much easier on us.” I begged with my eyes in a low whisper.

Yes. I *fucking* begged. And watching me go to such great lengths should have made him realize how utterly fucking important this was to me. To Bella.

“Please.” I pleaded in a desperate whisper when he didn’t answer me.

Then suddenly, he began laughing.

But it wasn’t funny like he was laughing *at* me, or even mildly authentic amusement at my suggestion. It was a wild, maniac laughter that made me shift uncomfortably against the stiff leather.

“Are you on drugs again?” He asked in an awestruck voice with a smile that didn’t seem like a smile at all. It was mocking and just as maniacal as the earlier laughter.

I remained silent. Because that was a low fucking blow and he knew it.

Carlisle stood then, running his fingers through his hair. “I’m your...” He trailed off and darted his eyes around the room. “Guardian.” He concluded softly, carefully avoiding the ‘F’ word where he was concerned. Because he wasn’t.

“Do you honestly think...” he put his palms on the desk and leaned forward towards me while he bore his gaze into mine. “... that I can just ignore this?” He asked.

I nodded at him rather confidently. I didn’t see any reason why he couldn’t. It wasn’t against the law. I had checked all the books and websites and had found no legal objection to two... children sleeping in the same bed.

“Esme.” He hissed, narrowing his eyes at me.

That was one kink in the entire idea. Convincing her that it was okay. Carlisle knew that better than anyone because he was closer to her than anyone. That was one of those indiscretions I was saving for the ‘dickhead tactic’.

He shook his head again and it felt annoyingly condescending as he smiled at me. The same smile that wasn’t really a smile at all. “You’ll be so lucky if you’re even allowed to see Bella anymore after what happened last night.”

It was my turn to stand up and seethe. “That’s fucking *bullshit*, Carlisle!” I yelled, slamming my palms loudly onto the hard wood of the desk. And just... really fucking pissed that the previous night’s events were being so epically blown out of proportion.

His jaw dropped at my outburst and then it was his turn to yell. “No, Edward! Bullshit is sneaking a girl into *my* house every night for the last *three* months!” His face was red and we were staring each other down again. There was a large vein bulging from his right temple that almost made me feel guilty at the fact I was causing so much turmoil for this man.

Almost.

Not quite.

He could tell as he dropped his face and continued shaking his head while mumbling shit under his breath. “Of all the stupid... ridiculous... this tops it all.”

“Neither of you can stop me from seeing her.” I said simply, and I sat back down in my chair with a glower at him. “I’ll be eighteen in two weeks.” I raised my eyebrows and dared him to deny my logic. “I could move the fuck out if I really need to.” It was true, and a particularly distasteful way of settling this entire thing, but I could hardly give a shit. Bella would be eighteen in a few months. We could tough it out until then.

Carlisle’s face paled slightly, and even though we were talking now and not screaming, we were both seething in our own, silent way.

He evaded my threat successfully. “You had sex with Bella.” He stated in the same flat voice he had used earlier in the conversation. I nearly smirked triumphantly when he didn’t argue my point.

But he was going for another low blow.

“No.” I replied, deciding I much liked mono-syllabic replies rather than the screaming and yelling.

“No?” He raised his blonde brows.

“Yes.” I confirmed.

“Yes?” His brows went impossibly higher on his forehead.

“No!” I shouted, getting a little fucking annoyed and feeling betrayed by the simplicity of the mono-syllabics.

He appeared more than a little frustrated himself as his brows fell his blue eyes flashed in an annoyance I hardly thought Carlisle capable of. "Why do you insist on lying to me, Edward?" He hissed as his eyes narrowed once more.

This was where the whole honesty thing got fuzzy.

Maybe.

Okay, so I had no fucking clue whether or not I was telling the truth when I denied having sex with Bella. It was all confusing as hell and I was tempted to ask him to "Define 'sex'" so that the semantics of the term could make my response truthful. Honestly.

Maybe.

I didn't answer. Instead I let my thoughts drift to a song. The song that started all this bullshit. I wasn't sure if I could blame it all on a song, but I needed to blame something because I couldn't blame my girl, and everyone else was already putting plenty of the blame on me.

I was just sitting on my bed eight hours earlier with Bella while I ate my food. Things were so much different then. Better. Happier. Fucking perfect. And it was really messed up how it could all go downhill so quickly.

She was reading a book while I was thoroughly immersed in the meal she had brought for me. The silence was comfortable and relaxing as I sighed and ate the meal in contentment; occasionally peeking up at her to note the way her hair cascaded onto the pages of the large book in her lap as she gazed down at it.

But then I heard her humming. And it wasn't so much the fact she was humming, but the song she chose that made me narrow my eyes at her in a blatant glare of utter disdain.

When her eyes finally drifted to mine, they widened and her humming abruptly stopped. Which confused me a little, but I just covered the container and decided I had enough of that shit.

I fucking flew at her, and I think I probably shocked her for a second until my hands found her sides and I began tickling her senseless.

Because my girl humming the Scooby Doo theme song couldn't possibly go without proper retaliation. I told her so as she attempted to wiggle free from my hands.

And when the words left my mouth she began fucking giggling. A lot. I just kept tickling her, moving to straddle her so I could get a better angle at her sides. I found she was quite ticklish there as she writhed relentlessly under me and her giggles transformed into breathless snorts. Her head thrashed from side to side as she gripped my wrists to restrain me and my body lurched up and down with her every chuckle.

It was comical the way she began begging me through gasps to release her. It made me smirk. I didn't stop until her face was red and she had tears streaming down her cheeks. And when my hands finally left her she was panting and tense, anticipating further attacks of retaliation as my hands lingered in the air at her sides.

But then the weirdest thing happened.

I was leaning over her, smirking and triumphant as she gazed up at me with watery eyes that shone. And suddenly, the whole atmosphere of the room changed. The charge between us grew and crackled as our smiles slowly disappeared and we gazed into each other's eyes knowingly.

She smoothed back a lock of hair from my forehead with her soft, little fingers. It was so fucking tender and sweet that I cupped her cheek and gently rubbed it with my thumb. Her brown eyes were intense with the weight of what was occurring. The crackle and the growing tide of emotions in our gazes and touch.

Then I lowered my lips to hers, just barely sweeping them with my own as I gazed into her eyes and the crackle in the air grew and amplified even more.

Because this was the feeling. And we both knew it. *Felt* it.

Her eyes became hooded and our breaths began to quicken against each others' parted lips as our gazes intensified further with lust and love and affection and tender.

Then my hands were grasping the blanket on either side of her head as I hovered above her and took her tongue into my mouth. It was sweet like cookies and I fought to keep the tender as we kissed and I gripped the blanket like it was the only thing holding the teenage hormonal motherfucker in.

She removed my shirt, and I removed hers. It wasn't about showing her mine or showing me hers. It was about needing to feel the skin and the close as she pulled me back on top of her and recaptured my lips. My necklace was still there resting above her heart as I kissed my way down her neck. And her ring was still on my finger as I intertwined my fingers in hers and rolled us over onto my back.

She kissed my scars again and I just leaned my head back and tangled my fingers in her hair with a sigh. I liked that shit. A lot.

But then she straightened up and removed her bra. I kind of gaped at her breasts when she freed them, and my girl looked shy and insecure as she bit her lip and gazed down at me uncertainly. Which was stupid because she was fucking beautiful. I told her so as I took her in my hands and... massaged.

She liked that. A lot. Throwing her head back and arching her chest into my hands with a throaty moan.

Then my dick was hard. A lot.

I had never done this whole making love thing before but I really fucking tried as much as possible to show it as I kissed her peaks and all of her scars like she had done to me. The jagged one that crept up between her breasts, and the little ones that scattered over her ribs and torso. I showered them in kisses.

Her hands weaved through my hair, but she didn't pull. And she didn't bite. She wasn't trying to spur me on because she didn't need to. I felt ready and willing. A lot.

She rolled us over so I was on top of her again. She liked something about my being on top. It made me a little nervous because it seemed so dominant to me, but she didn't seem to mind it and there were no cookies being said, so I trailed my kisses down to her stomach and began removing her jeans.

They got tossed away like the rest of our clothes. It could have been beside my bed or the black fucking hole of the universe for all I knew. Nothing else existed as we kept our gazes locked on each other and our chests heaved in anticipation.

Fuck.

The anticipation.

It was palpable in the air between us. What little air there was as I glided my hands up her little, soft legs.

There were more scars there. Up high on her thighs. I kissed them too as she ran her fingers through my hair languidly and stared into my eyes longingly. As if there were anything to long for. I'd give her fucking anything.

My hand made its way to her center, touching her through her panties, and she gasped and moaned and writhed, and the teenage hormonal motherfucker was doing a little dance somewhere when she didn't say the safe word.

She pulled me up and took my lips again as I kept rubbing her. Trying to make it pleasurable for as long as possible because I knew it wouldn't be pleasant the entire time. She grabbed my erection through my jeans and I grunted into her mouth as I thrust into her palm.

I was trying to find that line between making love and fucking as she unbuttoned my jeans and slid them down my legs with her little feet. And it was really fucking hard to not be overcome with lust when she grabbed me again and stroked me through the thin remaining fabric.

I gripped the pillow at either side of her head and groaned; plunging my face into her neck and breathing in the smell of my girl desperately. I trembled as I fought to remember what this was about. Love, not lust. And I was chanting it in my head as I panted and clenched my eyes shut. Because I *really* didn't want to fuck my girl, and the teenage hormonal motherfucker was wondering if there was any difference between making love and fucking.

She knew just how to drive the teenage hormonal motherfucker away though.

"I love you." She whispered tenderly into my ear as she stroked me through my boxers slowly. And those three little words spoken in unison with her stroking palm made the whole feeling different for me.

I lifted my forehead to rest against hers and I rubbed her through her panties, returning the gesture with words and touch.

I was going to just slip off her panties as I moved down her body, like it was no big fucking deal for me to be doing that to my girl. As if it were the most natural thing in the world even though I had never seen that part of her. I was a little embarrassed as I paused with my fingers hooked in the elastic and I glanced up at her.

She lifted her hips in response to my silent question, so I slid them off slowly, maintaining eye contact with her the whole time.

They got thrown into the black fucking hole of the universe surrounding my bed and when I looked, I touched. And when I touched she moaned. And when she moaned I groaned. And it was so fucking sexy when I watched my fingers slide into her that I had to tell her I loved her again as I shifted my gaze to hers.

And when she told she me loved me, it made it feel differently to me. I didn't feel guilty about being so turned on by the sight of my fingers moving in and out of her. I licked my lips lazily as I watched it and listened to her moans of pleasure.

Fuck.

I wanted to taste it.

I told her so.

And the dual looks of utter shock and just... *yes, please* plastered all over face made me want to fucking kiss her senseless. When she nodded silently, I did just that. Of course I didn't kiss her on the mouth.

And... *fucking Christ* did she like it. A lot.

I worked so hard to make her cum with my tongue and my fingers because I just knew that it would probably be the only time that night she would. She brought a pillow over her face to muffle her moans and cries, and I reached up and ripped it the fuck away as my tongue worked relentlessly between her legs. Because I had to hear.

My name fell from her lips in a chant as she began constricting around my fingers and her thighs quivered against my ears.

She said my name, followed by a low “fuck” that made my dick twitch as she finally came with her fingers in my hair and her back arching off the bed. She hardly ever cursed. I liked hearing her do so in the throes of passion. A lot.

I had leaned back on my ankles while she recovered, contemplating my next move before she sat up and threw her arms around my stomach; burying her face in my chest.

My girl fucking hugged me.

She seriously – sincerely – hugged me for eating her out. It was simultaneously the weirdest and sweetest reaction I would have ever expected from giving oral. It was just... so Bella.

I returned the hug after the initial shock wore off; encircling her in my arms as I smelled her hair and felt a pang of remorse that I hadn’t thought of a similarly sweet gesture when she fellated me on Valentine’s Day.

I think she probably wanted to do more of that after she slid my boxers off and tossed them into the black fucking hole of the universe. But I didn’t let her. For many reasons. I had just, somewhat, balanced the scale with my oral, and I was in no hurry to have them tipped again. I felt shitty enough.

Then we were both completely naked together.

Me and my girl.

In my bed.

Naked.

A lot.

And we were surprisingly comfortable. No awkward bullshit or blushes or subtle attempts at covering areas with the blanket as we lied down. I was hers and she was mine and we showed each other what was theirs. Hands and eyes roamed and caressed curves and flesh.

I had never in my entire life been as regretful of the *Ghosts of Bad Fucks Past* as when I watched her explore my body.

My girl looked so amazed as her eyes followed the trail her fingertips made over my flesh. Skin to skin with no barriers. She was alight with fascination at the feeling. I envied her awe and wonderment at being so intimately close to someone for the first time. That she had waited to feel *this* and not just an empty fuck in a hot car against slick upholstery with empty people that didn't give a shit about you.

Of course I was also ridiculously happy she had waited. That I could give her something with substance and love like I never had. And as we explored, we memorized every little perfect imperfection. No scar went unknissed, and no freckle went unnoticed.

She had a little mole on her left hip. She squirmed and giggled as I kissed it because she was ticklish. It made me smile, but nothing was said as we explored and kissed because nothing needed to be said. We did it with gazes and glances and the gentle sweeps of our fingertips and lips as we sighed and... *fuck*...

This was what it was like to make love. And then I was alight with my own awe and wonderment that it was even possible to distinguish one from the other. But it was there and I could see it. The look in her eyes and the way we touched as I rolled her over and underneath me the way she liked. Not urgent or demanding, but reverently savoring every moment.

She looked amazing and beautiful as she lay beneath me. Offering me all of her body and soul with absolute certainty while her eyes shone with love and tender and affection. Not need and want and desperation.

I wasn't truly ready until that exact second to follow through with it. I had convinced myself five nights prior that I was, but I was so fucking wrong. Because I was still having those doubts that she *wasn't* ready. That she was doing it for the wrong reasons. And as I gazed down at her I could tell that wasn't the case at all.

So I kept going.

The curiosity in her eyes as I put on the condom was amusing to me. And so fucking sweet and innocent and endearing that it gave me a pang of guilt for taking it all away.

I asked her again, because I had to. I already knew the answer before she whispered it to me, but I had to hear it anyways. I had to tell her how much I loved and adored the shit out of her as I positioned myself between her legs and rested my forehead against hers.

She smiled and told me the same. She looked excited and curious and still a little amazed by the whole thing.

But mostly she just looked like she loved me as she licked her lips and stared into my eyes. And I really, *really* fucking loved her.

Really, we both loved each other. A lot.

So I pushed into her slowly. Really fucking slowly because I couldn't decide if it would be more or less painful if it was swift or slow. But slow had been good to us thus far.

Her lips parted and she bathed my face in a warm exhale as my hand created a fist in the pillow under her head. I could feel the barrier when I reached it, and I fought a grimace as I gazed into her lust hooded eyes.

I clenched my teeth because it felt so fucking good and warm and wrong and right. "It's going to hurt." I ground out through my teeth remorsefully. My fist tightened in the pillow against the overwhelming strain of the all encompassing need to just fucking... do it.

She told me what I already knew. There was no avoiding that shit. The pain was inevitable and no amount of time or preparation was going to make it any more pleasant. Then she shifted her hips and begged me with her eyes to continue as her chest heaved beneath me in anticipation.

So I fucking did it.

I thrust into her with a soft grunt, deciding swift was better for the actual pain portion of the act.

My eyes rolled back into my head once I was completely inside of my girl. I think I might have whimpered her name as all the air left my lungs in a sharp gust against her face. It felt so good and so fucking perfect that I nearly missed the way she had completely stiffened and began gasping beneath me.

And I knew what was coming.

I was out of her and leaning back on my ankles off of her before the safe word could even escape her mouth, but it did nonetheless. Again and again as she gasped and I kind of fucking panicked at the sight of her trembling in front of me.

There was blood. And her eyes were clenched closed as she chanted "cookie" over and over again in shaky gasps.

It was fucked up and I felt shitty and unsure of what to do as I stroked her cheek and tried to calm her with my voice and caress. I was so goddamn mortified as I kissed her cheeks and began shaking nearly as much as she was.

I figured the panic attack she was having would pass as the pain subsided, but it didn't make me feel any better in that moment as I glanced down at her trembling body.

She looked so scared and there was still... blood.

Blood that I drew with my love.

And I couldn't look at it anymore.

I lurched off the bed and sprinted to the bathroom and turned on the shower with my very unsteady hands, and when I returned to the room she had rolled onto her side and was hugging her knees tightly. I wandered over to her, slipping my arms beneath her and grimacing as I picked her up. She was silent as I walked her into the bathroom. Not even questioning what I was doing and I was thankful for it. The logical part of my brain was kicking in and I utilized it fully in the evident emergency of the situation. The need to just have her... okay and clean again was overwhelming as I stepped into the shower with her in my arms.

By the time her feet reached the tiles and the warm water hit her face she was crying. And fucking apologizing to me. That pissed me off. I told her so as I leaned her head under the stream of hot water and smoothed her hair out of her face.

I began washing her hair because it seemed like a soothing gesture as I massaged her scalp with my fingertips gently. She remained quiet as she slowly relaxed into my touch and the last of her tears were washed away with the blood of her innocence down my shower drain.

She stared at me as I washed her hair, and eventually her little arms came to circle my waist. I smiled at her, just so she'd know this was okay. I was a stupid motherfucker for not anticipating that exact reaction, but that didn't make it wrong and it didn't make it right.

It just made it... us.

"We'll try again though, right?" She whispered as I leaned her head under the water once again to rinse out the shampoo from her long hair. "When it won't hurt?" She asked with this adorable pleading look that almost made me forget the whole fucked up first attempt minutes earlier.

I rolled my eyes and nodded. Even though, secretly, I was in no hurry to risk putting her through that shit again. It seemed to relieve her and her shoulders relaxed as I began washing her body.

Washing *me* off of her body. A lot.

And then I waited for it. Her bitterness at the fact she had failed at doing this one thing that seemed so important to her as I lathered her up and cleaned her skin.

She always surprised me though. “I think you missed a spot on my pancreas, Edward.” She teased with a smile and a chuckle as I scrubbed every inch of her front really fucking meticulously.

I smirked at her. “Nothing wrong with being thorough.” I shrugged one shoulder, massaging her breasts and trying to make it appear as though I was just cleaning her so well because I enjoyed touching her. It wasn’t a complete lie, but it wasn’t the complete truth either.

She quirked an eyebrow down at my very obvious erection that stood traitorously between us, but I just spun her around and washed her back.

No fucking way in hell was I getting off after *that*.

I dried her off and I took care of my girl as much as possible. It eased the guilt... minutely.

But as we dressed for bed and our separate bathroom routines became one, I felt really quite relieved. Because it was over and done with and there was no bitterness in her eyes as she got her little blue toothbrush out and began brushing her teeth with a grin at my reflection in the mirror. I just got out my green toothbrush and brushed my teeth right beside her.

I smiled back. A lot.

I was thankful for the dark comforter that made denying the blood stain easier once we were ready for bed.

And when we were both curled up next to each other, we still caressed with love and tender and affection because it wasn’t a fucking fluke or anything. I was having trouble coming to terms with the way I fucked it up, but I couldn’t regret it and I never would.

She hummed sweetly to me as I breathed in her hair and stroked her cheek. It didn’t smell like flowers and cookies though. It smelled like flowers and cookies mingling with my shampoo as I drifted off to sleep with her tight in my arms.



I didn’t know how long I had been sleeping but it was a deep, peaceful slumber and I was so fucking warm and comfortable under the covers that I had a hard time understanding why I was even awake to realize it.

But... something felt wrong. Something that was off enough to actually wake me from the dead coma I was in.

I was still half asleep with my eyes closed, dancing behind my lids as I used my remaining senses to determine what was wrong around me.

My girl felt oddly rigid in my arms and her breathing was coming out in sharp gasps against my throat. Her hand was fisted into my shirt; pulling the neck down and exposing my chest she was gripping it so tightly.

She shook once.

I furrowed my brows, fighting off the cloud of drowsiness that hazed my mind... or embracing it. I couldn't decide which was more desirable at the moment.

She shook twice.

I nuzzled her hair. It smelled really good. Like the two of us combined. Flowers and cookies and my shampoo. And it was still damp. It felt cold against my face.

She fucking screamed.

Loud and shrieking into my throat and I shot up out of bed. Gaping at her as her mouth hung open and the loudest fucking wail escaped. I was going to clamp my hand over her mouth before I realized her wide, terrified eyes weren't fixed on me.

She was backing up against the headboard and she was staring across the room as the scream stopped just long enough for her to draw in a shuddering breath. She began shrieking again as soon as her lungs were filled to capacity.

And as I spun my head around to follow her gaze I realized what had her so goddamn terrified.

Someone was *inside* of my fucking room.

I fumbled for the lamp, cringing against her scream and knocking over the alarm clock as I grabbed blindly in the dark for the lamp.

When I finally found the switch and flicked it on, the room became illuminated in the soft glow, but her screams never lessened any as I squinted and turned my face to the direction of the intruder. Just basically ready to fuck someone up so badly that my fists were clenched and shaking just as much as my girl.

But I didn't know if I could exactly call Daddy C. an intruder.

Carlisle stood in front of my dresser with his hands over his ears and his eyes as wide as two saucers as he registered the scene in front of him.

I brought Bella into my arms. Because even though there was big fucking problem standing in the middle of my bedroom, she was the more important issue. I squinted and brought her head

to my chest, smoothing back her damp hair and rocking her. I shushed her gently, cooing in her ear and trying to reassure her everything was okay.

And after a moment, the screams finally ceased. She still had her little hand fisted in my white shirt and she was still shaking and gasping, but she finally realized what I had been trying to tell her all along.

She slowly turned her head against my chest to peek at Carlisle through her damp locks, but his gaze was fixed somewhere else entirely.

The clothes scattered on the floor. Jeans and shirts and the bra and underwear all scattered haphazardly across the black fucking hole of the universe surrounding my bed. His eyes wandered over the carpet and his face paled as they finally rested on the empty condom wrapper resting on the bedside table.

My heart sank and my stomach lurched as I watched his expression grow from confused to downright horrified. I just held Bella to my chest tightly as I stared at Carlisle's disbelieving face grimly.

Because for the only time that night, my girl and I were both thoroughly fucked.

Chapter 38. Poppy Dipped Darkness



Hours passed torturously as I lied in my bed crying. It was only the second time ever I had actually laid in it. It was uncomfortable. Plushy and full and warm and just... awful.

I wanted Edward's bed.

I knew every lump and spring in that mattress and how to lay on it just the right way so that my hip bone wouldn't dig into the bed uncomfortably. But with mine, it didn't matter where I laid on it. I tried the left side and the right side, but... Edward and I didn't have 'sides' of the bed. We both met in the middle. And now I was lying in the middle of mine and trying to just... imagine him right there beside me.

It wasn't working.

Sometime during the morning the sunlight had eventually filtered through the window, but it still felt so dark. And quiet. Eerily quiet.

I couldn't hear anything else in the house because my room was separated from the living space. Close to the kitchen that I wasn't allowed into after nine at night anymore. I was supposed to be in this awful room after that time. Locked away in the dark and the quiet and longing for another room and another bed that felt so close, yet so far away.

Hours and hours passed, and I didn't have a clock, but I could feel the seconds ticking away and the sun beginning to set as evening fell. I stayed under the blankets and even though my bladder was screaming at me, I was irrationally afraid to uncover my head.

After what felt like hours, I heard a soft rap on my door.

But I didn't call out and I didn't get up. Part of me was just being spiteful and angry over the non-punishments. But another, possibly far more significant, part of me was just scared. I didn't know what I was scared of, because I knew that this room was fundamentally safe for me. But I couldn't shake the absolute feeling of unease at the thought of rising from the warm spot my body heat had created under the safe cover of the blanket.

Whoever knocked eventually left without entering the obscurity of the room.

I had to pee... so badly that I was rocking under the blanket and squeezing my legs shut, but I could feel the dark and I didn't want to venture into it.

Time passed and no one came to check on me or ask me if I was okay after that first attempt. It made me furious and it made me relieved. I figured if I was being forced to stay in this room, then I should be able to wallow and cower in solace.

I did.

Wallow.

Cower.

Alone.

While I lay under the blankets I began wishing for Monday. Esme couldn't stop me from seeing Edward at school, surely. Then I remembered how she had given instructions to the school administration. That Edward could tend to me in the event of an emergency. Then I worried and panicked that such permission could be rescinded. I had no idea how far she was willing to take this whole thing.

I spent my time trying to put the pieces together in my head, mostly trying to figure out how Edward and I could still make this work. Thinking about those things allowed my attention to remain away from the fact my bladder was painfully distended... and the fact that the room had become entirely dark from above the covers.

I think I was trembling?

Shuddering?

Crying?

It was so dark and quiet, and just when I thought I might go absolutely insane lying in this foreign bed, I heard a tap on glass. It made a high pitched shriek escape my mouth as my hands went to my hair and I pulled. Curled up tighter. Rocked harder.

Silence once again invaded the room after the soft tap, but I shook more violently under the blue cotton and poly blend. And when I heard the window slowly slide open, scrapes of metal and wood, my heart was thudding so loudly in my chest I thought I might need medical attention.

"Bella?" I heard a familiar velvety whisper from feet away.

Edward.

And then my whole body, stiff with hours upon hours of tension, relaxed so extremely, I thought my bladder might empty right there on the mattress. Instead I flung the blankets off my head and sat up in a simultaneously swift motion.

There Edward stood, right outside of my open window with his palms flat on the sill and his upper body leaning over it and into my dark room. The sheer curtains were fluttering lightly in the breeze from outside. He narrowed his eyes against the darkness to find my wide, disbelieving gaze from where I sat on the large bed. Once our eyes met, his face transformed into an expression of relief; shoulders hunching under the leather jacket he wore and a sigh escaping his lips.

He smiled tightly while lifting his leg over the sill. “Thank fucking god this is the right room.” He breathed while climbing inside. It had occurred to me that Edward had never actually been in my room before, but I was still quite surprised – and relieved – to see him here now. It took me a moment to register that... Edward was *here*.

My hands were still trembling as I climbed out of bed and did a really embarrassing half sprint, half dance across the plush white carpet to the window while still painfully aware of my bladder situation.

His left foot had just made contact with my floor when my body met his with an eager force. I was afraid momentarily that I might knock him over and alert the house to his presence. But he was just as eager as I, and he met the force of my embrace with an intensity of his own. Crushing us together while our arms wrapped around each other fiercely.

He squeezed me tight, bringing a hand up to cup my head and press it against his neck while I inhaled deeply. He was taking in large gulps of my scent as well from the top of my head. And really testing the durability of my bladder against his grip, but I couldn’t find it in myself to protest.

I could vaguely detect the scent of cigarette smoke on his black leather jacket as I breathed him in, and it took me aback for a moment because I hadn’t seen him smoke in months. “I’m so sorry.” I sighed dismally into the cold leather. Because I still felt responsible and crappy that of all the nights we had to get caught, it was the one night we decided to make love.

I could feel him shaking his head as his lips made contact with my hair. He hated when I apologized, but I had to. I could imagine his eyes narrowing as he held his lips to my head. We stood for many moments in my open window. Just embracing and smelling, and probably dreading the foreseeable future because we both likely knew that the sleep was gone now. The sheer lilac curtains that had been pulled aside grazed us in tender ripples as we embraced.

I was wondering if it were possible to do this every night.

"I can't stay long." He whispered softly into my hair after a few moments, stroking it gingerly with his fingers while they began fluttering down my back. "I just wanted to make sure you were okay." His cheek came down to rest on my head as his fingers played in my hair.

I nodded into his chest, but didn't let go. I didn't want to let go, and I wanted to tell him I was fine and everything was okay. But he'd never buy it because I was such a dreadfully awful liar. I wanted to nuzzle my way into his warmth and crawl inside of him and never leave.

But there was this other issue that I could finally take care of...

I pulled away, cursing my biology and squeezing my knees together. "Can you stay here for a second?" I asked timidly while my arms were still somewhat locked around his waist. He furrowed his brows at me but nodded, looking a little disappointed as my arms finally released him and I stepped away.

I sent him an apologetic grin and turned quickly, taking the fifteen strides to my bathroom door in five because I really, *really* had to pee. On the way to the bathroom I passed the closet, and I cringed a little, walking as far from it as possible while moving past it with more haste.

Once I entered the bathroom, I rushed. Shutting the door quickly and dancing my way to the toilet. It took me forever to release the full day's contents of my bladder. I could hear movement in my room from behind the door, but it was quiet enough that I was sure Esme wouldn't hear. I furrowed my brows at the sound, wondering what Edward could possibly be doing, and began washing my hands. Unfortunately, one glance in the mirror was enough to make my smile fall.

I hadn't even brushed my hair since the shower with Edward and it had dried in the most horrendous fashion. Sticking up every which way and looking quite untamable as I stood in the same pajamas from the previous night. I was going to take the time to brush it out, but I glanced longingly at the door, biting my lip, and impatiently turned away from the mirror and exited the bathroom.

My eyes immediately began darting around the dark room in search for Edward once the door was opened, but my gaze fell upon a sight that made my shuffling footsteps halt abruptly as I exited the bathroom.

Edward stood with his back to me in front of my closet, staring at the door and rubbing the back of his neck while his long, slender fingers mingled with the dark hair falling at his nape.

But... the door wasn't there anymore. Or, I suppose it technically was, but now it was being entirely obscured by my very large, ornately wooden wardrobe. The furniture had been a requirement for me since I never entered my closet and refused to use it for any type of storage – clothing or otherwise.

I stood awestruck, gaping at the sight as his head slowly turned to meet my gaze once again.

I smiled incredulously as I slowly made my way to him. Quite impressed that he had somehow managed to move the large piece of furniture all on his own. And so silently at that.

But the look on his face made my smile fall as I neared him from where he stood motionless in front of my closet. He looked distraught as his hand continued rubbing his neck, and for a moment I was concerned the exertion of moving the wardrobe might have hurt him, but his eyes convinced me otherwise. The darkness of the room cast shadows over his face and emphasized the tight lines around the edges of his eyes as he watched me approach.

I had seen this expression before. On Thursday, though the rage was replaced with anxiety and... glum.

I moved between him and the wardrobe and put my arms back around his waist without hesitation. "Thank you." I mumbled sincerely, burying my face into his chest and squeezing his waist tightly. Somehow he always knew what was bothering me, and I felt so crappy because I couldn't ease any of his anxiety or glum.

He cleared his throat while bringing his arms back around me. "How pissed is Esme?" He asked in a clipped voice that made me sigh and burrow deeper into his chest. Because 'pissed' was probably an understatement where Edward was concerned.

I began relaying to him the events of the morning while I held him firmly. As if I could keep him here in this room for the rest of the night. Or possibly hang on so tightly that he would be forced to drag me home with him.

He remained silent while I explained the non-punishments in a hushed whisper seeping spite and utter disdain. And by the time I was done with the recount of Esme's tirade, I was endlessly curious as to his own confrontation with Carlisle, and figuring the argument they likely had was the cause for his distress and anxiety. I waited with baited breath in the silence of the room for him to offer me the information willingly. Hoping there was something I could do to soothe him, even though I knew there probably wasn't.

Instead he kissed my head and pushed me away gently, his hands lingering on my shoulders as he gazed into my eyes. They were dark and troubled and I knew that he must have had quite a falling out with Carlisle to be so phased like this. "If I get caught here, all hell will break loose." He explained, looking rather apologetic that he had to push me away. "Again." He grumbled and shook his head lightly; trailing his fingers down my bare arms and hooking them in my own while I stared at him forlornly.

I still had one little ray of hope. "School?" I shrugged one shoulder, trying to smile and be optimistic and probably failing quite miserably.

Edward made his own attempt at being optimistic with a tight grin and nod, leaning down to give me a chaste kiss on the lips that was very unfulfilling. When he pulled back, I went with him, holding my lips to his for as long as he would allow.

He smiled against my lips as I refused to release him. I smiled back because it felt real, and not forced, and made me feel like maybe I was soothing him anyways.

He didn't look tired yet, and I was thankful as we walked to the window. Slowly. Ridiculously slowly, holding hands and prolonging the encounter for as long as possible. But eventually we were there, and the curtains were billowing around and beckoning him to leave with his house looming largely outside mine.

I leaned against the window frame, shivering from the cold and biting my lip as he swung his leg over without releasing my hand. I watched him climb out completely. Lithely. And I didn't want to let his hand go as he stood outside of my room and darted his eyes around the yard in a nervous gesture, licking his lips.

"I'll see you Monday." He whispered, rubbing my knuckles with his thumb and staring down at our intertwined hands despairingly.

I stared at his face and it made my heart ache. "I love you." I choked, wishing those words could ease all of his troubles and make every problem dissipate between our two households, yet knowing no such thing was possible.

He smiled sadly at our hands and shook his head. "Yeah." He chuckled darkly, confusing me and forcing my eyebrows to pull together until he dropped my hand and finally darted his distraught eyes back up to mine. "I fucking love you too." And then he was gone and my hand was cold as I crossed my arms over my chest and stared out the window toward the Cullen house.

A sharp, cold breeze whipped through the yard, sending a shiver down my spine as the lilac curtains at my sides swayed in tandem with my tangled hair. Everything seemed comfortingly silver under the moonlight outside my window.

Until the edges of a large cloud slowly passed over the bright, full moon in the dark sky, bathing everything in black and obscure as I closed my window swiftly and returned to the safe cover of my blue blankets.



I never slept of course, and was out of my room before the sun could fully rise. The kitchen looked warm and inviting as I began making breakfast. Still sour and dismal, but needing the distraction rather badly.

I spent my entire day there, with no interruptions from the other occupants of the house. I wasn't entirely sure if I was being avoided, or merely being given my space. It didn't really matter to me, because I was glad for it either way. I wasn't going to be polite company, and I was already tired. So I cooked. Pointless things that would probably never get eaten, but I packed most of it away. I figured I could take it to Edward at school the next day. The thought made me smile. He was probably very hungry.

The house was quiet for the most part, so imagine my extreme surprise when I heard an argument between Esme and Alice floating in from the living room. The closer I got to the room, the more surprised and curious I became. My name was being said and huffed from Alice as I stalked down the hallway and stopped just short of being visible.

"She's seventeen, mom! You can't just forbid her from having a boyfriend!" Alice protested loudly. I put my back flat against the wall and smiled down at my bare toes. Alice was *siding* with me and Edward. The thought was enough to actually lift my spirits as I stood and eavesdropped on their argument.

Esme didn't agree. "I'm not forbidding her from having a boyfriend, Alice." She insisted softly, attempting to placate Alice with her voice and likely her sweet smile. I could almost imagine Alice's eyebrows rising to her forehead like they always did when she got flustered. "I'm just forbidding her from having Edward as a boyfriend." She clarified curtly.

Alice huffed then and my smile fell as I hastily made my way back to the safety of the kitchen. If I heard anything being said about Edward, I wouldn't be able to stop myself from defending him and causing more trouble.

When dinnertime approached, there was a knock on the front door. I was curious but I remained in the kitchen as I finished up some last minute weekend homework. Remaining occupied and dreading nine-o'clock for the first time in months.

I could hear talking and laughter from the living room. Laughter that sounded much like Dr. Cullen's. Then I was angry. Slamming my pencil down and swinging my head to the direction of the voices.

Esme was with Carlisle, and it just didn't seem fair that everyone else could have a relationship. A sexual relationship. Yet I was forbidden from being with Edward. Treated like some fragile child that couldn't make her own decisions. Treated differently.

I seethed at my schoolbooks as they left the house. And when Alice entered the kitchen and pulled up a stool in front of mine, I couldn't hold it in.

"It isn't fair!" I screeched, throwing my hands up in the air and taking her by surprise as she flinched slightly from the volume of my voice. Traitor tears prickled my eyes as I blinked them back angrily.

She sighed and shook her head, making her black hair bounce from side to side as she picked up my pencil. "It's not." She agreed, sliding a piece of paper out and doodling on it. "Can you believe her and Dr. Cullen?" Her eyes never left the paper as the pencil drew sloppy circles.

Oh. Right.

I had forgotten that it wasn't as obvious to other people. "You didn't know?" I asked sadly, tilting my head and pushing back my own problems long enough to hear hers. I figured it must have been hard for her to see that. Her mother with another man.

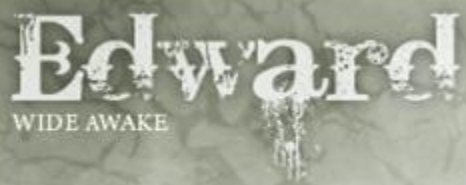
She giggled, surprising me. "Oh, I knew." She quirked an eyebrow and smiled at me. "I was just shocked they were finally making it public." She snickered with another shake of her head.

I rolled my eyes and rose from the stool. Deciding that we were eating supper alone. But I was thankful that I wouldn't have to deal with Esme again for the night. I briefly considered sneaking out, thinking that Alice might cover for me as she sat in her stool and relayed to me various clues that had tipped her off to Esme and Dr. Cullen's relationship.

But I stayed put. Hoping my honesty and good behavior would give me bonus points and... if I was very lucky, earn some of the trust back I had already lost.

I would use that trust to convince her I wasn't a child anymore. To convince her that I was mature enough to decide for myself whether or not Edward was good for me, and even though it was a long shot of the farthest kind, maybe that trust could eventually get us the sleep back.

I made cookies at eight at that night, just as Esme returned. We didn't speak, and as I bagged up the *Poppy Dipped Darkness* cookies, I dreaded the coming night, and all of the black and blue that awaited me behind the door to my bedroom.



Carlisle and I were no longer on speaking terms. The feeling was mutual. Things were said in that study that both of us were being really fucking bitter about.

He shouldn't have been in my room that night. The door was locked, and I knew it was because I was always so fucking careful to do it every evening before Bella came. Which meant that he used a key to get in. Which confused the shit out of me, but he refused to tell me what he was doing. Always telling me it was his house or just changing the subject swiftly.

I ended up using the ‘dickhead tactic’; throwing his secret relationship with Esme in his face, and loving how he got suddenly defensive about his privacy as an adult. He emphasized the use of the word ‘adult’ to justify his constant prodding into my own privacy.

It didn’t justify shit.

Then, he began examining my relationship with Bella right in front of me. And the shit that came out of his mouth was so untrue and just... wrong. Unfortunately, the more he spoke, the more they began making sense to me, and the more I began irrationally questioning everything.

It pissed me off, and after much shouting and various expletives, I stormed out of the study and seethed in my room alone. The blood stain mocked me relentlessly from my bed until I got fed up and ripped the comforter off angrily.

So many things ate away at my thoughts while I stewed for the remainder of the day. If Bella was okay, all the shit that Carlisle had questioned, the fact that I couldn’t sleep and I was already tired from the lack of sleep the previous night.

And what Esme probably thought... well...

I knew what it looked like to everyone else. Bella was innocent and I was the asshole. It would seem like I took advantage of her condition. Like, because I was the only one who could touch her, I just grabbed that shit and ran with it.

Like I was the asshole manipulator that I had always feared being from the beginning of this whole fucked up situation. I doubted even hearing the disagreement from Bella herself could convince anyone else otherwise.

I smoked outside on my balcony. And it had been so fucking long since I had a cigarette that it felt good and relaxing and made me beautifully light headed. But when the night fell, I needed to see my girl. It was the first night we had spent apart since Phoenix, and I just... had to know she was okay before I could even think of relaxing. I knew it was risky and if I got caught it would just make shit so much worse, but I couldn’t wait until school on Monday to ease my fears.

So I snuck out. Down the lattice that my girl would usually climbing at that exact moment, and over to the Brandon house. The kitchen was empty as I peered through the window, so I figured she’d be in her room. But I had never been in her room, so I had use the process of elimination to find the right window.

And I was so fucking relieved when I got the right one on the first try.

She was scared, I could tell. Being locked away in the dark room that she seemed to loathe. And she looked like shit with her hair all over the place and it was obvious that she hadn't changed since she left my house that morning.

I covered the closet door for her, and that fucking wardrobe was so heavy that I glared at it the entire time she was in the bathroom. But she still held me and loved me and I was fucking laughing at Carlisle inside my head as she kissed me and made me smile.

He didn't know shit about me and my girl.

I spent my night alone in my room, still seething, but happy that Bella was okay. Esme was really putting her foot down, not even allowing her to use the kitchen at night. Which seemed really fucking extreme to me. Like cooking was so debauched. It wasn't fair to her. She didn't do anything wrong, and now she was being forced to be in a place that scared her instead of being safe with me.

I began pondering over the possibility of sneaking out myself every night. To go to her room. To keep her in my arms and make her feel safe in her own bed.

As if he knew just what I had been thinking, that morning Carlisle had the lattice torn down from the back side of the house. I pulled my curtains back and glared down at him from where he stood in the middle of the yard. Now not only could no one sneak in, but I couldn't sneak out either.

Motherfucker.

He was covering all of his bases and not even glancing towards the direction of my window as he watched the lattice crash to the ground unceremoniously. I spent my day alone in my room again. I was hungry. Fucking starving. But there was no way in hell I was going to risk passing him in the hallway.

I didn't want this. I didn't want to fucking be *here*. In this house with this man that was holding me back from the one thing that could bring me peace. In this whole fucking town that looked at me like I was this... asshole. I was sick of it. The scrutiny and the reputation that I probably deserved, but fucking hated nonetheless.

I wanted to leave. I wanted to get out of this house and this town and just... be away from it all.

But I would never leave my girl. She kept me in my room that day as the rage swelled inside of me towards Carlisle, and Esme, and... the entire population of Forks in general. She was the reason. She was *always* the reason.

It became painfully obvious to me that it was us against them. But I told myself I could handle it. Tough it out for as long as I needed. I had been through so much worse, really. Daddy C. was a fucking saint compared to some of my past foster parents.

Some liked to hit with fists and feet. Rule by fear. I could handle that kind of shit because physical pain never meant much to me. But Carlisle liked to get inside of my head. Plant little inklings of doubt in my own beliefs.

It wasn't painful, but it pissed me off.

I later discovered that Carlisle and Esme went out that evening. Publically. He went to her house and picked her up right in front of Brandon, and I was hoping that she blew a fucking fuse when she found out. They were only doing it to prove a point. To make their actions more moral or some shit. To give us one less thing to use against them.

Fuck it.

I could care less what those two did, and I had to battle with my every instinct that night not to go back to my girl's window and see her after I knew they were both gone. It was one of the worst night's I've ever had. The first night I hadn't seen her or touched her in months.

By Monday morning, I was tired. Really fucking tired as I drove to pick up Jazz. I could tell when he got in the car I didn't need to explain anything. I figured Alice must have already filled him in because the look on his face was sympathetic and all fucking full of careful pity that I didn't want.

"Sorry, dude." He muttered as he settled into his seat. He didn't look at me and I didn't say anything as I drove us to the school. Most of me was still pissed off about it. Pissed off at everyone. Another part of me was just tired. But there was another part that was just anxious to get into the parking lot and finally have my girl with me again.

Then when I finally whipped into the space next to the Porsche and got out, I realized that Alice fucking *knew* we got caught. And I had never been in worse danger of castration than I was at that moment. Deflowering her cousin, and looking like the asshole manipulator as I leaned against my car and stared at the yellow Porsche in front of me both longingly and dreadfully.

The tint on the windows obscured her exact facial expression as Bella's door opened and she stepped out.

My heart fucking sank when I saw her, because she was tired too and her eyes were already bloodshot. But then they met mine and she looked so fucking happy to see me that I couldn't help but smile at her as she flung herself into my open arms.

Her hood was up, and even though I knew we were at school, and it wasn't lunch yet, I didn't give a shit. I pulled the hood down and freed her hair, sweeping it off her neck as I encircled her in my arms.

She smelled so fucking good as I buried my face in her neck and just... inhaled all of her. She was hugging my neck so hard that she was nearly hanging from me; her feet just barely grazing the pavement as I held her close.

We just stood there for a while, and I was hoping maybe Jazz was containing Alice and her anger as I enjoyed the feeling of Bella's body pressed completely against me. I was terrified to lift my face out of the warmth of her neck and realize the rest of the world actually existed. But I did.

Just barely.

Just enough to raise my eyes and meet Alice's gaze from where she stood at the other side of the Porsche.

And she was smiling at me. *Fucking smiling*. It wasn't a happy smile, and it wasn't a mockingly devious smile like I would have expected from Alice. The way she quickly casted her gaze elsewhere... as if she felt like she were intruding by staring and smiling made me realize what the smile really was.

It was a *sad* smile.

Like she knew how sad the reunion really was, and I wanted to furrow my brows and ask her why she wasn't pissed off at me, but instead I let my face fall back into Bella's neck. Because if something was going right for once, I wasn't going to question that shit.

But the rest of the world did exist, and so did first period. And the goddamn bell had to ring and bring us back to reality. I felt her sigh against me, and I turned my face into her neck and kissed the warm skin there. It was a slow, sensual kiss. Almost open mouthed as I gently pulled the skin between my lips and just barely pinched it.

She fucking shivered.

I smiled and finally released her, her feet making full contact with the ground as she grazed my cheek with her lips. Then I shivered, still holding her waist and trying to keep all the images of Friday night out of my head as her tired gaze finally met mine.

As I stared into her bloodshot eyes, I got the urge to ask her what her position on skipping class was. We could get in the Volvo and drive somewhere secluded. Lay down in the back and take a nap. Maybe kiss a little first. *Why the fuck not?*

I wanted to ask her if all of this was important to her. We had the car right behind me. We could just get in and leave. It could be me and her alone together for as long as we wanted. No fucking people and bullshit.

Wild fantasies began brewing in my mind while I stared back at her just as drowsily as she stared at me. There was so much more in her eyes though. So much more than the tired and the need for sleep and safety.

She fucking wanted me. She *loved* me. If I asked her to, she'd get in the car and leave this all behind for me. I knew she would because I'd do it for her in a fucking heartbeat.

I didn't know where we would go or how much bullshit it would cause. It didn't really matter. We had the cover of a vehicle and I could run by the house to get supplies. Non-perishable food, blankets to keep her warm, the iPod and the sketchbook. I'd fill my trunk with books so she'd never get bored. Maybe I could even raid the stash of money in Carlisle's third desk drawer hidden beneath his medical supplies. The credit card would be traced too easily, and we'd need the gas money. But we could make that shit work. We'd be happy.

Running away with my girl. I fucking smiled as I grasped her hips and pulled her closer. She smiled back but looked confused because she had no idea what was going through my head. We could go south. Definitely south. Somewhere warm and fucking sunny, and we wouldn't need anything else because we'd have each other. Fuck school and this whole town and all of our family bullshit. We'd leave all of that behind. She'd leave it all for me.

I was still smiling as I leaned in and put my lips against her forehead. I held them there, closing my eyes and releasing her hips to take her hand in mine while realizing how fucking perfect that would be.

She'd give it all up to be with me, and all I had to do was ask.

I inhaled deeply as I intertwined our fingers. "Let's go to class." I breathed against her skin, leaning back and still smiling at her as I stepped away from the car. She just nodded and grasped my hand tighter, allowing me to lead her across the quad to first period.

We'd stay and we'd try our best to make it work for as long as we had to. All we had were the minutes between classes and lunch to be together. It wouldn't be easy, and it definitely wouldn't be sleep. I'd be tired and I'd be haunted by every nightmare and fucked up memory that tormented my consciousness with the few hours of sleep I did get. But I'd do it, and I'd keep my goddamn mouth shut.

Because my girl would give it all up for me, and I loved her enough to never fucking ask.

Chapter 39. Persimmon Rest in Pieces

Edward WIDE AWAKE

It's three a.m. according to the alarm clock that was glowing green at me from my bedside table. Monday, March first, and I could hear the wind fucking howling outside the house as I clutched the pillow at my side.

I'll remember this morning and this exact time with perfect clarity in the future. I'll be standing on a street somewhere, or driving in my car, or sitting in English class next to the smelly motherfucker who never brings a pen, and I'll be utterly capable of recalling this precise moment without effort, despite any circumstance.

It wasn't because it was the first day of the month, or the day my Economy project was due. Not because only six hours earlier I had spoken to Carlisle in the kitchen for the first time in a week, and it was a mere "fuck you" that made him all sad yet hopeful. Not because it was six days until my birthday, and not even because I could finally go to school in four hours and see my girl after the long weekend.

I'd remember it because it was the first night I slept without my girl.

I'll remember falling asleep at midnight, and waking up three hours later in my dark room to the most horrifically vivid dream I had ever encountered in my entire fucking life. I'll remember instinctively hugging the pillow that still held the faint scent of flowers and cookies. I'll remember the way I fucking shook and dug my nails into it like it could keep me in the present and drive away the past.

I had caught a couple hours on Wednesday afternoon, during the day after I got home from school. I could almost still feel her warmth on me from where I held her in the halls, and I figured it would make it easier as I collapsed onto my bed lifelessly. I was a little cocky maybe, thinking perhaps they wouldn't come back after so long. As if my mind had simply been conditioned to just... not do it after so many peaceful nights.

Which was fucking bullshit.

My mind was incapable of 'conditioning'. And even though the dream on Wednesday afternoon was... unseemly... it didn't result in this.

Me lying sweaty and alone in my bed with the sheets tangled in my legs as I roughly shoved the pillow into my face with a muffled, frustrated sob. I weakly inhaled the lingering smell of Bella

as I held it to my face, and fought to calm my breathing and tremors. It had been too long, and even though all of the long nights of love and affection with my girl were precious to me, they made me so goddamn soft. Obliterated the tough exterior shell my mind had created for the memories. It was right on the surface, invading my composure until I was forced into numbness.

The numbness I could handle, but I knew from experience it would get old fast.

I thrashed my feet free of the sheets and finally sat up, swinging my legs over the side of the bed and just fucking sitting there in the darkness with my chest heaving while I roughly rubbed at my face with a palm. Wet and sticky with sweat and tears. I hated crying. It was so fucking weak, and it just made my eyes heavier, which was not something I needed.

There was only one thing I could do. The same thing I always did when something like this happened. I stood up, and didn't even bother turning on the lamp as I threw on my jacket and went to the balcony doors. I stared at my hand trembling on the handle for a moment before I pushed it open and stepped out into the grey night. The wind was still howling, blowing loose leaves across the back yard below me in furious torrents as I lit a cigarette and leaned back against the railing. My eyes instinctively went to one place whenever I came out at night.

Bella's window next door.

I had to move to the farthest corner of the balcony to bring it into view, so I sat down with my back to the railing, facing the house, while I gazed at it curiously. Black. It was always black, which confused me because the dark had to just make shit worse for her. It also made it fairly fruitless for me to bring her all of my books at school last week. I was hoping it might give her something to keep her occupied while she was alone in there. We never had the chance for complete privacy, so I could never gauge how she was really dealing with it. I hoped the closet door being hidden helped, but I had no way of knowing.

The routine was lost, and I wish I could say a new one replaced it those days following the... incident. But I couldn't even call the shit I did a routine.

I watched Bella deteriorate right before my eyes as the week passed. Her eyes grew darker and heavy lidded; a lot like mine. Her steps began to drag as I walked her to and from her classes, forced to slow my steps to accommodate her sluggish pace. Her goddamn cookie names grew progressively more disturbing as the significant events in her days became blatantly relatable to her exhaustion alone.

She shrugged it off well, because my girl was a silent sufferer like that, but she wasn't fooling anyone. I could see it in her eyes and know when she had slept. Not because of the lack of tired, but because of the... fucking anxiety. She was always tense after she dreamed, darting her eyes around and flinching at every sound as we walked the halls. It was how I knew she had slept twice last week, though it probably wasn't enough because she still looked like a zombie

on Friday. Everyone had to have seen it. You'd have to be fucking blind not to. I didn't know what Esme was thinking, allowing this shit to get worse with every passing day. But I didn't see any give by Carlisle, so I figured it just didn't matter to them.

Carlisle.

Dr. Carlisle *motherfucking* Cullen.

I was avoiding that asshole like my girl avoided off-brand baking ingredients. I'd make certain our paths would never cross in the house so I wouldn't have to face that sanctimonious prick anymore. Every time I did, it made me feel so fucking scrutinized and pissed off. Even last night, as I only muttered two little offensive words in the kitchen, he had that look on his face. The one that clearly said... I was telling him to go fuck himself, but... at least I was talking to him again.

What a dumb-fuck.

I didn't even realize he was standing behind me when the words left my mouth. Truthfully, I was just cursing the microwave that made something seemingly as simple as reheating leftovers seem like rocket science. I had the urge to spin around and angrily inform him I was actually bitching at his overpriced kitchen appliances, but... that would have made me look insane. So I just rolled my eyes and left, escaping once again to my room, and feeling irritated that I had accidentally broken the silence between us.

I continued gazing out at Bella's window as I finished my cigarette slowly. I was in no hurry to face that bed again. And as that thought floated through my fuzzy mind, I realized exactly what I should be doing. I wanted to slap myself in the forehead for not acting sooner. I jumped up and extinguished the cigarette, darting back into my room and moving towards the door to the hall. It was dark in the house, and quiet, with the exception of Em's loud ass snore as I snuck past his door. The second floor study was my destination and I found the knob in the darkness like I had done a million times before.

Before Bella.

I entered cautiously and closed the door with a light click behind me. The study was dark and empty at night, with that same annoying clock ticking on the desk as I passed it, tossing it a pointed glare. I carefully stalked to the cabinet at the far side of the room; the one with the spare medication and supplies Carlisle usually kept on hand.

The large metallic cabinet opened without even a creak or scrape to alert Daddy C. to my whereabouts. My gaze immediately landed on the bottom shelf, second row of bottles, and fifth one back. Those beautiful amphetamines that would be my only savior for the night. I knelt down and grabbed the bottle, opening it to pour a large amount of the contents into my hand because it would be too obvious to purloin the entire thing. I hastily shoved them into

my pocket, returning the bottle to its original position, label angled ninety degrees askew. He'd never fucking notice.

I smirked as I closed the cabinet, turning on my heel to leave the study with one more glower at the ticking clock on the desk. I returned to my dark room undiscovered, finally turning on the lamp and bathing the room in a dull grey light. The acoustic silence of my bathroom greeted me grimly as I stood over the sink and turned on the tap. Splashing freezing cold water onto my face and sighing at the focus it gave me to swallow down the white pills in relief. I didn't take an overabundance of the medication. It only served one purpose to me, and unlike cocaine, it wasn't freakishly addictive.

This was the time of night I began to loathe once again. Standing in the middle of the room and looking around like a lost fucking puppy for something to keep me occupied. So I got out my sketchbook like always, flopping down on the bed and opening to a clean, blank page. I stared at it, considering the dream I had woken up to, and rapidly tapped it with the eraser of my pencil.

This was a problem for me.

Wednesday night, it had become abundantly clear to me that somewhere along the way, sketching stopped helping with the memories. I tried to draw it out, moving the pencil over the page and barely noticing when the drawing transformed into a rough portrayal of Bella's lips. I furrowed my brows at the page and turned to another, blank sheet. But that one ended up becoming a perfectly clear rendition of her left wrist. It took me a moment to realize it was even Bella's wrist, but the little circular grease burn scar that the pencil created was unique to her wrist alone. It frustrated me to no end as I stared at the page and desperately tried to determine why I couldn't sketch the memories anymore.

I eventually reasoned... maybe it was because of *her*.

Maybe when the page could be black and white with Bella, the grays of everything else lost importance to me. And I fucking loved sketching my girl, honestly. There were hundreds of little body parts and details that were just waiting to be put down on paper after... *that* night. But it was still a problem for me. Because at the end of the day, I had lost my only outlet for it all. Sketching used to get it out of my head, and buy me some peace for the coming day, but it wasn't working anymore.

I desperately missed the way my girl used to lay me down when that kind of shit was bothering me and just... ask me about it. It was such a simple gesture, but it worked better than anything else. Her hypnotizing whisper and tender caress that drew the demons from my head against my will. The way she would gaze intensely into my eyes and smile with me. Laugh with me. Frown with me. *Cry with me*.

Shit.

It would have been really fucking helpful right about now.

But I didn't have that anymore, and I couldn't draw the dream. So, with a heavy sigh, I began sketching her on the bed. Before, I used to sketch her on the couch, but it wasn't close enough. Which was pretty fucking stupid because it was just a goddamn drawing, but she just felt wrong on the couch. She belonged in *my* bed.

I could feel the medicine steadily perking me up as it flowed through my blood stream gloriously. It got me through the night alone, the same way it always used to. It made Bella's hair more realistic on the page of the sketchbook as my pencil floated over the black and white with ease. Everything became finer and more detailed as the sun began to rise. Her round belly button, her tiny elbow, her bare shoulder, and the way her hair poured in delicate waves across my pillow and smothered it in flowers and cookies and perfection, and... *fucking Christ*.

I couldn't wait to get to that parking lot when school started.



I probably should have stopped taking the pills that morning as I showered and got ready for school, but I didn't. Because as I brushed my teeth and stared drowsily at her little blue toothbrush that was no longer used, I decided I needed more. More time to be alert with her. To notice the little things that the drowsiness eclipsed.

I passed Carlisle on the way out the door in the hall. And he was still looking at me and smiling all fucking annoyingly hopeful, even halting his steps as I approached him with my bag slung over my shoulder carelessly. But I pushed past him and kept my eyes fixed straight ahead. I got that familiar, immediate pang of guilt for brushing him off so callously as I exited the house without looking back in his direction.

But once I was outside and leaning against the door to the Volvo it all disappeared. Because my girl walked out the front door of the Brandon house. And she looked so fucking rough. Her face was pale and taught and she didn't look like she had even been eating for the last eight days. Those full pouty lips were white and chapped, and *her eyes*...

Her fucking eyes were drooping and purple and bloodshot. Already.

We locked tired gazes from across the yards like we did every day the previous week and shared a familiar knowing look as I pushed off the door of my car. Because she should be riding with me, and we both knew it. It'd give us more time together and we could talk without all the fucking people watching us. But I never pushed it because Carlisle was always home when I left for school, and I got the feeling he was watching for that kind of shit. It effectively erased any guilt I may have been feeling for being a complete dick to him.

She smiled at me tightly; reaching for the door handle of the yellow Porsche as she quickly turned away and shielded her tired expression with her flat, brown hair. But I wanted to run over there and grab her fucking arm and drag her back into my house.

I wanted to pull her up the stairs, storm into the study, stand her right in front of Carlisle and fucking show him what this was causing. I was stronger than her. I could tough this out for as long as I needed. But not Bella. I couldn't stand seeing her like...

Like the way she was before me. Like I hadn't made any difference at all.

It made me sick as I drove to pick up Jazz. He kept silent as we made our way to the school. He knew me well enough to know, the lack of sleep had made me irritable. Or at least that's what he thought. The truth was, so many things made me irritable and frustrated. Sleep deprivation was just one of them. The massive suffocation of feeling trapped in this shitty loop of sunrises and sunsets added to it. And the way I had become suddenly devoid of any outlet certainly put me on edge.

The Porsche was already sitting idle in the parking lot as I pulled in beside it. Jazz and I exited the car at the same time, both impatient to see our other halves, and kind of making me feel like a pussy for being as pathetic as him when it came to my girl. I didn't really care though. Jazz and Alice could pretty much see each other whenever they wanted. *Lucky fucking bastards.*

Bella practically flew out of the car, not even shutting her door as she sprung into my open my open arms with an enthusiasm that likely expended all of her remaining energy. I smiled as I gripped her tightly around the waist. The first real smile since Friday probably.

She giggled lightly as I took her face in my hands and began planting little kisses all over her face. Her cheeks, her nose, her droopy eyes and her chin. *Not the lips.*

Her smile was a little more genuine as she wrapped her arms around my waist and gazed up at me. "How was your weekend?" She asked, still smiling as I slid my hands underneath her hood and massaged her scalp without lowering it. She sighed and it was warm and soft against my fingers.

I watched as her eyelids began to fall under the relaxation of the massage. "Shittier than Emmett's bathroom on ninety nine cent burrito night." I smirked, attempting to see her smile widen, and feeling a little guilty about making her so goddamn relaxed when she was so obviously already tired as hell.

She chuckled once, raising her eyelids and quirking an eyebrow at me. "Monday morning fecal humor. No thanks." She replied dryly. I could see the smile flirting at her lips so I just shrugged and pulled my hands out of her hood. She began staring at my forehead with an odd expression. Concern maybe? One corner of her lips turned down tightly and she released my waist as her gaze remained fixed on that same spot on my head. I began feeling all fucking self-

conscious, battling with the urge to turn to my car door and check my reflection in the window real quick.

She just lifted a little hand to my face, using her fingers to firmly press into my forehead, as if wiping something off. When her hand returned to her side, her frown deepened and she sighed, finally meeting my quizzical gaze with a forced grin.

I couldn't decide what she was so concerned about, but I took her hand in mine and began leading us away from the cars with one sly glance in the window of Tyler's van as we passed it. There were no marks or smudges on my face so I shrugged it off and inwardly rolled my eyes at my sudden lack of confidence.

Her feet were dragging, and I was actually a little twitchy from the uppers as I snaked my arm around her waist and led her across the quad. All Bella and I had was school. That brief embrace between the cars before the bell rang. The smelling and the simple kisses as we approached the doors. The minutes on the way to the next class where we walked... really... fucking... slow. And just like with every other class, we didn't want to let each other go when we reached the door. She looked all fucking sad as she leaned up to give me a soft kiss on the cheek and shuffled through the doorway to her desk.

This was what our relationship had been reduced to. Instead of me just walking her to class, it was seven goodbyes a day. I watched her get settled into her seat at the back of the class before I walked to my own, fucking glaring at all the assholes eyeing me in the halls. Everyone was always eyeing me nowadays. Making me feel impossibly more suffocated and scrutinized than I already was.

I just gave them all a fleeting look that clearly illustrated my irritation. *Yeah, I'm in a really shitty mood. So fucking what? Move the hell on.*

It all began again as I got to my first class and settled into my seat for another hour long lecture on....something I could barely recall by the time the bell rang. I could feel the numbness settle in again with every hour of rest I successfully evaded. The way things became unclear and murky with the sleep deprivation, like static fuzz in the background of a really bad foreign movie. It became progressively more difficult to pay attention in classes once again, harder to let the little shit slide that pissed me off, harder to relax under the strain of it all... and I was so used to *this*.

Numb and irritation.

By third period, the numbness and irritation was saturating every cell in my body. I was impatient in my seat to go get Bella from her class for lunch. Drumming my pen on the surface of my desk and annoying everyone around me while I shot the clock on the wall furtive glances. The teacher had stepped out to take a call while we were supposed to be doing our literature assignments. I had already forgotten what it was about and was simply leaning back in my chair

with my boots propped up on the empty seat in front of me when Smelly Motherfucker leaned over the aisle. The drumming of my pen became louder and quicker in anticipation, because I wasn't sure I could handle this shit from him today.

"Psssst." He hissed from my side covertly to gain my attention. My jaw clenched and I didn't meet his gaze as my pen clicked the wood surface rapidly. "You got a pen, man?" He asked in a whisper, just like he did every day. *Un-fucking-believable.*

That was just it.

I dropped my feet from the desk and sat up straight in my chair, leaning over to fish a plain Bic pen from the front compartment of my school bag. When I rose and turned to him, the expression on my face made his grin fall. He backed away from me dubiously as I shoved the pen into the empty space over the aisle.

"Look here," I paused as I struggled to remember his name. "Ben." I spat, deciding if it wasn't his name, it would have to do. "Take this goddamn pen..." I snapped angrily, tossing it onto his empty desk as I narrowed my eyes. "Protect it like it was the only piece of pussy you'll never get..." He gulped loudly, and I could feel everyone's eyes on us, but I couldn't give a shit as the frustration swelled inside of me at his insolence. I leaned in closer to him over the aisle, lowering my voice so only a select few motherfuckers could hear me. "And so help me fucking god..." I growled, making his eyes widen. "If that goddamn pen isn't in your hand tomorrow, I will break your fucking fingers." I injected as much venom into my voice as possible in my sluggish state.

The bell finally rang as the threat left my mouth, and even though he looked all fucking terrified and offended at my suggestion he'd never get laid, I just shot up out of my seat and snatched my bag up off the floor to leave, ignoring the snickers and whisper behind me as I exited.

My girl was waiting for me like always in her seat, slumping over her bag in her lap and looking on the verge of a nap as I leaned against the door frame. She met my gaze, rising from her seat and shuffling towards me as our smiles widened in anticipation for lunch. Because a whole fucking hour was a lot to us.

I led her from her Trig class to the lunch room, holding her tightly and hating the way her feet were barely lifting off the ground with her exhaustion. I just held her tighter, because it was all I could fucking do.

We were the first to the table, as usual, enjoying the rare moment to sit down and be alone... sort of. Then my girl started unloading her bag, because she had been bringing food every day for lunch.

I fucking frowned at the brown paper bag as she slid it in front of me. "Christ, Bella. You don't really have to do that." I sighed, dragging one hand over my face while my foot began bouncing

my knee up and down rapidly. I mean, I was pretty fucking incapable, but I could manage to feed myself once a day.

She shook her head and sat deposited my cookies beside the brown bag. "You know how much I love cooking for you." She slurred while removing her hood and attempting a small smile for my benefit.

Fucking slurred.

I stared into her eyes, noting the way they were swollen underneath and nearly grimacing at how dark they were as my knee bounced up and down under the table. "When was the last time you slept?" I asked in a clipped tone, because she wasn't tense enough to indicate she had slept the entire weekend, and I fucking hated seeing her so goddamn sleepy.

She bit her lip and turned her face away, shrugging a little and irritating me as she just leaned back and kept her face down without answering. I let it go, because I was in no position to do otherwise. My leg was probably vibrating the whole table as I opened the brown bag and removed my meal.

Because really... I was hungry and that bullshit school pizza paled in comparison to one of my girl's quesadillas. I took one moment to glance curiously at the Ziploc bag she had placed on the table. *Persimmon Rest in Pieces*. I sighed and shook my head at them.

"How's it so easy for you?" She whispered from my side as her little hand went to my knee and began rubbing it.

I let my leg still under her palm and took a bite of the quesadilla. "Uppers." I chewed honestly with a shrug while staring at the cookies sullenly. I didn't feel like I should lie to her. I never lied to her. I told her everything no matter how fucking stupid it made me look.

The next words out of her mouth almost made me choke.

"Can I have some?" Her voice came out small and timid and still slurred.

I turned to face her with wide eyes and she looked completely serious. Rubbing my knee and basically asking me to be some kind of fucking... supplier as she begged with her heavy stare. "No." I choked with a start, appalled that she would even ask.

No fucking way in hell was I going to let her put that shit in her body.

She just looked away indifferently, like she was expecting that answer from me anyways. And then I felt like shit because her eyelids were falling and she was so goddamn tired that it made my heart clench for her. Yet I was staying awake because I had a little white helper.

I returned my quesadilla to the bag and dusted off my hands, leaning back completely in my chair while shoving my fists into my eyes.

It wasn't fucking fair. It wasn't tit for tat.

I shrugged off my jacket and laid it across the table. "Come here." I ordered softly, putting my arm around her and pulling her to me. She moved closer, but not close enough, so I pushed my chair back, ignoring the way she eyed me quizzically as my arm snaked its way around the entire circumference of her little waist. I pulled her into my lap sideways, pushing her chair away so her feet could fall freely at my side.

She furrowed her eyebrows at me, and I knew the whole fucking lunchroom was watching this shit, but I could care less.

I just situated her in my lap and used one of my hands to softly push her head to my shoulder. "You have one hour to sleep." I whispered while grabbing my jacket and draping it over her.

She was stiff for a moment before relaxing completely into my chest, not even asking any questions as her eyes closed and her body angled further into mine. She was so tired that she didn't even give a shit if everyone was watching. I lifted the jacket higher to obscure her face from the bright lights of the lunch room, and then I just wrapped her up in my arms tightly. Because that's what my girl needed for sleep.

She nuzzled deeply into my chest, and then I felt her sigh against me once before I knew she was dead to the world. One hour wasn't much. But if I did it every day it would make it more bearable for her. Five free hours a week. That was more than I was ever guaranteed.

Rose and Emmett came to the table first, glancing at us curiously as they settled into their seats. I just looked away and tightened my arms around her as I began feeling more than hearing her signature soft snore, muffled by my chest and jacket.

She was so warm on top of me and so soft and comfortable and smelled so fucking good. I was getting drowsy myself as I held her. Feeling her rhythmic breathing against me while the hand lying flat on my chest began twitching lightly under the black jacket covering her.

Jazz and Alice came next, and I looked everywhere but into their eyes as I tightened my grip and felt the stares boring into me. My gaze was fixed on the table in front of me as they slid their chairs out and got seated.

Then it was just fucking silence. All around.

No one spoke and it was making me uncomfortable. They all got her cookies; they should have known she needed it.

I was still hungry, and that goddamn quesadilla was eyeing me from behind the rumpled brown paper, and just fucking begging me to pick it up and eat it. But I didn't want to wake her up or lessen my hold on her, lest it not be adequate enough to make her feel safe. So I sat utterly still in the chair. Not stiffly, but just leaning back and relaxed while I matched my breathing to hers.

Jazz used his usual technique to break the palpable tension. "Gettin' a happy ending under there, man?" He snickered crudely from across the table.

I shot my eyes to his and gave him a pointed glare. Usually that'd be enough, but I was irritated enough to punctuate it. "Shut your fucking mouth." I growled lowly, narrowing my eyes and making his smirk fall so completely that I almost expected verbal retaliation.

Because Jazz is a prick like that.

But... he actually looked genuinely apologetic as his face fell and he began chewing on the shitty school pizza in silence. I couldn't tell if it was because Alice was passing him the evilest eye I've ever seen, or because he was actually sorry, but it didn't matter. Because when Alice shifted her gaze to mine her expression softened.

She propped her elbow up on the wooden table and combed her fingers through her short hair while she looked into my eyes. They were a deep brown, and I was just now noticing it as she cradled her forehead in her palm and held her hair back, but her eyes were the same shade of brown as Bella's.

"Thanks." She sighed, closing her eyes and shifting them down to her food. She looked so fucking... afflicted, and I wasn't sure what she was thanking me for. Just being a dick to Jazz because he deserved it, or for letting Bella sleep on me. But it was obvious as I looked at Alice, that whatever was happening in that house was affecting her as well.

I wanted to ask her to tell me about it as she gripped her black hair and stared down at her food distractedly. To explain it so I could find a way to fix it as I held Bella tightly and listened to her snores, but I knew I couldn't. I was doing what I could for my girl as I allowed her this one peaceful hour of undisturbed rest. And Alice had her own motherfucker for that. He just wasn't doing that shit right. So I sent another pointed look to Jazz. And I wasn't sure if he'd get it, but I tried anyways.

Comfort your girlfriend, you insensitive fucking prick.

He blinked at me with a blank expression. Because that was a new one coming from the likes of Edward Cullen.

I darted my eyes from him to her, tilting my head in Alice's direction because he was looking all confused and a little addled himself. After two blatant head jerks, he finally got my point,

straightening up in his seat and putting his arm around Alice and rubbing it up and down consolingly.

I wanted to snort. For once, he wasn't the knowing one. But even he looked disturbed by it. Alice's mood and the way she looked... somber and grim penetrated his usual calm and confident demeanor. And as I darted my eyes to Em and Rose, it became apparent that this shit was affecting everyone. It spread from Bella and me to the people who cared.

I was being a dick to Jazz, and Alice was probably in the middle of some feud at home. Emmett had to bear the tense atmosphere in our house between Carlisle and me, and Rose had to see it bother the three people she was closest to.

This was some *fucked up* bullshit.

Everyone remained quiet at the table for the rest of lunch. Maybe they didn't want to disturb Bella, or maybe they just weren't in the mood for conversation. Either way, they all left before the bell ring and I had to wake up the limp form hidden beneath the black leather on my chest.

My girl looked around disoriented after I jarred her into the here-and-now. My jacket fell into her lap while she rubbed her eyes with her little fists, and I just rubbed her back in circles, feeling shitty that it had to end so quickly.

She yawned. Big and wide and making her whole body tremble as she covered her mouth with her hand. It made me yawn too, gaining her attention as her eyes met mine and she smiled sadly.

Her little hand rubbed up and down my chest. "How was the quesadilla?" She asked groggily while stretching her legs out and flexing her feet.

I brought my hand up behind her to roll up the bag. "Fucking delicious." I smirked, leaning in to place my lips on her cheek. I didn't feel it necessary to tell her I only took one bite as she sighed and leaned into my lips.

"Thank you for that." She whispered softly, turning her face to graze my lips with hers. And that was my cue to stand us up.

Because I hadn't *really* kissed my girl in so long that my whole being... fucking ached for it. And I really hated to shove my tongue down her throat with such an audience.

On the way through the doors, I tossed the brown paper bag in the trash so she'd think I ate all of her food and enjoyed it just as much as she enjoyed the sleeping.

She smiled and drew up her hood as I put my arm around her shoulders and led her out. "I sautéed the chicken with red pepper and lemon juice..." She trailed off into a deep yawn,

bringing a hand up to cover her mouth and snaking the other around my waist as she leaned into me. I felt a little guilty for throwing out her prized creation as she relayed the sauté technique to me in a barely intelligible half yawn.

Usually when she went off on these wild cooking tangents, she'd get that sparkle in her eye while she'd glance up at me. But it wasn't there as she began explaining the intricate seven-cheese process in great detail, likely attempting to engage her mind while her voice was devoid of the usual enthusiasm I'd expect for the topic. I just nodded and hummed in interest.

Unfortunately, it sounded really fucking good and I was still hungry.

"With the corn tortillas..." She continued, almost appearing to feign interest in her own conversation as she rubbed at her eyes furiously with her free palm. "...a light brush of oil is what's *really* important." She nodded weakly as we walked slowly across the quad.

She looked up at me then, squinting against the grey light of the cloudy sky as I tried to remain interested in this cooking tangent. Her enthusiasm was usually enough to absorb my attention, but she seemed oddly disinterested as she curled farther into my side.

"Without the oil..." She added in a grim voice, sounding almost dead serious and forcing my attention entirely on her blank stare rather than the path ahead of us. She licked her chapped lips; never breaking my inquisitive gaze as her bloodshot, brown eyes penetrated and hypnotized me. "...the shell simply heats up and dries out." She concluded in a flat and emotionless voice.

I slowed my steps and knit my eyebrows together at her tone and expression. It bothered the shit out of me. But she just shifted her gaze back to the path and kept walking as if nothing had happened.

I shook my head, breaking the trance her blank stare put me in while I considered if she had reached the insanity stage of sleep deprivation so soon. I was more than a little disturbed by the fact that the process of making tortillas sounded far deeper than it was likely intended.

I just hummed and bobbed my head, deciding that the extra hour of sleep at lunch was what was '*really* important'.

As I walked her to Bio with my arm still kind of holding her upright, I figured this could be something of a routine. It wasn't as good as our old one, but it could still be a routine of sorts.

That's the moment I could finally define what a routine even was to me.

A regularly timed interval of sleep followed by various events and moments that are directly influenced by one's immediate cognizance and state of awareness.

It was either really fucking insightful, or a sign that I was going just as insane as my girl.

Chapter 40. Biscotti Buy Me Offs



I whipped the icing roughly, watching the streaks of blue food coloring bleed into the white until eventually it was a perfect shade of pale cornflower.

Blue had been the bane of my existence as of late. Blue walls, blue bed, blue rugs, blue everything. And then there was always the black that swallowed it whole. But today wasn't about my black and blue. Today was very important and I had a mission to accomplish.

It was a Saturday and I was standing in the kitchen wearing the modest outfit Alice had chosen for me per the arrangement that was still standing, even though she accepted Edward anyways. It was kind of special for this occasion. Hopefully. Really, I felt awful that Alice had been pulled into this mess between Esme and me. She didn't want to choose sides, and she shouldn't have had to.

She didn't need to until Esme asked her to keep an eye on me at school. Now she has to lie for my benefit. We grew ridiculously closer over the last two weeks. She began covering for me more and more often, deterring Esme from speaking to me when she could. Which I was grateful for, because in all honesty... Esme had been driving me up the wall.

She was constantly asking me if I was "okay", or if I felt "okay", or if everything at school was "okay". There was a day the previous week where I began keeping track of the number of times she said the word 'okay'. I got to twelve before I lost count.

I would nod, biting back a grimace at the truth of the word. I was okay. I wasn't great, and I wasn't happy with the current circumstance. But much like a disgruntled multiple amputee, I was okay in the sense that I was still technically alive and breathing. I couldn't complain very much really.

So instead I settled for the two week silent treatment and reduced our communication to nods and head shakes, emphasized by the occasional grunt or hum. It was possibly a little bitter and immature of me, but I didn't care.

Esme detested the silent treatment quite openly, attempting to force multiple word answers out of my mouth with elaborate inquiries. It never worked, and I could see her growing agitation with every simple shrug I made. She began resorting to desperate measures to gain my attention.

The prior weekend, she had returned home with hundreds of dollars in kitchen accessories. My jaw fell slack as I watched her unload the contents of her trunk in awe. There were stainless steel mixing bowls, cookie presses, pots and pans, a waffle iron, a food processor, and... I was not pleased as she passed me with a large grin.

I made it quite clear as I used the old, plastic mixing bowls to make my *Biscotti Buy Me Off* cookies that evening. I shot the cookie press a few covert glances, but I didn't budge. Because, as the cookies were clearly meant to illustrate, I couldn't be bought. She seemed sad to see all the newly purchased accessories go to waste the following morning, but I was too mad and, truthfully, a little offended to feel guilty about it.

I offered her a mere grunt when she frowned at the new waffle iron that sat unused and asked if it was 'okay'.

Then she tried another route that evening. Declaring it a 'movie night' and working feverishly to become one of 'the girls' while Alice and I rolled our eyes and settled on the couch disinterested. The darkness and the movie made me sleepy as I leaned my head on Alice's shoulder and fought to stay awake. Esme sweetly suggested I "Go get some sleep."

Yeah. That didn't help her case any. I nearly caved right there in the dark living room and told her everything just to see the look on her face. To tell her that I could sleep just fine if I were with Edward. But I kept my mouth closed and finished the movie with multiple yawns. Because Esme wouldn't understand why I needed Edward for sleep.

Alice began keeping me company until she was forced to go to bed at nights. I would let her paint my nails or do some other kind of crappy girly thing because it kept me alert and awake. We talked for hours during the evenings while avoiding Esme. I'd talk about Edward and she'd talk about Jasper, and it was the most normal I had ever felt around her.

Eventually, I got the impression she knew more than she should have. Like she knew that I wasn't just sleeping at Edward's because it was a fun thing to do. It was almost as if she were helping me stay awake intentionally, talking animatedly and holding my attention constantly with various activities and cautious expressions whenever my interest would waver.

The only way that was possible was if Jasper had told her everything regarding our sleeping arrangements, because I never had. I was content letting her believe that my nights with Edward were purely relationship related.

And if she ever had suspicions, they were confirmed thoroughly during lunchtime when I slept on Edward.

A yawn crept up my chest at the thought, forcing me to abandon the wooden spoon long enough to cover my mouth and shake my head. It had been two weeks since I had a full night of sleep. Lunches with Edward helped some. He would always pull me into his lap and hold me tightly. He smelled so divine with the extra hint of cigarette smoke and mint, and all of his electricity made me fall asleep before I even knew what was happening. I don't remember anything that had occurred at lunch over the past week. When I fell asleep the table was empty. When I woke up the table was empty. If Alice hadn't told me any different, I would have thought that they stopped eating with us all together.

School had become shorter. Well, not school as a whole. The time between classes grew shorter. The actual classes grew longer. I'd be utterly exhausted and trying my best to remain coherent through every lecture and boring assignment, and always impatient for lunch. Not for the nap, though that was quite Edwardly. Mostly just the extra time to be close to him.

Edward was the reason I was doing this. He had become... worse. He was smoking more often; I could tell when I smelled him. It didn't bother me, but I used it as an indicator of his nights, knowing he used it as a vice when he felt particularly stressed out or troubled.

And the crease...

The crease was ever present this week. It never went away, and I couldn't lay him down and work the memories out of him to clear his mind. So it stayed, creating a slight groove between his eyes that even my fingers couldn't remove. And his eyelids grew heavier and darker every morning I would spot him across the yards.

The so called 'uppers' he took weren't doing him nearly as well as I would have expected. I could see him growing more and more agitated at little things as the sleep deprivation drained his patience.

Just the previous day, I stood with him at his locker, and watched him shout a colorful string of expletives at the lock. His combination wasn't working and I was rather confident he wasn't doing it in the proper sequence. But he looked so frustrated and sleepy as he raked his fingers through his hair and tried it for the fifth time, that I didn't want to upset him further by correcting him.

I waited patiently while I watched him attempt the lock two more times. When it still wouldn't yield, he chuckled humorlessly and punched it. The lock. With his fist. As if hitting inanimate objects would force them to submit to his will. I flinched against the loud sound and cringed at the pain it likely caused.

He appeared apologetic for startling me, but I just grabbed his fist and gently pushed it away. When I stepped in front of him and entered the combination perfectly, it opened with ease, and without the need for violent intervention. He looked really quite flustered as he shoved his books inside roughly.

And this was Edward.

Walking time bomb, and I don't think I heard one person really speak to him the entire five days except for me. I appeared to be fortunately immune to his short temper. It was commendable really, and must have been quite a feat because he glared at every single person we passed no matter how little they were focusing on us.

But it still drove me insane. Seeing the look in his eyes and the crease in his forehead and not having the ability to ease him like I usually would. I'd always try of course. With a gentle caress or a kiss on the cheek. Sometimes I'd just tell him I loved him. Just because. It seemed to help minimally, but I still felt frustratingly impotent.

It just made this day that much worse. He was sitting next door at this very moment, tired and exhausted, and probably quite peeved with Dr. Cullen as he likely spent the day alone in his room. And it shouldn't be like that.

It's his birthday.

I turned around, stifling another yawn with the back of my hand as I began scooping the pale blue icing onto the large, tiered cake. It was chocolate peanut butter, and I could just imagine the smile on his face when he ate it.

It had been so long since I had really seen him smile. He'd smile at me in the mornings as we met in the parking lot, or when he'd meet me after classes. The largest smile of the day was right before lunch. But even it seemed strained to me. Not natural. Not the kind of smile I was use to seeing. And I needed it. More than I needed sleep or a night outside of my black and blue bedroom, I needed Edward to smile for me.

I, on the other hand, was probably having my own issue with smiling. I'll admit I was exhausted as well. I'd never confess it to Edward, but the one hour a day he gave me wasn't quite enough to remain functional. I never slept during the night of all times, and had spent most of my week in a stupor. I had allowed myself some much needed sleep earlier this morning, just as the sun was positioned to shine into my window.

What a joke.

It didn't really matter where the sun was. The dreams were the same. It was a different closet that was covered up by another piece of furniture in another town and another room. As awful

and nearly fruitless as it was, it gave me just enough focus to bake this cake without falling face first into the icing.

Alice broke my train of thought as she stepped into the kitchen with a smile. "Mmm." She hummed, skipping to a stool and eyeing the cake I was icing methodically with a hungry stare.

I shook my head. "Not for you." I slapped away her hand as she dipped a finger in the icing and pouted at me.

She still managed to get some on her finger and she popped it in her mouth reverently. "Edward is so spoiled." She whined with a glance at the containers of his favorite pasta. I simply shrugged with a tiny smirk. *Let's hope.*

"This..." She waved a little hand at the cake and container of food. "...is never going to work." She arched an eyebrow while propping her elbow on the counter and resting her chin in her palm.

I frowned and kept icing meticulously. "It might." I shrugged while trying to remain optimistic. "I'm hoping to appeal to her compassionate nature." I nodded decisively, stepping away from the cake and giving it a once over for flaws.

Alice snorted. "Compassion?" She rolled her eyes and picked up the spoon to lick as I placed the container of pasta into my black sack. "Surely, you jest." She chuckled darkly around the batter coated spoon as she slid it into her mouth. I frowned further at her newly evident disdain for her mother on my behalf as I set the bag aside and leaned against the counter.

I was about to give her a lengthy and very disapproving speech on the pitfalls of jinxing when Esme stepped into the kitchen. My whole body tensed as I quickly looked away.

Ever since the morning of, what Alice and I were now referring to as 'sleep-gate', I hadn't spoken one word to her. I was hoping – given time to calm down – maybe she would be more... pliable to my own logic. And now was the time to test this theory, because I needed it. For Edward at the very least. Also for Alice, who was always encouraging me to stand up for myself.

I cleared my throat as I turned to face Esme and look her in the eye. Unfortunately, her gaze was fixed on the blue cake sitting in the middle of the island. She looked... curious. I supposed Carlisle hadn't informed her of Edward's birthday, or she just wasn't putting the pieces together.

Her eyes flickered to mine, where she did a sort of double take at the fact I was actually acknowledging her presence. She smiled brightly at my attention. "Are we having cake tonight?" She asked while sliding into the stool beside Alice, who was trying desperately to keep a straight face amidst her knowledge of my intentions.

I took a steeling breath, building my courage and lifting my chin as my gaze remained locked with hers. "It's for Edward." I spoke the words with such a confidence that I could see Alice's wide smile from my periphery. "It's his birthday." I added nonchalantly while her face remained blank.

The kitchen became eerily quiet as Esme and I stared at one another and Alice began shifting uncomfortably in her stool.

"I'll just be..." Alice trailed off as she hopped off of her stool and looked back and forth between me and her mother. "Not... here." She finished lamely, walking away from the tense defiance mounting in the room. She turned when she reached the doorway, gaining my attention and breaking my stare as I met her gaze.

She mockingly flexed her arm muscle at me, mouthing the words "Be strong." dramatically with a nod of encouragement before she finally exited.

"I can have Carlisle take it to him." Esme finally spoke. I met her gaze again, fighting a smile as I took the stool in front of her. Because that wasn't good enough for me, and I was ready to fight for this one thing. This one little, tiny gesture. To give my boyfriend a cake on his birthday.

Esme must have seen the silent defiance in my eyes as she worked to shift the subject away from the blue cake/pink elephant between us. "Are you speaking to me now?" She asked quietly, almost sadly as she folded her hands on the dark granite.

I decided to humor her into thinking that argument was over. "Yes." I concluded with a minor nod of emphasis.

Her expression softened and she smiled widely, lighting up her face, and making me realize how much I had missed speaking to her. "That makes me endlessly happy, Bella." She smiled, reaching a hand around the cake to pat mine.

I began feeling uncomfortable with the direction of this conversation. She was being nice to me, sweet even, and I needed to retain my anger with her.

I needed to fight harder. "I want to take the cake to Edward." I demanded, pulling my hand out from under hers, possibly a little childishly, but I didn't care.

Her face fell as she withdrew her hand and frowned at the cake. "You know the rules, Bella." She whispered curtly, her face hardening in a rare show of authority as she lifted her own chin. "I don't want you around that boy." Her voice seeped with a little less disgust than the morning of sleep-gate, but not nearly enough to placate me.

I lifted my chin higher and narrowed my eyes. "His name is Edward." I nearly sneered at her, being at my wits end with her insulting tone. Her nostrils flared slightly and she simply shook her head sharply, denying my request once again.

I groaned in frustration, throwing my hands in the air. "What harm could it cause, Esme?!" I asked in exasperation. Seriously, it wasn't like he would maul me for simply bringing him a cake.

She huffed and her brows furrowed. "You know, most children would be grounded for that little three month long stunt you pulled." Was her clipped reply.

I gaped at her, realizing the non-punishments weren't so much non-punishments as much as real punishments, and hating the whole concept of punishment impossibly more.

She seemed to have come to the same realization at that precise moment as her face fell and she bowed her head in something that seemed like shame. "You know I don't mean to punish you, Bella." She whispered while fiddling with her fingers.

But I really didn't know that. And I doubted Esme believed her own statement either. She had been so busy convincing herself this was all for my own good, she hadn't even realized she had taken away so much more than my boyfriend. She took away my kitchen at night and even my freedom on the weekends.

I was, essentially, grounded.

When she met my gaze again, she had a frown on her face. "I got a call from the school yesterday." She tilted her head at me as her frown deepened.

I stiffened in my stool, flipping through the dim recesses of my memory to determine if I had fallen asleep in class again. But I knew I hadn't, so I furrowed my eyebrows at her questioningly.

She cleared her throat and got that familiar look of concern on her face she had been giving me for the last two weeks. "You're not paying attention and your grades are slipping." She informed me, squinting her eyes as she appeared to be inspecting my face very closely.

I shifted uncomfortably under the scrutiny of her gaze as my stare fell to my lap. "I'll do better." I promised in a whisper while biting my lip in uncertainty. Because I had been trying my very best to keep up, and it still wasn't enough.

Esme sighed, but it came out more like a strangled moan. "No." She spoke weakly, and then repeated it once again louder, and once again in a strong and sharp tone that made me flinch as I cautiously met her gaze again.

Her eyebrows furrowed in annoyance as she stared at me. "You are downright debilitated with exhaustion, Bella." She nearly growled at me, which was a tone I had never heard Esme take with anyone.

I figured – *this* – was probably the pink elephant in the room. If I were being honest with myself, this had been the pink elephant in this entire house ever since sleep-gate.

I simply shook my head, refusing to admit just how true that statement likely was. This just made her impossibly more agitated as she stood from her stool and leaned over the cake, grabbing my chin in her hand and forcing me to lock gazes with her.

She leaned even closer to my face, inspecting me shamelessly while she held my chin. "You aren't sleeping at all, are you?" She asked in a tone that clearly suggested she already knew the answer. I gulped, staring into her eyes as my brain warred with itself over how to proceed with this conversation.

One half of me was certain, if I just told her, explained that I couldn't do it without Edward, she would understand. And maybe then, she would allow us to resume our routine. Maybe under supervision, or in my own bedroom, it didn't really matter to me.

But the other half of me *knew*, there was no possible way for her to reconcile the line between what Edward and I *needed* for sleep, and what we *desired* for our romantic relationship.

That line was already blurry enough, and I found it hard to distinguish that line myself most days.

My face collapsed under her gaze and my shoulder hunched inward as I realized I was too tired. Tired of making excuses, and tired of lying about... being tired. "I can't sleep without Edward." I admitted nervously, in just a barely-there whisper, and half of me hoped she didn't hear. The half that knew the line wasn't clear enough.

Esme huffed and released my chin gently, dropping back down onto her stool with a different expression of frustration etched on her face. "Is this your method of rebellion?" She asked skeptically while my fingers began instinctively pulling at my sweater sleeves on the cold granite. "To stay awake so long that I'll be forced to cave in?" She added. I frowned. I should have seen that coming.

I shook my head while I sighed deeply in defeat. It was going to be all or nothing. I had kept so much from Esme since I moved here. She had my doctors' notes and references, but she didn't really know. I preferred to keep her in the dark about the severity because I didn't want to pull her into that darkness with me. I could only hope my honesty would force some kind of rational thought into her brain.

So, with another steeling breath, my mouth opened and it all spilled forth. I spent ten minutes telling her all about my nightmares, dreams, memories, whatever. She remained perfectly still and kept a deceptively blank expression while I relayed the tale of the closet dreams and watched her eyes flicker in recognition.

Likely because she had been questioning the wardrobe ever since Edward had moved it for me to obscure the closet. I watched her put the pieces together slowly, realizing how long this had been occurring, and how modest I had already been in relation to my problems. Downplaying them for her benefit.

And once I could no longer talk about the memories in a calm and collected voice, I began telling her about Edward, and how I could sleep with him. In his arms alone. I briefly tried explaining the electricity, but hastily skirted around that. Because it felt too personal. Instead, I simply told her how he made me feel safe.

By the time I had finished, her eyes were wider, and her face was paler. I sucked my bottom lip into my mouth, chewing it anxiously while she processed my words and turned them over in her head. We sat in the tense silence for many moments before her expression swiftly transformed.

Into anger.

Unbridled fury flashed in her dark brown eyes as her fists clenched on the dark granite. "You kept this from me?" She asked in a low voice, which was calm, but injected with a very obvious anger nonetheless. "It's my place to help you with these things, Bella." Her voice shook and I could do nothing but stare at her anxiously. "Not Edward Cullen's." She concluded curtly.

I didn't say anything as my feet swayed lightly beneath me from the stool. What could I say? I didn't want her help? The truth was, there was nothing she could do for me. Why bother her with a problem she had no chance of solving?

Esme thought differently. "I'm making an appointment with the psychologist." She spoke decisively as *my* face now paled and my head shook furiously. I didn't want it, and I wouldn't do it. She couldn't make me.

Her face became desperate as she roughly grabbed my hand from the counter top and enveloped it in both of hers firmly. "Please, do it for me?" She pleaded, nearly begging as my head continued shaking and she held my hand tighter.

Just as swiftly as anger overcame her before, her head fell in a long and agonized sigh of something that sounded a whole lot like defeat.

I suddenly decided, this could be used to my advantage. I had felt utter defeat and desperation before.

"If you'll let me see Edward." I bartered cunningly, fighting both a smile and a grimace at my genius. It was such an enormous compromise on my part; she had to see that and meet me halfway if she really wanted this.

I grew more excited as her head lifted and her eyes began shifting the room in contemplation of my offer. I waited with a baited breath as she chewed the inside of her cheek and made her decision.

When her eyes met mine once again, the glimmer of hope inside of my chest fizzled and died with the smile that was awaiting her approval. "I'm sorry, but I can't agree to that." She whispered, declining the compromise with a sigh and looking away from my crushed gaze.

I withdrew my hand dejectedly as my shoulders fell. "Why?" I asked incredulously. She had been trying to lure me into therapy ever since I moved to Forks. It just didn't measure up. "Do you really hate him so much?" There was no other explanation, and I couldn't fathom how her hatred for Edward could possibly be stronger than her desire for my mental health.

"I don't hate Edward." She insisted, shaking her head vehemently. "I just don't trust Edward." She clarified with pleading eyes. She kept her hand lingering precariously on the counter beside the cake, and I could see it twitching, palm up.

"He'd never hurt me." I wanted to pound it into her brain. I really shouldn't have had to. She had seen him with me that day in the gym, and it should have been proof enough that he cared too much to ever harm me.

"There's more than one way to hurt someone, Bella." She sighed in something that sounded like exasperation. Her hand remained on the counter as her eyes darkened. "You've had physical pain beyond what I... can even comprehend. You had emotional pain from losing your mother." Her voice became strained, her face contorting in a brief flicker of agony before it was once again clear.

She cleared her throat and shook her head a little. "But, Edward..." She trailed off with a cautious expression. "Edward has had these things too." She said quietly as her hand closed into a loose fist.

I was taken aback by her now casual mention of him, and pondered briefly how much she actually knew regarding his past.

She seemed to have read my expression correctly. "Carlisle has offered me the... abridged... version of what he knows." She explained without really explaining. It didn't escape my notice that she used that same word Edward had applied to his growing up in Chicago.

I was torn between being furious at Dr. Cullen for offering that kind of information to Esme, and feeling relieved that she knew something of his struggles.

Esme's face held a light frown. "He's a troubled boy, I understand that." She continued, and then at my defensive expression added, "No, but I do." She persisted, finally moving the hand to grasp mine once more while staring deeply into my eyes. "It doesn't make him a bad person." She insisted as my confusion grew. "It just makes him a difficult person." She clarified, pleading with her eyes while she squeezed my hand. "It distorts his view of what is right and wrong."

I snatched my hand back angrily. "That's not true. Edward has never been anything but - "

"You are both clinging, Bella " She cut me off before I could continue. I snapped my mouth shut and looked away indignantly as she continued. "You're both lost and confused and clinging to each other for help." Her voice grew desperate once again at my retreat as she attempted to shift her face into my line of vision. "But you can't help each other." She added, making me impossibly more furious as I once again met her eyes and prepared to prove her wrong.

She didn't give me that chance. "Not if you refuse to help yourselves." She concluded with a sad, yet knowing smile.

I rolled my eyes and looked away again. She was wrong. Edward helped me plenty, and I helped him. We helped ourselves by helping each other. She couldn't possibly know anything about our dynamic.

"I understand, you don't see that yet. But you will." She still had that knowingly condescending look on her face. Esme knew all. It was making me quite flustered. "One day when you're older and your judgment isn't being clouded by your emotions, you'll see that I'm right."

"I'm not a child." I snapped defensively, folding my arms across my chest and clenching my fists into my sides.

"No." She agreed, leaning back in her stool and eyeing me warily. "So maybe it's time you stop acting like one." She quirked an eyebrow at me.

I scoffed and looked away once again.

"I don't want to fight with you, Bella." She sighed regretfully. "But I must do this right." She spoke in a determined tone. "I have to keep trying to get you into therapy, and I have to keep you away from trouble." She said, and then after a pause, mumbled, "Trouble like Edward."

Then it was silent, and I was fighting back tears as I stared at the cold linoleum. Because her logic was so deeply rooted into her consciousness, that I had nearly no hope of making her see otherwise. She honestly believed she was helping me by doing this. By keeping me away from Edward.

The thought was so ridiculous and preposterous that I wanted to snort and shake my head at her.

My gaze wandered from the floor to the blue cake in front of me while one traitor tear trailed down my cheek. I swiped it away quickly, and Esme made that same strangled moan sound at the sight of me crying. I nearly decided to do it more. Just to show her how much I was really hurting and make her feel awful for it.

But she was right. I wasn't a child, and I wasn't going to start acting like one. Crying to make her feel guilty was rather immature.

Of course, no one grew up in one day.

I met her gaze with my most sincerely agonized look. It wasn't difficult. I was usually agonized in one way or another.

"Please." I breathed, preparing to beg shamelessly while I sniffled. "Just let me take him the cake." I asked quietly as my hands began nervously picking at my blue sweater sleeves. Her eyes look tortured as she listened to my plea while moving her gaze back and forth between me and the cake. She got that same pondering look as she chewed on her cheek and tapped her foot softly on the hard floor.

It would have made me hopeful if the same gesture hadn't crushed me minutes earlier. So I stuck to my original plan and appealed to her compassionate nature. "Everyone deserves a cake on their birthday. Even Edward." I frowned, laying it on a little thick for good measure.

Her face tightened and her shoulders hunched as her tortured gaze remained fixed on the blue cake. I fought back a smile as I watched her resolve slowly dissipate under the notion that Edward wouldn't even get a birthday cake. She was compassionate. Either for Edward's sake or Carlisle's alone because they were close, I couldn't tell.

It didn't matter. Because, with one long, defeated sigh, she *noded*.

I squealed both loudly and embarrassingly, startling Esme so much that she blanched and looked at me with wide, shocked eyes. The smile on my face was enormous as I sprung off the stool and flew around the island to envelop her neck in a quick, yet fierce hug.

I kissed her cheek. "Thank you." I smiled sincerely as I released her and began packing away the cake very carefully in the large box. It was really all I had set out to accomplish anyways. Furthermore, it was proof that Esme's will wasn't entirely impervious. It gave me more hope.

She continued watching with an oddly awed expression as I swiftly grabbed Edward's bag of cookies and shoved them into my waiting black sack.

"I'll just be ten minutes." I promised, working hastily to add napkins to the bag, because I knew Edward could get messy when he ate pasta. I slung the bag on my shoulder and met her gaze again, wondering how rude it would be of me to simply walk out that second before she changed her mind.

Instead she rolled her eyes and chuckled, soft and musical yet somehow still tortured a bit. "Stay as long as Carlisle allows." She sighed, still defeated as my smile grew impossibly wider. I battled with urge to jump up and down and clap like the child I swore I wasn't. I picked the box up to restrain myself as I turned and prepared to leave the kitchen impatiently.

Esme's voice stopped me as I reached the doorway with the cake in my hands. "Bella." She called softly, making my body tense in anxiety as I dubiously turned to meet her gaze.

Her expression was sad once again as she now held her cell phone in her hand and stared at it dismally. "Could you..." She paused, seeming to appear rather shy and uncertain suddenly as she met my gaze. "Could you tell Edward to take it easy on Carlisle?" She asked in a breath of a whisper, seeming rather regretful that she had to ask that favor of me.

I nodded slowly, but seriously doubted even I could convince him to be nice to Dr. Cullen. Truthfully, I wasn't very pleased with the man myself.

"This is a one-time occurrence." She added with the same commanding posture that made my smile fall infinitesimally, but I nodded. She opened her cell phone and began pressing buttons while speaking. "And I'm not giving up on therapy." She added decisively with raised eyebrows as she brought the phone to her ear.

I grinned minutely as I shifted the large box in my arms. "And I'm not giving up on Edward." I spun on my heel and exited the kitchen before she could reply to that remark. It was the truth. Given time and the escalation of my exhaustion, Esme's will would falter, and she would realize what was for the best.

I passed Alice in the living room as I made my way to the front door. She was lounged on the couch as she inspected the contents of my arms with a smug grin and a fist pump of solidarity that made me snicker softly.

I opened the front door and it was bright and sunny. A tiny taste of the coming spring as I stepped outside with a satisfied grin, prepared to fight tooth and nail for Edward, no matter how exhausted I grew.

Chapter 41. Ginger Snappy Birthdays

Edward WIDE AWAKE

I had been holed up in this room ever since I got home from school the previous day. It was the weekend, and that was unfortunate, because weekends were now nearly unbearable for me. But that fact was supplemented with another, equally unfortunate event.

My birthday.

I hated them. I didn't allow myself to remember why I should hate them; I just knew I was meant to. I left the proverbial door to those memories closed off in my mind where they only resounded with distant childhood laughter that echoed and faded as I willed it away. It wasn't as difficult to do with the supreme lack of focus that had been weighing me down all week. My limbs felt heavy and slow as if the air were thick with liquid, but the amphetamines made them ironically restless. It would have been some really trippy shit, except I wasn't enjoying it at all. And now I was trying very hard to lie perfectly still on my bed so I wouldn't have to feel it anymore.

And when I heard a light knock on my bedroom door, I was seriously torn between physical violence against the individual on the other side, and jumping off of my goddamn balcony. Can't they see that I just wanted to be left alone?

I growled in frustration and shoved the pillow into my face. *Fucking Emmett*. I knew two nights ago some shit like this was going to happen. We had some kind of fucking bonding moment and now he'd never leave me alone.

It all began on Thursday, close to midnight. I was hungry, and rather confident that Daddy C. had already passed out in his bed, so I figured the kitchen was safe. I was wrong. I stood glaring at his back as it protruded from the open refrigerator until he swung around and noticed me.

Emmett had a pack of sandwich ham dangling from his clenched teeth and was attempting to cradle various items in his arms as he approached the counter. "You look like shit." He said once all of his items were spread out before him.

"Yeah?" I asked flatly. "Fuck you too." I pushed off the wall and stumbled towards the fridge.

He shrugged and continued making his sandwich nonplussed. "Coming for a midnight snack? This isn't exactly Bella's four course meals that you throw away at lunch or anything, but it gets the job done." He kept going as I opened the fridge and stared blankly at its contents. Utterly disinterested now that good food had been mentioned. *Asshat*.

He kept fucking talking, and as he droned on while making his sandwich with his back to me, I was idly wondering if we had any duct tape in the house. "I mean, there are children starving in China or some such, and you're just chunkin' food away like your lanky ass doesn't even need it. Meanwhile, the less fortunate of us – " He tossed a wry grin over his shoulder – "– with less domestically inclined girlfriends have to actually choke down that sorry ass excuse for sustenance that our tax dollars pay for. Here." He turned around and he was suddenly offering me a plate with a sandwich on it. I blinked at it in confusion as the cold chill of the fridge brought me a minute amount of focus to register what he was offering.

He rolled his eyes and shoved it at me. "Eat." Was all he said as I hesitantly took the plate and glanced cautiously at the sandwich like it was laced with anthrax. Which was a definite possibility.

And then he resumed with making his own... and unfortunately, more talking. "So I was going to come down here and fuck around with some video game. You in?" He asked uncharacteristically.

I was still holding my plate and staring at him bewildered while I replied with a lame "huh?" Because I was a little afraid that maybe I was hallucinating from a serious overabundance of Adderall and sleep deprivation. And if Emmett was the one person my mind chose to create, then I was checking myself into the looney bin, stat.

He sighed and shook his head. "Come on, bro. It's not like you're going to sleep or anything." He turned then and raised his eyebrows at me expectantly. And why in the fuck would I ever submit myself to hours of playing games with Emmett?

I shut the fridge and examined his face closely to determine his motive. Why was he asking me? What was the catch? Why was I so reluctant when I knew it would ease my boredom for the night? Why did I hate being around him so much? The talking was annoying as hell, yes. But there was more to it than just my simple aversion to lackluster conversation.

There were inescapable truths about Emmett that I couldn't ignore in that moment as I fought to justify my annoyance with him. He pissed me off, but my usual justifications were blurred and vague under my exhaustion.

We were different, but I always blamed his background because it was easier than the truth. He never knew his parents or a happy first home, so he had never had the chance to miss it. There were no overtly traumatizing events in his childhood or rejections from the nicer families he

was placed with. He had it so much easier than me, but even that didn't justify my resentment, and I was only just now realizing it as I stared back at him in a hollow stupor.

Unlike me, he rose from his ashes, reborn and willing to take every opportunity that knocked. But I didn't deal in absolution and defying the odds on a daily basis like he did. And that was the primary thing about Emmett I had always resented.

It was his strength. He never clung to his past. He could have become bitter like me, mumbling distantly impossible 'what if's' in his mind as he struggled to function day by day under the weight of what-could-have-beens. If he ever did, he never let it show, and it never dragged him down.

I could have admired him for this. I could have sat back and watched him grow and perhaps... even learned from his astounding resilience in the face of adversity. But I couldn't do it, because every attempt at becoming close to Emmett was an invitation for pain. I'd be forced to watch his smile and examine my own because even though we weren't alike in so many ways, we were alike in the ones that mattered. We both had parents that didn't want us. We were both adopted and taken in by clean and sterile Carlisle Cullen. We both took his name and lived in his home. Yet he turned out better.

I'd be reminded of that fact every second I spent being comfortable and friendly in his presence. I'd see his smile and grow even more resentful at the pain this realization gave me.

It was easier to fucking hate him, so I did.

It wasn't right but... it made me feel better. This was just further proof that I was fucked in the head, because for the first time in five years, I couldn't justify it anymore.

And that's how I ended up in the living room, playing the most morally debase video game in history... with Emmett Cullen.

I was furrowing my brows at the large screen and trying to figure out which button was hit and which button was shoot when I discovered they were the same thing. Emmett was not pleased.

"What the hell, Edward?" He screeched in a comically feminine voice that made my lips twitch involuntarily. "You're supposed to pick up the hookers, get them in your car, get an amazing blowjob..." He trailed off as he snatched the controller from my hand. "And *then* kill them." He shook his head disapprovingly while one of the last remaining living prostitutes entered his stolen vehicle.

I took a bite of my mediocre sandwich while I watched him. "So let me see if I understand this..." I chewed and tilted my head at the screen. "You aren't allowed to kill the women until you have sexually demeaned them for no compensation?" I asked dryly, quirking an eyebrow. He nodded enthusiastically and demonstrated for my benefit.

I rolled my eyes as I watched the screen. "How the fuck did I become so widely known as the dysfunctional one?" I asked, almost sincerely as I leaned my head back against the couch languidly.

He chuckled and shook his head, moving his face with the screen as he punched the buttons noisily. "Because shooting hookers and stealing cars in video games is what makes kids normal, Edward."

I don't know why, but as I lolled my head to the side and gazed back at him while processing the absurdity of the statement... I laughed. I couldn't fucking help it. A loud snort escaped me and I was temporarily panicked at the fact I was actually enjoying this. Spending time with the version of the prodigal orphan everyone was so disappointed I wasn't similar to and feeling comfortable. But as I watched his eyes flash in amusement and he began laughing with me, I discovered it didn't hurt at all as I'd feared. It didn't feel weird or like he was better than me because he was perfectly rested and his laugh came naturally, unlike my slow and fatigued low chuckle. It felt like five years of hostility and resentment slowly dissolving over shitty ham sandwiches and murdered prostitutes.

Normal.

So, it was easy assumption that it was probably Em knocking on my door, coming up to give me a semi-sincere 'Happy Birthday' or some annoying shit. But when I stalked to my door and swung it open angrily, the person standing in front of me made me sigh.

"Well, fuck me." I drawled, semi-awestruck. "Are we actually knocking now?" I asked, feigning shock at Carlisle as he stood in the hallway and shifted from foot to foot with his hands shoved in the pockets of his slacks. "Is your key not working?" I asked, feigning concern now as he rolled his eyes at my sarcasm. This was the most I had spoken to him in weeks, so I wasn't at all surprised to see his eyes alight with that little bit of hope.

And then I was definitely leaning more towards physical violence.

Carlisle must have seen the annoyed look on my face because he said the only word that could have saved him from a brutal verbal attack.

"Bella," He began, showing an unnecessary amount of interest in the way every fiber of my being suddenly sprang to life and shifted focus to his words alone. "Is in the dining room waiting for you." He involuntarily darted his eyes to the stairs and back to mine warily.

I pushed passed him and made my way down the stairs. It was odd how the pulling sensation I had become so familiar with suddenly shifted from the adjoining house to the large dining room on the first floor when I hadn't even seen her yet.

When she came into my view, she was leaning against the table in a brown sweater and wearing a lazy grin that made my heart lurch as I made a bee line to where she stood. Pleasantly surprised for once.

I wrapped my arms snugly around her waist, pulling her to me and basking in her small giggle and sigh as she buried her face into the crook of my neck with a nuzzle. I could barely feel Carlisle's intrusive presence behind me, but I heard him nervously clear his throat in a silent order to... back away from the neighbor girl.

I smirked and squeezed her tighter, burying my nose into all her shiny hair in a kind of silence defiance. What the fuck was he going to do? Rip her off of me? I nearly snorted into her hair at the thought. I doubted he had a fraction of the balls it would take to touch my girl. And if he ever did, he wouldn't live to see her Random Emotional Breakdown.

So I held her close while she clung to my neck and I rocked us from side to side contentedly for many moments before I was suddenly too curious and hopeful to keep my mouth shut.

I turned my head to her ear and made an attempt to whisper so low that Carlisle couldn't hear me. "Released on good behavior?" I asked, unable to hide the twinge of hope that laced my whisper.

She sighed deeply, and from the feel of it against my chest, I already had my answer. I couldn't repress the frustration that swelled inside of me as she shook her head softly against my shoulder in indication that her punishment was still in full effect.

"How long?" I asked dismally, and I knew she would understand.

She did, because she pulled away and smiled tightly, darting her eyes to where Carlisle likely stood behind me. "As long as Dr. Cullen allows." She spoke loud enough for him to hear and as I stared at her eyes I realized something was off. Different from Friday.

Her shoulders were tense, lifted, stiff, and her eyes held a similar tension that I knew all too well. She had slept very recently.

Carlisle watched as Bella led me to the table, and I could feel his eyes scrutinizing and documenting our every movement inside of his head as he quietly corrected her formal use of his last name. He wanted her to call him Carlisle. I had a few suggestions of names she could call him too. I listed them off in my head as we took our seats at the table and I finally realized she had cooked for me.

And for once, I could actually eat it.

I smirked at her as she placed the food in front of me with utensils and napkins and a little grin and... it smelled so fucking good. My stomach jumped and twisted at the scent and I began

eating with enthusiasm while staring at her. I blocked Carlisle out from where he stood in the room, and even though I felt I may regret allowing him to intrude on such an intimate moment, I took her hand and smiled like we were alone in my room and it was ten-o'clock at night.

Her face seem to brighten the sight of my smile, the private one reserved for her alone, and she sighed in relief with a squeeze of my hand. She watched me eat, stretching her arm across the table and laying her head on it while gazing at me and I didn't give a fuck if Carlisle was watching. I gave her every hum and moan because I knew it was how she liked it.

She spoke softly, quietly, and timidly as I ate. Nothing of consequence and not broaching the subject of how she managed to briefly escape her punishment. I was thankful for the break from all the drama and tension and relaxed in her presence while joining her in useless conversation and banter. School, Jasper, which book she was currently reading, Alice, everything and nothing.

When I was finished with my food, she cut the cake and I eyed it skeptically. I was pretty fucking full.

She narrowed her eyes at my dubious expression. "Oh no you don't. You have room for a slice, I know it." She said matter of factly while placing it in front of me with a pointed glare. I snickered and shook my head because she was so fucking cute when she was bossy.

I ate the cake, and figured I'd need to come up with another compliment reserved just for it alone when fucking delicious wouldn't suffice.

When it was all gone and I felt uncomfortably well suited for a position in the next Pepto Bismol ad campaign, I slid the empty plates aside and mirrored her position, stretching my arm out across the table and laying my head on it while gazing at her. We moved closer and talked in whispers and I rubbed her hand with my thumb under the table.

I basked in her every grin and soft giggle and I thought she just might save the whole concept of birthdays for me as she continued talking about things that wouldn't interest me at all if they weren't coming from her mouth.

"So there we were on the beach..." She chuckled as she whispered and moved closer. "Just two little seven year old girls pulling each other's hair and screaming, and Alice was completely beating me down." She rolled her eyes with a grin and I chuckled at the mental image of her worst family vacation. "I mean, that girl had some serious cat fight skills." Her eyes were wide and mockingly incredulous as I smiled and inched my face closer to hers on my arm. "We're talking all out, no holds barred, Edward. Nails and biting, and I think she even called me a skank." She snorted in laughter at the memory of her and Alice's first fight and the arm she had stretched across the table bent at her elbow and moved her hand to my hair where she began caressing it.

I hummed in satisfaction and fought to keep my eyes open as she smiled at me. "I can see Alice being all bitchy about a fucked up sand castle." I snickered lazily in agreement, moving my hand to her hair and stroking it while she sighed. I smiled and inched closer so our foreheads were nearly touching and I used my fingertips to push the locks away from her ear. She moved closer, and I could feel her breath on my face and I never wanted to kiss her more than I did at that moment as she stared into my eyes with a shocking intensity.

I hadn't kissed her in so long. Always pulling away even though I was aching for it.

I darted my tongue out to lick my lips involuntarily and she closed the distance between our foreheads with a contented sigh that bathed my face in warmth.

Then Carlisle had to completely ruin the moment by clearing his throat and being a total dick. "I think perhaps Bella should go home now."

She flinched; startled by his voice even though it was a mere whisper because she had forgotten he was even there. Then she darted her gaze to him and back to me dismally. And I gripped her hand in mine tightly because I didn't want her to leave yet.

I sat up and met Carlisle's gaze with a glower. "Why? We aren't doing anything wrong." I asked in a frustrated confusion.

His eyes went to the floor and he scratched the back of his neck. "Please, Edward. Don't make a scene." He pleaded softly, dropping his hand and meeting my gaze again.

I was getting ready to make a scene and really enjoy it quite thoroughly when Bella suddenly stood up.

She leaned in close to my ear, grasping my shoulder gingerly. "It's okay. Happy birthday, Edward" She kissed my temple, sliding a bag of cookies in front of me on the table. *Ginger Snappy Birthdays.*

Then she packed up her bag and turned to leave. But she was wrong about one thing. It wasn't okay.

I watched in desperation as she cringed past Carlisle. "Goodbye Dr. Cullen." She said curtly as she slipped past him and left the room. He opened his mouth to correct her formal use of his last name, but she was already gone and it was obvious to us both she wasn't using it as a formality. She was pissed off at him, but not nearly as much as I was.

And I couldn't fucking wait to move out of here.



The week following Edward's birthday dragged on slowly. I was forced to check planners and calendars to keep my mind in sync with the days of the week.

Esme and I were on admittedly better speaking terms. I still wasn't happy with her, and she wasn't showing any further signs of retreat, but we had managed to come to a sort of truce since our conversation. We agreed to disagree, and skirted around the subject of Edward, but I was still wasn't off the hook for my lack of sleep or for my refusal of therapy. She made that abundantly clear every evening before she went to bed with a firm look as she said goodnight.

I hid under my blankets with a flashlight and read various books Edward had given me. It seemed ridiculous somewhere in the recesses of my mind, doing something as immature and childlike as reading under my blanket. But it created a new space for me outside the dark suffocation of my bedroom. It was there, but far more bearable. The words on the page became blurry and I found myself having to read the same paragraph multiple times before I could apply it to the story in my head. But it kept me awake.

The lunch naps began feeling shorter and shorter, and the long nights in my bed, spent hiding under the covers with a flashlight and a book grew longer and darker.

I used the activity of plotting strategies in my head to keep my mind engaged. They usually involved tricking Esme into seeing Edward and I together... unplugged, if you will. Not too much unlike how Dr. Cullen had seen us that day. No hiding or holding back our feelings because we knew people were watching, but more how we were when alone. Just some little moment that would give her some sudden epiphany that she was wrong, and we were helping each other.

Maybe a brush of his hand against my cheek when I was tense, or a stroke of his hair when he felt agitated and restless. The way we would both relax and ease under the feel of the others' affection. These were the things that Esme should see.

Of course, the thought was impossible, and my strategies all got shot down one by one by my rational judgment. And by the time the sun set every night I was resigned to simply waiting for school the following day to fulfill my need for his presence.

Edward's mood had shifted since the day of his birthday. He became impossibly easier to agitate, and at moments I would watch him stare off into space with an oddly contemplative expression that still appeared angry to me. Frustrated and calculating.

I wanted to ask him what he was thinking. What dark thoughts were making him so distant and quietly analytical? I didn't feel the need to push because I was calculating in my own way, but his sleep deprivation and the entire situation made me worry for his behavior. I became frightened that he was planning, and not including me.

That Thursday – or maybe it was Wednesday, I couldn't remember – he confirmed my suspicions as he was walking me to lunch.

He had his arm draped across my shoulders and mine was wrapped around his waist, as was our usual stance when roaming the halls. The campus was filled excited yelps and boisterous laughter at some approaching school event. Was it a dance? Maybe the prom? Or a basketball game? I couldn't decide, and I never got a chance to listen closely enough to hear what they were anticipating because I was having a distracted conversation with Edward. Whispering to him quietly as he moved us around the students.

Then he finally spoke the words that had likely been spinning the contemplative thoughts inside of his mind for the week.

"As soon as I move the hell out of there-"

"What?" My head immediately jerked upwards to meet his gaze.

He rolled his eyes as he continued steering me around the flow of students that were avoiding his glares. "I'm eighteen now. I don't have to put up with that shit that happened on Saturday." He explained in a quiet voice that was seeping with irritation at someone who ran past us with a loud yell towards the end of the hall that made me flinch.

I opened my mouth, and then shut it again when I realized I knew what he meant. This was about Carlisle, but it was about me, coming between him and Carlisle. And this wasn't how it was supposed to go. They were supposed to give in and allow us to see each other, and even though the thought seemed ridiculous even to me, everyone was supposed to be happy.

"No." I shook my head furiously while trying to stay in step with him. "I have a plan, really. I can convince Esme to let this go, and you know once she's on the bandwagon, Carlisle will follow." I was talking rapidly in desperation to get my point across before we reached the cafeteria. "It's going to take some time and patience, and..." I paused and grimaced while continuing in one brisk breath. "Okay... Maybe me going to therapy, but I don't care -"

He cut me off with a sudden halt of his steps, his hand firmly jerking my shoulder to a stop. Quizzically, I once again met his gaze in confusion.

His eyes were wide, lips fractionally parted as he stared at me. "What?" He breathed, his brows furrowing softly as he regarded me.

Instead of waiting for me to elaborate, he quickly resumed his walking with fervor, ignoring my bewilderment as he moved us past the traversing crowd and swiftly slipped us between two adjoining buildings. I followed in a confused silence as he led me to a familiar spot. The same one behind the school where I had fled the day I willingly touched Emmett and broke down.

We didn't stop until we reached the same area. The brick wall of the Math building offered total cover from the teeming campus, and even though the large industrial air conditioners rumbled behind us, it was still more quiet and privacy than we had become accustomed to.

"You want to go to therapy?" He asked incredulously as he released my shoulders and turned to face me completely.

I was still puzzled as to his reaction, but I managed to shake my head. "No, but I mean... if it would get Esme off our backs, I'd do it." I trailed off into a quiet voice. I never wanted to subject myself to that, but anything seemed like a fair compromise if it meant I could be with Edward. It was reason enough for me.

The crease between his brows deepened and he looked away from my gaze. Opening his mouth. Closing it. Opening. Closing.

He repeated this a couple more times as I stood patiently, glancing around the area and biting my lip. The nice secluded location suddenly seemed like a very comfortable napping spot. Of course, this happened to me often. My mind could create a napping spot anywhere when I was this tired. The previous night I had stared at a nook inside of the fridge and decided it could be comfortable, if I was one inch tall and immune to cold, that is.

Edward finally broke me out of my slumberous fantasies when his face finally jerked back to mine.

"No." He said sharply, his eyes narrowing as his hands went to comb and rake through his hair in irritation. "Don't be fucking ridiculous. That's exactly what they want." His voice was rising, and I was shocked by the anger that darkened his eyes as they penetrated mine.

I was afraid I had been so sleepy that I had missed some vital piece of information over the last five minutes. Why would this make him angry? He wasn't the one that had to go.

"Well of course it's what they want, Edward." I sighed in exasperation, shoving my hands into my hoodie pockets and leaning against the wall with a sour face. "They think it will be magical and rainbows and cure me and make me into a real girl." I grumbled bitterly, kicking the grass at my feet.

He mumbled something quietly to himself and his eyes grew impossibly more furious. "Don't you see what their plan is?" He asked, and he was twitchy again as he often was, seeping

irritation and frustration from his every pore. I was accustomed to seeing it, and knew a lengthy rant was likely approaching, so I relaxed into my spot against the wall and simply watched.

"She got this bullshit from Carlisle, I just know it. And that day..." He shook his head and looked away from me, shoving his hands in his jacket pockets to restrain the urge to comb them through his hair once again. "This was what he wanted. It's so fucking perfect. Lure you into therapy and make you better so you can broaden your horizons. Widen the dating pool so you can realize how much better off you could be with some other motherfucker who isn't completely fucked in the head." His finger came up to his temple, poking it as he spoke, and then after his brisk tirade was complete, he used that finger to rub it and his face slowly fell.

I watched, stunned and wide eyed as the finger went to his hair and his eyes slowly slid closed.

"Which is probably exactly what will happen." He breathed in a low voice that I had to strain to hear over the rumbling of the air conditioners.

He hadn't meant for me to hear it. But I did.

I huffed, annoyed that he could ever believe something so incredibly preposterous. "What are you talking about?" I didn't even attempt to hide my frustration with his entirely unfounded paranoia. Like I could just go and get cured and suddenly find someone better. I wanted to laugh at the idiocy of the thought. My going to therapy wasn't some conspiracy against our relationship. It was bargaining tool.

His gaze once again jerked to mine, and he looked so oddly vulnerable and truly bothered that it alarmed me. I couldn't stand seeing him vulnerable. He was supposed to be the strong one and seeing that strength falter made me feel undeniably vulnerable as well.

"Think about it." He sighed, a hint of bitterness lacing his tone as his hand returned to his pocket. "I mean, what am I really, Bella? I'm basically the last man on earth for you." He shrugged and looked away, hiding the bitter invulnerability in his eyes while I stared back at him incredulously.

"You can't be serious." I blurted, feeling even more agitated that he could even think something like that. After everything that I had told him and shown him... did he really think it meant so little to me? Did he really think I could be so fickle with my emotions... given more options? And as he still avoided my gaze in indication that he was, in fact, quite serious, I grew offended. "That is so damn stupid, Edward." I snapped, absolutely insulted that he thought so little of my emotional integrity. I was preparing myself for my own lengthy rant on the subject when his eyes met mine and flashed with fury.

"Thanks a whole fucking lot." He spat, removing his hands from the pockets and throwing them in the air. "It's just stupid!" He raised his eyebrows high on his forehead and smiled a large maniacal grin. "Fucking perfect. *Stupid*." He nodded his head and his hands fell against his

thighs with a clap. "Why didn't I think of that?" He questioned, his grin falling and transforming into a sneer as my mouth hung agape at his mood swing.

His finger was pointing at me then, accusing as his voice lowered to a growl. "Every time you felt like you were inferior, I went out of my goddamn way to make you feel otherwise. I spent months, Bella... *fucking months*... trying to just..." He shook his head and dropped his finger, unable to finish his statement as I gaped at him.

"And all along I could have just told you how fucking stupid you were being. So thanks." He turned away, running his hands through his hair and I couldn't have felt more awful if someone had snuck up behind me and stabbed me in the back.

He was right. My insecurities probably seemed just as ridiculous to him, yet he never grew frustrated with reassuring me. He was patient with my stupid sex crap, spending night after night with his technique on me, when I was the only one even worried about it. He did that all for me. And I just shot down his insecurities in the worst way possible.

My shoulders slumped and my chest ached as I stared at the back of his head and the guilt inside of me burgeoned. Then I had to clear my mind and think. I had to wade through the muddy exhaustion to put myself in his shoes, and figure out the best approach at fixing his fears.

Were mine ever fixed?

They weren't. We never got to make love and I never figured out if it was even possible for me. But at least he tried, and at least he made me feel – without question – that he wanted me.

I pushed myself off the brick wall and shuffled through the grass to his side, peeking up at his face. His eyes were closed and his shoulders were stiff, radiating tension and residual anger, but he didn't react to my presence. So I stepped around him, facing him, and got closer. Touching his chest with mine, feeling his breaths against me. He kept his eyes closed still and his hair was a disheveled mess from his fingers and frustration. Grabbing two fistfuls of his jacket, I pulled myself up to his face and pressed my lips against his firmly. But he turned his face away, forcing my lips to his clenched jaw, and then I was the frustrated party.

"Stop doing that." I growled against his skin, pulling him closer to me. "You never kiss me anymore." I made no attempt at masking the venom in my voice because I had let it go so many times. I had let him pull his lips away without feeling the dejection and hurt, because I was giving him time. But now he was being the hypocrite. Asking me to reassure him while feeding my own insecurities with his actions.

His face didn't move and his eyes didn't open, so I let go of his jacket and grabbed his face in my hands. I forced it to mine, smashing my lips to his and pressing my body closer in frustration

when he didn't react immediately. I sucked his top lip into my mouth, and with a sharp intake of breath, his mouth opened.

His tongue darted out of his mouth and shoved itself between my lips forcefully as his hands moved to my waist. He gripped my hips and aggressively yanked me closer, a low growl emanating from his chest as our tongues met. It wasn't sweet, and it was miles away from being anything near tender. I smashed my face closer, our teeth banging together as I pushed my tongue deeper and met his aggression with my own.

His teeth were skimming my lips and tongue, pinching and scraping as he plunged deeper and tightened his grip on my waist. I breathed raggedly into his mouth, moving impossibly closer to his body, and suddenly he was spinning me around, walking me backwards. I was stumbling, attached to his lips and forced to grab hold of his disheveled hair to steady myself. I knew it was hurting him, but the grunt he made, low and gritty in his throat, reminded me that he liked it like that.

And then I was pressed against the rough brick wall and he was wedging me between it and his urgent mouth. I pulled his hair harder, willing him to let it out and he bucked his hips against mine, already aroused and grunting breathlessly into my mouth once again.

But this was more than lust. It was more than affection. And it was much, much more than love.

This was mine and Edward's unbridled frustration. Venting via kiss as our teeth clanked and our tongues dove and danced aggressively. I pulled and grunted with him as I violently returned the kiss, eager and brimming with need to show him how much I wanted him. How much I needed him. I yanked his hair in my fist and pushed away from the wall to get closer, deeper, and rougher than him.

He abruptly jerked away, breathing raggedly as his palms went to slam against the brick wall at either side of my head. His body was still flattened against mine as I panted and opened my eyes to meet his.

His eyes held a dark glimmer as he trapped me between him and the wall. His arms creating stiff and tense bars of imprisoning flesh and leather around me. He was breathing unevenly against my face, staring at me and my hands were still full of his hair. This dark glimmer was something I had never seen in his eyes before. He was always so careful not to, so careful to make me feel at ease and relaxed in his presence.

Any other time, I might have cowered away and muttered the safe word. I could see in his eyes, hidden beneath the glimmer, he was expecting just that.

But... I *wanted* it.

I was almost horrified at the excitement it gave me. The way it made my knees weak and my thighs tingle with sharp sparks of electricity bounding up to my pelvis and torso. It made me feel ashamed to want more of it. To see Edward looking at me like this. *This* particular way. I should have been frightened of it. If I just opened my mouth and said the word, I knew he'd back away, and he'd never resent me for not allowing him to have it.

Even though he wanted it desperately.

But, instead, I was going to give it to him. Not because I was afraid to fight back, but because I *wanted* it. Deep inside of my being, something was begging for it. Twisting in the pit of my belly and making my limbs limp with anticipation.

I exhaled and leaned my head back against the wall in surrender while releasing his hair. I could see how my passive posture amplified that dark glimmer as his eyes grew wide in surprise and his arms flexed around me.

He wasn't expecting this.

His eyes lurched to my lips and he pressed himself closer to my body, testing my reaction. I didn't move, and I remained perfectly calm as he tentatively took my wrists in his hands and pressed them against the wall above my head.

I bit my lip and remained passive as the shameful excitement of my weak position below Edward overcame any panic I would have normally felt. When I didn't tense or need the safe word, his eyes darkened and he gripped my wrists tighter as his lips once again crashed to mine.

He took the kiss with a new aggression, his tongue plunging deep into my mouth with the gritty grunting sound that made my legs weak. His strength and control against my feeble and delicate body was hard and demanding and... inappropriately arousing. I kissed back as much as I could, and my wrists remained still and complacent as he pressed them into the rough bricks.

That same dark glimmer remained and radiated from his kiss. It was in the taste of his tongue. In the sound of his growl and the feel of his body as it trapped me against the wall.

Absolute dominance.

Edward

WIDE AWAKE

She was completely pressed against me. Soft and warm and delicate and... all mine. She was *my* girl. They wanted to take her away, but they knew she'd never fucking leave on her own. So they did the next best thing. They used me to get her into therapy so she'd get better and finally see how great her options were.

And that would happen. She'd finally realize she could do so much better. She could be with someone nice and normal and clean and okay to take home to Aunt Esme without flipping out over menial questioning.

She'd finally see how much of a piece of shit I was.

Carlisle spoke that day in his study, the same day he had snuck into my room and found us there, sleeping and happy. The same conversation that had planted the seeds of doubt into my mind. He spoke as if he were simply warning me. Like he was just saying words because he cared and was afraid I was putting too much faith in her love for me.

He stared into my eyes and uttered the words that had since become one of my worst fears. "What are you going to do if, ten years down the line, she is finally capable of other male contact?"

He went on some rant about how he wasn't attacking her candor when I blew up at his insinuation, insisting his point was to merely prepare me for a possibility I refused to consider. He was afraid she was too naïve to know any differently. And deep down, some part of me knew how fucking true that was. And it haunted me.

She kept denying it because she was so blinded by the fact I *was* her only option. It wasn't like some other motherfucker could come and sweep her off her feet. I was all she had. But she was all I had, and goddamn it... I had the options. And I didn't want them, I wanted her.

She was *my* girl.

I'd never had anything that was mine. My car, my room, my bed, and fuck... even my goddamn tube of toothpaste and bottle of shampoo. It *all* belonged to Carlisle. All the little necessities that made my life reliable and stable belonged to him. Nothing was mine. If I walked out of the door tomorrow and left his home, all I'd have would be the clothes on my back... and her. Didn't she understand that? I couldn't take the chance.

And I could imagine them planning this. Planning to get her better so she could know more than my touch. They wanted to take her away and give her to someone else.

The vision came into my mind, unbidden and infuriating as I imagined her hands on them. Touching them like she touched me. Kissing them like she kissed me, loving them like...

I invaded her mouth, pressing my body against her while gripping her wrists above her head, and feeling more awake and focused in that moment than any upper or line of coke could ever make me feel. Alive. My blood boiling with her soft moan at the feel of my complete control and...

This was so fucking wrong.

Why was she enjoying this so much? Why did her eyes flash in excitement when I was rough with her tongue and her wrists and her lips? It didn't make any sense to me. She should have said the word to stop me from being so fucking monstrous. But she submitted, leaning back against the wall and making herself completely vulnerable to all of my anger and animalistic need.

Seeing her like that, willing to let me finally show dominance even after all those nights in my bed that taught me I couldn't... it stirred something in me. It ignited and raged until it was a violent and primal instinct to completely possess her.

She was *my* girl.

It was fueled by so many things. It was the first opportunity I had had to kiss her in almost three weeks. It was feeling her control me, asking me to stay there and knowing damn well I could never say no to her. It was the feeling of helplessness that filled the pit of my stomach with a heavy dread that festered and suffocated me at the thought of her moving on to someone else.

It was the first time in weeks – maybe ever – that I felt in control of anything. I let the feeling and the high it provided consume me as I took her offering without hesitation.

But you don't treat people you love like this. You don't grab their wrists and shove them further against the wall. You don't feel pleasure in trapping and controlling them. You don't get enjoyment in possessing them like this. And you definitely don't get hard because of it.

But I was.

It was confusing and downright terrifying, because even though I knew treating her like this was wrong and unforgivably depraved, I couldn't stop that animalistic urge. I wanted to... I really wanted to love her affectionately and tenderly. I wanted to hold her hand and carry her books like some fucking stepford husband. I wanted to pull away and take her into the lunch room and hold her to my chest while she slept.

But I was doing *this*. Growling into her mouth and biting her lips and shoving her against the wall. Trapping her beneath me so that she couldn't leave and no one could take her away.

She was *my* girl.

I couldn't deduce who was more fucked up in the situation. Her for allowing at and liking it, or me for doing it and liking it.

I couldn't stop my hands from reaching for the zipper on her hoodie and pulling away just far enough to unzip it.

I tore my lips away, panting in hisses and shoving the fabric aside. "Take it off." I ordered in a breathless sneer, hating myself for being like *this*, but needing the barriers gone.

She complied as I unzipped my jacket and we were both tearing them off frantically while our chests heaved and our pelvises remained pressed tightly against one another. And once they were gone, I was back on her lips, forcing them open and grabbing at her sides while kissing her with reckless abandon.

I was disgusted with myself as I continued kissing her domineeringly. I wanted to pull away and vomit, purging the ugly and dirty from my body so I could be clean like her. Clean like Carlisle and Em and everyone else. But I couldn't stop the need, and she didn't want me to. She should have been repulsed and terrified by my behavior. But she was flushed, breathless, awake, and entirely compliant with every moan of pleasure my control granted her.

She was *my* girl.

My lungs burned and my chest ached with desperation, so I went to her jaw, kissing and tasting what was mine as the adrenaline of the lust gave me a newfound energy.

Then her lips went to my neck, I felt her teeth and she bit down. Hard. It hurt and I grunted into her neck and shoved my hips into hers sharply, because the pain felt good.

Her teeth sinking into my skin, penetrating and marking me. I wanted to mark her. I wanted to sink my teeth into her neck and get the same pleasure of knowing everyone would see it and know. She already fucking belonged to someone.

She was *my* girl.

"Don't go." She panted as she released my neck, her hands coming to weave and fist into my hair at my crown, and suddenly *she* was controlling *me*. A defiant set in her jaw as I allowed her to pull my head back, casting my face up to the gray sky.

I hissed and clenched my eyes shut against the sting of it. The pain penetrated the numbness and made a bright jolt shoot through my head and travel to the tips of my ears. I moaned and shifted against her while she pulled harder. So strongly her hands trembled.

But she was still asking and being selfish by taking advantage of my complete obedience to her every whim. She didn't want me to move out. She wanted me to stay and take all of this bullshit so that... I didn't even know what she wanted. I couldn't fathom how it would benefit her anymore.

But I agreed with a sharp nod and a hiss, making my scalp burn more with the resistance. Obedient to her every whim yet again.

She seemed relieved, releasing my hair and once again retreating to her meek position against the wall.

And now it was my turn.

I panted and returned my palms to the wall with a loud clap, fascinated at how she bit her lip and leaned her head back with a small writhe against me.

I had no right to ask – *order* – her not to do it. It was selfish and cruel to even think about it, and the last twenty minutes probably proved what everyone thought about me. But she got hers, and we were tit for tat, so why the fuck shouldn't I?

"No fucking therapy." I growled inches from her lips, seeing the same vision that made me furious at the thought of her loving someone else. Someone better.

Much to my surprise, she agreed without hesitation. Nodding compliantly in resignation and remaining entirely submissive to me as I trapped her against the wall.

And knowing she wasn't going to give in to what *they* wanted made the urge to dominate her dissipate. I was still trapping her beneath me when I became mortified with my actions. Impossibly more disgusted with my barbaric behavior.

I eased off of her and lowered my hands to her cheeks and I stroked them tenderly as I gazed into her eyes remorsefully. Then I kissed her like I should have. Soft and slow and reverent as I stroked her cheeks and apologized the only way I knew I could.

My lips and caress said I was sorry for letting it consume me like that. Sorry for not pulling away even though she wanted it. Sorry for liking it, and more than anything else, sorry for planning to bring her back here tomorrow.

We stood behind the Math building for the rest of lunch. Kissing and stroking and claiming and making promises that we wouldn't leave. And when the bell rang neither of us wanted to go

back to that place where nothing went right and nobody understood. We wanted to stay by the dirty brick wall and the loud metal air conditioners and let our need consume us for a little while longer.

But I still had a home to go. I still had a part to play. I still had grades to keep up. And even though I fucking hated that feeling of helplessness that filled the pit of my stomach with the familiar heavy dread that festered and suffocated me, I still had obligations to all of these things.

But they weren't going to win, because I still had *my* girl.

Chapter 42. Strawberry Stand Stills

CARLISLE WIDE AWAKE

I met with Esme in our usual location that evening, the leather padded booth of the hotel lounge in Port Angeles that we commonly frequented on our past trysts. We weren't hiding anymore, but the spot had become rather comfortable for our public displays of affection, so we felt no need to deviate from our old routine.

She was waiting in the same booth when I entered, offering a casual wave to the attendant as I passed. We both knew them quite well.

"I ordered your drink." She informed me as I leaned down to give her a soft kiss on her cheek. She always ordered for me, because I was always late. It was a social flaw that she had come to anticipate from my demanding obligations to the hospital. Only tonight I was late for another reason. Ever the intuitive woman, Esme noticed the frustrated expression I likely wore as I took my seat in front of her.

She frowned and tucked her hair behind her ear as she leaned over the table towards me. "How did it go?" She asked in regards to the birthday visit, appearing rather concerned about my day with Edward.

Secretly, during the thirty minute car ride here I had planned a tirade on how unfair it was to leave me with the responsibility of his and Bella's supervision. It was a burden that she so casually tossed on my shoulders while she remained next door and received all credit for allowing it. I was meant to look the mean parent, snatching her away at my discretion. I was resentful for the entire responsibility of ruining his birthday.

Of course, now that I was here, staring into her eyes and feeling rather miserable about upsetting her further, I decided to keep my own feelings on the matter more subtle.

By the grace of God and the well paid staff of the hotel, my drink came in a timely fashion. I kindly thanked the waiter and turned back to Esme with a deep sigh.

"It was..." I found myself at an uncharacteristic loss of words as I took a large gulp from my scotch. "Unpleasant." I finished lamely, lacking my usual grace as I replayed the ending of their

visit in my mind. Edward had not been pleased with me for sending Bella away so soon. I couldn't blame him.

She frowned and took my hand in hers above the table. "Were they... I mean... did they behave?" She asked, a twinge of anxiety lacing her voice as she leaned closer.

I smiled to reassure her. "It was completely innocent." I couldn't fathom what she was so concerned about. It wasn't as if I would have allowed them to begin having intercourse on my dining room table or any such thing. Of course, she was rarely rational in any matter regarding her beloved niece's safety and well being.

Her frown deepened and she dropped her gaze. "I was afraid I made the wrong decision." Her fingertip began softly tracing the rim of her martini glass, and I recognized it as a very sad gesture from my experience in her presence.

"Do you wish you had?" I asked, tilting my head in an attempt to decipher her odd reaction. Sometimes, I wondered if Esme weren't searching for additional justification to part the two. Secretly, I already knew this was the case.

Her eyes met mine and she shrugged delicately. "It would be easier to remain... resolute, but I'd never wish it." The ambient lighting of the lounge illuminated her face softly and exaggerated the deep and worrisome groove of her brow. This had become a long and tiresome debate between Esme and me.

Though I was admittedly appalled at the thought of Edward taking advantage of Bella physically... sexually, I was more inclined to believe it was never his intention. I had known Edward for many years, and had never once seen his behavior go beyond that of his own self destruction. It simply wasn't in his nature to intentionally cause anyone harm, especially Bella.

Unfortunately, Esme lacked my insight into his psyche and was impervious to my constant defense of the boy. I felt undeniably torn between the two, and my time with Esme grew tainted and bitter with the constant disagreement.

"It was actually rather sweet." I drank from my scotch and spared her a pointed glance over the glass. "They held hands and shared Bella's childhood stories as he ate cake. You should have seen her smile." Yes. I was hitting below the belt with that one. Esme never could resist the girl's smile. I was hoping to use the reference to soften the blow of the mention of their intense relationship. Of course, it didn't work.

As expected, her body grew rigid and she pulled her hand away from mine.

She shrugged tightly and wrapped her fingers around the stem of the martini glass. "Sweet or not." Was her curt reply. She avoided my gaze as she enjoyed her drink in silence and I was left unable to relay the specifics of their contact.

I had grown exasperated with her cryptic reaction to any mention of their relationship. In many ways, I could relate to her anxiety over the matter. They were both young and troubled and clearly vulnerable with their emotions. To allow such a co-dependant relationship to burgeon would have been irresponsible as their guardians. As their parents, it would have been downright reckless.

I didn't know Bella, and Esme didn't know Edward. If the relationship were to fracture in some way, their already fragile mental and emotional states would be crucially jeopardized. It wasn't possible to ignore such risks, especially when you cared as we did.

But on the other hand, I saw no issue in leading them toward the concept of a healthy relationship if they felt inclined to continue seeing each other. Esme was absolutely infuriated by my intention to allow the relationship to continue, and I was shocked by her complete refusal to entertain the notion. I certainly wasn't condoning their supposed sleeping dependency, and I definitely wasn't condoning any sexual relations between the two so soon in Bella's recovery – or voluntary lack thereof. But I felt given time, proper guidance, and positive example, they would grow to learn what a mature relationship was *meant* to be, and how to apply these lessons to their special circumstances.

It was that morning which I had found them in his bed that I realized, Esme and I had been carelessly setting a very poor example for the two. It occurred to me that they lacked any solid moral basis to set the standard in their romantic ideals. Instead of having a healthy example, they were only privy to mine and Esme's. This was neither healthy nor ideal in any way. It was how I had finally convinced her to go public as my lover.

When she agreed, I was admittedly upset, and a little hurt, that I had made countless attempts at dating her officially, and yet she was unwilling to take the step until this whole situation occurred. For nearly three years we had been casual, meeting in secret locations throughout the tri-county area.

At first, I thought her an adventurist, believing she received some kind of thrill from the secrecy of the rendezvous. After so long, I had resolved to assume her main motivator for remaining private must have been for Alice's sake. This was something I understood and respected, because it wasn't my choice to make.

Now, I realized none of these things were at the root of her uncertainty to be with me. It was in these moments, her unexpectedly negative reactions to particular subjects that made me ponder the real source of her reluctance.

It wasn't merely Bella and Edward's relationship that caused them, but at the mention of ours as well. Two years prior, on one of our long and private weekends away, I had made a very covert reference to marriage. I wasn't necessarily ready for any such commitment at the time, but I felt we had grown close enough to at least begin discussing our mutual views on the topic.

She reacted like this then. Tense and distant as she sipped her drink in silence. I had become quite nervous and mortified that I had frightened her away with my blunt acknowledgment of the subject. It wasn't as if I was shopping for rings already. It simply felt natural for two grown adults - with children - to discuss such things after so long together. Clearly, I was mistaken. We left the mountains awkward and quiet, and though she finally agreed to see me again weeks following, I had become wary of her position on such matters.

I never mentioned it again, and as we grew closer over the years, I found myself wishing that I could.

And now as I sit here scrutinizing her distant eyes and tense posture, I've decided it's quite possible I'm insane for pursuing this woman so passionately. The restrictions forced upon our romantic limitations had always been at Esme's sole discretion; and my own opinions and feelings were never taken into consideration. I had far too many obligations to my own family and emotional well-being to continue subjecting myself to such an unstable, hot and cold attitude.

The more I drank my scotch in silence, the more bitter and resentful I grew towards her. Just as with Edward, Esme perplexed me with her odd behavior and defensive gestures, while I simply waited patiently for some explanation to calm my fears. And just like Edward, she never once offered me any, opting instead to keep me at arms length. Close enough to want more, yet too distant to ever believe it was achievable.

The progress we had made by going public wasn't for the benefit of our romantic relationship at all. In fact, if I were being truly honest with myself, I'd admit that I pushed her into the logic with a rather unnecessary amount of effort. Three years I had been waiting for her to open her eyes and realize what she was missing. Three years I had spent spurning the advances of women, honestly believing that Esme and I were somehow destined for one another. Three years I had spent, waiting like a dog at her feet.

She remained tense and refused to meet my gaze as I pursed my lips and grew irritated at her refusal to consider my own opinions on the matters of their – *our* – relationships.

The scotch and cheesy ambient lounge - which she had chosen - suddenly made my stomach churn. It had become quite a pattern with me to allow people to take advantage of my patient nature to the point of abuse. Esme and Edward both had a habit of constantly taking and never offering a fraction of themselves to me. But even though I was bound to Edward by obligation; I was bound to Esme in no way whatsoever.

I poured over these thoughts for nearly an hour in silence as I drank and my frustration grew.

I thanked God for the bravery of inebriation as I eventually stared into my vacant glass, because the lack of clarity made me realize... it felt oddly freeing to imagine myself finally liberated from one of these emotional burdens.

I rose from the booth, disregarding Esme's suspicious gaze as I pulled out a stack of bills and tossed them on the table haphazardly. "I believe I've had my fill, Esme." And by the way I spoke and smiled sadly at her, I had made it rather obvious I wasn't referring to the thirty dollar scotch, and it wasn't a cue to head upstairs to room four-eighty-one as it would have been on any other night.

My smile was good riddance, and I took a shameful amount of pleasure in her alarmed expression as I turned on my heel and exited the lounge, thirty dollars and one painfully cryptic woman lighter.



She didn't even attempt to stop me, and I went to bed that night much like I did every night. Slightly intoxicated, still clothed, and lying completely alone in my unnecessarily large four poster designer bed. It was cherry maple of the finest craftsmanship. Esme picked it out herself, misleading me to expect her to use it with me. My side, the left, had a deep indentation in the form of my body. The right side, reserved for her, remained untouched and cold.

I rolled over onto my side with a sigh, but something in my pocket shifted, pressing painfully into my thigh. I rolled back over, fishing in my pocket for the offending item as my finger touched the cold metallic disc. I pulled it out, holding it closely before my face to inspect it, even though I already knew what it was, and why I was keeping it.

The scant light the window provided reflected in the smooth silver disc and intensified the embossed design with deep shadows. The Cullen family crest rose elegantly from the surface as I rubbed the lone "C" initial between my thumb and forefinger.

It was my family seal.

Mine was set in a pendant that I rarely wore anymore, but always kept. I had a ring made for Emmett when he turned fifteen, which much to my surprise, he often wore. But I had something different made for Edward. It wasn't jewelry. It was just a simple disc.

At the time I had it made, I didn't want to give him a ring, because I noticed he already wore one. Though he never specifically mentioned this unassuming bronze ring, I assumed it was a gift from Bella. And since I had no desire in turning the boy into Liberace, I strayed from the concept of adding another.

He didn't strike me as the necklace type, and I couldn't imagine him ever finding a purpose for cuff links or a flashy belt buckle. The disc seemed simplistic and non-committal. In the future, he could have it set in whichever way he pleased.

I just needed him to have it.

After our argument, the night he thoroughly destroyed my chess board, I had felt rather awful for being so intrusive and pushing him away. I had been encouraging him to relay something, anything, specific to his childhood or what he felt comfortable relaying to Bella rather than me. Honestly, how could I ever guide him if I knew nothing of his past to base his ambitions on? I couldn't exactly say why I needed the information, but I used the excuse of personal research as justification at the time.

It was probably a lie.

It was foolish to persist, but I did nonetheless, because, like Esme, my emotions drove my actions. Secretly, it was a familiar need for him to fall into the same comfortable niche as Emmett. Emmett introduced me as his father, and allowed me to introduce him as my son. It was never questioned, just a fact.

Edward introduced me as Carlisle Cullen, and I introduced him as Edward. It... bothered me to say the least, but I had always been too afraid of inviting trouble to change the dynamic. It was his choice, and he *had* taken my name after all.

And that evening as I stood in the middle of my quiet study and picked up the scattered chess pieces, I allowed the thought to dull the hurt his outburst had caused. *Edward is a Cullen*. Whether or not he gave it the same significance as everyone else was of no consequence to me. He just was.

Where I came from, my name meant something to the community. It was respected and had a certain dignity that everyone regarded very highly. It wasn't pretentious or conceited because we did something meaningful with it.

We were doctors and lawyers and the money we acquired was only as respected as what we used it for. For generations, we donated and built philanthropic ties across the globe to make a difference and change the world with a single, two syllable name. Just as it was when my family immigrated to this country centuries ago, and just as it was when I was a child; a boy on his father's knee, eager to hear the tale of our name once more and pass it along to future generations.

My father perished long before he could see his dreams come to fruition, but the two children I had brought into my home and privileged with that name would always know one solid fact if nothing else.

The Cullens were men of distinction.

It probably sounded much like an overabundance of expectation to impart on two boys, but I never really regarded it in this way. I had seen something in both Emmett and Edward that was prevalent in all Cullen men, and this was the singular reason I had ceded to mentor and guide them under my name. They were both men of distinction as well.

Emmett was extroverted in his strength and energy, and though many never saw his other qualities, he was also compassionate and almost regal in his exuberance to protect the ones he loved. He could bring a smile to anyone who submitted to his charm and outgoing personality. He didn't need to become a doctor or lawyer to change the world, though I was confident he would be successful doing either. It was my belief he would change the world with his kindness, smile, and conservative brawn.

Edward was dissimilar from Emmett.

From the first night I spoke with him in the hospital it was obvious he was a very introverted and analytical minded person. He examined everything closely and used his findings to build his judgments and feelings based upon observation and his own personal beliefs. He was also clearly a very selfless individual, sharp and defensive of what he cared about.

But Edward's most admirable quality must have been his passionately fierce loyalty. It was a subtle trait because he rarely allowed anyone to grow close enough to grant it. Being so fiercely loyal was a duty he didn't take lightly or bestow upon just anyone. With Edward, this privilege was *earned*. He would change the world with his intellect, sacrificing nature, and unwavering devotion to his principles and integrity.

He was a Cullen because I saw these characteristics in him and knew he was meant for something truly great.

But he took ten strides back after that night. He refused to allow me any entrance into his privacy, and though I didn't regret my attempt, I did feel awful for the counter-productive response. I wanted to apologize and show him the significance of his place in my home. He wasn't a project for me. There were times I feared he may have felt this way because I often found it difficult to traverse the line between what I desired for our relationship, and what he would willingly allow.

So, I ordered the seal that night from a special location in London where my family frequently had such things forged. It was an apology and a promise, all wrapped up into a one-and-a-half-inch disc.

The morning I had discovered it arrived, I was anxious and impatient to give it to him. I knew he'd likely resist any gift that felt intimate or familial, so I had resigned myself to leaving it somewhere he couldn't immediately return it to me. My shift was going to start shortly after I found the package in the foyer, and it was still early enough that the sun had yet to rise, so I made a last minute decision that proved to be fairly pivotal in this whole situation.

At the time, it seemed like a good idea to sneak into his room and leave it atop his dresser while he was sleeping. I figured he'd wake up and find it there, and though he'd be curious, he couldn't immediately refuse it. Instead, he'd simply keep it somewhere safe until our bond had grown enough for him to feel comfortable granting it the proper significance it was intended.

His bedroom door was locked, and it seemed so metaphorical for Edward that I nearly snorted as I hunted down the spare key to his bedroom on my key ring and slid it into the lock quietly.

The room was dark and obscure, and I prayed he had kept it clean as I felt my way across the carpet blindly to his dresser, in a bit of a hurry to depart for my shift. It had been so long since I had entered his room that I had to dig into the recesses of my memory to even recall the dresser's location.

I was quiet and fluid in my movements, and just as I pulled the disc from my pocket, I was met with an ear piercing shriek that made me jump and cringe as I covered my ears instinctively. The scream was... feminine and it took a couple moments, but the room was eventually illuminated in the soft light from his lamp.

To say I was stunned by what greeted my eyes would have been an egregious understatement.

Edward was squinting as I stared wide eyed at him in the bed, and at his side was none other than a hysterical and screaming Bella Swan. My jaw went slack as he swiftly made to calm her, and my eyes began finally absorbing my surroundings.

There were clothes just... all over the floor around the bed. Some his, and some hers, and by the time my gaze finally wandered to the condom wrapper upon the table at his bed side, I was torn between two completely contradicting emotions.

Absolute horror and... quite oddly... total *amusement*.

As he held her, I felt my lips twitch involuntarily. It was such a normal infraction for a boy his age, that I couldn't help the instinct to feel somewhat relieved. Edward rarely did *anything* normal, and seeing him in that position – a teenage boy being caught in bed with his girlfriend – actually made me feel like his awkward horror stricken father for once.

And if it were anyone other than *her*, I might have chuckled and fled the room to plot various methods of embarrassing him about it in the future, much like I would have done with Emmett if it were him and Rosalie.

But it was *Bella* for Christ's sake, and she was in no position to be taken advantage of. Her condition was serious and being voluntarily neglected by her own ignorant decisions. It was so unbelievably careless for him to even be considering intercourse with her that horror quickly became my paramount emotion, and all amusement and relief was swiftly lost as I realized the gravity of the situation.

I stared at the disc in my hand as I sighed deeply and felt regret for handling it as I did. I should have kept it to myself and simply had the lattice removed to prevent any further sleep overs. I should have taken them aside on my own and explained why it was wrong. I should have informed and educated them on the risks and led them to the proper course of conducting such

a fragile relationship. I shouldn't have given Esme the opportunity to overreact and cast light on all of *our* imperfections as well.

Maybe it was better that those imperfections were finally revealed, but as I dropped my hand and stared at the ceiling, I had difficulty deciding what to regret anymore.

I knew I may regret leaving Esme in the harsh light of morning, but I also knew with a painful certainty she'd never come to see me as anything more than a lengthy tryst. Just as I knew it was possible Edward may never come to see me as anything more than a legal benefactor.

As I gazed up at my white ceiling dismally, I spent many moments finally abandoning the impossible ideals I had set for them both. Esme would never be my wife, and Edward would never be my son. I had to accept responsibility for even allowing the notion to grow to such fantastic proportions in my mind.

I reluctantly let the vision slip away behind my eyes, and resigned myself to reality for once as I returned the disc to my pocket and rolled on my side once again. It still pushed into my thigh and I used the sensation to distract myself from the painful ache of loss in my chest as I surrendered to the chanting truth that penetrated my dreams.

Esme would never be my wife, and Edward would never be my son.

The darkness of night and solitude of my bare room consoled my defeat and reminded me that it wasn't possible to lose a family I never actually had.



The next three weeks were painfully slow and tedious with patients and boring routines. In an effort to keep myself constantly occupied, I nearly picked up an extra shift at the hospital before I thought better of it.

Edward had been deteriorating further, and I was reconciled to keeping a close eye on his physical health where I could manage. He had lost too much weight over the last month for my comfort. I knew he hadn't been sleeping much, and though the thought of sleep deprivation was frightening, there was little I could do.

I had considered my alternatives, but he was already a legal adult and therefore left solely responsible for his own medical decisions. It wasn't possible to defy his will if he didn't seek out treatment on his own... unless he proved himself legally incompetent to form such decisions. This would never happen, because Edward was nothing if not completely competent.

I wanted to take the car from him because I seriously doubted his ability to operate it under proper alert awareness. But I had used the car as punishment and leverage in the past, and I refused to go the route of Esme, taking away everything he desired and insisting it was for his

own good. I couldn't kick him while he was down, and I kept reminding myself he rarely drove, and had done so under similar conditions in the past. It didn't always put my worries at ease.

I felt desperately compelled to tell him, it wasn't *me* who so callously rejected his relationship with Bella, but it wouldn't have done any good, and I couldn't bear to think of the chasm it would create between her and Esme when he inevitably explained the situation in greater detail. So I kept my mouth shut, and acted the other half of the cruel parental force that was keeping them apart.

This made the weeks more difficult and anxiety ridden as I kept a close eye where I could. He only emerged from his room in the mornings for school, and at nights to eat or play video games with Emmett. They probably thought I couldn't hear them from my room, but I could as I lay in the dark, forcing my thoughts away from the woman next door.

She never called or attempted to see me, and with every passing day I became simultaneously relieved and disappointed with her lack of effort. So I kept myself occupied with hospital affairs and my own worries over Edward, resigned to going through these motions until something... I wasn't sure what I was waiting for, but I knew I was waiting for something to happen. Maybe I was waiting for the call from Esme, maybe I was waiting for Edward to finally forgive me. I was simply waiting, and I had no idea what I was waiting for. It reminded me of my favorite particular cookie of Bella's, *Strawberry Stand Stills*.

I was definitely at a stand still.

Eventually, I stopped receiving cookies all together, and I couldn't determine if it was Bella's ire with me, or Esme's that halted their appearance in my foyer every morning. It didn't matter; my troubles greatly exceeded the trivial woe of my lack of baked goods, and I used these truths to distract myself from the fact that everyone likely loathed me.

The nights crawled by slowly in my study as I finished paperwork and researched what I could on sleep deprivation and nightmares so I could better care for Edward. If I looked hard enough, I supposed I could see the signs were always present. Since the day I met him in the hospital and he refused the sedatives, he had always been eluding sleep.

I couldn't decide how I had managed to completely overlook something so critical since day one. Edward did a successful job of hiding it, that much was certain, but it didn't excuse my error. Maybe my smug nature as an established physician granted me some kind of false faith in my skills of observation. It had never crossed my mind that I might be dealing with something greater than the mere trauma of his burn scars.

Unlike with Emmett, I had little history of Edward's past. I knew his scars well because I had treated him repeatedly for various illnesses over the years, and though I knew this fire occurred, I had no specifics other than a brief mention that his father had perished. I was granted his medical history, but it hardly alluded to anything particular to the event, other than

his diagnosis and treatment. And the wards of the state, similar to Emmett's adoption, only allowed me limited information on his mother since he was surrendered to their custody via an anonymous source.

I accepted the responsibility and scant information in hopes that Edward might fill in the blanks for me once we grew close, since he had been an older child at the time he was surrendered. Of course, this never happened and I had never considered underlying and unrelated issues that were likely festering since... God knows when.

The day I brought Emmett home, when he was an overactive eight year old boy, I had gained some experience in dealing with underlying conditions. Emmett was a poster child for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and required much attention for our interim years together. And though he eventually lacked the need for his medication since he found an athletic outlet for his abundance of energy, I still filled the Aderall prescriptions and remained vigilant of his excellent progress. This was what I did. I observed and tracked progress and corrected where I could manage.

But it wasn't so easy with Edward.

The research on sleep disorders didn't ease my fears, and the further I delved into the subject, the more panicked I grew over what Edward was subjecting his body to. Sleep deprivation was frightening and *could* be fatal. The human body could be deprived of sleep for no more than approximately ten days. I had no way of determining how much he slept, or how much sleep debt he had acquired since that morning, but the facts alarmed me.

In all my years in practice, I hadn't experienced voluntarily induced sleep deprivation. I had mild cases of such things under my belt; they were usually stressed induced and caused my patients to become restless. I'd prescribe them a sedative and recommend a vacation. But *this* severity was unlike anything I had ever seen. So I had to re-educate myself on the effects.

There were health factors that long term sleep deprivation affected greatly. It reduces constructive thinking skills and emotional intelligence, and though this explained a rather large portion of Edward's major personality flaws, it didn't make me feel any better.

As the days passed and I immersed myself further in the topic, it just got worse. Heart failure, stroke, mood disorders, mental impairment, insulin deficiency... the list went on and on, and these didn't even include the more widely known and equally alarming short term effects.

Much to my surprise, there were even various references to sleep deprivation being used as a tool to treat depression. Apparently, during the interim hours of sleep debt, the subjects felt a sense of euphoria. This explained how Bella managed to remain so unbelievably collected in the face of her emotional and mental trauma, which really made me ponder the parallels between the two.

And then, late one night, as this notion flittered through my mind for the umpteenth time, I connected Edward and Bella... and my palm smacked my forehead in equal parts realization and idiocy. I felt ridiculously stupid as I slouched over my desk despairingly and shoved the newest book on sleep disorders aside.

I had spent so much time focusing on Edward's sleep deprivation and nightmares that I completely failed to consider them as being a mere side effect. Certainly, the sleep deprivation was a side effect of the nightmares, but the nightmares...

They were caused by something else. Not just memories. And then I stood up and sprinted to the shelf to choose another source that I had only recently acquired when Bella arrived. With it in tow, I returned to my desk and sought a particular page. I had skimmed over the passage at the time, because it wasn't necessary for Bella. We already knew her condition in detail.

If I were being truthful, I was completely out of my element. I was a general physician, and even though I had briefly breached many subjects during my time in practice and education, psychology was never my strong suit. So I used the book recommended by a far more capable colleague to guide my assumptions.

Using the indicators, I lined up all of the parallels. And then I did it again. And again. And once more for the sake of certainty and possibly hoping my assessments were faulty, but they weren't, and everything still fit. And it was just as I had feared.

I was ninety percent confident that Edward himself suffered from a severe and chronic case of post traumatic stress disorder. Likely since the moment this fire had occurred, he had hidden the severity of it under layers of defense and, probably, his own denial. It was so obvious that I felt utterly inept for not seeing it sooner. It opened so many doors to other various related mental conditions that my head spun just contemplating them all. It was *horrifying*.

But in many ways, it made it easier. Because even though I remained helpless, I was fairly certain of what I was dealing with. I had researched the subject of PTSD so thoroughly for Esme and Bella that I was completely aware of every treatment and cognitive therapy that existed in the state. The prognosis, though not excellent for such a long term chronic case, was definitely hopeful.

It unnerved me that I had seemingly overlooked something so critical and alarmingly unhealthy as it stared me right in the face for five years. But I couldn't make up for it, and I couldn't convince Edward that staying awake was fruitless to his condition. I had to simply be prepared.

So I began readying myself for the repercussions of this new realization. I knew something would eventually occur. With a sever condition brewing with such ferocity in his mind, it was only a matter of time before it was brought to the forefront. I had no way of knowing how or when an episode would be triggered for him as it would for Bella, but I found it hard to believe none existed. It could be added stress; something as complex as a long term build of emotions,

or it could be something completely insignificant. It was entirely unpredictable and, if my suspicions were correct, downright volatile.

So unfortunately, I had to wait. I was so exhausted with waiting that the notion made me frustrated and desperate, but I had to remain patient. Because soon, *very* soon possibly, Edward wouldn't be capable of denying the truth, and when that day came, I would be ready to offer him every available alternative.

Every alternative.

The thought made me slump into my desk chair sourly. But I had been prepared for Emmett when he was the appropriate age, and our relationship remained stronger than ever. I felt I could do the same for Edward if it meant progress.

As I collected the necessary information for this conversation we would likely have in the very near future, I was met with varied feelings of anxiety and unease. It wasn't something I necessarily wanted to offer him, but if I hid the option, it would only fuel his resentment for me and delay his recovery... *if* he ever sought it out. So I gathered the paperwork and information and locked it securely in my desk drawer.

Just like Emmett, he would come to me about this sooner or later. And I would be prepared to swallow the hurt when he did, because I had no other choice.

But for now I would wait, and prepare myself in anticipation of Edward's inevitable and complete undoing.

Thirty four days after Edward's birthday, I was busy in the hospital lounge slaving over the last of my day's charts and a hot cup of coffee when I heard my name announced on the loud speaker.

Dr. Cullen to reception. Dr. Cullen to reception.

The soft voice was professionally sweet and I recognized the slight twinge of annoyance in Linda's voice as she called for me. With a sigh, I rose from my seat and tucked my charts away under my arm, balancing the coffee in my hands as I exited the lounge and approached the reception desk.

Linda had her fingers pecking rapidly at a keyboard while I deposited the charts indifferently. She didn't offer me a glance, and I suppressed an eye roll at her juvenile immaturity before I noticed someone standing before her.

Esme.

She met my eyes with a small smile that made me swallow thickly as I hesitantly forced my own. She looked stunning and perfect and indecently smug at annoying the receptionist who had made more advances toward me than I'd really care to admit.

Esme walked around the desk to my side, leaning her elbow on the surface and turning to face me. "Are you free for dinner?" She whispered, and I couldn't disregard the deep sadness that penetrated her eyes as she nervously fidgeted with the visitor passes aligned on the desk top.

I pursed my lips and narrowed my eyes at my shoes as I tilted my head and mulled through the possibilities of what she sought from any such engagement. I wouldn't allow myself to be strung along anymore, and I didn't want to invite the temptation the occasion would bring. But I somehow felt as though I owed her an explanation for my actions; one that I could convey while sober and emotionally untainted by disappointment in Edward's disregard for me. So I agreed with a nod and led her out of the hospital silently.

We took separate cars to the small diner in town, remaining silent as we entered and chose an appropriately private location in a back booth. I was beginning to detest the booth concept all together, but the mediocre coffee was hot and caffeinated and I was dragging my feet from the long shift and late nights spent researching.

"Tired?" She asked as she sipped her drink and frowned.

I nodded, relaxing into my booth and wondering when she would just simply... 'cut the shit', as Edward would say. "Long week." I fixed my eyes on the tiles of the floor and waited. Waiting was what I did best after all.

When the waitress asked for our orders, we both declined. And then I felt ridiculous for even entering a diner when neither of us intended to actually eat. We came here to engage in a private conversation and nothing else, and this annoyed me. That's what homes were meant for. Of course, Esme never came to my home, unless it was in relation to Bella.

"How are Alice and Bella?" I asked politely as I sipped my coffee, though I already knew the answer I sought. Alice was a perfectly functioning teenage girl, and I had learned enough about PTSD and sleep deprivation over the last month to know exactly how Bella was coping.

She smiled and clasped her hands on the table. "Alice is good. Spending a lot of time with Bella..." She trailed off and her eyes grew downcast. I noticed the tight frown that followed. "Bella is much the same I suppose. No change." She whispered to her hands while rubbing her palms together.

I wanted to say something incredibly pompous, like... I told you so. I told you that you were suffocating her and just making her resent you. I told you this would all blow up in our faces. I told you it wasn't attacking the problem at its source.

But I pressed my lips together and kept my opinions to myself. She wouldn't want my input anyhow. If she ever had, we wouldn't have been here, now, in this diner, feeling awkward and tip toeing around the real matters at hand.

"I'm sorry to hear that." I offered, because I was and it seemed like the most efficient method of making it known without seeming as condescending and righteous as I felt.

She nodded and pursed her lips at the table, and then we were once again silent. It seemed rather pointless, bringing me here to speak about our children as if we didn't have our own problems. I couldn't decide her intentions, and I watched as she fingered through the large bowl of condiment packets idly.

"I miss you." She whispered, nearly inaudibly while her fingers began fidgeting with packets of artificial sweetener.

And there it is.

I remained silent as I sipped my coffee, because even though I missed her terribly, it would do no good to state my feelings now and show my obvious weakness. It was possible I was enjoying the upper hand far too much for any respectable gentleman. Not that I necessarily cared.

She sighed, and though I remained stoic on the exterior, my stomach was twisting because this conversation was either our absolution or the end of everything we had. For once, I was settling for no less, and like always, it was left up to her.

"Is this about Edward?" She asked, her voice suddenly hard and pleading as my cup warmed my hands.

I met her gaze and I was quite certain my eyes had grown wider than two saucers. "Excuse me?" I asked incredulously. Of course, I had never explained the exact reason for leaving, and the more I thought about it, the last words spoken were related to Edward and Bella, but... could she really not accept that our problems were proprietary?

I watched as Esme swept her wavy hair over her shoulder and laid her hands in her lap, leaning towards me with stiff shoulders in anticipation of my explanation. "This has nothing to do with Edward. This is about us." I raised my eyebrows deliberately and felt more than slightly frustrated at her confused expression.

I resolved to prove my point in the most effective method possible. "How do you feel about marriage, Esme?" I asked as I brought my hot cup to my lips. And just as expected she darted her eyes away from my gaze and pulled back. Pulled away. "That." I said simply while my cup met the table with more force than I had intended. "That is what this is about."

And then I looked away. I wanted to feel smug for being so precise about her reactions, but it never arrived. I felt ashamed and ridiculous, like some school boy attempting to ask his girlfriend why she wouldn't accompany him to prom. *So much for liberation.*

She didn't reply for many moments, and my coffee grew warm rather than hot as I contemplated the repercussions of another hastily disgruntled exit from a booth seat. Just as I began justifying doing so, she spoke.

"I never told you about Alice's father, did I?" She mused sadly, still fidgeting with sweetener packets and avoiding my gaze. I nearly answered her question, which was just preposterous, because it was common knowledge between us that he was never mentioned. I hardly felt compelled to learn about any of the men from her past. I was already too lovesick for my own liking to sacrifice another shred of dignity over something as petty as jealousy.

She sighed deeply, appearing determined as she met my gaze and raised her chin. "His name was Charles." She spoke his name as if it was an expletive, and as expected my jealousy flared over this man I could now put a name to. *Thanks.* Another shred of dignity lost to my pining nature.

She continued with a set jaw and distant eyes. "We were married when I was nineteen and stupid..." She began determined, and then appeared suddenly weary, and I was quite shocked because I had never known she was married.

And this... didn't help our situation any. If anything it made my stomach churn with more fervor.

She proceeded once she regained her resolve. "He was... a tyrant of sorts. When I had Alice, everything got worse." She shook her head and darted her eyes to the sweetener before her voice grew low and grave. "He was an awful man. He ruled me like I was his servant. I was never allowed money or friends he didn't approve of, and if I defied him, then I'd..." She paused and chanced a glance up at me through her long eyelashes, but I had become too frozen and stunned to offer an appropriate reaction.

"I'd be... punished." She finished in a whisper while avoiding my gaze. She still felt so distant, and though I was making every attempt to appear calm, I was inwardly enraged with this Charles. I wanted to find him and use my diligent scalpel skills with abundance. I remained silent, lacking the stomach for coffee and waiting for her to continue. Always waiting.

Her face suddenly transformed into a wistful expression. "I took Alice and left the day she turned one. Charles refused to give me a divorce, but I eventually... persuaded him." One corner of her lips tugged up into a ghost of a smile. "I brought her here and made a new life. We built it together, and I became independent because it was safe." She whispered, finally meeting my gaze and dropping the packets.

"It was never my intention to project my own fears on you, Carlisle." She pleaded with her eyes and reached for my hand that had frozen around the cup. I let her take it. I probably shouldn't have. "I love my independence, and though I hold it dear, I did want to be with you. I still do." She spoke the final words in a small and timid voice that vaguely reminded me of Bella on my dining room table.

I was trying to process every bit of information and apply it to her reactions over time, because as a clinical individual, it was the only way I could possibly comprehend... and it still wasn't helping. I had the urge to tell her I had a girlfriend in high school that had an obsessive penchant for kleptomania. *Can I check your purse, Esme?*

But the more I put myself in Esme's position, the more awful I felt for her. I felt her fingers around mine, cold and slender, and her tender flesh reminded me that Esme had probably been through nearly as much agony as Edward and Bella. She had been domestically abused, or so it appeared, though she – thankfully – offered me no specifics. She had lost her sister to a violent homicide and given refuge to her traumatized niece and...

I was surrounded by so much despair and fear that it felt suffocating and made bile rise into my throat. It was never my desire or intention to bind myself to such damage. I was wearied with endless attempts of penetrating barriers that always remained impervious. Between the three of them and Emmett alone, I just couldn't bear anymore wounds. I feared I'd come undone before Edward.

"I'm not that man." I replied in a strangled voice, and I could feel the blood drained from my face as I gazed into her eyes.

She nodded in a swift bobbing motion. "I know, I'm sorry." She replied hastily, appearing quite desperate as she grasped my hand tightly. "I had no idea that you wanted more, and maybe I was simply ignoring the signs for my own benefit, but I'm just...sorry." She pleaded, leaning closer and pulling my hand farther toward her body.

I sat silent and expressionless because I was never seeking an apology, and she stared at my blank gaze remorsefully for many moments. The waitress halted at our table with a bright smile I could see from my periphery as she asked us if we were okay.

We remained silent as I stared into her eyes, and the question suddenly seemed ridiculously meaningful as it lingered in the air between us. The waitress waited, standing in an awkward pose and scrutinizing our locked gaze before she quietly departed.

"I suppose I've never *really* considered marriage." Esme pursed her lips thoughtfully, and I quirked an eyebrow, rather skeptical that she was suddenly showing an interest simply to pacify me. She seemed to be contemplating for many moments, biting the inside of her cheek as she commonly did when in deep thought. And then her foot began to tap beneath the table, and I recognized the gesture as one she often did when forming substantial decisions.

Finally, her foot stopped, and her pursed lips slowly curled up into a small smile. “I wouldn’t be entirely opposed to the concept.” She smiled with a gentle caress of her thumb on my hand.

My eyes narrowed and I might have called her out for lying. I might have told her I didn’t believe it and I refused to remain trapped in a dead-end relationship for three more years while she strung me along shamelessly. I might have told my trust required more than just her audible musings.

But her eyes and smile were curiously bright as she spoke and lightly grasped my hand in her acquiescence. She wasn’t distant, and she didn’t pull away, and suddenly I felt a swelling of hope that I could get through one barrier in this mess of troubled individuals. If I could make progress with Esme, then surely I had hope for Edward as well.

I wanted – *needed* – the hope her committal granted me. I had been devoid of it for so long that I was irrationally willing to give her another chance, and find faith that she would be proof that my love and persistence accomplished something.

I couldn’t deny my skepticism still, but if I refused, then I was no better than her; harboring old pain and doubt and allowing it to effect my present and future. A Cullen was *never* a hypocrite.

But even if she were being sincere and willing, there were still two people in this world who I’d never hesitate to put before my desire for her. Because they were my family first. And though she and Emmett could get along swimmingly...

“Edward?” I asked stiffly while my hand lay limply in hers. If she meant to deepen her commitment to me, Edward would be involved. And so would Bella.

She exhaled deeply, darting her eyes away from mine with a grimace, and I instinctively knew that whatever barrier we had just breached was unrelated to her issues with him.

“Tell me.” I ordered while retrieving my hand, because this was the moment for genuine honesty. I had to know her justification for being so resolute on her position against Edward and Bella’s relationship.

Esme’s eyes shifted to my withdrawn hand as she frowned and leaned back into her booth seat. “Renee.” She whispered in an oddly defeated tone and her fingers began fidgeting once again with her shirt hem in her lap.

“Bella reminds me so much of Renee some days. They were completely differently of course, but so alike in their ambitions and independence. It was one of the things I always admired about her.” She smiled down at her lap and it was sad and wistful yet again. She could never speak of her sister without becoming emotional, and I braced myself for her tears.

She met my gaze again, and I was momentarily stunned that I saw no tears, only a silently brewing bitterness. “But Renee had a flaw. She always fell head over heels for the wrong men. Usually, they were just... dependent or boring, but sometimes...” She paused and glanced at me with an anxious expression as her fingers continued their ministrations on her shirt hem. “Sometimes they were troubled, and her compassion and curiosity blinded her, and that flaw killed her.” Her voice lowered to a nervous whisper as she bowed her head. “If Bella ever allowed – ”

“What exactly are you insinuating?” I cut her off in an angry sneer, downright infuriated at the direction of her explanation, and daring her to admit her own assumption aloud in my presence. I’d leave the table, and this diner, and this whole damned town behind if she ever did.

She avoided my gaze as I seethed and clenched my fists under the table, and I realized she wouldn’t say it. *Coward.*

“You mean to compare my son to a deranged sociopathic murderer?” I spat at her, as more of a statement than an inquiry, because clearly she was. Much in the same way she meant to compare me to an abusive misogynist. I fought to ignore the fact that it was the first time I had ever verbally referred to Edward as my son.

She blanched at my tone, and her eyes widened as she finally gathered the courage to look me in the face. “No. I just don’t know him Carlisle, and...” She hastily defended herself as my teeth ground together in restraint from launching a particularly vulgar string of Edward-approved profanities. “Can you honestly tell me you know him. Really *know* him.” She asked in a low and suggestive voice.

“Yes.” I answered without hesitation. “He’d never... *never* ...” I paused and shook my head because it was simply too appalling to even think. “I can’t even finish that statement because it is utterly insulting to even speak the words.” I looked away, bitter and angry at Esme yet again.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to imply...” She whispered after a few moments of tense silence.

I took another drink of my coffee to occupy my hand. “But you did. You’re doing it again with him, and it’s hardly fair. He’s done nothing to deserve such assumptions – ” I paused when I noticed her arched eyebrow and pointed glance.

I rolled my eyes in exasperation at her skeptical expression. “Please, Esme. He’s been arrested twice for minor offenses.” I alluded to his commonly known criminal history and, shamefully, downplayed the drug offenses. “And if this is about the sex... how many teenage boys and girls their age do the same thing? How often do you suppose Alice and Jasper-“

“Carlisle!” She interrupted with a panicked expression before I could imply that her own daughter was sexually active. I did prescribe her birth control after all.

She visibly relaxed when I retired my defense and her face softened. “I know. It’s a double standard, and it isn’t fair to Bella. I’m sorry.” She apologized once more, and it was frustrating. I didn’t want an apology, I wanted to see *action*.

She pleaded with her eyes once more as she leaned closer again. “I just couldn’t... if anything happened to her because I was being negligent... it would kill me.” Her face grew grave and darkened, and I really did understand her fierce need to protect Bella. But she was going above and beyond her call of duty. She continued with heavy sigh. “There isn’t a handbook here, Carlisle. I’m doing the best I can, and still, it isn’t enough.” She appeared desperate and... exhausted as she shifted her gaze to her lap, and I figured she truly felt lost.

And I knew the sensation of failure and loss because I had felt it with Edward for so long. It wasn’t my place, and I was certainly no expert in parenting or blended families, but my judgment wasn’t being clouded by her personal extenuating circumstances.

I somehow felt as though my guidance could be appreciated. “Maybe you’re being negligent right now by treating her like an incapable infant.” I fought to keep my voice calm and failed as her eyes rose to mine and widened. I hated being harsh with Esme, but I’ll be damned if she didn’t need it.

Her head tilted to the side and her brows furrowed as I continued.

“Do you honestly think Bella would go through such an ordeal and put herself in the position to be harmed so carelessly?” I asked, raising my eyebrows expectantly.

Esme slowly shook her head and pursed her lips again, appearing quite interested in my opinion as her attention clearly piqued. *I nearly snorted*. If she had been this interested months ago, we could have avoided so much undue turmoil.

I proceeded while leaning closer to her face over the table, obliged to be beneficial for once. “Wouldn’t you agree that, even though she requires special attention, her judgment hasn’t been damaged in any way?” I asked knowingly. If anything Bella was a better judge of character than most as a result of her tribulations. As expected, Esme shook her head, still thoughtful in consideration of these truths.

And then I had to add my final thought at her defeat, even though I knew it would upset her greatly.

I inhaled deeply and prepared myself for a river of tears as I spoke my final question in a low and remorseful voice. “Would Renee react to this situation in this manner?”



The car was warm, dark, and comfortable as I pulled out of the diner, and I felt... lighter. It was more freeing than the night I had left Esme, because this time, I had done something constructive. She broke down as I had anticipated, and though I felt awful for upsetting her, I didn't regret the progress she made. I could see it in her eyes as she surrendered to the realization that she had been wrong. Not exactly wrong, per say, but she allowed her overwhelming emotions to drive her actions, and now it was up to her to mend the relationships she had destroyed. Ours *and* theirs.

And she would, because even though her hurdle with Bella was higher than her own, she was incapable of bearing the possibility of disappointing her sister. So I would do my best to assist her in finding the right balance with both relationships.

As I drove home in undeniable relief, I began making strategies of lists and requirements for these new circumstances. Esme would need to grow closer to Edward and observe what I had on his birthday between the two. They would need to act responsibly and placate her fears by remaining less dependent. He would need to gain her trust, and I could only pray he wouldn't ruin the opportunity to return to her good graces. I smiled as I realized he would probably do just about anything to be with Bella.

I would still proceed in my secondary instinct to pull them aside and educate them on the proper way to conduct their relationship given their special circumstances. And perhaps once this had all settled down, Esme and I could convince Bella and Edward to seek treatment for – at the very least – their sleeping problems.

It was nearly nine as I pulled into the drive, and the house looked oddly darker. I had spent most of my day at the hospital, and my homecoming was delayed by my meeting with Esme, which ended up being nearly three hours long.

As I parked and exited the car, the soft glow of the living room light illuminated the yard and made the path to the dark porch slightly visible. I frowned as I approached the door and wiped my feet. It was inconsiderate not to leave the porch light on when they both knew I would be arriving after dusk.

The house was silent as I entered and closed the door behind me. Still, somewhat... dark. I furrowed my brows curiously and deposited my bag in the foyer before making my way up the first flight of stairs, flipping light switches as I ascended.

I was honestly rather excited to speak to Edward about the evening's events. I wanted to inform him on proper behavior in front of Esme and see the smile on his face when I told him we were invited for dinner the following day with both her and Bella. We all needed the deviation from the now-common glum and tense atmosphere of the two households.

As I approached the second flight of stairs, something crunched under my feet. I stepped back and inspected the broken picture frame in confusion. Deciding it had fallen off of the wall, I

began picking up the broken shards of glass and tossed it in the second floor bathroom's trash can before continuing up the stairs to Edward's room.

When I reached the silent hallway that led to his door, I flicked on the light and frowned once again. He hadn't left his room since the sun set. It wasn't particularly uncommon, so I didn't think much of it as I approached his door and knocked softly.

The door was just ajar enough that my knock pushed it open, and I felt nervous about entering without express verbal permission. I eventually decided, as I peeked into the black sliver the open door created, that my news would be enough to distract him from my intrusion.

Tentatively, I pushed the door open and used my hand to seek out the light switch to turn it on. When my fingers found the switch and flipped it, my jaw slowly dropped in horror as I gazed bewildered into the large room before me.

It was utter *destruction*.

There were clothes and papers scattering the floor so haphazardly that the gold carpet was barely visible. Holes and scuffs littered the walls as I stepped inside and my foot suddenly met the overturned black leather couch. My eyes widened at the sight as I stepped around it. As my gaze absorbed more, I realized the bookshelf had been overturned as well and was now lying completely flat on the floor face down; books strewn across the perimeter randomly.

And the bed...

The bed was ravaged and the sheets bore distinguishable and ragged rips as they frayed and spilled onto the cluttered floor and revealed the pale blue mattress beneath. My first instinct upon seeing the mangled wreckage was immediate alarm and concern. I was dumbfounded, worried, angry, and Edward was nowhere in sight.

I checked the bathroom and it was empty, though admittedly in far better shape than the bedroom. I had to nearly climb over the book shelf to reach the balcony doors, but when I did, I was met with nothing.

As I went back to the door and prepared to sweep the house for his presence, I couldn't decide if I should start deciding punishments, or just absolutely panic for his safety. But every room I entered was vacant and dark, and I was finally settling on panicking rather than anger.

The kitchen was black, empty. As was the dining room and family room. The television in the living room was off, but the lights were on, and I was beginning to search for a phone to call authorities because I had no idea what had happened in my home while I was away and the boys were gone.

I went upstairs once again to reach the phone in my study and tried to calm myself as I approached the door and opened it. The study was dark as well, but I had expected as much. As I entered the room, I was suddenly startled by a form in the leather chair across from my desk.

I found the light switch on the wall and fumbled until the room was illuminated in light. The chair was facing the opposite side of the room, but once I saw the familiar mop of bronze hair poking out from above the leather chair back, I was overcome with relief.

And... now that I knew he was alive and breathing, I felt comfortable with the irritation and anger that I had pushed down before.

I frowned in confusion of what he could possibly be doing sitting in my study in the dark. "Do you mind explaining what the hell happened upstairs? And where on earth is Emmett?" I asked as I crossed the room in the most complacent voice I could possibly manage. He didn't answer and I didn't meet his gaze as I rounded the desk and approached my chair behind it.

I sat down with a relieved sigh, still unnerved from finding the house in such an odd condition when my eyes finally met his face.

"Good God, Edward..." I breathed as I rose from the seat once again and the panic returned to my chest. "What happened to you?" I asked, terror stricken as I raked my eyes over his injured face.

His cheek was red and appeared welted and bruised, his bottom lip was lacerated, and though it appeared mostly scabbed by now, it didn't ease me at all. As I looked closer, I noticed that his neck had a deep and mangled bite-shaped mark that made me swallow nervously as my gaze zeroed in on the swelling and bloody wound where it disappeared beneath his collar.

My eyes traveled up his neck to his disheveled hair that appeared knotted and unusually bedraggled, and why wasn't he speaking?

I met his eyes and they were red, irritated, and impossibly darker, as if he had been... crying. But most alarming of all was the expression he wore as he sat in the chair and stared at me in complete silence.

Serene and tranquil.

His face was relaxed and placid and his brow and forehead unusually smooth as his head rested languidly against the leather of the chair. I had been keeping such a watchful eye on him for the past month that I had become familiar with his every expression. *This* was never one of them.

He looked eerily calm among hundreds of distressing signs and it was simply disturbing. Slowly, I lowered myself into the chair once again, and his green eyes followed mine in a bizarrely fluid incline as the rest of his body remained completely motionless.

“Did you get into a fight?” I hedged in a strangled whisper while absorbing more details of his unkempt appearance. But I *knew* he hadn’t. I had been witness to post-altercation Edward in the past, and serene and tranquil he was *not*. This was different, and he just stared back at me with that same peculiarly sedated expression.

I sat for many moments in silence as I inspected him, committing his injuries to memory for treatment, until I grew both irritated and anxious with his complete lack of communication and movement.

“Would you *please* say something?” I ordered and the desperation must have seeped into my tone because he finally, almost imperceptibly shifted. I saw his hand twitch on the padded armrest from my periphery and I watched in anticipation as his lips began to part and he spoke in a low and gravelly voice.

“I need your help.”

Chapter 43. Chewy Granola Grievances

Edward WIDE AWAKE

I narrowed my eyes at the question on the paper as my brows furrowed in concentration and my elbows sank into the mattress.

In what year did Japan launch the Second French Indochina Campaign and oust the Vichy French and formally installed Emperor Bảo Đại in the short-lived Empire of Vietnam?

My head tilted as I read the question for the seventh time, and I was fairly positive that was a run-on sentence, right? Fucking bullshit. I huffed and scratched my brow while relaxing further into my bed on my stomach.

It was late. Or, really fucking early. Not that it mattered. I had this goddamn practice test mocking me with grammatical errors, and I quickly scribbled down my best guess before moving on to the next bastardization of the English language.

A tongue clucked over my shoulder from beside the bed, and I ground my teeth together. "That's not right." She mused softly while staring at my answer on the once-crisp paper. It had become a victim of my aggression.

I quirked an eyebrow and turned my head up to get a better view of her face. "Care to enlighten me, Miss 'I know fucking everything'?" I teased. Well, I mostly teased. Secretly, she had been oddly annoying me for the past two hours.

She pursed her full lips thoughtfully at the question for a few moments before emitting a defeated sigh. "I can't remember the date. I just... don't think that's right," she concluded with a delicate shrug and stepped away from my bed to walk to the sofa.

I sighed sharply and was preparing to launch a snide remark on how very fucking unhelpful she was being when my eyes unwillingly traveled to her bare legs. Her gauzy red tiered skirt swayed

around her knees, and I was mesmerized by her fluid movements as she stepped over my messy clutter on the floor.

I shook my head and tried to focus on the next question while speaking. "How'd you say you got in here again?" I mumbled distractedly while hunting down another passage in the textbook. I tried to ignore the urge to spring up and clear all the dirty clothes off of the floor. I mean, that can't be an attractive quality, right?

Bella's soft giggle resounded in my ears. "I didn't." She replied simply, and her evasion to my questions made it impossible to bat down all the frustration, but I let it go. How could I get pissed off at my girl for coming to keep me company? I couldn't.

I kept answering the assignment questions, and I was irritated with the certainty that I was going to fail this test. I never failed a test. And this shit was really fucking with my resolve to stay awake.

Bella sighed loudly from the sofa, gaining my attention as I shifted my focus to her. "I'm bored." She muttered while twirling a shiny curl of her brown hair around her finger. She was wearing that sexy red outfit from Valentine's Day, and I was positive she was just doing it to distract me.

And I'd be fucked sideways if I said it wasn't working.

I tried to peel my eyes away from her cleavage and ignore the way the necklace I had given her drew my attention to her tits. I'm pretty sure that wasn't why I bought it. I was disgusted with myself for ogling them, and still frustrated with both her boredom and my own. We could be doing better things.

"Well, shit, Bella," I began as the annoyance once again crept into my tone. "We could always take a fucking nap or something." I snapped and immediately felt like shit when her face fell and she flinched.

She dropped her lock of hair. It skimmed her cleavage as it fell to her stomach. "We already talked about this, Edward," she whispered remorsefully as her eyes shifted to her lap.

I gazed at her glum expression for a moment, and my guilt swelled for snapping at her so harshly for something she couldn't even control. "I'm sorry," I apologized softly at her frown and took a deep breath to calm my frustration. I mean, it was fairly fucked up—and admittedly rare—for me to ever be annoyed with my girl.

I felt like such a prick.

It was enough that she came, and I reminded myself of this as I forced a crooked smile once she glanced up at me from beneath her eyelashes. She tentatively smiled back, one corner of her red lips curling up sweetly, because that crooked smile was hers and no one else's. I didn't own her. She fucking owned me. I was pretty sure she knew it, too. It was the only reason I was still here in this house.

I figured Emmett might have been waiting up for me in the living room, and any other night, I would have already been down there. It had become a sort of ritual for us to meet up near midnight and spend a few hours on whatever fucked up video game Emmett had chosen. It killed the boredom, and though we rarely talked about anything unrelated to what we were doing at the exact moment, I let him amuse me with his over the top reactions to getting his ass kicked.

But for the first night in over a month, I wouldn't be leaving my room to meet him. There was no way I could leave my girl. She looked so fucking beautiful and sexy as she smiled and relaxed into the black leather... I needed to touch her. Everywhere.

But from the first second I noticed her standing in the middle of my room, all fucking red and perfect against the trashy backdrop of my life... she wouldn't let me. She said 'cookie' before I could even feel her skin or hair, and though I was confused and hurt, she reassured me she was just having an 'off' night. I didn't know what the fuck that meant. Every night for us was an 'off' night unless we were together. And now that we finally were, I figured it could be like old times.

Shamefully, the first notion that crossed my mind when my eyes landed on her was... sleep. Bella was sleep—especially when she was standing in my room at eleven at night. For the first time ever, I felt like I wanted to use her. Not only was she sleep, but she was food and lust and distraction and comfort and affection. I was such an asshole for not immediately seeing her for who she was, and not what she could offer me.

This guilt, coupled with the incorruptible sanctity of the safe word, helped fuel my resolve to keep my distance at her request because even if I couldn't touch her... or sleep, I was lucky just to have her here.

I watched as she suddenly brought her hands up to her hair with a grimace and removed the two barrettes that held her bangs back. My lips twitched in amusement as she glanced at them

in her hand petulantly. They always hurt her head, and I much preferred her hair free anyways.

With a contended sigh, she used her fingers to comb her hair back off of her forehead, sweeping it back and destroying the perfect parted line of her hair as it fell in messy waves of curls around her face. It was a bizarrely sexy gesture, and I was so fascinated that I nearly failed to notice her angrily tossing the offending hair accessories onto my floor with an irritable glare in the vicinity in which they landed.

“You’ve really let the room go,” she sighed sadly at the floor while relaxing and appearing far more comfortable sans scalp pain.

I couldn’t hide my scowl as I shifted my gaze to my paper. “I... wasn’t expecting company?” I hedged awkwardly. It was like she just fucking knew how much it was bothering me.

“I could straighten up for you if you’d like,” she offered in a timid voice.

“No, thank you,” I declined sharply, and perhaps a little too hastily as I avoided her gaze. It was one thing to let her make my food and hum me to sleep, but I’d be damned if I was going to sacrifice the shred of dignity that would surely go up in flames if I watched her collect my dirty boxers off the floor. Every motherfucker has to draw a line somewhere.

She sighed, and we were once again silent as I tried to... just fucking... focus.

Test questions. Focus. Indochina. Focus. Empire of Vietnam. Focus. Bella’s feet inches away from my dirty laundry. Shit.

Concentrate. Ho Chi Minh. Concentrate. Viet Minh. Concentrate. Bella’s tits and that necklace. Fuck.

We had spent all month slipping behind the school unnoticed for lunch to... well... pretty much just to kiss and be private for a change. Though we usually just talked and ate, when we did kiss, I was always gentle and tender. Luckily, the animalistic urge to possess her never returned—but we never went past kissing, and even though I’d ached to touch her everywhere, I never did.

She seemed to enjoy the affection, even though we both emerged unkempt and more sexually frustrated than we had ever been while sleeping in the same bed together. This whole sexual frustration bullshit was damaging my focus, and I was disappointed in the amphetamines. I mean, that was what they were for, and shit... I had to pass this test.

"So," I began, eager to ease her boredom and engage her in conversation at the very least, "since you're clearly so astute in all things Indochinese, I think you should be the one mindfucked on this practice test." I balanced on one elbow, lifting the paper in my free hand while waving it lightly and grinning.

She snorted and folded her legs up beneath her with a shake of her head. I pouted all dramatically but was secretly very fascinated with the way her eyes looked. She looked so fucking rested. I could barely see the dark circles. I began to ponder questioning if she had slept before she finally regarded my mock pout.

"Tough titty, Cullen." She sniffed and propped her elbow on the back of the couch with a smirk. "That's what you get for being all advanced placement." She winked seductively. Not helping the focus.

I smiled tightly over the grimace that fought to emerge over the sound of her calling me 'Cullen.' What the fuck was that? I wasn't sure why, but it bothered me. Instead of being an asshole about it, I rolled my eyes in amusement and returned the paper to the textbook. "I'll remember that when you're all fucking remedial tomorrow in Trig." I smirked in return, to which she appraisingly nodded a delicate "Touché."

I smiled and resumed my perusal of the textbook before peeking up at her from beneath my eyelashes like she commonly did to me, because payback is a bitch. "And by the way." I started in a low and suggestive voice that I knew she probably found sexy or some shit, "you can show me all the tough titty you want." I winked back at her playfully.

With that, her eyes abruptly darkened, and she sat up straight on the sofa. Her long eyelashes grazed her brow as she dipped her head and gazed back at me. And those pouty red lips were screwed up into a wicked grin that immediately made my hormones stir. She just looked so fucking... different. Almost cocky.

My eyes widened, and I swallowed audibly while her hands went to the hem of her blouse and began tugging it up. I'm pretty fucking certain I was stunned speechless, and my jaw was likely in danger of unhinging. I didn't know what to do as I watched her lift it up and bring it over her head. I mean, fuck, Bella. I wasn't being literal. Haven't you ever heard of teasing?

For some reason, I didn't stop her.

She discarded the red fabric and was then left sitting in that red lacey bra that had made more repeat appearances in my fantasies than I'd ever willingly admit. Slowly, she reached behind her back, arching her chest and staring pointedly into my eyes with a smirk as she unclasped her bra and slid it off her shoulders.

I wanted to open my mouth and tell her how fucking unnecessary this whole strip tease thing was, but... I just couldn't form the words, so I watched, transfixed, as the red lacy bra fell down her arms, exposing her breasts and landing on her lap.

I could feel my eyes darken as they raked over her bare chest, and I shifted involuntarily against the bed; my erection pressing painfully into the mattress below me. Not that I hadn't become accustomed to painful erections over the last four months. Fucking cock tease.

She knew I couldn't touch her, couldn't kiss her, couldn't even fucking smell her. And yet here she was—undressing and smiling deviously as she relaxed back into the couch to resume twirling her shiny curl around her finger—topless.

I tore my eyes away from the sight of her perky breasts and that goddamn necklace and curly hair against pale skin to calm the hormones and try to finish my test.

"Touché," I conceded in a shamefully husky voice as I fought to focus on Indochina.

She was going to pay for that shit tomorrow at lunch when I could hopefully touch her again. Hopefully.



I couldn't recall exactly when Bella left that morning. I went into the bathroom to take a piss because the caffeine mixed with erection made my bladder beg for release. When I emerged, she was just... gone, and the sun was rising outside my French doors.

I huffed and raked my fingers through my hair as I stared at the cluttered floor, debating whether or not to clean it. She could come again tonight and I'd feel like a fucking pig again. I resolved to wait until after I returned home from school, because those hours in between were always the worst for me and I'd be thankful for the distraction.

I got ready much like I always did and was out of the house before Carlisle could even glance at me sideways. I stopped talking to him again after my birthday. Call me fucking juvenile, but I was fed up with his bullshit. I was tired of playing games and refused to do anything beyond the

absolutely necessary song and dance. I went to school, got the grades, ate the food, attended to hygiene, changed my clothes, and dangled like a fucking puppet when I repeated the charade all over again the next day.

I picked up Jazz and allowed him to talk animatedly about some new movie while I nodded and pretended to pay attention. My eye lids drooped and I fought to keep myself coherent while driving. I used the memory of my girl sitting on the couch topless all night to keep me alert.

Yeah. Pretty effective shit.

When we entered the parking lot, I was anxious—nervous that she was still feeling “off” and that she wouldn’t want me to touch her. Luckily, she stepped out of the Porsche and walked straight to me like she did every morning. I suppressed a frown as I noticed she looked different from just hours ago. Her eyes were darker, face sallow, cheeks sunken, and lips pale while her purple eyelids covered most of her vision. She seemed fine before she left my room, but now she looked just like... just like she did yesterday when we parted in the parking lot after school.

I smiled as she stepped into my arms and grasped my neck so tightly it nearly choked me, and I was so fucking relieved. I wrapped my arms around her waist snugly and buried my nose in her hood, finally able to touch and smell and kiss her head. Even though I enjoyed the late night visit, it was fucking unbearable to see and not touch.

I grinned tightly as she released me. “Everything go okay this morning?” I asked nervously, fucking praying that she hadn’t been caught by Esme. That was the last thing we needed, and I wished that I had paid the risk more attention at the time.

She pursed her lips and tilted her head. “Yeah.” She shrugged indifferently, and I expelled a breath I hadn’t even realized I had been holding.

She wasn’t feeling “off,” and she didn’t get busted. My girl was a fucking excellent juvenile delinquent.

I smiled in relief and led her to class, anticipating lunch, and I could tell she was, too, because when my lips met her neck in front of her door, she shivered. I smiled against her skin as I released her and watched her enter the room. Shuffling and dragging her steps in a way that really fucking concerned me. She hadn’t seemed that bad earlier.

I shook off the feeling of unease and went through the day as I normally would. I was spot on

about my History test. *Motherfucking 'F.'* It soured my mood, so I crumpled the paper in my fist, tossing it in the hall trash can as I made my way to meet Bella for lunch.

When the fuck would I ever visit Indochina anyway?

She was waiting for me in her seat with her head resting on her arms when I arrived. She must have heard me approach because when I entered the doorway, her head suddenly turned, and she smiled at me knowingly.

Admittedly, I had been really fucking impatient for lunch the entire day. I should have been taking her to the lunchroom so she could sleep because she looked disturbingly exhausted, but instead, I wrapped my arm around her shoulders as she stood and led her out of the classroom toward our familiar spot. I couldn't shoulder all the guilt, because her steps were livelier on the pavement as we approached the two buildings, just like they were every day we walked out the doors at noon.

We slipped between the buildings, and I released her as we finally arrived at the location and assumed our regular position on the ground, side by side against the wall. She smiled as she produced my brown paper bag, and I fucking rolled my eyes as I took it.

I went for the cookies first, and not because I knew they'd be delicious, but because I was curious about Esme. It was common for my girl to revolve her cookie names around Esme nowadays, and I was hoping for some improvement in her attempts to break her resolve against our relationship.

Of course, the name of the cookie wasn't very encouraging. *Chewy Granola Grievances.*

I frowned at the black ink, rubbing it with my thumb as if I could wipe all the bullshit away and make everything perfect. *What a fucking joke.*

With a sigh, Bella removed her hood, and I furrowed my brows in concern over the dull texture of her hair as I set the cookies aside. It had been so shiny last night.

"So," She began, as she leaned against my side with a deep yawn. "I asked around and... finally found out who the original James Bond was," she continued as the yawn subsided, shaking her head as she peeked at me. "You were right. Sean Connery was the original Bond," she conceded in regards to a debate we had the previous day. Then she rolled her eyes at my smug expression, because... fuck, Bella. *Everyone* knows Connery was the original Bond.

"In my defense," she added all fucking indignant, rubbing her eyes from the residual yawn tears. "Roger Moore was way better." She shrugged and relaxed against the wall as she stretched her legs out before her.

I scoffed at her ignorance and mirrored her pose as I lifted my arm, and she granted me access to her shoulders. "Okay. I could spend all hour debating that horseshit." I quirked an eyebrow at her skeptically, because... no fucking way was Moore better than Connery. "But," I continued as I pulled her closer and planted a kiss on her temple. I lowered my voice all suggestive once again. "You'd probably just flash your tits to distract me from your insults on classic film." I mumbled against her skin with a smile as my hand found her chin and tilted her face upwards.

She gazed into my eyes with amusement and her lips twitched. "Excuse me?" She nearly giggled, but I cut her off as I swiftly sucked her bottom lip into my mouth, and now, she was the one who was speechless.

I kissed her slowly and softly, but my hand was just fucking dying to find out if she was still wearing that red bra. I hadn't touched her breasts since that last night we slept together, so I was hesitant to just fucking... grope.

But she sighed into my mouth and parted her lips to deepen the kiss, and the lust as our tongues met reminded me... she wasn't hesitant last night about showing them.



The feel of his tongue against mine made every cell in my body spring to life, and I bit back a moan as Edward's hand found my hip and pulled me closer.

Best way to stay alert *ever*.

The whole day had been a struggle, and even though I never let Edward see it, I had spent every class consuming coffee from my thermos just to stay coherent. I usually wouldn't hide the fact that I was so tired, but I knew he'd likely insist on taking me to the lunch room to sleep, and I would be missing out on this.

Our tongues intermingled languidly, and the way he gripped my hip brought a perfunctory flash of remembrance: that afternoon over a month ago when he had me pressed up against the brick wall behind me. I moaned into Edward's mouth at the memory, and he twisted his body to move closer as the flash of lust and excitement energized me minutely.

He never acted like that anymore. He cupped my cheek and caressed my hair while his tongue moved over mine gently. He was tender and loving—no longer domineering and urgent. I felt a familiar surge of guilt and shame for being confused about which version of affection I preferred.

There were times I nearly considered mentioning therapy once again simply to elicit his previous reaction—until I realized how completely awful and evil that made me, which yet again made my chest swell with guilt and confusion.

Truthfully, I was too tired to expend the necessary mental effort of working through the complex meanings behind it all, so I let him kiss me like this, and I loved every second of his reverent adoration of my lips and face and hair. I had to push away the urge to spur on his more urgent personality.

His hand began creeping up my side, and I angled my body towards him to weave my fingers in the back of his hair. He smiled into the kiss as his hand ascended, and I was momentarily confused at his amusement until his hand suddenly grasped my breast.

I gasped in surprise, and he pulled away slightly, opening his eyes to meet my gaze with a grin as he licked his lips and massaged my breast in his palm lazily. His eyes were so dark, and I was immediately concerned with how they seemed so unfocused. Nearly moving from side to side as his nose nudged mine lightly and I moaned involuntarily. He hadn't touched me like this in... too long, and it was beginning to make my blood boil as my breathing grew deeper.

He took my moan as encouragement, and quickly moved his hand down to the hem of my hoodie, slipping it underneath while his lips went to my neck. I tilted it to give him better access as his cold hand slid up my torso to my breast once again.

"Mmm," he hummed against my neck, and I was biting my lip as his thumb rubbed my nipple over the fabric. "You changed out of the red one, but I don't give a fuck." He mumbled into my skin and dipped his fingers beneath my bra, surprising me again as I gasped and arched into his hand involuntarily. "They all look better on my floor anyways." He chuckled throatily and

continued massaging.

I battled the urge to climb into his lap as I hummed at the sensations of his hand. “What’s with the sudden interest in my undergarments?” I asked distractedly while nuzzling his hair and pushing him closer. I was thankful for his boldness, because I really loved the light kissing, but had decided that this was way better.

“You were so fucking cruel last night,” he groaned into my neck as I arched against him again to get closer. “I hope you realize I failed that test because of these.” He muttered and alternated to my other breast as I moaned.

I weaved my fingers into his hair and furrowed my brows in confusion. “What?” I asked breathlessly as his teeth grazed my earlobe.

“You’ll have to tell me how you managed to get past Carlisle’s security system.” He breathed huskily against my ear. “Because... fuck, Bella. I’ve been trying to do that shit for years.” He whispered and returned his lips to my neck while massaging me, and his tongue met my skin and almost distracted me thoroughly, but I managed to pull back infinitesimally.

I met his hooded gaze, and he was still licking his lips and groping me as I furrowed my brows in confusion. “What the hell are you are talking about?” I asked as I attempted to back away and resist the pleasure of his hand trapped firmly between my flesh and my bra.

His lips turned up into a smirk, and he dove for my neck once again. “Don’t pretend like you can’t remember that strip tease.” He snickered drowsily into my skin, and I tried pulling away once more.

“What?” I repeated my inquiry weakly, because I was utterly lost in this conversation and his hands weren’t helping my focus. He shook his head against my neck with another deep chuckle and didn’t cease the movement of his hand.

It felt good. Very good. I was nearly resigned to dropping this odd conversation before I thought better of it, but when I tried to pull away again, his lips and tongue were on my neck, and I began getting frustrated.

I put my hands on his shoulders and attempted to push him back, but he didn’t budge, so I did the only thing I knew with certainty would work. “Cookie,” I blurted sharply and perhaps more irritably than intended.

His hand immediately withdrew from my bra and hoodie as he lurched back with a part groan, part growl and resumed his position against the wall. His eyes were heavy and tight as his hand raked through his hair and he scowled blankly ahead.

I straightened my bra and hoodie and frowned at his frustrated expression. "What happened last night?" I asked softly, tilting my head and reaching for his hand. I hated frustrating him and using the safe word for purposes that were unrelated to my panic was really unfair. It felt like the boy crying wolf or something.

He huffed and allowed me to take his hand as he met my gaze and quirked an eyebrow. "You sneaking in my bedroom, taking off your shirt, tough titty, ring any bells?" He spoke in a harsh tone and raised his eyebrows expectantly.

I gazed into his eyes for many moments to determine whether or not he was joking with me, or if I had become so sleepy that I simply misunderstood his words. But he looked serious. He was still scowling.

"Edward," I started, and cleared my throat because it felt tight, and I had no idea what was going on. "I never left my bedroom last night," I whispered in an apologetic voice while gripping his hand and attempting to soothe him with a gentle caress of my thumb.

His flushed lips abruptly curled up into a smile, gazing back at me with an unexpectedly bemused expression. Mine remained unchanged as I stroked his hand and searched his green eyes in confusion. As he stared at my lost expression for many moments, his smile slowly faded to a tight line and his brows furrowed softly. "Stop fucking with me," he whispered and gently pulled his hand away.

I must have been gaping at him. "I'm serious!" I insisted, feeling rather insulted that he didn't believe me, but Edward scoffed in return and eyed me suspiciously.

I grew frustrated as I recalled my nightly routine aloud. "I made cookies at eight, I was in bed by nine, I read four chapters of my book, I used my bathroom at three twenty seven, and then I went back under my blankets until the sun rose, and I never even left my bedroom, Edward." My frustration steadily shifted to alarm as the words left my mouth and he grew visibly upset.

I gazed into his agitated green eyes for many moments, uncertain of what to make of this. His face remained hard and the now constant crease in his forehead deepened as his eyes still held that oddly unfocused movement.

Suddenly, he sprang up off the ground and his eyes grew furious as he snatched up his bag and turned to me with a glower. “You,” he pointed his finger accusingly at where I sat, “are *completely* full of shit,” he spat, turning on his heel and storming to the path between the buildings as I stared after him in shock.

It took me a while to regain any rational thought before I stood and had the presence of mind to approach the lunchroom in search of him, but as I entered the door and looked to the table, I noticed Edward’s seat was vacant. I leaned out the open door and glanced at the parking lot before I realized his car was missing.

Still confused and admittedly, a little hurt, I entered the lunchroom and made a bee line to Alice, because I had to figure out what was going on.

“You want what?” she asked incredulously as I shifted from foot to foot anxiously at her side.

I groaned in frustration, lacking the patience and energy to engage Alice in an argument. “Alice, please. I know how to drive a car,” I sounded like a desperate child, but she was wasting time. She kind of laughed hysterically before turning to her food in clear dismissal of my request. Jasper glanced at me apologetically from her opposite side as I took a deep calming breath.

I leaned down close to her ear, and Emmett eyed me curiously from across the table. “It’s Edward.” I whispered pleadingly, and her fork stopped in the air as she glanced at me sideways.

I stood for a few more moments, growing impossibly more frustrated, and preparing to walk home before she sighed in defeat and began digging in her purse.

“If the Porsche dies, you die.” She gave me a pointed glance as I snatched the keys and smiled tightly in thanks. I didn’t even wait to answer any questions as I shuffled out of the room and went straight to the yellow Porsche.

It confounded me.

“Stupid, overpriced German technology,” I muttered as I pulled out of the parking lot and discovered that both the brake and gas were unforgivably sensitive. I let the difficulty of operating the vehicle under ridiculous exhaustion—and the jerky stop and go motions—distract me from the anxiety that welled in my chest as I approached our street.

I was relieved when I spotted his silver car in its usual position as I pulled into our driveway and

threw the Porsche into park. Without hesitation, I climbed out and made my way across the yards to the Cullen house. I was lucky both Esme and Carlisle were still at work as I stepped onto the porch and eyed the door dubiously.

I had no way of knowing how angry he truly was with me or if he would even open the door, and I was still lacking the patience to argue anything efficiently. Deciding I didn't want to wait any longer to figure out what the hell was going on, I grabbed the door knob and entered swiftly.

The house was quiet, and appeared empty as I timidly stepped into the living room. But his car was in the drive, and I was fairly certain he would be in his bedroom, so with a steeling breath, I began climbing the stairs.

It was odd how it felt very comfortable—as if I had lived in this house at one time, even though I rarely spent time in any other room besides Edward's. My fingers swept up the banister lightly as I ascended and carefully passed the rooms on the second floor.

As I climbed the second flight, my anxiety and impatience got the better of me, and I sprinted two steps at a time, nearly stumbling over my own two feet, until I was in the hallway and approaching his door cautiously.

It was open, but only just barely, and I could detect a faint sound of paper shuffling as I splayed my palm against the wood and lightly nudged it open so I could peek inside.

"Edward?" I called softly as I stepped into the room tentatively.

He was on his knees, still wearing his leather jacket, and rifling through a pile of mess on the floor as he briefly met my gaze and grunted in acknowledgment. I stood awkwardly, watching him search his floor for something as I let my gaze wander the room I had once known so well.

I hadn't seen it in over a month, and I frowned at the clothes lying astray across the floor and hung over the black sofa as I shifted uncomfortably. It was a little messy, but I reasoned that he rarely ever had visitors, so it made sense for him to get a little careless. The bed stood paramount in the space, and I think I may have expelled a longing sigh as I gazed at it in remembrance. I had never seen anything look more comfortable in my entire life.

I returned to observing him as he leaned down and appeared to be peeking beneath the bed.

“What are you looking for?” I whispered cautiously, bringing my bottom lip between my teeth. I wanted him to explain his odd behavior before I went insane with worst case scenarios, but he looked determined as he continued his hunt below the bed.

He shook his head, and all of his messy hair met the carpet as he ducked his head lower and his eyes scanned the sliver of space below the sofa. “The fucking—” he paused and sat up with a huff, snapping his fingers and screwing his eyes closed as if he were trying to remember something. “The... uh... goddamn... hair things,” he finished lamely, gesturing to his hair for emphasis.

I furrowed my brows at his terminology. *Hair things?* “Hair tie?” I hedged, quirking an eyebrow as he continued his search, peeking under clothes on the floor. He shook his head, so I kept guessing. “Um, hair clip?” I hedged weakly once more, digging in the recesses of my memory for various hair accessory terms, and he lurched off the floor, spinning to meet my gaze.

“Yes.” He nodded quickly, appearing out of breath as his chest heaved. “The fucking hair clips.” And then he simply stood and stared at me. I didn’t know what to say or think. Why would Edward have hair clips?

“Whose hair clips?” I asked in a small whisper, fidgeting with the sleeve cuffs of my hoodie.

His hands jerked up to his hair, and he gripped two fistfuls with a growl of frustration as he glared at me. “The ones you were wearing last night, Bella,” he ground out through clenched teeth as he narrowed his eyes at me. I was frozen.

Edward never talked to me like this, and I felt horrible for upsetting him, but... I had not worn any clips last night—and certainly not in his bedroom. At my blank expression, he growled once more and returned to scanning the floor and looking under jeans and shirts as I stood and watched in bewilderment.

His movements grew feverish as he threw clothes and papers around, his eyes wide and scrutinizing every item in sight as his breaths began coming out in hard pants. Edward looked so desperate and frantic as he dropped to the floor, looking under the bed and couch for the third time, that I began doing the most irrational and insane thing ever.

I *helped* him look.

I felt utterly ridiculous as I began lifting the sofa cushions and sweeping my hands along the

creases to find these... hair clips, but I couldn't *not* help him when he looked like that. We were always a team, and even though I doubted I'd actually find them, my first instinct was to just... help. It was preposterous, but I nearly asked him to describe what they looked like as I began lifting clothes from the floor and scanning the gold carpet with my eyes, assuming my attention should be focused on the floor like him.

He paid me a minimal amount of attention as I searched with him, sparing me an occasional glance of appreciation for my creativity when I began shaking out the shirts. A large part of myself actually hoped I would find them as I began searching the pockets of the jeans on the floor. This was insane, because if I did find them, it would have to mean that they belonged to another girl. The thought made my heart sink.

Eventually, I realized what I was doing and, feeling quite ridiculous, turned to noticed him ripping the blankets off the bed to continue his search.

My eyes widened in horror. "Was she—" I paused and tried to spit the words out while still claiming sanity. "Was... *I* in your bed last night?" I asked in a strangled whisper as he turned to face at me. He furrowed his brows and his chest was still heaving, and I wasn't sure what I was feeling. Was someone, some *girl* in his bed? Was I jealous of... *me* or someone else?

He shook his head, and I sighed in relief, but he looked impossibly more frenzied. "You were there." He pointed to the couch and began walking hastily towards me. "Right fucking there, Bella. Don't you remember?" He stopped at my side and gripped my upper arm roughly as he stared into my eyes with a frantic expression. It unnerved me so much that I nearly... gave in and admitted that I did remember.

But I honestly hadn't been in his room, so I remained quiet and shook my head cautiously.

His face fell, and he released my arm, walking back to the bed and collapsing onto it with a defeated sigh. He chuckled once and dropped his head into his hands as I stared at him.

"One of us is out of our goddamn minds." He mumbled into his hands, and I honestly couldn't tell him so, but... I knew it wasn't me. I had been sleepy and disoriented at times, but last night was solid in my memory.

He chuckled into his hands again and suddenly leapt off the bed, sprinting toward the sofa where he gripped the back and began tilting it over to search behind it.

The absurdity of the situation and his persistence were beginning to irritate me. "I wasn't here, Edward," I stated firmly while watching him shove the sofa completely to the floor face down. He didn't listen and kept looking. I was growing frustrated. "When was the last time you slept?" I asked sharply, and he abruptly froze.

He was silent for many moments, staring at the wall where the couch once sat before he turned to me. "I honestly can't remember," he admitted in a low and strained whisper, and my heart broke a little as he lowered himself to the cluttered floor before me and gazed into my eyes. He looked so lost, and I wished I could take it away as I kneeled before him and realized... he never had another girl in his room.

He never had *anyone* in his room.

I sighed and his eyes were doing that odd jerky thing once more that made my heart thump loudly in concern. "Maybe..." I whispered and glanced around the disheveled room anxiously. "Maybe you were like..." I shrugged, my hands fidgeting with my hoodie sleeves again as I avoided his gaze and fought to say my theory without insulting him. "Hallucinating or something?" I hedged cautiously as my fingers picked and pulled, and I suppressed a grimace as I heard the words leave my mouth and linger in the air between us.

After a few seconds, I met his gaze warily and wasn't at all surprised by what I saw in his expression. I would have looked the same if he had accused me of being crazy. He looked frustrated and accusing as his eyes narrowed. I swallowed thickly.

"Why does it have to be me?" He scowled darkly, and his expression turned suspicious as I sucked my bottom lip between my teeth. I lacked the resolve to voice my opinion further as his eyes grew impossibly more furious.

"Carlisle told me all about your brief psychotic episode in the gym." He lifted himself off the floor, never breaking my stunned gaze as he stood straight and peered down his nose at me. "You have a history of losing touch with reality, Bella. I don't." He seemed almost relieved as the words escaped his mouth and his shoulders visibly relaxed under his jacket.

And denial was obviously a river in Edward land too, but I'd be damned if I'd let him talk me into believing this... what did Edward call it? Horseshit?

I mustered up every ounce of energy that caffeine and anger could possibly provide, set my jaw, and raised my chin as I lifted myself off the floor and met his angry gaze with my own. At

least I was nice about my insinuation. He looked downright pleased with his.

I rounded my shoulders and narrowed my eyes at him and... how dare he? I knew where I was last night. He seriously needed to wake up and smell the sleep deprivation, and wasn't he the one on drugs? He began eyeing me in a way I knew well. In a way I hated from the common passerby, let alone my own boyfriend.

He was looking at me like *I was crazy*.

Well, fuck that and... "Fuck you." I spat, impossibly more insulted at his persistence to push this all off on me. I held my ground as I stared at him and dared with my eyes to repeat his assumption.

He snorted, and I could see his fists clench at his side in my periphery as I watched his green eyes flash and his lips curl into a bitter grin. "Fuck you?" he began, taking a step closer and nearly touching my body as he tilted his head and gazed into my eyes. "I could try fucking you again," he mused as he moved closer, his chest touching mine as he gazed curiously into my eyes. "But I'd be saving myself a whole *shitload* of disappointment if I just fucked myself," he whispered, and his lips abruptly transformed into a sneer as he leaned down inches to my face. "After all, my hand *never* says 'cookie.'" He spat the safe word bitterly at my face, and after a moment of rolling the words around in my head, I felt my lips part as my eyes widened in shock.

His green eyes darted back and forth into mine as I felt the familiar prickle of tears from my somewhat delayed reaction, and I realized how very intentional this all was.

I had two choices, and my jaw began trembling with my foremost instinct as I gazed into his unapologetic eyes. I could cry and admit that his comment was probably the most hurtful thing anyone has ever said to me. I could admit it struck a deep chord and made me question my worth as a woman worthy of love and affection and futures with weddings and children. I could be a weak and sniveling little girl who let some asshole hurt her with his intentional insults—just to make himself feel better. I could back down and run from it to hide away in my blue room while I sobbed pathetically.

Bullshit.

I'd been bruised and battered and nearly mutilated, and Edward Cullen was *not* going to make me cry with thoughtless *words*. Following my primary instinct just... would simply *not* suffice, so I blinked back the tears and pushed them away while I stilled my trembling lip.

The second instinct would have to do.

My hand jerked against my thigh, and without even a moment to think, I lifted it and put every ounce of strength I could muster behind force of my palm as it flew toward his face with a painful smack that resounded off the white walls of the room.

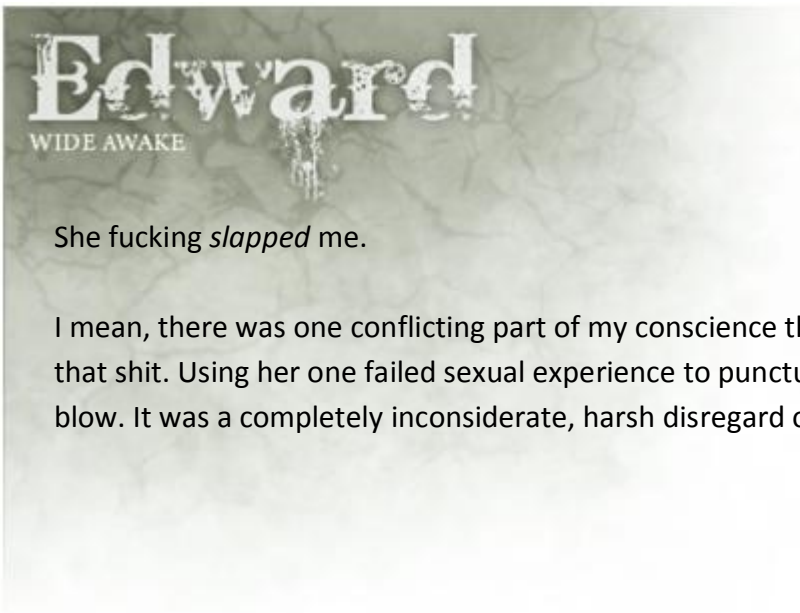
A sharp, sudden sting reverberated across my hand as it connected to his cheek. I watched in awe as his head lurched to the side and his body swayed with the force. He froze to steady himself, his head still turned as he lifted his own hand to his face and my gaze slowly traveled to my palm.

I stared at my upturned hand as my jaw dropped again, completely awestruck that I... hit Edward and somehow had enough energy to do it that strongly. A foreign surge of adrenaline coursed through my body as my breathing accelerated, and strangely, it felt... really cathartic. Staring a man in the face and finally having the guts to just... fight back was freeing in a way that made my shoulders tingle with strength I never knew myself to possess.

Way better than running away crying, I decided. My lips twitched as I open and closed my fist and the sting of it lessened.

Slowly, my eyes wandered from my palm to Edward face, where he was rubbing his cheek soothingly and gazing back at me in astonishment. I kept my back straight and stared at him pointedly while dropping my hand to my side.

I wasn't sorry.



Edward
WIDE AWAKE

She fucking *slapped* me.

I mean, there was one conflicting part of my conscience that was fairly confident I deserved that shit. Using her one failed sexual experience to punctuate my point was an unforgivably low blow. It was a completely inconsiderate, harsh disregard of her feelings. I knew this shit, and a

little part of me hated myself for saying it, but the other part of my conscience reminded me that it served its purpose better than anything else I could have mentioned. This whole mental instability shtick was her thing, not mine.

I had prepared myself so completely for the bitterness and defeat that would inevitably follow after she realized how right I was. I was prepared to soften my features and kiss her head, and tell her it was okay. It didn't matter to me if she sometimes had difficulty discerning real memories from delusions. I'd love her no matter what.

Thankfully, the bitterness was painfully present in her shining eyes as her lip trembled, and I was so goddamn relieved as I stared back at her and mentally primed my fantastic comforting skills, because she was basically conceding that she was in my room last night. It was like the rising panic that had been building since lunch suddenly dissipated. Her eyes were brimming with moisture and defeat, and I anticipated holding her while she cried.

For about two seconds.

Then her lip stilled and her jaw locked, and instead of bitterness, I saw only conviction and certainty. The sight of it made my stomach twist and churn as I barely heard the fabric of her arm shifting.

And then she fucking *slapped* me.

And it wasn't one of those girly bullshit smacks either. It almost knocked me over with the force of it, and my cheek was still throbbing in pain and stinging from the outside in. I mean, shit. She really just... slapped the *living shit* out of me. It *really* fucking hurt.

More.

I felt a brief swelling of pleasure that penetrated my irritation and anger for an abrupt moment. It was interrupted by the look in her eyes when I met her gaze again. Courage. Conviction. Anger. She used to be timid and meek, but I couldn't find that in her eyes as she stared back at me. That one conflicting part of my brain that believed I deserved it wanted to be proud of her, but the other parts of my conscience drowned it out.

She looked fierce and regal and confident, and now as I stand here rubbing my cheek and gazing into her wild eyes, I realized she reminded me of how she looked last night. Almost cocky, save for her sallow cheeks and dry lips and purple under eye circles that contradicted

everything else. This made my head spin as I closed my eyes and tried to sort through all this shit again, because her conviction was seriously damaging my own.

What was real? Was *this* Bella standing in front of me? Or was *that* her last night? Or were they both Bella all along and she didn't know it? Or was she just... fucking with me?

I just didn't know anymore, and it was completely fucked up that I could be *so confused* about something *so obvious*. I mean, I *saw* her on my goddamn sofa. I saw her tits and my necklace, and the *red* was *there*. I could still recall with perfect clarity the way her hair fell on her shoulders and her pale shins peeking out from under the skirt as she curled up on my sofa. The memory of her silky voice and wicked red grin was clearer than any memory in my head. She was *here*.

So who is this?

I opened my eyes and scanned her form suspiciously. She looked real. She looked like how she did last night, and yet she looked completely different all the same time. Confidence mixed with an air of fatigue.

I pushed that back and stroked my cheek soothingly as my mind suddenly justified why she was acting so dramatically to my insinuation. Because the guilty dog barks the loudest and...

The truth hurts, doesn't it?

Bella moved closer to me then, stepping over the clothing while her dark eyes flashed in anger once again. I dropped my hand and stood straight as she gazed into my eyes, and I heard her arm shift once more, and then I could feel the blinding sting of another loud slap against my cheek, knocking me sideways with the force as I hissed and fought to stay horizontal.

"It doesn't hurt at all, Edward, because it's not true," I heard her hard voice in front of me, and vaguely registered that I must have said that aloud. I wanted to curse my brain filter for choosing a frustratingly inconvenient moment to fail me, but... I didn't regret it. The truth hurts.

I used a few moments to enjoy the sting before allowing her to taint my pleasure, and I idly appreciated that this version of Bella was a fucking *fantastic* slapper. She didn't even bother alternating cheeks on a motherfucker.

When I finally turned my face to look at her, she had removed her hoodie, and was tugging up

the hem of her shirt. And... *What. The. Fuck?* This shit was some sick and twisted fucking déjà vu moment as I glared at her acrimoniously.

“What the *fuck* are you doing?” I growled, deciding it didn’t matter if either Bella was real, because clearly, they were the same. She pulled her shirt over her head, her hair swaying around her shoulders as she removed the sweater and tossed the fabric aside.

Her jaw was taugt and rigid, and her face was tinged a pale pink as she stood there—fucking topless—again. My intellectual abilities must have been totally fucked because, for some unjustifiable reason, I let my eyes wander from her face, lowering to the necklace she still wore—which didn’t aid in my confusion at all—and travel down to her white bra. Her skin looked flushed against the pale fabric as her breasts swelled above it with every huff.

She met my gaze, arching an eyebrow and looking so goddamn arrogant. “What? You don’t think I can follow through?” she asked in a silky and provocative tone as her hands went to the button of her jeans, and I swallowed all fucking thickly, still staring at her chest, and wondering how in the fuck I could even focus on something like hormones at a time like this.

I swiftly turned my gaze to the wall to avoid her temptation, narrowing my eyes at the black scuffs from the sofa as I finally realized her intentions. “I’m not in the mood, but thanks for the offer,” I replied dryly, still stroking the inside of my cheek with my tongue as I heard her lower the denim and kick it aside. I became suddenly agitated that she was going to attempt to prove me wrong... like *this*. Such a one-track mind.

I could feel her glare on my cheek for a moment before she abruptly stepped into my view. I scrunched my nose in annoyance at her bare hips and legs, and tried to think of anything else as she moved close enough to smell.

Then she was fucking taunting me with her flesh against my jacket and her hands grabbing my waist as she suddenly smashed her lips to mine. A deep growl built low in my chest, and I turned my face away, using one hand to push her shoulder back because I wasn’t in the mood for her stubborn bullshit. I wasn’t going to give her the opportunity to convince me any further. Wasn’t it enough that I was already fucking questioning it?

She wasn’t pleased with my refusal, and before I could even register what was happening, my face was met with another sharp smack that made my vision white as I stumbled sideways and began grabbing blindly for something to keep me steady.

I managed to find my footing, and I didn't even fucking bother soothing my cheek this time. My lips twitched in equal parts annoyance and pleasure as I turned to meet her gaze with a bitter grin.

More.

She was still all fucking cocky and determined, striding toward me once again and lunging for my face as she grabbed my hair and sucked my bottom lip into her mouth. My hands twitched at my sides as I allowed her to suck it between her teeth.

I fought the urge to return the kiss, feeling her body against mine, and her tongue stroking my lip in her mouth. I completely resisted the urge to shove my fingers into her hair and draw her closer. I fought her temptation—just because I knew it would *really* piss her off when she didn't get her golden moment.

But then her hands went to my jacket and started pushing it open, and I was growing tired of all of this nonsense and her foolish persistence to prove herself. With a frustrated growl, I shoved her back roughly by the shoulder, and it was a careless idea because she still had my lip in her teeth.

I could feel the searing pain as she was launched backward, her teeth slicing through my lip as it was pulled from her mouth with the force of my shove. I hissed, instinctively bringing my hand to the lip as Bella stumbled slightly and returned my irritated gaze.

I lowered my hand from my mouth and her eyes followed it, widening as I looked down at my palm. *Blood*. My sight zeroed in on the scarlet that stained my flesh, pooling around the creases in my fingers and smearing as I rubbed it in. *Red*.

I sucked my lips into my mouth, tasting the coppery substance and completely entranced by both the stinging sensation of my saliva meeting the wound and the red that colored my fingertips.

More.

Glancing up at her, she stood in her underwear, white instead of red, and was staring at my bloody hand in awe. She was wearing white, but she was *red* too, just like before. Those mischievous lips parting as her hand came to wipe away the residual blood on her mouth.

I suppressed a smirk when I realized how much Bella hated blood. No way in hell would she kiss me now. It had to have completely killed the moment for her.

I win.

Then she met my gaze, and her wild eyes made it apparent that the fact that she just cut my lip didn't affect her resolve at all. She was still standing in the middle of my room, all fucking confident and quirked an eyebrow at me assuredly. It was almost like she enjoyed drawing blood and slapping the shit out of me.

It was admittedly a little sexy and her self-assurance mixed with the pleasure of the stinging pain involuntarily stirred my hormones further. This pissed me off. The last thing I needed was my dick conceding to her antics.

It suddenly reminded me of that cocky version from the previous night. *Look, but don't touch.* The way she had swayed across my carpet and taunted me with everything I wanted but wasn't allowed to have. How she had to make that comment about my room... just fucking knowing how much it would have bothered me. Pointing out all of my insecurities and making me feel undeserving of all of her red and perfection. The way she smiled wickedly and removed her shirt. The winking. The hair twirling. The games.

Red Bella. White Bella. Both taunting and tempting me when I can't have it.

Fucking cock tease.

Her eyes snapped up to mine and flashed wildly again, her brown hair all framing her flushed face as her red lips twisted into a sneer and her chest heaved and... oops. Did I say that aloud, Bella? My lips twitched bitterly as I realized, yes. I did say that aloud.

She lunged for me once more, and I just fucking let her because Red Bella would be confused, and White Bella would be really pissed when I didn't respond. She splayed a palm against my chest, shoving my jacket off my shoulders as I stood and inspected her lips. They were still stained with blood, and I was admittedly smug with her annoyance when I stood completely still.

"Take it off," she ordered breathlessly, tugging the arms of my jacket until she found a clever way around my stiff posture and managed to slide it off despite my resistance. I kept my eyes on her lips, refusing to stare at her tits, or waist, or perfect hips that were being hugged by her

little white panties.

Once she had the jacket removed she began kissing my jaw, opening her mouth and nipping at my stubble as her hands rubbed up and down my chest. I suppressed a satisfied smirk as I stood still and resisted rather easily by fixing my attention over her shoulder on a hole in the wall that was caused by a projectile textbook. *AP History, of course.*

She grew impossibly more agitated as she fisted her hands into my shirt and pulled me closer. “Come on,” she growled against my neck, licking and kissing, and then suddenly her hand began traveling to the one place that was already giving her the reaction she desired. *Fucking traitor.*

I hissed softly through my clenched teeth as she pressed her palm into my crotch, rubbing and stroking while she licked my neck and began nipping with her teeth. I could feel her smile against my skin when she discovered how much she was affecting me, and I felt humiliated by the way my eyes hooded and my lips parted involuntarily at the feel of it.

That lesser part of my conscience was suddenly tired of fighting the pleasure of it or maybe just tired in general, but I was too tired to decide and really, too tired to give a shit about making the decision. I knew it was weak, but for a brief moment, I allowed myself to surrender to the overwhelming sensation of pleasure, turning my face slightly to her hair and inhaling as my hand lifted to ghost over her waist. My head began nuzzling itself into her hair as she pressed harder, eliciting an involuntary groan as my fingertips grazed the flesh of her bare hip.

And then finally I had to pull away, because she was going to win this game by doing some shady shit like that. I’d be damned if I’d let my lack of rational decision-making skills give her the upper hand and make me feel both sexually frustrated and insane simultaneously.

Plus, there’s always the possibility of...

Her hand met my cheek once again, and since I saw it coming—because honestly, both Bellas were a little predictable—I kept my neck stiff and didn’t turn my face as the sting and white pain resounded through my cheek.

More.

I kept my eyes locked on hers, feeling a little victorious when her face fell and she growled in frustration. Yes. There’s a lot of that shit going around, isn’t there? I stood silently while she huffed and appeared to be contemplating as her eyes shifted around the room. She looked

utterly fucking flustered and calculating as she tucked her hair behind her ear and furrowed her brows in concentration.

I could see the wheels turning in her head as she bit her lip, running her fingers through her hair, and I hated to break it to either Bella, but this shit wasn't going to work, so they might as well hang it up.

Suddenly something flashed in her eyes, her brows rising and smoothing as her gaze slowly traveled to mine. Her lips curled up into a wicked and knowing grin as her eyes darkened infinitesimally. *Very Red Bella*, I mentally noted. I suppressed a grimace at that grin as she stepped towards me, clasping her hands behind her back and popping her lips merrily. My eyes narrowed in suspicion as she nearly skipped to my front.

She gazed up into my eyes, tilting her head with the sweetest and most innocent expression she could surely muster after borderline beating my ass. I almost felt compelled to grin back at her because I knew better, and her sweet expression was tainted with sallowness and purple eye lids that reminded me she wasn't as strong as she was attempting to appear.

"It's okay, Edward. I understand," she replied with a faux coy smile and wide eyes as she licked her lips and shrugged her shoulders. "I'm sure after I go to therapy and get well enough to touch other men—" Already my throat was tightening and my fists were clenching as she brought one finger to my chest and swept it up to my chin. "One of them will be more than happy to accommodate my needs." Her lips turned up into a sweet, lazy smirk as she tilted her head further and my stomach lurched.

Her eyes searched mine as I fought the urge to reach out and grab her to keep her here. We stood staring for many moments, and my chest fucking ached with the thought of someone else seeing that bra. White, red, it didn't fucking matter. It was *all* supposed to be *mine*.

With another shrug, she turned and bent down to pick up her pants.

This was so different from Carlisle and Esme splitting us up.

If I let her go, it would all be gone, and I felt a phantom tickle of loss in the pit of my stomach that grew into something old and familiar like the memory of hugging my knees while I watched my life go up in flames. The feelings of letting it slip away when I could have just held out a hand.

I felt so fucking suffocated as I tried to resist the instinct to stop her that I began gasping for breath, fisting my hands into my jeans at my sides to ground myself. She began walking away, and I clenched my eyes closed in agony as I contemplated allowing her to leave. Something burned painfully in my throat as I imagined being devoid of all of her sleep and cookies and lust and love and affection and comfort.

Unbidden, the vision passed through my mind, and I saw the same thing that made my teeth grind and my chest constrict painfully. She'd get better, just like *they* wanted, and she'd know some other motherfucker's hands and love and affection. Once she realized how much better she could do, she'd have no need for a crazy, possibly hallucinating piece of shit like me.

With a shuddering gasp, I opened my eyes and followed her form as she folded her pants over her arm and began collecting her shit off the floor. My eyes grew heavy as I followed her movements, my gaze scanning every little detail and scar on her flesh, recalling how it felt beneath my hands and lips.

Those slender legs and pale thighs. Her arms, shoulders, neck, and the perfect bumps of her spine as it descended and disappeared beneath her white panties. Her petite waist and the way her hip bones gently jutted out above the fabric. She didn't look this skinny before. Before everything got fucked up and everyone found out, we were *happy*. If she stayed, we could find that again, and I'd do everything in my power to make her smile, but...

If she left, it'd all be gone.

I recalled every detail of her flesh before it became impossible to contain the urge any longer.

She's my girl. My mind screamed it possessively in my ears as she approached the door with her clothes in her arms. My gasping breaths turned deep and laborious as I walked forward, involuntarily allowing my instincts to control my movements, and the barely familiar spark igniting something deep and animalistic as I sprang across the floor.

Her red lips still held a hint of a lazy smirk as I surrendered shamefully and lunged for her, grabbing her waist from behind in an angry desperation, not startling her at all as I crushed her back to my body. Her shoulders went slack as I wrapped my arms entirely around her waist and tightened my grip to bury my nose in her neck. Smelling *my* flowers and cookies.

I could feel her breathing accelerate, that tinge of excitement in her eyes that confounded me as I spun her around and pressed her against the wall beside the door.

Our noses touched and she bit her lip, visibly suppressing a smile as she sighed in contentment and my hand reached blindly at my side. I found the door knob and slammed it shut angrily, the walls vibrating, as her red lips twitched and she writhed against my hips triumphantly. I fumbled with the knob, locking it hastily while my eyes raked over her shoulders and my teeth ground together at the thought of her nearly leaving me.

Really pissed off about that, my fist met the wall beside her head as I met her gaze and felt the drywall give out against my knuckles. Once again, her eyes flashed in excitement, and even though she was assuming some fucking meek position below me, she still looked arrogant and smug as she began lifting my shirt. She kind of looked like a bitch, but... at least she was *my* bitch.

My girl.

I shoved my dusty fingers into her hair and crushed my lips to hers with a growl as I forced my tongue between her lips. She moaned, encouraging this festering instinct that made my chest ache as she fought to lift my shirt.

It was depraved, all of the thousands of ways I unwillingly imagined taking her as I tore my lips away and ripped my shirt off over my head. Against the wall, on the floor, over the back of the goddamn couch she may or may not have occupied last night. It didn't matter, just as long as I made her mine, I didn't give a shit where we did it.

Deciding to enjoy this brief lapse of sanity, my fingers went to her bra straps, tearing them away roughly, and I vaguely registered that my hands trembled while I pushed them down her arms. She moaned at my aggressive movements against her flesh and arched her back off the wall so I could access the clasp and remove it.

And I really fucking tried, panting against her face and fumbling with shaky fingers as I worked to remove it. I could feel her getting impatient, arching her back further into me to grant me more space before I just started pulling until it finally snapped.

With a grunt, I tossed it aside and palmed her breasts between us.

Mine.

She hummed and let her head fall back to the wall, that small smile still playing on her lips as I

dug my fingertips into her flesh and tried to stop my hands from shaking.

She suddenly put her hands over mine, gazing into my eyes as my teeth ground and a growl built low in my chest again. She leaned in close to my ear as I pushed her farther into the wall, trapping her while she kissed my earlobe.

She sighed into my ear as my hands still trembled between us and I panted into her neck. “I’m *your* girl.” She breathed intentionally while bringing my earlobe into her mouth, and I vaguely remembered that whole brain filter problem. Could she hear me saying all that shit? I decided it didn’t matter, because she was telling me she was mine.

All mine.

I groaned into her hair at the sound of her saying that and suddenly her lips were back on my neck, parting against the skin as I dug my fingertips deeper into her flesh. I felt her teeth on my skin as she bit down gently, likely hoping to spur me on.

“Harder,” I growled into her hair, ordering her to make me hers. Obediently, her teeth sank in deeper, but I kept repeating my request until the sting was something pleasurable, and with the growing pressure, my breathing turned to hisses and my vision suddenly changed. I had no idea why, or what was happening, but something wasn’t right.

It was like walking through a movie screen where I could feel and hear everything, but I couldn’t connect to my limbs after that initial instant of pain and possessiveness. I didn’t realize it until I tried to lessen my grip, and found that I couldn’t. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to, but I let my hands grip her ass and carry her to the bed. My movements felt automatic and rigid but I couldn’t find that thread that attached my thoughts to my body.

The sudden realization was startling and immediately blanketed my every thought with dread and fear as I kept attempting to loosen my grip.

I could feel myself ripping off her panties with her teeth still attached to my neck. The sensations were there as I unbuttoned my pants and hastily slid them down. It all felt oddly amplified in touch, but I couldn’t change the course of their movements anymore.

She felt silky and smooth yet rough as my hands grasped her hips, my fingertips dug into her flesh, and even though I knew it had to be hurting her, and I should be more careful, the caution just... wasn’t connecting to my fingers.

I trapped her beneath me on the rumpled bed, and my hips were shoving her into the mattress as my vision tried to fix on something, but everything was clouded and murky. I figured I could completely panic over the total loss of control or just submit, and let it play its course. I wasn't sure I had any other choice, and it scared me shitless as she removed her teeth from my neck.

And then she tried to move out from under me, sliding out from under my arm, and I could hear my voice growl something oddly unintelligible to my own ears as I grabbed her wrists and held her down. Then the telltale panic began gripping me because this was so utterly... fucked, and I was completely helpless. I felt my lips against hers, licking and forcing as I grasped her wrists and heard a soft moan from beneath me.

I could feel rather than see her smile against my lips as she opened her mouth and assured me she just wanted to get a condom. Of course, my mind knew this, and it was trying to tell my body to back the fuck off for two seconds, but was unforgivably uncertain of its capability to do so. I fought against it and used every bit of resolve I could possibly access to lessen my grip on her wrists.

I was thankful that I still had an inkling of rationally connected thought to let her go... just enough to allow her to slide out from under me. But I was right behind her with my arms around her waist, letting her guide me to the dresser that I only opened with one hand.

The drawer was just a clutter of colors blurring together into fuzzy shapes and my hands felt for it while my other held her waist and my face buried itself into her hair. I could smell it, and I could feel it against my lips as my hand found the box and began dragging her back to the bed hastily, and I used the smell to soothe my anxiety.

Her drowsy giggle sounded in my ears as I pushed her in front of me, and I idly wondered if she was going as insane as I was. She had no fucking idea how truly fucked this all was. I wanted to open my mouth and tell her something was wrong, and we could do it later when I had control of my actions if it was really that important. But every time I opened my mouth, I couldn't even understand what I was saying.

Whatever it was, it made the blurred shape of her lips curl up into a grin as I spun around and sat on the bed, pulling her into my lap facing me. I couldn't decide why my body wanted it like that, her on top instead of me, but it obviously did and the better part of my working conscience was grateful because this position would lessen the chances of her being hurt.

After a few moments of my hands pulling and digging into her flesh, I began feeling her sliding the condom onto me, my face still burying itself into her hair as my hands pulled her hips closer. Ready and apparently growing frustrated with the idle pace of her fingers working the latex.

She was leading, which felt odd to me since she didn't have the experience, but I wasn't sure she had a choice, because my hands wouldn't do anything but pull her closer to where my body wanted her. My fingertips kept digging deeper into her hips, and I could hear my low grunt as she lifted herself and got into position.

My mouth opened, and I couldn't understand what I was saying, but it made her moan as she dropped her lips back to my neck. There was white and green in my vision as I gazed over her shoulder, and I could feel this ache as my hands dug deeper into her sides. Without even a moment to expect it, they shoved her down onto me.

She met my lap as my hands forced her down, and I'm positive I was as shocked as Bella with the rapid movement. It was too fucking fast. Too hard. I didn't like it one bit. I could feel her gasp into my skin as her body grew rigid and I didn't know if it was shock or panic, but I hoped and fucking prayed my body would let me have control again if she said that word.

I wanted to stay still, give her time to react before I decided how much to fight this goddamn incapability of controlling anything. But my hips began rocking slightly and my tongue was on her neck as my fingers dug deeper into her hips. As my tongue met her flesh she began breathing heavily, and I could feel it against my skin, shuddering and hot. I was begging her with my kiss on her neck as much as I could possibly manage.

Please, don't fucking say it.

Not because I wanted to keep going. Not because I wanted her to be right and prove herself. Not because I could hear myself groaning in pleasure at the oddly amplified sensation of everything, and not even because it felt absolutely fucking perfect to that part of my conscience that had control.

I didn't want her to say it because I was going to be such a fucking monster when she did, and I couldn't let her up. My hips kept rocking against my will, and I tried to convince myself my hands were holding her hips steady until I knew she was okay. But I couldn't decide how true that was.

My eyes never closed, or even blinked as my nose began nudging her earlobe and I could feel her breathing steady against me again. I couldn't determine if it was a positive sign or if I should start... attacking my own mind to let her go.

But then she lifted her face from my neck, and I could barely make out the fuzzy shape of her lips as they curved up into a smirk and she rocked back into me victoriously.

The sound that escaped my mouth alarmed me as my hands gripped her impossibly tighter. I could see her lips growing into a wider smile—white between red—as she rocked again to intentionally recreate my reaction.

I couldn't make her eyes out clearly, and it was difficult to judge her expression, but the smile appeared fairly self-proud, still a little arrogant and self-assured as her fingers began tugging at my hair. I allowed her pleasure to calm my panic minutely. She looked so smug, spurring me on, that the functioning part of my conscious wished I possessed the capability to roll my eyes at her.

What do you want? A gold fucking star? I thought in annoyance at her smugness and watched as her smile grew impossibly larger.

Her lips moved in a fuzzy blur as she spoke low and softly. "I much prefer silver, but thanks for asking."

Just as I remembered that goddamn missing brain filter and was contemplating using it to explain that something wasn't right with me, my hands suddenly moved lower, and took two fistful of her flesh to lift her up, trembling as I felt the amplified sensations and suddenly shoved her down in another abruptly rough movement.

Apparently, all my body needed was a sarcastic remark to feel assured that she was okay enough to continue. I wanted to feel relieved that my body, even its baser state, realized that she was precious, but I couldn't feel relieved at all.

Because it repeated the lift and shove so fucking aggressively that I was utterly terrified, trapped inside of my mind as I watched the shape of her lips and listened to our grunts of pleasure. My hands kept repeating it, and I tried to get away from the feelings and sounds of skin clapping as her voice grew louder and echoed in my ears.

I think it was frantic and urgent, but I turned away, trying to block it out so I didn't have to see

myself acting so fucking animalistic. I only paid attention to the sounds my girl was making, and even though they were obviously not the cries of panic or fear, it didn't make me feel any better.

Her knees caressed my hips as I moved her, and even though I knew she wasn't, it felt like she was rubbing me with sandpaper. Every tiny touch was exaggerated and staggering with her breath against my face that felt like fire as she panted and yelped.

Something obscure and terrifying began building in my stomach and my hands moved faster and tighter as I felt her flesh around my fingertips. The intensity of it made my heart hum it was thumping so erratically, and my panic grew to epic proportions as I foolishly began focusing on my own movements and sounds.

It was so desperate and guttural, almost as if my body were trying to purge itself of something as my hands and hips worked furiously. It was so fucking appalling that I was wondering if the building pressure wasn't nausea, because I would have loved to have vomited in that moment as I heard and felt myself fucking my girl like some goddamn savage.

The building pressure was coupled with her lips once again on my neck, her teeth sinking into that same spot, and the pain of it amplified everything impossibly more as my hands began shoving her onto me with more force, my grunts transforming into desperate and sharp grating snarls.

It could have been hours, or it could have been minutes as my hands and hips began moving almost violently, filling my ears with the lingering slapping of skin and grunts and muffled whimpers as my arms burned with exertion.

I felt and listened powerlessly as it escalated, until suddenly, everything shifted and plummeted so unexpectedly that it made my stomach twist. The pressure abruptly ruptured into a blinding implosion that I thought would surely ruin me.

Everything felt agonizingly painful and fractured as my body convulsed and my mind instinctively recoiled away from every sensation. It wasn't pleasure at all, and the amplified sensations all felt so excruciating that I wasn't shuddering and cringing in satisfaction of an orgasm.

It was total fucking torture, and I fought to jerk away from it as my guttural sounds suddenly turned to agonized cries into her shoulder. My body, skin and limbs, stung with a violent

reverberating buzz until I could feel moisture on my cheeks against her skin, and it was finally over.

My mind went blank for an immeasurable amount of time as I was gradually surrendered control of my movements. My face came first, and I buried it deep into her shoulder to fight off the residual memory of the agonizing sensation that still left lingering twinges of stinging pleasure.

My hands came next, and I removed my fingertips from her flesh so hastily that I could barely register the motion in my fuzzy mind as they moved to embrace her around the waist. I could vaguely realize that she was panting into my neck, her teeth still lightly attached to the tender and throbbing bite wound as I clung to her for dear life, wincing with every sudden movement.

Bella must have thought I was just really enjoying the whole fucked up experience because I could feel her lips curl up into a smile on my neck as she slid them over her teeth and sighed. I wasn't sure if I should be pissed off about it, resentful, vindictive, or any of the other emotions I would have expected to feel after having so much pain inflicted on me.

I couldn't really feel anything but the lingering buzz of turmoil, until my chest began feeling heavy and burdened with something suffocating. Then unexpectedly, a loud and strangled sob suddenly erupted from my throat, making my body heave against her damp skin. I tried to suppress it for as long as possible. Holding my breath and squeezing her tightly, before I decided it was just fucking useless. Surrendering for the fifth time that day, I allowed the pressure in my chest to rupture and release at its own fucking will.

I had no will today.

I used her shoulder to stifle my sobs as my body began rocking unthinkingly to soothe itself. My tears soaked her flesh, and she must have –*finally* – realized that something was wrong, because her whole body went rigid, and she tried to pull back. I held her firmly in place against me, and I wasn't doing it to keep her there. I was just holding her tight because I was scared shitless that I wasn't grounded enough to my own body anymore.

Her breathing grew rapid, and I could feel her hands on either side of my head, trying to pry my face up. "What's wrong?" she asked in an alarmed and breathless voice as I rocked her in my lap. I just shook my fucking head, because how do you explain something like that? My chest produced the deepest and most pathetically desperate sobs, as if my body needed to rid itself of the remnants of whatever the fucking couldn't purge. Even though it was humiliating, I

allowed myself to expel every cry into her shoulder because pride was so far from being a priority, it was just embarrassing.

I could feel Bella's alarm escalating as she continued her fruitless attempts to pull away and look at my face, but I held her tight, maybe too tight, and I couldn't bring myself to really give a shit.

She eventually stilled her attempts with a huff and resumed caressing my hair as she rested her cheek on my shoulder. "Please, Edward. You're scaring me," she pleaded in a desperate and strangled whisper against my neck, and if I weren't busy sobbing uncontrollably, I would have fucking laughed at her.

Now I'm scaring you?

She let me rock and cry for many moments until she suddenly lifted her cheek with a gasp. "Let me hum you to sleep," she spoke rapidly and assuredly as if she just knew this would fix me. Her fingers began stroking my hair with more familiar and intentional caresses.

Her offer tumbled around in my head as I finally allowed my sobs to diminish with deep and calming breaths of flowers and cookies mingled with sweat.

Sleep.

It sounded really fucking useless to me for some reason.

I turned my face to rest my cheek on her shoulder as I stared blankly out the window, still lightly swaying us back and forth. I used my mostly recovered visual clarity to scan the bare trees outside the window until I finally realized that... I wasn't tired.

I wasn't energized or refreshed and my body still felt completely exhausted from the skin on my toes to the tips of my hair, but I wasn't tired. I was just... here. Nothing more and nothing less.

There were black birds flying and chirping as they perched on the bare branches of the trees by the river, and as I swayed me and my girl lightly on the edge of my bed in the destruction of my room, I let go, and I gave up.

"I'm not tired," I replied in a grating whisper that sounded dead even to my own ears, and I had no idea what the fuck was wrong with me, but I felt so detached that it was endlessly relieving.

I reasoned, maybe this was what it felt like after someone finally gives up. Just... done.

I stilled my rocking and removed my arms from her waist, nudging her hips gently to indicate I was ready to let her up. She hesitantly leaned back, finally capable of seeing my face as her hands ceased their ministrations on my hair. When her confused gaze met mine, her face swiftly transformed into a horrified and appalled expression. I supposed I must have looked pretty shitty, but I just nudged her once more until she had climbed off of my lap because she looked perfectly okay. I was thankful I didn't have to worry about that, and it was odd how the mortification I should have been feeling towards what just happened never really came.

I could feel her wide eyed gaze on my face as I collected my pants and pulled them on gingerly, still hyper sensitive in certain areas. And then I just grabbed my jacket, searching the pockets for my cigarettes, and walked to the balcony doors.

I paused as I approached, my hand lingering over the knob. "Are you okay?" I asked in my hoarse monotone voice, just because I had to. Just because she was more important than whatever happened to me, and I wasn't sure I could ever really give up on that.

I didn't turn to look at her as she answered with a small and strained, "*I'm fine,*"—emphasis on the "*I*" —because I couldn't look at her hips where I just knew I'd see my hands. I could deal with that shit later if I really had to, but right now I was letting it go.

The April air still held a hint of chill, but was mostly damp with humidity as I stepped outside and lowered myself against the white siding of the house. I pulled my knees to my chest and gazed blankly over the yard and black birds that flocked the trees along the river bank. The wind felt cold and soothing against my bare damp chest as I lit a cigarette, but I didn't smoke it.

I just let it fucking burn.

Chapter 44. Desecrated Marzipan Delicacies



I stood, looking over the bedroom that had once been such a perfect sanctuary. It was warm and inviting and offered every bit of comfort I could have ever wished for. Now it was just destruction. The holes in the walls and the ripped sheets and the sofa lying face down on the floor no longer made it inviting.

Desecration.

My stomach was churning and every inch of my body below my waist ached and throbbed as I began searching the floor for my clothes. I pulled them on both hastily and slowly, wincing in pain when I buttoned my jeans and forcing down the bile rising in my throat over what had just occurred.

Edward had it wrong all along. He wasn't the monster. I was.

There was something about standing up to Edward when he'd intended to hurt me—even just verbally—that gave me some kind of sick power trip. At the time, it never really occurred to me how wrong it was, because it felt so right to finally be... in control. It was utterly repulsive how it made me feel strangely vindicated, as if I was fighting some awful excuse for a human being rather than Edward.

I got carried away from the second slap as I heard him ask for more—all the while accusing me of being the crazy one.

Oh, I was definitely crazy.

And then I was determined to prove that I could follow through and be the normal girl I always knew he deserved, because even though he was wrong in saying that I couldn't, he was right at the same time. It was the worst time to prove myself, but it felt like the best opportunity at the moment. Adrenaline and confidence coursed through my body while I stripped and told myself, "I'll show him." It had been arrogant.

He had resisted, and the glorious confidence that had been intoxicating had faltered, causing my anger to escalate. And the anger had sparked the power-trip that told me... I could fight

back, and he wouldn't harm me. I knew I could hit him, and he'd never retaliate because he loved me. I used his own love for me against him... for the purpose of hurting him. It was so despicable that I felt vomit rising in my throat as I recalled how I even managed to break his resolve.

It was the lowest of the low. I knew it was the only thing that would ignite that passion in his eyes for me again. The realization made me impossibly more decisive as I met his gaze and involuntarily smirked, unable to hide my own smugness over the genius of the idea. I had known he wouldn't be able to resist if I threatened to leave: once again, using his love for me against him.

I was truly evil.

And it had worked. Everything went as planned, and I'd allowed him to dominate me while secretly... *I had been dominating him.*

I wondered if this was how Edward had felt when he treated me similarly behind the school; the day I begged him not to move out of Carlisle's house, and I allowed him to dominate me against the brick wall. I wondered if he felt sick and disgusted with himself. I wondered if he questioned any presence of a soul. Did he hate himself like this? He probably did, and it was my fault for ever encouraging it.

He had told me over and over again that I was his girl. "Mine." He growled into my face, palming my breasts as his hands shook and his fingers dug deep into my flesh. His fingertips had hurt as they dug deeper and his eyes grew frantic and cold, but the pain I could handle. The desperation in his voice when he told me I was his... that was the most unbearable thing of all. His tone had abruptly made my chest ache, momentarily breaking the adrenaline power trip just long enough for me to realize that I could never allow him to believe any differently. So, I told him I was his, because I always would be. No matter what.

I carefully approached his bathroom, stepping over the clothing and papers scattering the carpet and blinking back tears as my trembling hands searched for a hand towel under the sink. They began spilling over as I turned on the faucet and dampened the towel with steaming hot water. As I watched the steam rise, leading my gaze to the mirror in front of me, it forced a dry heave from my abdomen, nearly doubling my body over the sink as I fought to swallow it down. Aside from the tears and puffy lips, I was visibly unscathed. How was that even fair? It would have made me feel better, had I possessed something tangible and obvious to wear like a red flashing sign that clearly said, "I did something horrible to deserve this, right here."

But there was nothing staring back at me but pale and panic and absolute disgust.

It was odd how I had felt so proud at the time—very anticipative of the entire thing, in fact. The excitement of my bravery and determination had kept me forging ahead, even when Edward couldn't put on the condom.

I remember what he had said as he'd spun around and sat on the bed, reaching for my waist to pull me into his lap: "Show me you want it," he'd ordered, gripping my thighs and pulling me closer as his eyes focused on my smiling lips. Because, of course, I wanted it, and even though I had no idea what I was doing, I had shown him the best way I knew how. I'd put the condom on myself. I'd watched him do it the last night we'd slept together and was fairly certain that the action would make it clear that I was a willing participant. I'd figured it would lessen his probable guilt after-the-fact.

Then as I lifted myself and prepared for the coming challenge, his mouth opened once again. "This," he began, still staring detachedly at my lips. "Is what it feels like to be completely fucked." His strained voice had held a bizarre twinge of sadness mixed with anger, but his words had excited me further, eliciting a moan as I'd dropped my lips to his neck. Then, he'd just shoved me down onto him.

It had been a different kind of pain from the pain I'd felt on my hips. It had been inside of me and burning and the panic that invaded my chest, as I'd gasped and clenched my eyes closed, was inevitable, but I'd squeezed my knees around his hips, fighting the panic and trying to breathe steadily as he'd begun rocking his hips and whimpering into my neck. In any other circumstance, it would have been arousing. His tongue had come out, licking me in a foreign way until suddenly, he'd begun kissing my skin, almost sweetly—a complete change in his demeanor. "Please, don't fucking say it," he begged in a strangled whisper into my neck between kisses, still moving his hips infinitesimally as his grip on my flesh tightened. His plea had steeled my resolve as I continued to breathe into his skin, forcing myself to ease with mental images of calming moments.

Quite ironic that most of them involved Edward himself.

When I could no longer feel panic and the pain had begun to subside, I'd lifted my face and felt victorious as I'd shifted against him without any trouble at all.

That wasn't the case now as I stood over the sink until I was positive I could leave the vicinity of the toilet without vomiting on the floor. I turned away from the mirror and stared out the open bathroom door towards the balcony. With a deep shuddering breath to attempt to quell my tears, I walked to where I knew he was.

It wasn't how I'd imagined our first real time to be. It wasn't how I'd imagined *any* kind of sex to be. It had been quick and frantic, and his hands had bruised me. There had been no declarations of love, whispers of devotion, or affectionate gestures. There had been no promises or tender caresses. There had been no ridiculous unicorns or stupid fairytale fucking rainbows.

It had been pure greed.

The worst part of all of it was... I'd liked it so much I'd never even realized what had been happening. It hadn't been the sex that thrilled me, making it possible to remain calm. Admittedly, the sex had been barely enjoyable to me at all. It had not felt like the day in the semi-meadow, or Valentine's Day night, or even the first time we'd tried. It had felt hurried, covetous, and selfish, and I'd loved the fact that he had been getting so much enjoyment out of *my* body. That had been the only thing that had made it likeable for me. Seeing him need me so much that he'd finally let the facade of perfect control collapse had been oddly validating. I had felt powerful yet again, and I'd bit him harder because I knew he liked it, and I'd wanted him to. I could taste the blood in my mouth, but the movement of our bodies had been distraction enough from the coppery tasting fluid, and I'd never let it effect me. I had felt so accomplished.

I was a complete moron.

In this moment, as I cautiously walk toward the balcony doors, I couldn't even decide if he had... finished. I figured he had, but then he'd begun crying into my shoulder—deep and agonized sobs that shook us against each other. My confidence and empowerment had crumbled and dissipated under the sound of his anguish. Yet, I had no idea what he was anguished about.

A million thoughts had raced through my mind as I'd fought to pry his face up, but it had been fruitless, and I had been left slightly panicked as he'd rocked our bodies back and forth, his cries never ceasing.

I'd reasoned that the cause for all of this... everything... must have been his lack of sleep. If he would have just slept a little, even just a couple hours, I knew he'd feel so much better.

Until I saw his face.

The light breeze whipped through my hair as I reached the balcony doors and slowly exited the room, quietly stepping out into the humid April air.

He was leaning against the white siding with his knees lifted up toward the sky and his chest still bare. His eyes were unmoving as he stared ahead toward the river, and his mess of hair was going every which way from my fingers. He didn't acknowledge my presence as I kneeled down beside him and inspected his face.

I did this, and the realization made my hand cover my mouth in horror as I saw the injuries that *I inflicted*.

The welt on his cheek that was already bruising a discolored shade of purple and red was from my hand. The cut on his lip that was just beginning to scab was from my kiss. The deep and mangled bite mark on the side of his neck was from my teeth. Even the scratches on his bare shoulders were from my fingernails.

My tears blurred my vision as my hand shook against my open mouth. I had *been* this broken figure before. There was once a time when I was the victim, and to see myself make Edward – the person I loved and cherished – *my* victim... was horrifying beyond all comparison. My own personal demons had turned me into one.

With a deep breath to stifle the sob threatening to escape my chest, I lifted the wet towel to his face to cleanse him. He winced minutely as the warm towel touched his cheek, and I jerked my hand away, his gaze finally wandering to mine. I brought the towel back to his cheek carefully, wiping away the remnants of tears and sweat as he simply stared at my face blankly. Every inch of his skin was under my close scrutiny as the fibers glided over his flesh, and I couldn't help but notice... the crease was gone.

Every crease was gone.

His forehead was completely smooth, and the calmness in his eyes was unending. To the common observer, it might have seemed as if he were... tranquil—even serene, but of course, I knew Edward better than that. I knew the emotions of a victim better than that.

He was conquered.

It was defeat mixed with numbness, mingling together in a vast pool of empty and a refusal to fight any longer. Seeing that expression on Edward's face made my stomach churn for the final time, and I could feel the sickness in my stomach erupting. I scrambled back frenziedly and found the edge of the balcony in the nick of time. I gazed down at the Cullen's immaculate green lawn three stories below me as I vomited, my head wedged between two rails as my body heaved and fought to expel the entire contents of my stomach.

Edward never moved. He simply watched.

When all the contents of my stomach had finished splattering across the lawn below and I was gasping for breath and wiping away tears, I used the warm towel to wipe my own face. Edward remained unmoved when I turned around and leaned back against the railing.

"I'm sorry." I choked, my throat still raw and acidic, and I think we both knew I wasn't sorry for vomiting. His gaze left mine as he rested his head back on the siding and continued staring over the back yard. He shrugged, and I noticed the completely burnt cigarette in his hand, a long trail of ashes indicating he never even lifted it. I watched dismally as a light breeze swept through the yards, rustling the bare branches surrounding the property, and blowing the ashes over the edge of the balcony.

"Go home," he abruptly rasped, remaining eerily motionless as the wind barely ruffled his heavily dampened hair. "You can't be here." If he had been looking at me, he would have seen the pain and remorse flash in my eyes at his words.

"I can stay for a little—"

"You can't *be* here," he repeated louder, cutting me off mid-sentence. If I hadn't thought it was possible to feel any worse, I was being proven wrong.

When I made no move to leave, he finally met my gaze, and I saw a relieving spark of annoyance, for just one second as he grated out once again, "You can't *be* here."

I simply stared at him, because if I left, I had no idea what tomorrow was going to be like. I couldn't leave it like this, so I didn't move, and I was relieved to see another flash of annoyance as we gazed at one another.

Annoyance was something.

Annoyance wasn't being conquered.

His hand moved just enough to discard of the cigarette in his hand as his nostrils flared. "You can't fucking *be* here, Bella. I said *go home!*" he snapped in his gravelly voice, and it was harsh, but detached at the same time, like a bad actor reading lines on a page, except Edward was reading the lines from his familiar script of annoyance, and there was no real feeling. How was that even possible? I knew I was pushing him by staying. I knew I could hold my ground on the balcony and wait for him to speak or try to apologize once again. I might have continued pushing him if I hadn't just witnessed the consequences of doing so. I stood up and dusted off my jeans as I stared at his forcedly annoyed expression. This was the best I could get. I couldn't get a smile or the warmth of love in his eyes. I could only get false annoyance, and I deserved every bit of it, if not the real thing.

I walked back into the room, watching out of the periphery of my eyes as his body relaxed and he resumed his blank stare. Once I was inside and staring at everything once again, the destruction and the desecration, my gaze landed on the one perfect item in the room.

The bookshelf.

It stood perfectly unharmed in the midst of absolute chaos against the white wall of my sanctuary. It looked large and triumphant, as if to say, "I made it out of this battle alive and well, when everything else fell to its death."

It was a proud citadel that transcended all and survived, even in the aftermath.

It wasn't conquered.

On my way out the door, I stopped and used every bit of my energy to knock it down, watching as it fell to the floor with a loud rumble and crack as books spilled from it like blood.

Because *nothing* makes it out of here alive.

Edward

WIDE AWAKE

She couldn't fucking *be* here.

Anywhere but here.

I didn't want to be this around her, and I doubted that I could handle her stubborn arrogant attitude when she realized how broken I had let myself become. I didn't want her impatience, and I didn't want her aggression. And I *really* didn't want her to slap me again when I couldn't even muster up enough emotion to get pissed off about it.

My physical safety might be jeopardized by my one-hundred-and-ten-pound girlfriend, and I couldn't even feel the humiliation that the thought should have granted me.

Fucking ridiculous.

I didn't know how long I'd sat on the balcony watching the birds by the river after Bella left, but I dreaded the thought of having to go back inside. The sun barely moved at all, which meant it hadn't been that long when I heard footsteps in my room. It felt like years though, and everything was so quiet, painfully quiet, until I heard the footsteps and then a voice.

"Edward?" Emmett's low voice called from inside my bedroom, and I was really hoping he'd just fucking leave and not even think to look out here for me, but my luck was just too shitty for all that.

I saw him emerge, stepping out onto the balcony as I felt his gaze bore holes into my face.

"What happened?" he asked, looking back and forth from my face to the room behind him. He may have been appalled, but I didn't focus on his face. The birds were still perching.

Shit, I was pathetic.

"I fucked Bella," I mumbled honestly, and my voice was really grating and disgusting, and I

couldn't bring myself to care about it one bit. I couldn't bring myself to care about anything.

"Say what?" he asked in confusion as he stepped around me to get into my field of view, and... goddamn it Emmett. You're blocking the birds.

"I fucked Bella," I repeated in the same detached voice that wasn't matching what my emotions on the matter should have been. "She threw up over there," I added as an afterthought, pointing to the edge of the balcony and wondering why I even felt compelled to mention this.

Emmett glanced at the spot I pointed towards for a moment then back to me with a confused expression. "So you fuck a girl, and she vomits. What else is new?" he chuckled anxiously as his eyes tightened and searched my face.

Right. A joke.

Hilarious.

He shifted awkwardly as I gazed over his shoulder without acknowledging his jest and continued watching the birds. The flock was huge, all converging on branches and the riverbank. They covered everything in black.

"So, you and Bella did all that?" he asked, eyeing the double doors in surprise. His head tilted a bit, and he hummed in thought before I could answer—not that I had planned to. "Is sex with you two always so... *destructive*" he asked, his voice an octave higher than usual, and I really wanted to be amused by it. But I wasn't.

"Wouldn't know, it was a first," I replied flippantly, really not in the mood to discuss this. I watched as his mouth transformed into a silent 'o' of realization, and his brows rose high, before furrowing in confusion.

"I see..." Emmett shifted awkwardly again, scratching the back of his neck as he lowered himself to a crouch across the balcony then began mumbling, "I guess we all figured, you know. With her sleeping over here, and the lunches and shit, and—" he paused, grimacing, and then huffed loudly, narrowing his eyes at me. "Damn it, Edward. Throw me a rope here. I don't want to talk about you fucking Bella for Christ's sake."

There is a God.

We were silent for a long while, because it was better. Still awkward for Emmett, but better for me and the black birds continuing their private conversations on various perches while I observed them numbly. We sat, and the sun moved faster towards the horizon as the minutes passed in silence. Time wasn't really tangible for me, and I cunningly left my mind and thoughts blank in regards to what had happened in the room. I wasn't sure why Emmett remained, why he cared what happened in the room, or why he was just crouching over there, staring at the house and sitting with me like he didn't have better shit to do. I didn't ask him to leave either, and I sat and watched all the birds finally fly away in a blanket of dark that danced and weaved past the river.

He finally spoke. "Everything is really bad, isn't it?" he whispered in an oddly sad tone that piqued my attention as I shifted my gaze to him. He sighed and finally flopped down out of his crouch, taking the spot Bella once occupied, and shook his head. "You, Carlisle, Bella, Esme, hell, even Jasper and Alice. Everything is wrong, nothing's right, and..." His eyes then narrowed in annoyance, and he wasn't looking at me as his voice grew louder and more agitated, but he didn't need to. "Nobody is saying what needs to be said in this whole fucked up situation, and it's really starting to personally burn my ass, Edward." When he said my name, he finally looked me in the eye. He seemed pretty pissed. I really wanted to give a shit, but I didn't.

He rolled his eyes when I didn't give him the response he had likely anticipated, and then, because he was Emmett, he kept going. "Well, geez, Em? What might that particular thing be? Hmm, good question, Em. Here, allow me to elaborate," he spoke to himself sarcastically, but he was looking directly at me. It was like he was having a Jasper moment. All-fucking-knowing and sarcastic and one detailed flower reference away from being the prick-incarnate himself.

His brown eyes flashed in anger, nostrils flaring as he glared at me. "Grow the fuck up," he said bluntly, pausing to glower and probably granting me the opportunity to respond as I returned his gaze blankly, but I had no plan to.

With a growl of frustration, he continued in a frenzied tone. "You and Bella both. You act so fucking entitled to everything and take advantage of nothing. Carlisle and Esme split you up, and everyone agrees it was wrong, but... *shit*, Edward." He chuckled humorlessly, shaking his head and breaking my gaze. "What the hell have you even done to gain any trust from either of them. You think you're the first couple ever to be split up by their parents?" He quirked an eyebrow questioningly and grew angrier when I didn't respond. I had nothing to say for it. Partly because it was true, and partly because I refused to admit it right this second. I watched his one quirked eyebrow drop, and his eyes grew dark as his fists clenched.

“Bullshit,” he spat, rising up from his position and standing over me, flailing his arms wildly as his tirade exploded into hard syllables and expletives. “The earth doesn’t revolve around Edward fucking Cullen and Bella fucking Swan. All four of us took your sides, just waiting for you to pull your heads out of your asses and prove them wrong by acting like mature fucking adults for once in your life. But you never fucking did. And now everything is bad, and we all pay the price, so... *fuck you*,” he spat acrimoniously, chest heaving as his finger pointed down at me. “Fuck you and fuck Bella, and... fuck you for fucking Bella. I’m jumping off the Edward and Bella band-fucking-wagon and taking Rose with me, and if Jasper and Alice have a lick of sense, they’ll follow, because you’re never going to change your shit and it’s not worth it until you do,” he finished, remaining still and seething as I gazed up at him.

He still had those little dimples in his cheeks when he made a sneer, and it really made him a lot less intimidating.

And if it were anyone else but Emmett telling me this shit and yelling at me like I really deserved it, I would have kept watching the river and shrugged them off, because they wouldn’t have had any answers for me--only questions and accusations. I didn’t need that shit. I needed answers and I just... didn’t fucking have them.

But Emmett did.

“How do I fix it?” I asked, and if I had any pride left in me, I never would have gazed into his eyes and basically begged him to tell me how he made it all work: how he managed to be the good son, how he managed to have friends without shitting all over them, how he managed to love Rose the right way, or how he managed to let go of the past that could have been but never was.

“What. Needs. Fixed?” He ground through clenched teeth, still glaring down at me as I broke his gaze and pondered his question as if it were the last entry on the final exam of my entire fucking life.

Everything?

I had opened my mouth instinctively to answer his question with that exact word, but I snapped it closed, because it wasn’t good enough and... *fuck*, even I could see that.

So what made everything so wrong in the first place?

My mind became swirls and torrents of words and memories as I fought to follow the clues to something that could give me the right answer.

What needed fixed?

Bella, Carlisle, Esme, fucking, red, white, black, humming, sleeping, memories, dreaming, waking, sweating, panting, crying, searching, burning, coughing, suffocating, losing, clinging, grasping, slipping, wandering, neglecting, fighting, defeating, finishing, giving up, letting go...

"Me," I confessed in a strangled whisper, searching his eyes pleadingly because I knew how true it was. It wasn't Carlisle or Esme or Red Bella or White Bella or even the lack of sleep that fucked everything up and made me this way. It was me—all along, it was me. All of that other shit to blame, and it would always return to the same thing when I traced it back: Everything was fucked up, but nothing could compare to the realization that I felt completely infected, deep inside of my soul. It was a gaping wound, throbbing and sore, but somewhere along the way it grew into an infection and invaded every tiny cell of myself. I thought Bella was the medicine, but she was always a band aid. It was so fucking unfair either way.

Emmett's eyes softened as he gazed down at me, sitting on the balcony, giving up, admitting defeat, shirtless in the cold April air with bruises and wounds on the outside-in. It was all I had to give, and it must have been the right answer because he returned to his position against the railing with a sigh.

"I don't have all the answers, man. I'm not Dr. fucking Phil over here, okay? I haven't always been as put-together as I seem," he replied, mirroring my pose with his knees bent upwards and his hand idly clutching his shoes strings. I wanted to be disappointed that he just put me through that whole fucking epiphany bullshit and wasn't even going to help, but... it sounded more like a disclaimer as he eventually continued.

"Do you remember last summer? When I went to go see the campus at UT in Nashville?" he mumbled, glancing at me briefly and shifting his eyes away at my nod. I remembered him and Carlisle making a big fucking deal out of it, something about the athletics program that I never really paid attention to because I couldn't be bothered. Emmett's shoulders abruptly did the most foreign slouching motion, and I was momentarily stunned. His eyes flashed in pain and anger as his posture grew almost protective of itself—folding in and curling away, as he met my gaze and showed me his pure weakness for the first time ever.

“It was just a cover Carlisle created for me,” he admitted, and Emmett rarely whispered, but he spoke now as if he were afraid someone might hear him.



It was eight fifty-three, and I used the ticking clock on Carlisle’s desk to count down the seconds until he arrived home. It was strange how the darkness of the study amplified it, but... a lot of things were strange. My being here was strange, that’s a fucking definite. My sending Emmett to Bella’s to make sure she was okay—that was strange. His promise to stay until I got this over with was probably a little strange too. My calling Rosalie Hale to ask a favor of her wasn’t just strange but completely fucking sacrilegious.

I’d do it again in a heartbeat though.

If someone had told me twelve hours ago that I would be doing this, I would have laughed at them, and accused them of being another one of my hallucinations. *That* is how strange shit was at this very moment. The clock ticked and moved as I counted the seconds off in my head, and I used it as a worthy distraction from everything that could possibly send me into an absolute panic. My emotional numbness was fading slowly, but it was still fading. I couldn’t let Carlisle see that.

It must have been nine when I finally heard the front door open and his footsteps echoing the halls. He called out for Emmett and me, but I didn’t move a muscle. I was afraid if I did, I wouldn’t stop, and I’d bolt like a frightened bunny.

He ascended the stairs and probably saw my room, but it was nothing compared to what I was about to do. He’d understand that later, but for now, he was downstairs again, still searching and coming up with nothing but empty rooms.

My breathing was steady, which surprised me. It didn’t match the anxiety that was slowly creeping into my chest as his footsteps finally paused outside the study door. When he opened it and entered, I heard a faint gasp and his hands searching the walls.

When the room was finally illuminated and bathed in a soft light, I could hear the relief and irritation present in his voice as he spoke. “Do you mind explaining what the hell happened upstairs? And where on earth is Emmett?” he asked while crossing the room. I wasn’t going to answer either of these questions. Both involved Bella, and if I thought about her... I’d chicken the fuck out.

No more of that.

So I remained silent and still as he came into my view across the desk and took his seat. “Good God, Edward...” He breathed as his gaze met my face and he rose from his seat in alarm. “What happened to you?” His wide eyes scrutinized my face, and I had somehow forgotten about that. I idly wondered how bad I looked. My girl could really rough a motherfucker up.

It was one more question that I couldn’t answer, and I watched him lower his body back into the chair as he hedged, “Did you get into a fight?”

Like he’d ever believe me if I could tell him. I doubted it.

“Would you *please* say something?” he eventually ordered, and his voice was laced with desperation and alarm as I decided it was now or never.

I opened my mouth to mutter the words that I had been rehearsing in my head for the last two hours, but all that emerged was a raspy, “I need your help.”

That wasn’t necessarily a lie or anything, but it wasn’t what I wanted it to be. What *did* I want? Fucking violins and the gasp of a crowd? I was beginning to feel the reluctance of continuing on this path, and I battled to fight it back.

Carlisle’s eyes widened for a brief moment before he visibly forced an expression of neutrality. I imagined he had wanted to hear those words for quite some time. “Anything, just tell me what you need,” he said with a staggering amount of conviction. His sincerity brought me a pang of guilt that made me swallow thickly as my hand twitched against the leather armrest. *Why should I feel guilty?* I mused to myself. I needed Bella for the last three months, and where the fuck was his sincerity then?

I kept building cases against Carlisle in my mind to make what I was about to do easier, and I could see his expression growing skeptical and cautious as the seconds passed.

“Emmett,” I began and paused to clear my throat because it was gravelly from screaming and crying like a little bitch. His brows furrowed at the mention of my brother, but he remained silent as he waited for me to continue.

I’m not sure what I looked like on the outside, but on the inside I was fighting to keep this ridiculously calm exterior and praying like hell that I was succeeding. “I want what you did for

Emmett,” I finished, and watched the emotions flash across his face. First, confusion and curiosity, and then calculation as he struggled to find the meaning of the statement without forcing me to elaborate—which I was thankful for. I could discern the exact second he finally understood what I meant, because his face lost all its color.

His head began shaking slowly, as if involuntarily. “I don’t know if that’s such a good idea, Edward.” His strangled voice sounded pleading, and I watched his fingers on the desk clasp and unclasp in an anxious gesture.

“Are you refusing?” I asked flatly as I watched his hands, and I was secretly hoping he would say “yes.” If he refused me, and I couldn’t go through with it, then it wouldn’t be my fear that stopped me. It would just be another way for Carlisle to control me. I could live with that.

“No,” he whispered softly after a long moment in defeat, and my stomach sank. The one time I needed him to go against me, he didn’t.

So fucking typical.

His hands left the desk, and I couldn’t meet his gaze as they began flipping through his key ring. He used a little golden key to unlock one of his drawers, and when the yellow manila folder met the dark wood of the desk, my mouth went bone dry. It looked so unassuming and innocuous. Just a pale yellow folder. I didn’t know what I was expecting as I tentatively leaned forward in my seat and eyed it dubiously. Maybe a black box with barbed wire and chrome spikes or some shit? It would have been more appropriate than this little yellow folder. I reached for it with a dry swallow that made my throat ache, and handled it as if it were the black box I had expected. I didn’t open it.

Carlisle’s gaze was fixed on the folder as I set it in my lap. The look of pain and defeat etched across his features was almost painful to look at, and more than a little puzzling. It was an easy assumption for me to make—that he had wanted this shit for years now.

Wordlessly, he rose from his seat and traveled to the cabinet across the room that held his medical supplies. I didn’t object as he gathered various items and knelt at my side to inspect the Bella-inflicted bite wound on my neck. “This could get infected,” he whispered sadly, and I sat unflinching as he cleaned it carefully—the yellow folder burning holes into my hands as I held it limply in my lap.

No more words were exchanged.



It was a little odd how three people could manage to have an entire conversation with their eyes alone, and somehow understand everything the other person was attempting to convey.

This was Alice, Emmett, and I when Esme came home at nine.

She leaned her elbows on the island, picking at the leftover meal I had cooked for Emmett and Alice while she had been working late, and the room was entirely silent. It wasn't an eerie or uncomfortable silence, but more like... the calm after the storm kind of silence. Maybe Esme was intuitive about this type of silence because she tossed me a small grin and asked, "Is everything okay?"

There's that 'okay' word again.

I nodded and attempted a forced smile which only made her more curious about the tense atmosphere of the room. Then she began covertly drilling Emmett and Alice for details of their day. Emmett sent Alice a glance that clearly showed his anxiety over lying to her, and Alice offered my panicked expression an easing smile while she attempted to distract Esme with her AP History practice test grade. Emmett gazed at me apologetically, and I smiled in thanks as Alice stole the show and performed flawlessly.

Esme didn't have a clue what was going on.

The call from the school about my abrupt disappearance was more or less inevitable, but it was obvious she hadn't received it yet because she looked unusually chipper. Yes, chipper. Ever since the evening of Edward's birthday she had been withdrawn and sullen, so seeing her chipper was a rather big deal for Alice and me.

I might have shown more interest, but my head was somewhere else entirely—mostly next door with Edward, and I was tossing Emmett the occasional glare because he shouldn't be here with me. Edward was over there all alone, save for Carlisle, of whom I had serious doubts of being anything but a nuisance to Edward given the state I'd left his house in.

The all consuming guilt of my actions once again swelled within me as I whipped my cookie dough and blocked out the voices behind me. I couldn't find the energy to pretend everything was "okay," and I certainly couldn't handle the explosion from Esme when she learned about my skipping class. To go see Edward. To victimize Edward. To have sex with Edward.

Before she finally excused herself from the kitchen, she came to my side and whispered low in my ear, "It's too late to do it this evening, but tomorrow you and I are going to have a discussion."

My whole body froze, the cookie sheet only half filled with the *Desecrated Marzipan Delicacies* as I realized my original assumption was clearly wrong. She knew. She must have known, and this discussion was going to be so unpleasant that it had to wait until morning. I listened to her exit the kitchen without meeting her gaze. She would have surely seen the panic in my eyes, and I was positive that was her intention all along. Making me wait and stew in my anxiety until she decided to punish me further.

Could this day get any worse?

The tense atmosphere of the room seemed to escalate after she left, and the three of us did not speak as we waited for the cookies to bake. Alice asked me about the afternoon's events only once before realizing that it wasn't something I was willing to discuss just yet.

Emmett knew.

That much was obvious from the second he'd walked through the door and used his big brown eyes to scan every inch of my visible skin. He had made himself comfortable and refused to leave for some reason unknown to me, so I'd simply made him dinner and welcomed the distraction.

I was wondering how long he could possibly stay?

We were all three sitting at the dark granite counter island in our respective stools, Emmett farthest away from me on the end, and Alice at my side, fidgeting uselessly with clear Ziploc bags and spatulas when three things occurred simultaneously. First, the timer buzzed loudly on the stovetop. The cookies were done baking. Second, Esme's cell phone went off in her purse beside the microwave, a grating ring tone programmed specifically to Dr. Cullen. Finally, there were three sharp and loud raps on the front door that could be heard even in the kitchen over

the timer and the cell phone.

The silence was so abruptly damaged that it made me flinch as I sprinted to the stove and quickly turned off the timer and the oven. Esme's cell phone kept ringing as she attended to the visitors at the front door, and I narrowed my eyes at her black purse in annoyance before she finally raced into the kitchen to answer it. She was slightly out of breath as she answered Dr. Cullen's call with a smile and relaxed against the counter.

I watched in a stealth curiosity and returned to my seat as they spoke, assuming that Edward had been caught skipping class too and growing horrified at the notion of him being in more trouble. As Dr. Cullen spoke, Esme's smile slowly fell and her eyes immediately darted to mine and widened.

Shit.

I quickly shifted my gaze to my lap, fingering the hem of my hoodie and wishing there was a hole nearby for me to crawl into and die. The appalled and heartbroken expression on Esme's face must have meant that they knew *everything*.

Before I could even muster up the appropriate level of alarm, two figures entered the kitchen. I was taken aback as Jasper and Rosalie met my shocked gaze with smiles and gracefully strode to their partners' sides.

My brows furrowed in confusion as I fought to pay attention to everything surrounding me.

"Right now? Can't it wait until—" Esme paused and bit on the inside of her cheek absently as she held the phone to her ear. "Should I do it?" she whispered, and I suddenly noticed Jasper and Rosalie speaking lowly into Alice and Emmett's ears.

The hell is going on?

I tuned Esme out to focus on the exchange between my four friends and grew alarmed as Alice's face paled and she met my gaze. Emmett didn't seem as affected by whatever Rose told him, and she took a seat at his side, smiling at me warmly.

"Oh, cookies!" she exclaimed brightly and smelled the air. "Almond, right?" she asked while lacing her arm through Emmett's, one blonde brow quirked up in curiosity. This was weird. Rosalie never gave a crap about cookies. I had just opened my mouth to panic more verbally

when Esme snapped her phone shut and turned to me.

Her eyes briefly connected to everyone else's and I felt like I was being left out of some huge secret. It was pissing me off. "Bella, I think that—" Esme began, then paused to shake her head, as if she needed to start over. "What I mean is that maybe..." she trailed off and the other four people in the room were looking everywhere but at me.

With a sigh, Esme walked behind me and grasped my shoulders, silently asking me to leave the stool. I obeyed, and when she turned me around and led me to the kitchen window, I became impossibly more confused. Before I could grow annoyed and ask her what the hell was going on, my eyes adjusted to the darkness of the back yard, and I could clearly make out a form in the gazebo.

"Go" was all she said, and I didn't wait for any further indication of allowance as I sprung for the door and swung it open. It was too good to be true, and somewhere in the back of my mind I realized this as I crossed the yard. Esme would have never let me leave the house so late—to see Edward, of all people, but I was trying to avoid the nagging sensation of foreboding as I approached the gazebo.

Edward was sitting on his side of the bench as I hesitantly took mine. He was wearing his jacket, and he offered me a small smile as he folded his arms on the table—laying his cheek on his arms facing me. He was tired, and it showed. I was thankful for the darkness of night because I couldn't see his injuries.

I stared at him anxiously as he fixed his gaze to the wooden table. I was dying to close the distance between us, but I knew I couldn't, so I mimicked his pose, and laid my cheek on my arms. Mostly, I felt stupid, and the sounds of the river were lulling me into a far too relaxed state given the circumstances.

"Emmett once had a really disgusting infatuation with reggae," he abruptly whispered, meeting my gaze and grinning crookedly.

Avoidance.

It was frustrating, and I wasn't in the mood to play games. But if this was what Edward needed—for now —then I would give it to him.

I returned his grin tightly. "Reggae music isn't so bad," I defended quietly with a shrug while I

memorized the lines of his face in the darkness.

He rolled his eyes and began picking at the wood with his fingers. “The music I could stand, but that fucker had to wear those ugly rainbow caps and everything,” he grumbled while I reflexively snorted at the mental image his comment created.

The whole avoidance thing was making my chest feel lighter, so I continued. “Alice’s first wet dream was of Freddy Krueger,” I offered appreciatively, and his back rose and fell with his soft laughter. He looked much better than when I left him on the balcony, and I was endlessly relieved as I relaxed my cheek into my arms and bathed in his amusement. This wasn’t so bad. Maybe everything could be salvaged, and Edward didn’t feel toward me what I felt toward Phil.

Secretly, this had been a festering panic since I left his house.

“I’m not shocked,” he admitted after his laughter subsided with a shrug. We spent a few moments gazing into one another’s eyes. He still looked so exhausted, and for a moment, I allowed myself to imagine that it was November again, and we were sharing our friends’ most sordid embarrassments to keep each other awake.

Good times.

“Jasper had his tongue pierced, and it got so infected and gross that he almost had to have surgery.” He offered, quirked an eyebrow. This really didn’t surprise me much either.

“Alice said that Rosalie wet the bed until she was twelve,” I countered, and he grimaced, finally sitting up and shoving his hands into his pockets.

“Everyone knows that, Bella.” He shook his head, still grinning lightly as he fished something out of his pocket and began fidgeting with it absently. “It’s a fucking miracle the name ‘Pee-Pee-Rosalie’ didn’t stick with her after Junior High,” he mused distractedly. I couldn’t see the object as he passed it from hand to hand, but I caught a brief glimpse of shimmer from the scant moonlight.

I sat up with a sigh. Avoidance time was over.

“What’s going on, Edward?” I whispered dreadfully, and the mirth that was present in his eyes vanished entirely. He began chewing his lip and bouncing his knee beneath the table without meeting my gaze as I observed his anxious behavior warily.

I allowed him as much time as I could possibly bear. He stared at his hands intently for many moments, playing with the shiny object as the sounds of the river made everything appear so peaceful. It was a lie. The avoidance was a lie, and I wanted to know what the hell was going on.

Before I could completely lose it and snap at him impatiently, he sighed long and agonized, dropping his forehead to the wood of the table in surrender. “I’m so fucking tired, Bella,” he admitted quietly without raising his head. His voice was so thick with pain and defeat that I decided, middle-ground gazebo rules no longer applied.

I tried to scoot cautiously to his side but ended up flying over the distance between us and grasping his shoulders in the tightest hug I could possibly manage. He stiffened momentarily but eventually relaxed and lifted an arm to snake around my waist.

I didn’t deserve any of his affection, truth be told. I had hurt him over and over again, and I wasn’t even worthy of his polite conversation—let alone his tenderness. But he squeezed me tightly to his side, finally raising his head and planting a kiss on my temple before nuzzling his nose into my hair softly. It made me feel impossibly worse.

I opened my mouth with the intention of apologizing once again. I would have said it a million times, and it still wouldn’t have made up for any of it, but apologies were all I had. Phil never once apologized. Maybe this made me less of a monster. If he was willing to forgive me, then maybe eventually, I could forgive myself. Unfortunately, I never had the opportunity.

“I’m leaving,” he mumbled into my hair, stroking it softly down my back with his fingers.

I blinked in confusion, gazing out over the river and trying to understand his words. *Leaving.* “You decided to move out?” I frowned. It made sense. If he had been caught skipping class then he and Carlisle likely had another falling out. I couldn’t expect him to stay in such an uncomfortable environment for my sake alone. It was upsetting, but I reasoned that it really wouldn’t change much.

I was going to assure him that I wouldn’t make good on my threat to seek therapy until I felt him shake his head.

“Not exactly,” he admitted, finally lifting his face from my hair to meet my gaze. My frown deepened as I pivoted my body toward his. His dark eyes were apprehensive, boring into mine and his grip on my waist tightened. “I’m going to Chicago,” he breathed remorsefully.

Too far was the first reaction my mind could successfully produce. I simply couldn't fathom that kind of distance between Edward and me, and my strangled "Why?" was the only response I could coherently convey through the sudden constriction of my chest.

He abruptly pulled my head to his shoulder, hugging me tighter as he spoke into my hair. He began telling me about a conversation he had with Emmett. Something about Emmett going to find his birth parents last year. I tried to wrap my head around it, but he was talking so quickly. As he spoke, it became an apparent and desperate justification. Even I could tell that much, though I couldn't understand why. Nothing he said made any sense.

The only words that completely penetrated my shock and panic were "I'm going to find my mother."



I had returned to my side of the bench. Middle-ground gazebo rules had returned in full force. I hadn't spoken for a long while, and my mind was still trying to capture the gravity of Edward's departure.

"Do you think... h-how long..." I stammered dumbly, my words as unorganized as my thoughts.

Luckily, Edward knew me well enough to understand what I was attempting to ask. "I don't know," he answered uncertainly as a light sprinkle of rain began falling. That answer was so ridiculously unacceptable that my head abruptly swung to meet his gaze.

"You don't *know*?" I tried to inject my voice with venom and anger, but it came out as a pathetic sob. His eyes were once again fixed on his hands, the object gone, and his hair dampened from the humidity of the misty air.

"Maybe... before school is out?" he offered with furrowed brows and a calculating expression at his hands. He had no idea what he was doing.

"I'll go with you," I pleaded desperately, and his head began shaking before I could even finish. "I can talk to Esme, and she'll—"

"Fuck, Bella," he sighed, finally meeting my gaze, and I knew he'd never let me. "We both know you can't come," he added in a rational voice, and you know things are bad when Edward

becomes your voice of reason.

So I conceded in that respect, but there were other straws to grasp. “What if it makes it worse for you, Edward? What if she... does it again?” I hedged reluctantly, and the brief flash of pain in his eyes assured me that he understood what I was getting at.

“Maybe she will,” he replied flatly with a tight shrug—like it wouldn’t bother him nearly as much as we both knew it would. Then I really would have to track her down to spit in her face. At best. Still, he wasn’t going to surrender to me anymore.

This idea of his was either really admirable, or completely insane, and there was no way of knowing which.

But Edward was determined to find out. I realized then, as I regarded his set jaw and resolute stare that... this was one of those things that he had to do. On his own. For better or worse. It wasn’t something I could help him accomplish, and it pained me to no end. I wondered... was this how he felt when I went to Phoenix?

I was praying the fear I felt wasn’t evident in my eyes as I met his. “Before summer starts,” I reiterated in a commanding tone that shook despite my every effort. He nodded, and the motion made a lock of his hair fall, obstructing his eye. I reached across the distance to push it away. “Promise me,” I whispered pleadingly.

His fists were clasped so tightly on the table that his knuckles had turned white. “I’ll be home before summer starts, I promise,” he assured me, and even though his voice rang deep with conviction and honesty, it did nothing to assuage my fear.

I nodded, and he slowly lifted himself from the bench. I was frozen in place. It didn’t make sense for him to do this now. He was too tired, and it was too rainy and late for him to drive safely. I couldn’t understand his justification for not waiting, but I feared that voicing this concern would make me seem selfish and unsupportive when I begged him to stay—so I didn’t, and the pit of my stomach twisted and churned.

The rain was coming down harder now, beating on the shingled roof of the gazebo as he stepped behind me and pulled me to him. His strong arms wrapped around my shoulders while his face found my neck and kissed it sweetly. I refused to say goodbye, and he must have shared my sentiment on it, because he didn’t either. Instead, he simply held my back to his chest, planting cold kisses around the necklace I wore and whispering in my ear that he loved

me.

I managed a smile and tried my best not to cry when I told him, “I love you, too.” It must have been hard enough without adding the burden of my emotions on top of his own.

When his arms released me, he removed his jacket and draped it around my shoulders. “Cover yourself from the rain when you leave,” he ordered, correctly predicting that I was going to stay until he departed. I nodded numbly without meeting his gaze. I wanted to spare him the guilt of seeing the pain and fear in my eyes.

My eyes remained fixed on the river, and I could feel him retreating from the gazebo without looking over my shoulder. It felt like a chunk of myself had ripped away from my body, and suddenly, I was freezing cold. My teeth began chattering, and there wasn’t really a monumental moment where I knew he was gone. Truthfully, I sat for a long time and still expected to turn my head and see him behind me. But I couldn’t feel his electricity. I could only feel cold and wet and dread.

One month.

After so long sitting alone in the gazebo, the moon was completely covered by clouds, and the darkness felt suffocating. I lifted my stiff and shivering body from the bench and clutched Edward’s jacket tightly around my torso. I wanted to go home, but my only home just drove away in his car—to seek out the only person that could hurt and victimize him even worse than I could.

I would have to settle for second best.

The rain pounded on my hair as I darted across the yard, and the water on the ground splattered with every step, soaking the bottom of my jeans as I approached the house. It didn’t escape my notice that Edward’s Volvo was absent from the Cullen’s driveway.

I knocked loudly on the door, waited five seconds, then pounded loudly once again. My teeth were still chattering violently when it finally opened. I blinked the raindrops away from my lashes, clutching the leather jacket tighter, ignoring the voices suddenly calling my name from across the yard, and met the weary and anguished gaze of Dr. Cullen.

He stepped aside wordlessly as I entered, and then closed the door behind me with a soft click, silencing the roar of the rain outside. We shared a brief stare, and even though he never

opened his mouth, it was easily the longest conversation we ever had. His sorrowful eyes spoke volumes into mine.

As I stood dripping wet and shivering in his bright foyer, I finally realized that Dr. Cullen probably loved Edward just as much as I did, and that was saying an awful lot. I think he probably had the same realization, because his gaze shifted to one of understanding as he regarded my numb and trembling form.

Our mutual love and concern for Edward made us kindred in a way that no one else would likely ever understand. This was probably why he didn't object as he watched me climb the staircase to the third floor bedroom—as close to home as I could possibly get. I instinctively knew that Carlisle wouldn't make me leave, and no matter what Esme or anyone else had to say about it, I had no plans of doing so until Edward was home, too.

Chapter 45. Chunky Chips-Ahoy



The night of Edward's departure was probably the longest night of my life. I'd stayed up so many nights in the past, but none of them were really comparable. After ascending the stairs to the third floor, I stepped inside of the ruins of my sanctuary, and knew what had to be done.

I began picking up the pieces and cleaning up the mess we'd made.

As a whole, the task seemed daunting and admittedly overwhelming. So instead of focusing on the entire scene before me, I mentally separated it into sections, and commenced tackling only what was directly visible and immediately achievable. I'd just begun clearing the golden carpet when I heard soft knocks at the bedroom door. I'd been prepared for Esme's resistance to my impromptu plan, so when the door suddenly swung open, I was taken aback when it wasn't her standing on the other side.

Instead of Esme, my four friends cautiously entered the bedroom one by one, each eying the aftermath of mine and Edward's altercation with varying expressions of concern and horror. I stood in the middle of the room, still soaking wet and freezing to the bone with hands full of debris, when Jasper immediately lowered himself to the floor to begin assisting me with the task of clearing it.

The paper in my hand crumbled under the weight of my tightly clenched fist as my gaze turned nearly murderous. I had the oddest feeling of being intruded upon in that moment-as if the destruction had been an intimate and personal production that I wanted no one else to witness-let alone touch. It made my face burn hot with humiliation and anger that mine and Edward's privacy was being somehow invaded.

But when Jasper met my gaze, his blonde hair created a veil from the others present, and his silent plea was etched deeply in the hard set of his frown and the low cast of his brow. He was helpless and suffering with concern for his friend, and... perhaps even me? I couldn't be sure

exactly what he was concerned about, but I was certain of this: helplessness is an unusual feeling. It often manifests into an overwhelming need to be constructive, and I was in no mood to deny anyone of that fulfillment-least of all Jasper.

And so, with a defeated sigh, I allowed him to continue clearing papers and debris from the carpet without interference. From his side, Emmett scratched the back of his neck and expelled a loud exhale as his eyes surveyed the fallen bookcase thoughtfully. Without speaking, he carefully traveled to where it lay, and singlehandedly began lifting it back to its position against the wall. Alice moved to the books on the floor and began collecting them, offering me a sad smile from where I crouched on the balls of my toes, gathering clothing and paper.

After a few moments, I realized the sounds of activity had abruptly ceased. I shifted my gaze to the people in the room, and saw them all staring at Rosalie expectantly. She was leaning against the door frame with pursed lips when she met my gaze.

"I'd like to help, Bella, but this whole... manual labor... thing just isn't my forte." She shrugged with a simple shake of her head, stumbling over the term "manual labor." I dismissed her with the best smile I could manage while the others rolled their eyes and continued cleaning.

We worked on the floor for what seemed like hours, clearing debris and books and clothing, and no one really spoke unless it was related to the task at hand. Jasper and Emmett began discussing how to fix the holes in the walls. I tuned them out. But when Alice started for the bed, I shot up from my crouch, rigid in alarm.

"The bed is mine." I informed her stiffly, as if I were laying claim on a community cupcake and not a portion of destruction. Her eyes widened in shock, but she retreated with a nod and instead offered to hunt down a linen closet to procure new blankets and sheets-*that* I could handle.

The night wore on as we labored, and bit by bit, the golden carpet became completely clear of debris. The furniture became righted against the walls. The bed had been graced with new sheets and blankets that weren't familiar to me but weren't tainted with our every mistake. I kept his leather jacket draped safely over the sofa, my eyes sometimes drifting to where it lay.

Without any apprehension, and with some slight instruction from Emmett, I did five loads of laundry. If Carlisle minded that five teenagers were rummaging through his linen closets and utility room, he never made it known. I dumped each new load of clean clothes on the newly made bed and commenced the duty of folding and putting them on hangers. Doing Edward's

laundry was the most oddly comforting chore, and I allowed myself to believe that maybe-if any such thing was possible-in the far distant future when everything was much less convoluted, this would be a common duty of mine. I allowed this fantasy to soothe me. That is... until I stood before his closet door, arms full of shirts and jeans with an anxious stare and a wildly erratic heartbeat.

Rose, somehow sensing my dilemma emerged from her position on the sofa and extricated the hangers from my hands. "Don't get used to this." She smiled. I watched her open the closet door as I retreated and wrung my hands nervously. She fumbled for a moment before the closet was suddenly illuminated in light. It was the only part of Edward's room I'd never seen before, and my sudden curiosity overcame me. My neck strained for a better view from my withdrawn position as she slid hangers aside to make room. As she hung them, I made careful observations on the particulars of his closet: the unexpected tidiness, the average size, the amount of clothing, and the types of shoes on the floor below them. The whole concept of his closet looked entirely innocuous, tremendously fascinating, and absolutely terrifying.

Rosalie's golden hair brushed against his dark shirts as she turned and scanned the rows of clothing. She deciphered the system he had in place, meticulously hanging the clothes according to his structure. My chest felt heavy as I watched another woman put away Edward's clothes. Dismally, I saw her gain an unusual and rare insight into his psyche that I had no way of possessing from where I stood, but suddenly craved. I was aware of the bitterness and envy this image should have summoned, but instead of bitterness, I just felt sadly incapable, a little inadequate, and ironically... hampered.

Everyone finally departed after the sun rose, and Alice enveloped me in a warm embrace before she exited the room. "You're not coming home, are you?" she asked after she released me. I made no move to follow her. With a sad smile and a shake of my head, I lowered myself to the bed, running my hands along the creases in the new comforter to smooth them out. It was brown.

She frowned while gazing around the room that we had all slaved so hard over. "Esme will be upset," she whispered softly before offering me a sideways glance. "But it might be for the best anyways. You two need some space," she said, and I could feel the double-connotation in her words as she disappeared from the doorway.

I closed the door behind her, more exhausted than I'd felt in some time, and leaned with my back against it. The soft oranges of the sunrise filtering in through the balcony doors amplified the golden hue of the carpet as my eyes absorbed the new scene before me. It was immaculate

with the exception of the holes that were still present in the white walls.

I peeled off my hoodie and kicked off my shoes as I walked toward the dresser. I opened the drawers and began pulling out his night clothes. His white t-shirt and dark flannel pajama pants were huge on me, but comforting and soft. I used his bathroom and my blue toothbrush that was still present to brush my teeth. I turned down the unfamiliar blankets and tucked myself into the warmth they were meant to provide. I curled my toes against the cool sheets and nuzzled into his pillow.

When I was finally left without tasks to occupy my hands and mind, I allowed the anguish of his absence to swallow me whole.



Sleep. I binged on it.

I didn't go to school for the remainder of the week. I slumbered in Edward's bed and knowingly plunged myself into nightmare after nightmare. I'd jolt awake, sweating and trembling with terror and desperation, but somehow I'd manage to find the will necessary to force myself back into unconsciousness every time.

It made the time pass more quickly.

There were moments when I awoke and the sun would cast bright slants of light across the immaculate room, illuminating and exaggerating the holes in the wall and drawing my eyes to the only visible flaws. The worst was waking up at night. With the exception of the occasional rain shower, everything was eerily silent and calm. The stillness made me yearn for chaos and disturbance as I tucked the blanket under my chin and burrowed deeper into its safety. In these moments, the room felt strangely foreign to me, which seemed irrational, because I had slept in the room many nights before, but I'd just never slept here so alone.

I never looked at the clock on the bed side table, and my only reference for time was the sun and the darkness. It was complete isolation, but I wasn't awake to really feel the weight of it. I hadn't eaten, but I didn't feel hunger. I drank from the bathroom tap on the rare occasions I would leave the bed to use the bathroom, but I didn't feel thirst. I just felt tired. By the third day, I'd become rather surprised by my lack of visitors. It felt so relieving to be forgotten and left alone while I rested, my mind healing itself as best it could through the binge of sleeping.

Of course, that didn't last.



"Your hair is like... like-" Rosalie's nose scrunched up disdainfully as she eyed my head from where it lay on the pillow. "I won't even waste my stockpile of creativity to insult it properly." She sighed and gracefully lowered herself to the edge of the bed.

She had basically entered the room without my permission, and I had cursed Emmett for giving her the key. It was rather odd that of all people to approach me first, it had been Rosalie.

I yawned and rolled over so that my back was to her. "I'm not going home, so don't even try." My voice was weak from lack of use, and I felt a little pathetic in that moment as I curled my knees up to my chest and burrowed deeper into the blankets. But my mood had turned sour over the course of my binge sleeping and the constant drain of waking night terrors.

I reasoned, if you can't feel pathetic after your boyfriend fucks you before promptly fleeing the state, then when can you? I barely restrained the impulse to say this aloud, because in my heart I knew Edward didn't deserve that.

"Yeah, yeah, not going home. Rebellious teenager. Spurned lover. Whatever," she replied flippantly, standing up and walking around the bed so I could see her. I fought the urge to roll over again. It would have been a little too juvenile. With a grin, she lowered herself to a crouch beside the bed, and rather abruptly, her face transformed into the most charming and tender expression. "Bella," she cooed, leaning close enough to rest her chin on the mattress only inches away from my face. She was still smiling sweetly as she continued in a soft whisper that caressed my face with the scent of some minty gum, "You are by far the smelliest bitch in all of Forks right now, and if you don't get your ass up and take a shower, I'm going to physically harm you in the process of forcing you to do so myself."

At my narrow-eyed glare, she threw her head back in laughter. Rosalie had the most obnoxious laugh I'd ever heard. It wasn't nasal or anything. It just didn't match her body. It was strong and guttural and came from the depths of her belly. I supposed it was more of a deep guffaw, and it annoyed me as I flung the blankets from my body and stalked into the bathroom to shower the three nights worth of sweat from my body and hair.

Edward's shower looked just the same now as it had the only time I'd ever used it. His shampoo was sitting in the same location, and I used it without hesitation, his smell wafting around me comfortingly as I massaged it into my scalp. I used his soap to clean my body and lathered myself in his scent. I used his shaving cream and razor to shave my legs. Everything felt and

smelled like Edward and the hot water eased my muscles. I inwardly thanked Rosalie for forcing me to do it. As the water eventually cooled, I stepped out of his shower and used his towels to dry myself. It was the best I'd felt in days.

When I emerged, the bed was stripped, and a new set of sheets sat atop the mattress. Rosalie motioned with a perfectly manicured hand to the bare bed, and to my surprise, began spreading out the sheet. It seemed so domestic, and so unlike her. This notion was only amplified by the deep crease of concentration between her brows as she fought with the elastic of the fitted sheet. With much amusement, I began helping her with the task, finding the silence with her to be quite nice.

Too nice.

"Don't get used to this either. And also, Alice and Esme are throwing toddler worthy fits over there, you know?" she asked, quirkling a brow at me as we both tucked the sheets under the mattress before adding with a breathy chuckle, "And Emmett actually spent three hours in town last night hunting down a bag of *Chunky Chips-Ahoy* cookies, only to eat one and throw them away."

"Then why haven't they come to check on me?" I sighed apathetically while craftily avoiding the cookie subject that I was in no mood to discuss. Truthfully, I didn't really care, but it seemed like the right question to ask. I was being given such a wide berth.

Rosalie shrugged lightly without meeting my gaze. "That's probably my fault. I threatened various methods of bodily harm if they bothered your sulky-lazy-bitch-time." One corner of her lips pulled up into a little smirk as we spread the top sheet over the mattress.

"And just what gave you the inclination to be my 'sulky-lazy-bitch-time' advocate?" I asked dryly, though I was more than a little perplexed. Rose and I had never been close enough to warrant it.

"Edward asked me too," she answered without hesitation, and at my rigid posture and blank stare, added, "He didn't use the exact term 'sulky-lazy-bitch-time' advocate though. Of course, he wouldn't. It isn't nearly vulgar enough." She sighed while tossing me one corner of the comforter. My brows furrowed in confusion as she continued, her attention fixed on the bedding. "See, when Emmett left to go find his parents, it upset me." She shrugged, and then chuckled while meeting my gaze. "Okay, it pissed me off something fierce," she admitted, now setting her sights on the pillows and offering me pillowcases before continuing, "He was having

this whole identity crisis thing, and when he left to go find them I felt-" She paused, her pillow only half covered as she gazed ahead at nothing in particular. "I felt like what I had to offer him here, in this life, wasn't good enough," she finished in a whisper while shooting me a sideways glance. She seemed a little uncomfortable with her confession as she cleared her throat delicately and resumed her task. "Anyways, I guess Edward just thought you could use a sympathetic perspective or something. He asked me to look after you." She shrugged casually, and my chest was suddenly filled with a heavily suffocating weight.

I dropped my pillow, grasping my chest as my face contorted in pain. I never even realized I'd felt that way until I heard the words escaping her mouth. *I felt like what I had to offer him here, in this life, wasn't good enough.* A breathless sob erupted from my chest, and Rosalie met my gaze with alarm and incredulity.

"You're crying?" she asked dumbly while tears began trailing down my cheeks, and I shot her a glance of exasperation. Her mouth fell into a disapproving frown. "Get a hold of yourself. I'm sure it's not as bad as it seems." She crossed her arms over her chest and regarded me uncertainly, as if she was unsure of how to deal with my visible emotions.

I suddenly had the most overwhelming urge to just... talk-about everything. Edward was the only person I ever really talked to, but even with him there were things I couldn't say. It occurred to me that I had never really been entirely open and candid to anyone at all. It was like this huge flood gate was shuddering and creaking under the strain of it all, just waiting for the chance to burst and drown the nearest bystander. It wasn't so much that I felt like Rosalie was the best candidate to hear it or sympathize. Truthfully, she was just there and convenient.

I started with the most pressing thing first. "I'm terrified for him," I admitted, and that was the truth. My own hurt and rejection and whatever else I felt was eclipsed by my fear that he was out there somewhere, getting his heart and hopes crushed into oblivion while I wasted away in his bed, helpless.

Rose didn't say anything, instead lowering herself to the bed and patting the space next to her, as if she sensed my all encompassing need to get it all out. Thus, I took the offer, sinking down beside her while my hair dripped dark circles into the bedding, and I began my purge.

I must have spoken for hours, and she thankfully granted me her ears without interference. Her blue eyes were intently studying my face as I confessed everything that had been festering deep inside of my mind for the past week. I told her about the day of destruction, wearing a deep, red blush that I made no attempt to hide. I told her how I'd felt powerful and lost control.

I admitted how badly I'd hurt Edward that afternoon. I even told her about the sex and how painful it had been for us both. I described the shade his blood had been on his neck and how the grass had seemed lush and vivid as I'd vomited onto it from above.

The more I spoke, the more I began realizing subtle truths that had never really occurred to me then. Maybe I was too tired to process everything entirely, or perhaps the wounds were just too fresh to approach it from a rational perspective at the time it'd transpired, but I suddenly realized that those two people that I'd been speaking of for the past hours weren't Edward and Bella at all. I felt in it the depths of my soul as I described our actions, hostility, and reckless abandon. Those two people were the manifestation of every evil thing that had been done to them, and the realization abruptly stunned me into silence-my explanation of the fallen bookcase left only half complete and lingering in the air between Rosalie and me.

I was Edward's Phil. He was my Elizabeth. I victimized him, and he abandoned me. I wondered if he even realized it, wherever he was. I had a dual aching then. One was to be close to him and tell him that I'd finally figured that day out so that I could apologize-the right way. The other was to be close to him and grasp what we'd had and destroyed securely, so he could never abandon me.

Rose eyed me warily from her position at my side. "So you pulled down the bookcase?" She spoke for the first time in as many hours, but I snapped my mouth closed. That conversation had served its purpose, and I had better insight now. Even though I had no way of contacting Edward to finally explain myself, I felt marginally comforted by the fact that I'd have this knowledge when he returned.

All I had to do was make it until he came home.

I smiled at Rose and stood from the bed. "I pulled down the bookcase, but look at it now." I nodded in its direction where it stood proud and unaltered. It hadn't been conquered for long, and I had finished binging and purging.

Edward

WIDE AWAKE

The Volvo smelled... really fucking awful. My nose scrunched up, and I began eying the backseat for the source of the offensive odor. I had more discarded fast food bags than I'd ever willingly allow anyone else to see. It had to be that something that just... really fucking smelled, and it was going to drive me out of the car if I couldn't find it.

"It's yo-ou," a sing-song voice teased from my side and my jaw locked. I closed my eyes and sunk into my seat with deep and calming breaths. *She's not here.* I chanted over and over in my mind, and when my eyes opened, they were gazing right into Bella's.

"Yes, I am," she whispered with a smirk and leaned back into the passenger seat, her red skirt spilling over my upholstery and tainting it with wrong.

"No. You're not," I repeated while avoiding her gaze, then added in a barely audible whisper, "And I don't smell." *Right?* That was going to make a shitty impression-if any impressions were made today, that is.

She snorted, and I successfully resisted the urge to stare at her legs, or lean in and smell her curly hair. *Fucking imposter.* The first time she appeared in my passenger seat, I'd been driving and I'd nearly wrapped the Volvo around a fucking telephone pole. Now, she just "decides" to spring up out of nowhere... sporadically. Annoyingly.

"Yes you do."

Shit. Not one of these again.

"No, I don't." I sighed, still refusing to meet her gaze.

"Do too," she countered with a chirp, and I could hear her clothing shift as she moved closer to my side. I inwardly scoffed. *Like Bella would ever chirp.*

"Do not," I huffed in annoyance, willing her to leave while squeezing the steering wheel in frustration. I didn't want to put up with this bullshit today.

"Do too, do too, do too!" she repeated obnoxiously close to my ear.

My hands gripped the steering wheel roughly as her voice kept repeating "Do too" until I couldn't handle it anymore. "Shut the fuck up!" I snapped, finally meeting her gaze with a glare. *Fuck*, she was such an annoying bitch.

Her red lips fell into a pout, and she pivoted her body to lean her head against the glass window. "You hurt my feelings," she whispered with a frown, shifting her gaze to her hands in her lap and putting on a good show-like always. The sight of that expression on my girl's face brought a perfunctory pang to my chest, but only because it was instinctual. I had to remind myself that *this wasn't* Bella. She had no feelings to hurt.

I rolled my eyes and shifted my gaze back to the building. "You know, this is a bad time for me. Come back when I'm in the general vicinity of something sharp, so I can gauge my fucking eyes out," I replied absently as my eyes scanned the street one more time. The sun had just risen, and the sky was bathed in soft hues of orange and pink. Springtime in Chicago.

"Edward," she tisked disapprovingly while propping her foot up on my dash. I sneered sideways in annoyance, and it seemed to please her. "Must you be so cruel to your own psyche?" She smirked knowingly as I struggled to ignore her presence.

It was like I was getting crazier by the second. I mean, she just kept coming back. *So much for my Adderall theory*. After I'd finally left the Forks boundary line, I'd pulled over and slept for hours upon hours inside the Volvo. I couldn't continue traveling in such an incoherent state. I just knew I had to leave Forks first, because if I hadn't left at that exact moment, I'd never have been able to.

That round of sleep had gotten me to Chicago safely, and since I'd arrived, I'd been fending it off so well that I'd become rather proud of my control. Of course, eluding sleep had its pitfalls. Most notably... *her*.

"We're not crazy," she defended indignantly while retreating her shunned foot. "Crazy people don't *know* they're crazy. It's what makes them *so damned crazy*," she explained, and from my periphery I could see her lifting her hair, sweeping it away from her face. "Stop being all..." she trailed off in thought while bunching up her curls and letting them drop in cascades down her shoulders. "Boy, Interrupted." She abruptly snorted and giggled while I rolled my eyes at the display. She always spent more time talking to herself than me.

Oh, wait a minute. I do that too, don't I?

I am so fucking fucked-up.

After her giggles ceased, she sighed long and hard, and then the vehicle settled into a glorious silence. I used the opportunity to concentrate on the townhouse and tried my best at blocking her out. It was the best I could hope for in these situations, and I really had to keep my head today. Today was the day I was going to just fucking... do it. No more excuses.

I had been in Chicago for two weeks, and I hadn't talked to *her* yet-even though it only took me five days to find her. It was surprisingly easy with the information from Carlisle's folder. She had lived in the same old townhouse for three years now.

This morning was my first attempt to see her... to spy on her. Whatever. It was a first, either way. I couldn't see any cars parked on the curb, and I'd spent the majority of the night scrutinizing the exterior face of her home. It looked nearly dilapidated, and I found myself repeatedly consulting the yellow manila folder to verify the address's accuracy. None of the windows were illuminated throughout the night, and I'd grown suspicious about whether or not she was home. Or if this even was her home.

My mind had been running frantic with thoughts and scenarios as I stared out my windshield. If I was really lucky, she wouldn't already have another family. That's what had happened to Emmett, and I knew it had devastated him. His mother and father had separated, but both of them already remarried and had children by the time he found them last summer. Still, I couldn't deny the look of acceptance in his eyes when he'd told me the story of his experience. They didn't want him in their lives, and he'd told me how happy they were. It didn't make him nearly as bitter as it *should* have.

"I always knew it was a possibility," he'd explained on my balcony the evening I left Forks. "They weren't mean, or rude to me or anything, they just didn't have room for me in their lives." He had shrugged as if it was no big deal-as if he'd been expecting it all along. At my disbelieving expression he'd continued, "It's not my place to barge into their lives and start demanding shit." I'd wanted to tell him that-yes, it was his place. He was their fucking child for Christ's sake, but before I could say the words, he'd swiftly added, "I already had everything I needed right here, Edward. I just needed to find that out for myself."

And so he had let them go, and it had shown with clarity on his face. I'd been shocked that he

was capable of discussing them so casually. I couldn't even hear the word "Chicago" without curling into myself. But Emmett found acceptance by confronting what he'd lost.

That was what I wanted.

More than anything.

Some part of my mind knew, the more awful she was to me, the easier it would be to let her go. At the very best, I'd apologize for everything I did, and then leave before I could manage to ruin her new life too. She wouldn't forgive me, but I'd never expected that anyways.

This was a ridiculously selfish experience, and *shit*-I knew that. I knew the only one with anything to gain in this whole fucked up decision I'd made was *me*. By doing it, I was hurting her, I was hurting Bella, and... God only knows who else. But I'd had no doubts that evening on the balcony that I had to grow a pair and just face this shit. No more shortcuts.

"Why won't you call me?" Bella suddenly whispered in a cautious voice, breaking me from my silent reflection. My hands tightened around the steering wheel once again. Why she was bringing this up *again*-and now of all times, was beyond me.

"Fuck off," I growled low in my chest as I fought to ignore her. She really popped up at the most inconvenient moments, and I was in no mood for this argument.

This dispute would always progress in an annoyingly predictable fashion. I'd start by reminding her that Esme's house didn't have a phone. Both she and Alice had their own cell phones, and they'd probably never had a need for the extra expense of one. On the other hand, Bella had never had a need for a cell phone. Thus, I concluded that there was no direct way to contact Bella by phone. To which my annoying and incorporeal companion would counter with a reminder that I could call Alice directly, and she'd allow me to speak with Bella. To which I would counter that I wished not to bother Alice, and to which she would again counter with her doubt that Alice would be bothered. To which I would counter, "Fuck off."

See? I was saving us a whole shitload of time.

"But you *want* me to stay," she murmured while twirling a lock of hair around her finger. It was so fucking disgusting. I couldn't decide which was more disturbing-her being here, or me actually acknowledging it *every single time*. "You want to talk to me, so why won't you pick up a phone and call?" she asked once again.

"I'm done talking to *you*," I informed her briskly.

Bella had everyone back in Forks, and I'd made certain that everyone knew that I'd wanted her looked after before I'd departed. I'd even enlisted Rosalie.

Emmett had told me what a difficult time she'd had while he was away, and...

I don't fucking know.

I just felt like she could help my girl in some way that no one else could. I'd also asked her to stick by her side during school, since I knew that Bella would have difficulty walking to classes with Emmett or Jasper. Alice was a great friend and cousin to Bella, but nobody, and I mean *nobody*, fucked with Rosalie Hale. I knew after I'd called her that evening... I'd be spending less time in Chicago worrying over Bella.

"If anyone touches her, I'll rip their fucking balls off," she'd assured me firmly, and then had added, "Or tits. Whichever." I'd heard her shrug around the phone, and I'd known that she was dead serious. Rosalie was hard-core like that.

Bella was silent for a few moments before emitting a loud huff. "You know what, Edward?" She faced me then, ramrod in her seat, and I avoided her gaze as her mouth opened and closed repeatedly-seemingly unable to complete her thought.

My thought? Shit, this was confusing.

"Whatever," she finally spat and sunk back into her seat, crossing her arms over her chest with a glower. I had made her angry. I suppressed a satisfied grin.

"Fine," I concluded, rather pleased that I had won an argument for once.

"Fine!" she yelled in an enraged concession, her cleavage heaving with her huffs and glaring ahead. She was always grouchy like this right before she vanished.

I closed my eyes and ground my teeth. I hated admitting that I wanted her here. I despised the notion that her presence offered me the smallest measure of comfort-just because she *looked* like my girl. I hated the power she had over me because of this fact. I hated that she was about

to leave, and I really fucking hated that I hated she was about to leave. "FINE!" I finally shouted back in annoyance, and when I opened my eyes, the seat beside me was vacant once again.



I spent my time focusing very carefully on the yellow door to the building. It looked so goddamn abandoned that it was making me second-guess my intel. I probably could have called Carlisle to ask him for further assistance. He did have access to medical records, and far more resources than I could ever manage to attain. But I couldn't call Carlisle, and even though I had been giving Red Bella idiotic excuses the past days of why I couldn't call Bella either, I knew it had nothing to do with cell phone logistics.

I couldn't call any of them until I was sure that I could be better. Like Emmett.

By nine, I had decided to leave and was checking the Volvo's fuel gauge in consideration of a fill-up. I reasoned that I could find my bearings later, but I was suddenly really fucking exhausted.

Before I could turn the key in the ignition, I saw the yellow door shift slightly. My hand froze on the key, and my body stiffened in anticipation as it slowly opened. A woman with long dark hair emerged, covering her face from the morning sun and closing the door behind her. She was wearing a long, brown trench coat that stopped at her calves and hid most of her form. I strained over my dashboard to catch a glimpse of her face, but she was already down the steps and walking in the opposite direction.

I released a breath I didn't realize I was holding, and my heart was suddenly thudding wildly in my chest-at the mere glimpse of a woman who may or may not have been my mother. There was no fucking way I was going to make it to her door if and when she returned.

I let my head fall to my seat with a shuddering exhale and waited.

I wasn't sure what I was waiting for, but I just had this feeling I should. My eyes closed for a few moments, but I opened them abruptly when I realized the risk involved. I watched a couple children traveling on the sidewalk with school bags on their backs. I shook my head quickly to stop that train of thought. It'd be out soon.

She returned after only twelve minutes with a brown paper bag clutched to her stomach. Her head was angled toward the ground, but I could see her face more clearly as she approached her building.

It *had* to be her.

I'd spent hundreds of nights sketching her face, and though this face looked more sallow, older, and pale, I was ninety percent confident it was the same person. The realization had me rigid in my seat. I watched her climb the steps and open the door to disappear inside. She didn't need to unlock it. I allowed this detail to distract me, and I somehow managed to spend fifty minutes dissecting it in my mind. She took a senseless risk by not locking her door. Then I decided it wasn't so much a dissection, as much as a really shitty method of noting the obvious.

By eleven, I'd grown weary with watching the door in anticipation of more movement. I wasn't sure if I wanted her to emerge or not, but of one thing I was certain: if I got this over with now, I could be back on the highway to Forks by nightfall.

With an agonized sigh, I reached a trembling hand to the door handle, only to pull it away again. I did this four times before I managed to pull it and open the door. Even then I sat in my seat, nervously tapping the steering wheel and huffing so frequently that it nearly made me lightheaded. After thirty minutes, I'd managed to exit the car, and I kept my eyes trained on my reflection in my window. I bit the inside of my cheek and raked my fingers through my hair and wished that I had kept my leather fucking jacket because it suddenly felt like a really comforting notion. Then, thinking about my jacket made me think of Bella, and I wondered if she was wearing it at that exact moment in lieu of the hoodie.

I allowed the vision that thought created to distract me for a moment as I rested my forehead on the cool metallic roof of the Volvo. I imagined my girl walking to class next to Rosalie, swimming in my leather and occasionally leaning down to inhale my scent. I imagined the sun reflecting off of her hair and embellishing the auburn-red tones that lie hidden beneath the flat brown. I imagined her smiling at something, and I allowed it to transform into laughter. The laughter felt closer, as if right by my ear, echoing through my head melodically and forcing my lips to curl upwards into an involuntarily grin.

I lifted my head from the car and turned, opening my eyes and allowing my smile to grow into one of silent relief.

There she stood. All fucking red and perfect with the most compassionate and tender expression. I wanted to hold her tight and kiss her on her red lips. If only I was a few additional degrees of crazier, maybe that would have been possible.

Her brown eyes shone as she gazed up at me and smiled warmly. "You wanted me." She sighed, seeming rather happy as I nodded in concession. She wasn't real, but I'd be damned if I was going to forbid myself the comfort she granted me at this moment. I needed it more than anything.

"I always want you." I said honestly, finally allowing myself to believe that this was my girl and not some materialization of my incoherency, because it made it better. I tried to ignore the complete lack of pull that the sight of my girl would have normally generated in my chest. I tried to ignore the still-present emptiness that plagued me as her red lips grinned.

She chuckled and rolled her eyes, pushing off the car and skipping forward. Her red skirt swayed and billowed in the breeze as she turned to me. "You coming, or what?" She smiled, and I inhaled a deep lungful of Chicago spring air to steady my nerves. She was so fucking perfect. Even pushing me to do what she knew I needed but was too afraid to accomplish on my own.

I shuffled to her side, and we stood on the street, both gazing at the yellow door. She kept skipping in front of me, coaxing me closer with her reassuring grins and gentle laughter. When I was close enough to see the grain of the wooden door, Bella and all her red hopped up the two steps and turned to me expectantly. My heart began thrumming in my chest once again and my breathing accelerated. My palms were sticky with sweat as I traveled to where she stood, climbing the two steps with apprehension and unease.

And then suddenly, I was just fucking there: at the door, face to face with yellow and my mental manifestation of a girlfriend standing at my side in provocative clothing with an encouraging red-lipped grin. I raised my fist while gazing into her brown doe eyes and made a million silent pleas as it lingered in the air.

She sighed and began wringing her hands in an odd gesture of anxiety. "I love you," she whispered without breaking my gaze, and even though I knew I was just telling myself that, it gave me the strength I needed.

My fist met the wood with three standard knocks and my body went rigid in anticipation as I waited. Bella was there, swaying her hips from side to side, red skirt swinging around her knees, and her hands clasped in front of her, lips pursed, and head down. I scrutinized her posture to distract myself until I eventually heard movement on the other side of the door. My pulse quickened and my throat contracted with my swallows as I kept one foot planted more firmly than the other, unconsciously prepared to make a run for it.

Before this plan could evolve into something I could act upon, the knob turned, and the yellow door opened. My racing heart stuttered and lurched as I gazed into the open sliver of darkness and a face emerged. Her eyes were sunken and bloodshot and she had to squint to look at me, slowly raising her gaze.

I swallowed and felt my fists clench of their own accord. My stomach sank and... it was too fucking late to go back, I realized as her eyes met mine. I couldn't have torn my gaze from hers to look at Bella if I had wanted to-and I kind of did. We seemed to be having some kind of epically pregnant pause. Her eyes were blank and completely devoid of all emotion and depth as they stared into mine. It summoned an unsettling sensation that rose into my throat and forced yet another thick swallow of apprehension.

Abruptly, something in her eyes shifted and the door was being violently swung open. Startled by the rapid motion, I flinched and braced myself for an impact, though I had no idea what to fear. Instead of the impact I was expecting, she stood in the open door with an expression of sheer panic on her face. She stood for only a fraction of a moment before she flew forward and grasped my face in her hands.

Her eyes became wild and wide as they scrutinized my face, only inches away. "What is your name?" she asked in a raggedly grating voice. I was stunned entirely fucking motionless and startled by her behavior as she frantically grasped my face tighter. "Your. Name." She repeated in a frenzied whisper that shook me.

"E-Ed-Edw..." I stuttered dumbly before grounding myself enough to answer completely, "Edward Masen." I used the name she'd be familiar with.

Her sharp intake of air was punctuated by her body unexpectedly colliding with mine, and I struggled to remain upright as her hands left my cheeks and wrapped forcefully around my neck. I just kind of stood on the stoop unresponsive and bewildered with my hands resting limply at my sides as she embraced me. I pushed back the emotion that fought to emerge over the notion that my mother was hugging me. If I went there, I'd be completely fucked.

From over her shoulder, my eyes drifted to red, and I was suddenly gazing at Bella's grin. She raised her hands in an expectant gesture, obviously cheering me to return the hug as my mother clung to me firmly. Hesitantly, I lifted my hands, watching Bella's red lips curl into a wider smile of encouragement as I allowed them to encircle her waist.

It was the most uncomfortable fucking hug I'd ever experienced. The awkwardness of the situation had made me still partially rigid, and the stance was only amplified by her stiff and boney figure pressed against mine. We stood for many moments and my discomfort grew, but I was uncertain if withdrawing would be impolite.

I decided I really didn't give a fuck.

When my hands left her waist and gently nudged her shoulders, I briefly panicked that she wouldn't release me and I'd have to either shove more firmly or endure the remainder of her... whatever this was. Neither option seemed acceptable at that moment. Fortunately, she must have sensed my change in compliance because she slowly retreated back to the doorway, her eyes fixed on mine the entire time.

My chest felt cold and vacant, and I realized I must have been injecting all of my detachment into my cold stare as I gazed at her numbly, but the hug had bothered me more than I wanted to admit, or her to notice.

She smelled shitty to, I noted dryly.

I heard Bella's soft snicker at my side and unwillingly, my lips twitched, because... *goddamn it*, she'd always have that effect on me-no matter the situation. Apparently misreading my amusement, my mother reached for my hand and tugged me gently toward the door with a sudden smile. I allowed her to pull me into the doorway as my eyes met Bella's. She frowned at my reluctant expression disapprovingly and waved for me to go of my own accord. Bitch.

My mother began hurling questions at me as she led me through the doorway into a darkened and stench filled room that made me recoil instinctively. "How are you? Where have you been living? Did you stay in the city? I never could bring myself to leave. Do you still play piano? Is spaghetti still your favorite food?" She finally turned to my blank expression, and her eyes, though no longer void of emotion, still appeared grey and vacant with just an inkling of excitement mingled beneath.

I remained silent as my eyes shifted around the stench filled room. I wasn't sure what it was meant to be. Perhaps, a sitting room or a living room? Maybe even a parlor room or den? It looked awful, and I could hear the tell-tale scratching of vermin in the walls. There was a sofa on the far end of the room that looked brown but was probably once a light tan. What kind of shit hole was this woman living in?

When my gaze once again shifted to hers, she was wringing her hands nervously, scanning the room with her wide and vacant excitement-laced eyes. "Can I get you something to dri-" She abruptly paused with a noticeable rigidity and jerked her gaze to mine, all traces of excitement vanished. "You shouldn't be here." She whispered sharply, and I was thankful beyond all reason that I hadn't let my earlier hopeful emotions penetrate me.

"I know," I said honestly before looking over my shoulder and searching my side for my lifeline. I found her by the door swinging her red skirt from side to side and smiling at me sweetly. She began humming something under her breath, and when I recognized it as the Scooby Doo theme song, one soft chuckle escaped my lips. Her red lips curled up into a smirk and she winked at me.

Sufficiently distracted from the pain her words threatened to produce, I turned to my mother and cleared my throat. "I just came to apologize, and then I'll be on my way," I spoke stiffly while her eyes scrutinized my face in that uncomfortable way again.

"You have his nose," she blurted and took one step closer before her brows furrowed softly. "Apologize?" she asked, tilting her head and searching my eyes.

I nodded curtly and somehow managed to gather the courage to follow through. I think I had just blocked out all emotions, and the numbness somehow made it possible. "I know I fucked up back then and ruined your life, and I just wanted you to know I was-am-very sorry." My voice was so controlled, it even surprised *me*. In my ears, I could hear Bella's soothing voice, but couldn't discern her words.

Her gray eyes narrowed and furrowed deeper as she searched my face again and stepped closer. "What did you just say?" she asked, and I could see her hands in my periphery tighten into fists at her sides. I repeated my apology once more, though this time refrained from using expletive. I wondered briefly if maybe it had ruined the sincerity of apology, though she only seemed to grow more confused and upset as she stepped closer once more. I was bracing myself for impact once again, knowing well and good that I'd let this woman physically harm me and not do one fucking thing to stop it. From somewhere in the room, I could hear Bella's soft snort.

"What do you have to apologize for?" she grated and I could see her jaw lock as her eyes shone with moisture and I battled to remain at ease. I hated her in that moment as I stood in her shit hole of an apartment and stared at her trembling frame of a skeleton. As if this weren't already difficult enough, she wanted me to say the fucking words and everything. Couldn't she just

accept a fucking apology? Couldn't she give me that?

"I'm sorry for the... fire, and I'm sorry I didn't help..." My voice wavered and I was praying she wouldn't make me say more. Bella's voice in my ear was whispering about the most inane things: the perfect temperature in which chocolates chips melt, the correct way to cut beef-against the grain for maximum tenderness. She plucked pieces of the past in an attempt to soothe me.

It barely worked.

My mother blanched and recoiled before shaking her head. "We should sit." She motioned to the sofa, and in the darkness of the room, I could just barely discern a glimmer on her cheek. The realization that she was crying made me suddenly infuriated-whether with her or myself, I couldn't say. But I walked to the dark sofa and stiffly lowered myself to perch on the edge of it.

Bella was now at my side, and she smiled at me tenderly. "Once you have your sauté tray ready you have to be quick, considering the smoke point of the oil you're using. Proper prep is key, Edward. " She had the most stern expression on her face, and I was able to recall with clarity the day she had said those words to me. I was thankful for this version of Red Bella. She was much more realistic. I allowed myself a ghost of a smile and shifted my gaze to my mother.

The room was silent, and I wasn't going to speak first. I didn't feel comfortable on the sofa, but I didn't dare move one inch. Every now and again, Bella would speak and mention something familiar and soothing. After what felt like an hour of still silence between us, my nose had begun to acclimate itself to the stench in the room. My hands were still clammy, but I kept them palm down on my knees, refusing to flinch whenever she would make a movement.

Looking at her face felt so different and foreign to me. I had been so long looking at faces that weren't like mine. People would sometimes make attempts to link Carlisle's and my features if they were unaware of our situation, but nothing was really there. Here, I was looking at things that were familiar to my own face. I had sketched her lips and chin for years, but really looking at them felt tangible and gave me an odd and false sensation of belonging.

She rested on the arm of a nearby chair and began smoothing her hair with her hands. There was a window behind her, illuminating her silhouette and making it impossible to see her face clearly anymore. I was thankful. "You blame yourself for something," she whispered as she dropped her hands to her lap.

A humorless chuckle erupted from my chest before I could suppress it. "Is there anything I *shouldn't* be blamed for?" I asked flatly, ignoring Bella's tisk of disapproval from my side. She was playing Bella too well.

"Tell me why you think these things," she whispered in an almost venomous hiss, and I could see the dark outline of her shoulders grow rigid with tension. I could feel one corner of my lips pull down into a hard scowl as my eyes narrowed.

The Bella at my side had only a soft sigh of defeat and one single word to offer to this exchange. "Damn."

"I think these things because I did them," I growled unabashedly as my anger and resentment mingled and consumed my emotions. "I think these things because I'm the motherfucker who said 'Hey, it's hot, dry, and there's a fuck-load of fabric in here. Let's use candles,'" I spat dryly, finding less enjoyment from her wince than I'd expected. I knew it was wrong, but I had no control over the growing volume of my voice. "I think these things because I watched him fucking burn to death and did nothing. Is that what you want to hear? Are you happy now?" I finished, or at least I thought I had, but surprising us both, my body lurched upright, and I was sneering down at her silhouette. "I think these things because my mother threw me away like a piece of curbside garbage. Tell me if these answers are satisfying you, mommy, because I could go on for hours. I've had ten fucking years to think real hard on it." I sneered, and... *fuck, that felt good*-for about one minute, and then I was horrified by my outburst and immediately sunk back down to the sofa. "Sorry," I choked out remorsefully, attempting to regain control of my emotions by inhaling the stench of the air deeply. What the fuck was I doing? I had lost sight of my purpose, and Bella had conveniently vanished from my side. This was accomplishing nothing. Emmett had no fucking idea how easy he'd had it.

The dark room fell into an uneasy silence, and after many moments of watching her figure's stiff outline in my periphery, I began forming an escape plan. My mind idly calculated: I could be off the sofa, past the kitchen, and out the door in three seconds flat if I ran fast enough. And trust me. I'd run fast enough.

After maybe twenty minutes of this charged silence, an abrupt whimper came from her vicinity, and I shifted my gaze enough to see her hand cover her mouth. I furrowed my brows and dropped my face into my hands, feeling the guilt of my outburst consume me with remorse. My escape plan was looking so attractive that I scooted closer to the edge of the sofa, ready to depart.

Suddenly, she spoke in an even and toneless voice, all evidence of her whimper vanished, "I know you haven't known me for the last ten years, so you can't really appreciate what I'm about to say but...." She paused, and I could see her head turn to gaze out the window, the soft line of her profile illuminated and sharp. "I've never felt more deserving of death than I do at this moment," she finished so quietly that I had to strain my ears to hear.

Her words puzzled me, and I kept my body still and prepared for escape. *Proper prep is key, Edward.* With an agonized sigh, she rose from her position and walked to me. My body hummed with tension every inch she grew closer to me. When she had come close enough, she crouched down, tilting her head to gaze into my eyes. The hard set of her frown appeared loathing and disgusted, and the sight of it made my stomach churn despite my insistence to remain unaffected.

"The fire was electrical, Edward," she whispered, allowing her face to relax minimally as she edged closer to my knees. My brows pulled together in confusion as I scrambled and drove my back into the sofa. Still, she edged closer and continued, "I never once blamed you, and you can't take one fragment of fault for anything." Her expression turned furious as she approached me, now close enough to touch my knees while I cringed away. Her hands abruptly grabbed mine and squeezed them tightly as she stared into my eyes with a frantic expression. "I won't let you."

"Stop lying." A thunderous and startling scream erupted from my throat as I lurched off the sofa and flung myself at the door.

My hand had just grasped the knob when she begged in a pained and desperate whimper, "Please don't go."

I might have been able to ignore the plea if it weren't punctuated by loud and agonized sobs that tore at my conscience. I smacked my palm against the door with a piercing growl of frustration as I turned and collapsed against it in defeat. Whether or not I wanted to admit it, she had more power over me than anyone, Bella included. It made me impossibly more resentful and bitter.

My body slid down the door and I rested against it with my knees to my chest. Ready to leave, knowing I couldn't, and hating every fucking second of it. And where *the fuck* was Bella when I needed her? My head rested against the wood as I stared ahead blankly. I sat for a long while in the dark against the door, and the only sounds of the apartment were her constant stifled sobs and the distant scratching of vermin. I closed my eyes and wrapped my arms tightly around my

knees. I imagined I was in my bed with my girl. Her cold toes were caressing my ankles, and I was smiling into her hair. I was asleep within seconds.

Sometime during the afternoon, I had lowered my body and curled up against the door. I didn't get much sleep before I was awoken with a violent recollection of flames licking at my chest. I jerked upright, frantically rubbing at my eyes and trembling against the yellow wood. At first I had forgotten where I was, and it took me a moment of panic to become lucid and coherent enough to remember everything. My breaths escaped in pants, and my dampened face felt cold and heavy.

I allowed myself a good while to recover from the dream mixed with the panic of waking from it in an unfamiliar location. I desperately craved a cigarette and cursed myself for leaving them in the car. I strained my ears to listen for any movement inside of the dark building, too apprehensive to begin looking for myself. After many minutes of hearing nothing, I rose from my position and stood awkwardly while stretching my stiff muscles.

Deciding I could exit unnoticed and overwhelmed with the craving that gripped me, I delicately twisted the knob of the door and eased it open. It creaked slightly, forcing me to pause and scowl at the antiquated hinges disdainfully. Eventually, I had worked it open just far enough to slip out and close it softly. It had already begun to grow dark, and I could feel the air cooling with the setting sun. The evening air was staggeringly fresh compared to the smell to which I had nearly grown acclimated.

I made a bee-line for the Volvo and had a cigarette out and in my hand within moments. And then I was left with this... opportunity. I could have left then as I leaned over my seat and retrieved my cigarette lighter from the console. I could have escaped this whole fucked up situation and gone on with my life.

But I couldn't, and if I were being truthful with myself, it didn't really have anything to do with her plea for me to stay. I was curious about the shit she'd said, and I wanted to know what it meant. I wanted to know why, if she truly didn't blame me, she would send me away. It was always easier for me to just believe she hated me for what happened. It made sense to me. It made everything fit and fall into place the more I dwelled on it over the years. Now I was left with questions, and they consumed my every thought.

I sat on the front stoop of her building and smoked my cigarette, watching the cars and people and leaving my mind blank for the moment-until the door behind me opened. I turned my head and squinted against the ray of setting sun that fell on my face.

Her stare was blank and hollow, yet questioning. It was interesting how her every emotion was simply lacing the "nothing whatsoever" that was already present in her eyes.

"I was afraid you'd left," she admitted quietly, hand still lingering on the knob. I wordlessly lifted my hand in explanation before shifting my gaze back to the street.

After a moment I heard the door close, and before I could wonder if she'd gone back inside, she was lowering herself to a position at my side. "You shouldn't smoke. And you shouldn't swear either," she chided disapprovingly.

I chuckled humorlessly. "Seriously?" I arched an eyebrow at her daringly. She had no right, and I could tell as her eyes fell to her lap dejectedly that she knew it too. I took the brief moment of her dejection to really look at her, and I wished I could have found a better word than 'starved corpse' to describe how she looked, but I couldn't. She was nothing like the woman who once hummed me to sleep and made me meals. I couldn't imagine her in a kitchen or doing anything domestic if I tried. It was a little fucking appalling that she had managed to get so... dead.

Belatedly, I smelled a very distinct scent emanating from around her, and I grimaced in disgust as I saw her sway slightly. "You're drunk," I accused sourly, incredulous that she had attempted to chide me for smoking when she was drinking.

She met my gaze and frowned, the lines around her eyes and lips accentuated by the expression. "I wasn't going to, but I... I... it wasn't much." She stumbled, her eyes shining with a very particular glaze of inebriation as she stared at me pleadingly. I looked away in discomfort, wondering idly how often she didn't "have much."

I considered that maybe it was a bad time to ask my questions given her lack of sobriety, but the stillness of the evening and my recent rest had made me feel stronger, and I didn't know how long that strength would last. "Why?" I whispered to my feet, and I didn't need to ask the entire question because she had been expecting it.

She sighed. "I don't know if you could really understand."

"That's a bullshit answer." I dropped my cigarette and used the toe of my boot to grind it into the concrete.

After a weighty pause, I felt her hand come to rest on mine. "Look at me," she appealed sadly, and I did. She shook her head, her coarse and greasy hair brushing the fabric on her shoulder.

"No, Edward. *Look* at me." She gestured to herself in a near slur that I was only now noticing, and then to the door behind her. "Does *this* look like a capable mother to you?" she asked, and I could detect the tone of self-loathing in her voice as she withdrew her hand and glared at the ground bitterly. "I died with your father, and there's no getting that back. I drink every day until I can't think anymore, and then I pass out-sometimes in a pile of my own vomit-all the while wishing for the comfort of death, though knowing I don't deserve it," she finished and peeked at me through her heavily laden lids.

I spoke before I had the chance to really ponder my words. "Well, it's nice to know my flair for ludicrous fucking dramatics is hereditary," I replied bitterly. Her grimace was satisfying. "Of course, at least when I'm doing it, I'm not hurting anyone but myself," I spat and returned my gaze to the street in a refusal to see the sting in her expression. Secretly, I wondered how true my words were but knew she had no way of realizing that I had anyone to hurt. My resentment grew.

"Would you believe me if I said I was sorry?" she asked in a pleading voice, and I scoffed in return. I didn't fail to notice how the upper-hand in this had changed so drastically. I fucking thrived on it. "I had no idea you'd think all these years..." she trailed off into an obvious voice in an attempt to explain herself.

"Let me see if I understand this," I began and turned toward her, a little high on the upper-hand but pissed off and a little disbelieving. She nodded and waited while I formed my assessment. It sounded so fucking ridiculous. "You sent me away because you couldn't be a fit mother... no, no, no. Wait. Not couldn't-*wouldn't*." She flinched and her face contorted into a pained expression, but I continued, "You don't offer me this completely inane and poor fucking excuse before shipping me off, and yet somehow a nine-year-old child is supposed to understand?" My anger grew with the truth of my words, and I could see it reflected in her eyes as remorse. I grew frantic and nearly maniacal as I laughed and smiled resentfully. "You somehow figured that four years of state foster care-which, mind you, is burdened with an overabundance of complete fucking psychopaths and under-qualified care givers-was better than being with my mother?" I asked incredulously, my chest suddenly heaving with sharp and hard breaths that stung my throat.

It was then that it hit me, and it felt like my whole world was shifting on its axis. I'd been surviving for so long off of one single truth alone-and *it was all a lie*. It should have made me feel better and vindicated, but it didn't. It made me fucking sick. All the years I'd spent hating myself, I only hated myself because I was so sure that she hated me. If I had never been under the assumption that my mother-the one person in the world who was supposed to love me

unconditionally-hated me, then I could have forgiven myself one day-I *knew* it. I might have been happy and normal and... better.

I felt so fucking robbed.

My body began rocking unthinkingly, almost like that day with Bella, and my arms hugged my torso. Everything was different. Everything was better. Everything was worse. I wanted to cry at first, but then I wanted to scream. Before I could open my mouth, my emotions changed again, and then I wanted to fucking break something.

Mostly, I wanted it all back. I wanted back everything that she wouldn't allow me to have. I wanted the birthdays and the dinners and the humming. I wanted to scold her for drinking and take care of her while she mended. I wanted to see her grief and know that I didn't cause it.

That was another thing she stole from me. Before I could control the overwhelming current of emotion that the sudden realization unexpectedly heaved upon me, a strangled sob erupted from my chest, and I felt her lurch at my side.

She stole my *grief*.

I had been so fucking occupied with grieving her, I never had the ability to grieve for the only person that died. I never got to grieve for my father or mourn his death. He was still this unpaid debt in my memory that I could never access because the *loss of her* eclipsed everything for me-even him, and it had been mounting all these years, festering and waiting for the opportunity to obtain my attention.

Now, it was drowning me, and I had to force my head between my knees to control my labored breathing. I felt her hand on my back and in my hair, but it was too much all at once. Nine years of completely veiled and neglected agony hit me without warning, and I felt the anguish devour me. I allowed myself to remember things about him that I'd never even attempted to recollect. I remembered his leather wallet and how I was always fascinated with it. He'd let me open it and play with his money and identification cards, and my enthrallment would amuse him. He'd lift me on his shoulders during the street parades. He'd always bring me home a gift when he'd return from business trips. He'd apologize for my name and blame my mother. He'd coached me in softball for two years and encouraged me to remain disciplined with my piano lessons even though I was easily frustrated. He was loving, caring, and with every new memory that I summoned my body would tremble more violently with sobs.

She came to my side and embraced me in a tight and pungent hug, rocking me soothingly as I cried and finally got my opportunity to mourn. I allowed her whatever comfort the gesture granted her, because it offered me none whatsoever.



I stared blankly at the paper and bit the inside of my cheek absently. It had those blue lines and red margins that I was so familiar with, but I couldn't find the words. I looked up when I heard a loud noise from the hall and dropped the paper, dashing across the room to the hallway. My mother was there, leaning against the wall in a stupor, and it took her eyes many moments to focus on mine. I locked my jaw and walked to her, gripping her arm firmly and helping her to the bedroom at the end of the hall.

"I didn't mean to... you... not-not here. Go." She slurred dumbly, stumbling over her own feet while I supported her weight and eased her down onto the bed. She nuzzled into the grime of her bedding and my fists clenched tightly at my sides as I made plans to clean them. It just wasn't fucking livable. Her hair covered the pale pallor of her face as she began mumbling nearly incoherently, "You shouldn't be here."

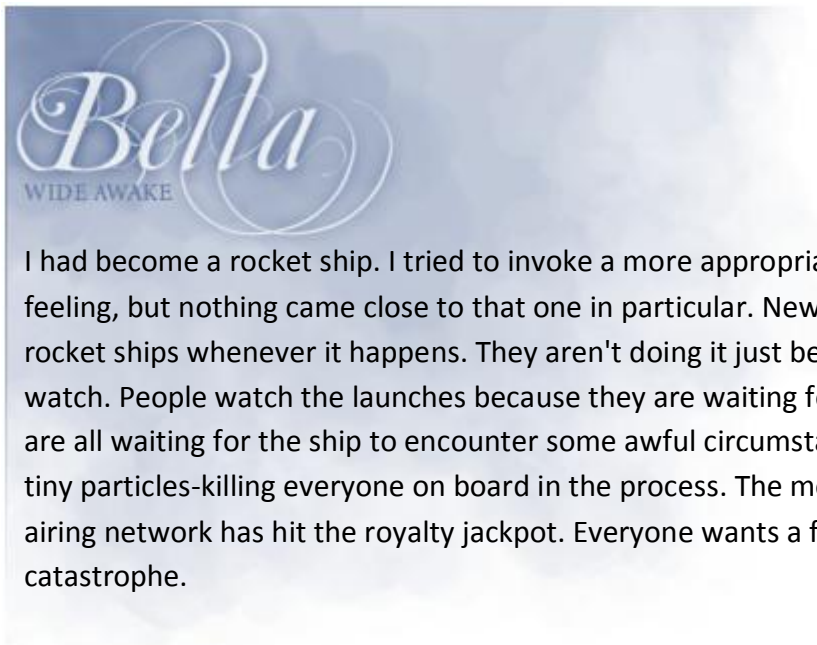
I rolled my eyes and turned to exit the room, turning off the light as I passed the switch and closing the door most of the way behind me. I could still hear the scratching of vermin and bugs as I returned to my spot on the sofa, my blankets and pillow bunched up at the end from where I had slept two nights previous.

Since my axis shifted, sleep was worse in some ways, better in others. Some dreams came less frequently, while others came more. Mostly ones of him. The wound that had devoured me three evenings previous was still gaping and sore. It didn't feel like it would ever lessen, and I wondered how it ever could. It was like the first time I had ever really lost someone I loved. It was torture.

Stifling the emotion that rose in my chest, I returned my attention to the paper and pressed the pen to it. It was such an easy fucking thing to do. So why was I having such a difficult time? I probably already knew the answer to that. With a shuddering exhale, I began moving the pen swiftly, not even bothering to re-read it once complete. I folded it carefully and slipped it into the envelope, sealing it before I could change my mind and re-write it again.

I walked outside to smoke a cigarette, and the fresh air was ironically pleasant. Before I finished, I walked a block down the road and stopped at a mail box. I slid the envelope inside

and held it for a few moments in apprehension. With a final surge of determination, I was able to drop it, watching it vanish into darkness.



I had become a rocket ship. I tried to invoke a more appropriate metaphor for how I was feeling, but nothing came close to that one in particular. News programs cover the lift-off of rocket ships whenever it happens. They aren't doing it just because it's an interesting thing to watch. People watch the launches because they are waiting for something to go wrong. They are all waiting for the ship to encounter some awful circumstance and explode into billions of tiny particles-killing everyone on board in the process. The moment the "accident" occurs, the airing network has hit the royalty jackpot. Everyone wants a front-row seat to a good fatal catastrophe.

Then again, maybe I've just grown too cynical for my own good.

That was how I felt though. I had become this spectacle to those around me, and I felt like they were waiting for that one awful circumstance to happen. It seemed ridiculous to me because... didn't they know? I had already experienced my explosion into oblivion. They were late for the show.

No ratings for them.

We all began a very predictable routine, and even though I knew it must have nearly killed Esme to give me space in Carlisle's house, she did. I don't know how it happened. Maybe it was Rose, or perhaps Carlisle himself was even being my "lazy-sulky-bitch-time" advocate. Maybe Alice played a part as well. I couldn't know, and as the weeks wore on, I found myself sorely incapable of caring.

I walked to my classes with whoever had the nearest class. I kept my head down. I wasn't really doing it to hide or anything. The dirt on the floor was just so much more captivating than the same old stares and whispers. The dirt was always new. Some days it was mud, and some days it had more of a sandy consistency. Some days it was redder than others, and if I was really lucky, some days my eyes would fall upon an abandoned paper or candy wrapper. There wasn't

meant to be any hidden meaning in that thought, but it was entirely fitting. For whom, I couldn't say. Maybe everyone.

Then again, maybe I've just grown too analytical for my own good.

Lunches had become very normal, and I found-much to my surprise-that it pissed me off. Everyone existed as if everything was perfectly fine and some massive portion of our lives wasn't vacant from the seat next to mine. Emmett and Rose smiled and kissed, and Alice and Jasper whispered back and forth softly wearing similar grins of satisfaction. Everything was so disgustingly placid. They made attempts to include me in conversation only to be evaded by my "I don't give a shit" attitude. They weren't bothered. Annoyingly and rather impossibly, they all seemed to identify with my mood.

After my first day back, I began riding home with Emmett and Rose. When Emmett had found me waiting by the Jeep, his brows had shot up in surprise.

"Need a lift?" he'd asked uncertainly, remaining a careful distance away. I nodded without speaking and entered the vehicle, even though his words weren't exactly an invitation. He didn't seem to mind, and Rose-who had become my ever-present shadow-had found the change in routine rather amusing.

"At least make him offer you candy first." She'd smirked that day, though I could tell she was content with my new-found comfort in his presence. Or at least what she thought to be comfort. Truthfully, I was biding my time for my Emmett moment. I didn't want him to see what I had coming.

Alice was hurt and upset by my distance even though she'd deny it whenever Rose would mention it. I wanted to console her but wasn't in the any position to do so. I refused to go back to Esme's house, and I could tell Alice felt uncomfortable seeing me at Dr. Cullen's. Instead, I tried to be as available to her companionship as possible at school.

One of the first days back, she had pulled me aside and asked me, "Are you going to be alright?" The worry and apprehension in her eyes exasperated me. To lighten up what probably felt to her like a very serious situation, I'd snorted and patted her on the head.

"You worry too much. I'm just sleeping at the Cullens', I'm not mutilating my flesh with razor blades or anything." It seemed to have calmed her worries enough for the immediate time being, so she'd smiled and walked with me to class, being very careful not to mention the

forbidden subjects of Edward or Esme. I knew she wanted to help in some way, but truthfully, there was nothing she could do but give me space. I think she realized this after so many days of asking me the same questions.

When I'd get home with Emmett, we would enter the Cullen house, and I would ascend the stairs to the third floor. He never made any attempt at stopping me or keeping me company. Poor guy was probably more nervous in my presence than I was in his.

I never wore Edward's leather jacket, but I would occasionally lean down to where it lay over the sofa and breathe it in. It just didn't feel right to wear it. It felt like admitting it was a keepsake and not something he planned to return home to.

I'd spend my time doing various things - mostly going through Edward's belongings rather shamelessly. I reasoned that I was his girlfriend, and I felt entitled knowing that I'd allow him the same privilege if I could. Sometimes Rose would come home with Emmett and keep me company while I did homework on his bed. Edward had left his iPod, and I listened to his music while doing homework, and even used his textbooks instead of my own. They had various assignment papers smashed carelessly between the pages - frayed edges of notebook paper hanging out in every which way - and for some reason, this made me smile. Half-completed essays and worksheets with Edward's handwriting gracing them would greet me with every turning page, and it felt like a surprise every time.

I plundered his dresser drawers in the evenings and dressed in his clothes. When I wore his white t-shirts and dark boxers, I felt like *his*. It was a little ridiculous, and I could imagine the look on his face when he'd find out. I decided to imagine him amused rather than angered by it.

His bed side table was most intriguing... and infuriating. In the bottom drawer - which was clearly his 'very private hormonal teenager' drawer - I'd made various appalling discoveries. I'd always known that I'd find something less than seemly while pillaging a teenage boy's bedroom. I'd been cautious and remained certain that whatever I'd find wouldn't bother me, but the pornographic magazine that was hidden deeply in the drawer threatened to damage that resolve. I'd grimaced at the photos of breasts and disgusting poses before angrily tossing it aside and continuing my quest. The notes from girls were the worst. I'd always known that Edward was attractive and sought after by most females our age, but the things they wrote to him were startling. He must have gotten hundreds of notes over the years, but only these he kept - the dirty, profane, and debauched notes describing various fantasies featuring him. It took me all of one second to imagine why he kept these before I irately rose and crumpled them in my fists.

I'd ignored the thick layer of dust lining the drawer's handle that clearly signified disuse and had gathered the offending items. I'd discarded them in the waste basket with a grin.

Unfortunately, it had fueled my curiosity and jealousy, and the closet door had begun taunting me with the hidden treasures that resided within. The one place I couldn't venture. I'd nearly asked Rose to empty it for me on one of her common visits but was afraid of her invading his privacy. It didn't even feel right when I did it, and though my guilt was short-lived when I considered his lack of communication and sudden departure, the snooping eventually lost its luster.

I never knew what time Carlisle had come home, because I was always in Edward's room doing these things. Late in the night when my stomach would rumble, I'd sneak downstairs and into the kitchen. I'd make myself something small and easy, all the while promising silently to repay Carlisle before returning to the room.

I'd spend the night going through sketchbooks and reading until the sun rose - unless I was particularly tired. In these cases, I'd sleep with the light on. I'd shower in his bathroom every morning before meeting Emmett downstairs to depart for school. I'd pass Carlisle in the hall, and he'd wordlessly offer me a sad grin as he prepared to leave for the hospital. He never mentioned Esme, and though he still appeared rather dismal, I'd wondered how close they still were, and if Esme were offering him any comfort in Edward's absence. I'd silently hope.

And so the school day would commence, and I'd repeat the routine without faltering. It was predictable and boring and even though I had a large group of friends on the ready to support me, it was lonely.



My eyes knew the calendar page of "May" like the palm of my hand. I never needed to ask anyone for a reminder of what day of the week it was. My mind had become perfectly in tune with the little black columns of numbers and blank squares. Every day felt like one piece of my obliterated rocket ship had been returned to my shattered fuselage. God, I'd become such a drama queen.

By the time the countdown had reached three days, my whole body had begun humming with anticipation. I paced the golden carpet of the bedroom and battled to find things to keep my mind engaged at nights. Even if I'd felt the need to surrender to sleep, it simply wouldn't have been possible. I was jittery during the day at school, nearly vibrating with my eagerness for the final dismissal. I jogged to classes, as if the action would make the school day pass faster. Alice

and Rose would struggle to keep up with me and occasionally, failed to do so.

The time was drawing nearer, and as the last morning of school approached, I found myself perched on the Cullens' bay window, staring anxiously at the driveway and waiting for the silver Volvo to suddenly materialize. Carlisle passed me on his way out the door to work, and even though I doubted he'd admit it, I could see him humming with the same anticipation as he smiled and exited the house.

Emmett finally descended the stairs snapping his hand over his shoulder as he reached the door. "Come on sexy lady. Last day of high school for yours truly. Don't wanna' be late or anything." He grinned, his dimples appearing endearingly. I smiled back and followed after him, trying to ignore the dual sensations of giddiness and anxiety.

The school day buzzed with excitement, and every student seemed to vibrate with the enthusiasm the summer brought. We had no assignments, no homework, and spent most of the day cleaning our lockers. By the time the last bell rang, I was a nervous wreck. Rosalie met me at my desk and led me to the parking lot, speaking amicably about her and Emmett's plans for the summer and college. They were both excited since Carlisle had sprung for off-campus housing.

Alice and Jasper were all smiles, and everyone seemed to be in such high spirits. I couldn't tell if it was the end of the school year, Edward's imminent return, or maybe even both, but for once I allowed myself to laugh and smile with them as Emmett drove us home.

I was so anxious as we approached the street that I held my breath. I was expecting to see the car in the driveway, even though I had already given Edward a good four-day grace period. I didn't know what kind of driving conditions he was encountering. Still, when we pulled into the driveway and found it vacant, my stomach sank in disappointment. Emmett knew this well and shot me a cursory grin of reassurance in the rearview mirror.

We were just entering the house when Alice's shrill voice alerted me to her presence in the yard next door. She was jogging to us from the road with something in her hand, and when she finally approached me, her eyes were cautious. She extended her hand and the envelope it held to me, and with some apprehension, I extracted it. There was no return address, but I recognized the handwriting immediately. I sunk to the ground and hastily tore it open, trying to ignore the eyes on me, and Alice's hushed whisper to Emmett, "It's from Edward."

I frantically tore it open, terrified that something was wrong-that something had happened to

him. When I tore out the letter and unfolded it, it took me all of three seconds to read.

Bella,

I love you. I miss you. I need more time. I'm sorry.

E

Chapter 46. Nilla Wafers



My eyes were trained on the small table in front of me, glaring a slight dagger at the children's' book I'd just discarded. *Freddy, the Falling Leaf*. I shifted my blank gaze to the small window of the office with an inaudible sigh and watched some leaves from a nearby tree flutter to the ground. I snorted.

Freddy, the falling leaf, was meant to symbolize the loss of a loved one. Apparently, decaying corpses are comparable to foliage in the psych field. It was completely ridiculous to think any child would get insight from such nonsense.

I rolled my eyes and let my head fall to the chair comfortably. My caffeine high was fading and this lady was taking her sweet time doing... whatever. It annoyed me, as many things did nowadays, and I was pondering how disappointed Carlisle would be in my behavior if I just left. With a frown, I realized he'd be very disappointed.

The office door finally swung open and my head snapped up to see the woman entering. She was all hair: black and glossy and falling to her waist as she juggled an abundance of items in her hands. She met my gaze and smiled, though the smile was inhibited by the brown bag she had hanging from her teeth. I watched as she shifted a briefcase to her other hand and used her heeled shoe to shut the door behind her. She reached her desk, stared at it thoughtfully for a moment, and then just dropped everything in one movement onto its surface. With a nod, she rounded the desk and sat in her seat, but not before swiftly tucking in the half of her blouse that was flapping out from her skirt.

Christ, I rolled my eyes again. This woman was clearly all over the place.

When she finally met my gaze, she appeared to be winded but smiled brightly. "I'm so sorry to keep you waiting. I have a six-year-old," she explained while waving a hand dismissively, as if this was an obvious excuse for anything. She furrowed her brows at a stack of folders on her

desk and began flipping through them while speaking, "So, Miss Cullen, how are you today?" she asked.

My entire body had gone rigid, and I'm certain that my nails were digging into the upholstery of the armrests. "Miss Swan," I corrected tersely through clenched teeth.

She was still fluttering through folders as she responded, "No, I'm Dr. Carmen actually. Pleased to make your acquaintance," she smiled.

I huffed loudly. "No-I am *Miss Swan*," I annunciated, visibly perturbed by her mistake.

Her eyes darted to mine. "Oh." She raised her brows in surprise. "I'm sorry. Dr. Cullen called, and I suppose I just assumed..." She shook her head and rolled her eyes. "I'm making a fool out of myself, aren't I?" she asked with an apologetic gaze.

I tried my best to relax and excused her error before explaining, "Dr. Cullen is a family friend."

"Okay," she produced a folder and sank back into her seat, exhausted. "Just give me a moment," she requested, bringing her fingers to her temples and rubbing them for a moment. When her gaze once again met mine, she regarded me thoughtfully. "Do you wish to discuss your reaction to my calling you by Dr. Cullen's name?" she asked quietly.

I grimaced and brought my knees to my chest, hugging them tightly in consideration. I eventually responded openly, as Carlisle had asked me to do. "His son and I had a relationship, and I guess being called by his name just..." I trailed off into a frustrated sigh and shot her a glance that made it clear she wasn't getting any more explanation than that.

She nodded in understanding and began writing swiftly onto a nearby notepad. "You were in a relationship," she stated while writing. "But not anymore?" She met my gaze and tilted her head questioningly.

I gave her the shortened version with a tight voice and clenched fists. "He left to go find his birth mother and hasn't returned." It was easier to say than I'd expected, and I released my death grip from my calves.

"Hasn't returned," she mumbled while writing once again. "And you are no longer communicating?" she asked absently, and I had to suppress a growl.

"I wasn't expecting this to be about Edward." I shot haughtily.

She met my gaze and nodded before returning to her pad. "Edward," she annotated while her pen moved.

Are you freaking serious?

"Look, Miss... Swan," she began with a sigh, depositing her pen and crossing her arms over her chest with a firm expression. "Dr. Cullen said you might be difficult, and I understand that." She shrugged and flipped her black hair over one shoulder. "But there's probably something you should know about me. I take my job seriously."

I snorted, but she ignored it.

"If I get a reaction from a mention of this Edward, then I'm going to address it. If I get a reaction from a mention of clowns dressed in drag, then I'll address that next. The point is, this is my office, and we're going to do things my way. I don't care how much Dr. Cullen begs me to, I have no interest in forcing someone to speak to me. It's a waste of my precious time-time that could be spent helping someone who really wants it." She shrugged once again and lifted one finger to point at the door. "So if you don't want to be here, then there's the door, don't let it hit you on the ass."

I remained silent and gazed out at the falling leaves. Of course I didn't want to be here, but my feet didn't move to remove me from this annoying lady's presence.

After a few minutes of silence, she sighed, and I could see her arms cross over her chest again. "Let's make a deal, okay?" She asked softly, and without waiting for a response, continued, "We'll talk today, and at the end of the session, I'll give you a series of assessments. If you believe any of these to be false or still have doubts by Tuesday, then we'll never have to speak again. 'kay?" she asked, tilting her head to the side.

I wondered briefly how she could know that my doubts about her being capable of helping me were making me so adverse to her requests. Truthfully, she was right. She could be spending her time helping someone who *could* be helped instead of going around in circles with me. It was a waste of time either way.

But I reminded myself that I had my reasons for coming here today, and I wouldn't simply walk out and abandon them. Even though I was completely disinterested in her "'assessments", and

had no desire to discuss Edward, I nodded and tried to relax into my chair while meeting her gaze again.

She didn't give me that wide, accomplished smile like Carlisle would have. Instead she just repeated, "Do you and Edward communicate?" and picked her pen back up.

I battled my frustration over having to explain the letter but managed to keep it short and simplified.

She pursed her lips with a nod and continued writing. "How long ago did you receive the letter?" she inquired, still writing.

I grimaced and felt my chest constrict painfully as it always did when I spoke of this. "Ten weeks ago," I answered in a whisper.

With another nod she continued, "Why do you think he hasn't returned?" She met my gaze with a curious expression.

I diverted my eyes once again to the window as I recalled my very first conversation with Carlisle, alone.

I stood silently in the doorway of the study to observe him curiously, trying desperately to subdue the added surge of unease that gripped me upon seeing him.

Carlisle was hunched over his desk reading through a stack of papers, a pen in one hand and the other fidgeting idly with the corner of a page. His hair was inconspicuously groomed, and though his spectacles made it difficult to see his eyes clearly for any clarification, the sag of his posture made him appear weary.

After a while, I began feeling intrusive with my standing and staring. Just as I began to consider leaving, Carlisle glanced up from his desk, his eyes widening behind his reading glasses. With an added surge of tension upon his consideration, I had a moment of limbo- deciding whether or not to regard him, or to cowardly abort my original task. With an objectionable glance at the empty hall leading to the third floor, I turned back to him and attempted a smile.

It was still uncomfortable being alone with a man and my smile wavered slightly as I once again realized that no one else was in the house. This was so irrational, being afraid to be alone with Carlisle. I knew he would likely sooner harm himself than another living being, yet I still got that

twinge of fear that sparked my irrational instinct: fight or flight.

His lips pulled up into a small grin in return. "Bella." He greeted me softly with a hesitant nod and slowly eased back into his chair.

Truthfully, I hadn't really spoken to Carlisle since Edward's birthday. It was a little disturbing seeing as how I'd been living under his roof for the past six weeks and saw him nearly every morning-but I still felt panicked about approaching him so directly-and so privately. I had actually considered calling Carlisle on Alice or Rose's cell phone to have this conversation. Ludicrous-but I couldn't help it.

While I waged my mental battle, Carlisle rested his hands in his lap and simply held my anxious gaze. His smile was still warm and friendly, and his eyes were patient. It took me a moment to realize that he was giving me the time I needed to gather the courage to enter. My smile came a little more genuinely at this understanding, and I took advantage of his tolerance without pushing myself. After only a few minutes, I was able to cross the threshold, and his face seemed to say he was satisfied with my progress. I found his patience slightly patronizing, but I pushed that emotion away and followed the wall closest to a small sofa on the opposite side of the room from him.

This is good, I inwardly sighed in relief as I sunk into the small sofa against the wall. There was space between us-and a desk. I was bordering on comfortable as I tucked my knees against my chest and hugged them. Now, I had to work up the courage to speak to him. This was just as frustrating-if not more so-than not being able to enter Edward's forbidden closet. It seemed like such a simple concept- just open my mouth and talk. Something that would have been a passing interaction before two years ago was now an epic battle of nerves and incapability. It would have been so much easier if Edward, Esme, Rose, or Alice had been in the room with us.

Carlisle continued to sit and wait patiently as I worked to overcome my aversion. He could have returned to his previous task to remain occupied while I calmed myself, but he didn't. He kept our minimal eye contact, occasionally reaching up to scratch his eyebrow or rock slightly in his seat. After ten minutes of easy breathing and nearly biting a hole into my lip, I felt comfortable enough to attempt speaking.

"H-How are you doing?" I asked, only faltering slightly as I hugged my knees.

His grin widened, and he sank further into his seat in relief. "Just fine, Bella. How are you doing?" he asked, raising his eyebrows meaningfully.

I relaxed a bit more and suppressed a grimace. "I manage. I'm sorry for disrupting you," I apologized, feeling a little guilty for taking up so much of his time for something so seemingly simple.

He shrugged and rested his hands comfortably in his lap once again. "It's no disruption, truthfully. If anything, it's a welcome distraction from the tedium of paperwork." He smiled genuinely.

I tilted my head to rest my cheek on my knees and inquired in a whisper, "Why do you always do so much paperwork?" He was always in his study doing paperwork. I couldn't understand why his job would merit it. Isn't that what nurses were for?

"Well, I add notes to each of my patients' files and have the transcriptionist add them into the computer. It's not required, but even the smallest detail of my examination could be pivotal to a diagnosis."

I engaged him further into the conversation regarding his paperwork to condition myself to his presence. It made me feel more comfortable with speaking, and I was surprised to learn how much time he expended for the sake of diligence. He obviously took the responsibility of his patients very seriously. I imagined him extending that meticulousness to Edward before he adopted him, and a phantom smile tugged at my lips.

"I once solved a critical diagnosis from noticing a bad toenail." He raised his eyebrow in earnestness.

I pursed my lips and nodded without even really considering his statement. It was silent for another moment before I decided that I was comfortable enough to continue my mission. "I want information on Edward's mother," I said with as much firmness as I could manage-which... really wasn't much.

His ashen brows rose high on his forehead. "May I ask why you want this information?" he asked in this annoyingly knowing parental tone that made my eyes narrow in response.

"Doesn't it seem a little odd to you that Edward hasn't made any contact for two weeks?" I asked, the now familiar vacancy in my chest throbbing forebodingly.

Carlisle frowned and shifted his gaze to his hands in his lap. "It doesn't seem odd to me, Bella.

Edward will contact us if he wishes to," he answered in a soft voice.

I gaped at him until he met my gaze again. "Maybe he's not contacting us because something is wrong!" My voice rose, aghast at his lack of concern .

He sighed and propped his elbow on his armrest, dropping his head to his folded fist casually. "What could possibly be wrong?" he asked in that same tone that made my teeth grind.

"Well, let's see," I drawled deliberately while prying my fingers loose from my legs and using them to count off. "Vehicular accidents, random city shootings, robberies, sudden and incapacitating illness, random airplanes falling out of the sky. Pretty much anything could be wrong and we'd never even know, Carlisle. Doesn't this bother you one bit?" I asked, unwilling to believe that he would simply dismiss any worry whatsoever.

Secretly, the painful void in my chest was causing panic that something very wrong had happened to Edward. It was stupid and irrational to imagine that the connection between us was so strong that I'd somehow feel if he was in trouble, but I couldn't shake it.

Carlisle's face fell momentarily before his expression shifted to one of careful neutrality. "I'm very sorry, Bella, but I'm afraid that Edward simply doesn't want to come home... yet," he added the last word far too late for my liking.

I scoffed and clenched my fists further around my calves. "How can you know for certain?" I all but sneered at his indifferent attitude regarding something so crucial.

He removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes with a weighty pause. "His credit card," he mumbled, dragging his palm over his face and meeting my gaze once again. "I've been tracking the statements carefully, and it's had constant activity for the last six weeks. There were some unusual purchases, but most are indicative of Edward: gas, food, cigarettes, even drawing pads." He shrugged while gazing at me apologetically.

The revelation sent my emotions into war. While I was beyond relieved that Edward was seemingly okay, the notion that he was somewhere, perfectly capable of driving, smoking, and even drawing while choosing not to contact me-it made me feel a deep ache of... irrelevance. I could feel my eyes burning from tears that I fought back relentlessly. I unfolded my legs and frowned down at my hands as they intertwined in my lap. "Can I see the statements?" I whispered dejectedly. I pleadingly peeked at Carlisle through my eyelashes.

He sighed and ran his palm over his face once again. "I'll leave you a copy at your door in the morning, okay?" he offered, and I nodded my approval while lifting myself from the sofa. It hadn't escaped my notice that he wasn't even referring to it as Edward's bedroom anymore, but my own. Was it really so simple for Carlisle to lose faith in him?, I wondered.

"Just promise me one thing, Bella?" he requested before I reached the threshold. I turned to him and nearly snorted at the irony of yet another promise. I raised my eyebrows expectantly, watching as Carlisle sighed and rubbed his forehead. "I need you to begin accepting the... possibility that he might not return. Edward is trying to find his place in the world, and that could be here with us, or it could be there with her. I need you to consider these possibilities and prepare yourself," he pleaded with his dismal gaze.

My jaw locked, and I fled the room, running up the hallway to the third floor. I did not want to say something to Carlisle that I'd regret later.

Because Edward was coming home. His place was here, with us.



The following morning, there was an envelope peeking halfway through the bottom of the bedroom door as promised. I spent the entire day scrutinizing the statements very closely. I was able to make various estimations given the information Carlisle had provided.

Edward was smoking too much, but he wasn't buying much gas for the Volvo, suggesting he was stationary for the most part. He'd gone through two drawing pads, and three packs of pencils. He had bought blankets and bedding and other household items, such as bath towels and pans. He'd purchased a variety of cleaning supplies over the last four weeks, all specific to a home environment. He wasn't eating nearly healthy enough, usually ordering from the same take-out Chinese restaurant. He bought socks, a small amount of clothing, toiletries, and extra-strength pain reliever. All of these things led to one conclusion: Edward was fine and had seemingly settled down somewhere else.

It wouldn't have taken much for me to hunt down the address of the restaurant, but I didn't, because Carlisle was right about one thing. It was up to Edward to find his place-and when he came home on his own, it would be genuine and sincere and right.

I only hoped that he'd figure it out soon...

Dr. Carmen spent another moment writing before meeting my gaze. "So how did you feel when

you realized that Edward might not come back?" she asked softly.

I blew out a puff of air and narrowed my eyes. "Left behind. Abandoned. Lonely. Heartbroken. Helpless. Worried. I don't know," I grumbled and diverted my gaze once again. "I only recently accepted the possibility, like Carlisle asked. That first conversation was just the beginning." I shrugged and swallowed down the lump that formed upon admitting it aloud.

Carlisle and I had a routine in which I would go see him every Wednesday to obtain Edward's credit card statements. As the weeks passed, I grew more comfortable on the sofa inside of his study. He'd let me engage him in meaningless conversation before I requested the documents. Eventually, he'd have them on the sofa waiting for me when I entered. I still talked to him though because I felt guilty for just about everything: living in his house, demanding private documentation, not making a more determined attempt to be in his presence.

"You look tired," she noted after a few moments of silence, and I merely shrugged. "Dr. Cullen says you have some problems with sleeping. Is that true?" she murmured, and I could hear her pen moving across the paper.

"Yes" was my only offer. I had already decided to be honest. It was the only way of doing it right. And doing it right was the only way of fully doing it. And fully doing it was the only way of knowing if she could help me accomplish the singular task that had driven me here in the first place, even though I doubted it. Furthermore, doing it fully would also just really piss Edward off to the max. A vindictive smile tugged at my lips.

"Can we talk about that?" she asked, and I shook my head. "Well, what can we talk about, Isabella?" she asked in an irritated tone.

I met her gaze. "Bella," I corrected, gaining much amusement from watching her write that down. "There is something specific I wanted to discuss," I requested, and at her idle nod, explained, "See, there's this closet..."

As the weeks passed, the anger, resentment, and rejection I felt as a result of Edward's continual lack of contact or homecoming became centralized into an overwhelmingly intense desire: that goddamned closet.

I'd become so determined to enter it that I'd coaxed myself to try on several occasions. I'd get as close as holding the door knob before I felt like my heart might explode in my chest. I'd try, so very persistently, to ease myself closer and adjust my mind to the concept of opening it, but

it never seemed to work. I'd even used Edward's desensitization technique to take a step and halt long enough to become completely relaxed. This only worked until I was a foot away, and then the closet's close proximity made any kind of relaxation unfeasible.

Logically, I realized there was nothing to fear from it. I knew that Phil wasn't hiding in that closet and waiting to trap me inside like before. I knew what it looked like, and I knew it was harmless. But my body and mind would not be convinced, and the response it provoked was unavoidable. It would take me hours to calm myself after a failed attempt, and I'd spend that time cursing the one niche of Edward's life that I couldn't pierce. I needed entrance into that one niche like I needed undisturbed sleep or his affection. It became a wild fixation that consumed my every second inside of the room. My eyes would wander to the door and narrow resolutely. There was once a day where I'd tried four times, always failing and left feeling desperately defeated.

"A closet?" Dr. Carmen asked, and I nodded while recalling my best ever attempt at opening it.

I had just emerged from Edward's shower, and I was staring at my face in the foggy mirror. I looked as broken as I felt and it manifested into a palpable frustration. Rose had left some clothes on the bed, and I put them on hastily, darting my eyes to the closet door every second or so. She'd told me that Alice had been asking about me, wondering when or if I would ever come home. I was angry at myself for pushing everyone away. I'd been feeling this sense of complete alienation from everyone around me, and I hated it. I hated hurting Alice and Esme and Rose. I hated being incapable of dealing with things like any normal person would. I hated Phil for making me this way.

With one last glance at the closet door, I balled my hands into tight fists and pushed off of the bed, frustrated and guilty and significant to everyone but the one person that mattered most. I threw myself at the closet with a sprint, closing my eyes as my hands found the cold metal handle and gripped it tightly.

Just fucking open it! I screamed internally in an attempt to make my hand move. My heart was already erratically thumping in my tightly constricted chest, and my breaths were escaping in sharp pants.

It's just a closet. There's no one inside. You won't be locked in. It's just a closet. I tried to soothe my nerves with logic while squeezing the handle. I was already losing the battle when I began instinctively listening for sounds coming from the other side of the door. My ragged breathing accelerated, and I could feel my every cell recoil from the concept of the door before me. My

internal alarm was sounding so violently that I trembled, the knob shaking noisily with my tremors. I could feel the tears trailing down my cheek, either in fear, or in frustration, as I willed my hand to turn the knob.

But I didn't turn the knob. I scrambled back and away from the door with hyperventilating breaths that made my vision spotty and unclear as I flung myself at the bed. I curled up under the brown blankets and gasped and sobbed for hours. I gripped his pillow and hated myself for not being strong enough to hold on, and not being weak enough to let go.

My breathing had accelerated from the memory alone. Dr. Carmen gave me time to calm down as silence fell upon the room. After a few minutes of my steady breathing, she spoke. "Are you afraid of what's *in* the closet, or being trapped inside?" she asked quietly, to which I answered, "Both."

At her blank expression, I explained my experience with Phil in greater detail. I didn't necessarily want to, but a tiny bubble of excitement formed as I shakily relayed the tale of him hiding in the closet, and then him trapping me inside for weeks. I told her of the two times I had nearly escaped and explained being thrown back into the closet, but only after having been punished by Phil for my failed attempts at escaping. I left out the finer details; the starvation, the sounds coming from my mother on the other side of the house, my begging Phil for ridiculous things like water and permission to use the bathroom. I kept it very precise and immediately related to the closet. This was where that bubble of excitement came from. This was surely the way to help me-unlike discussing Edward. I was pleased to finally begin with the real stuff.

After having told her of my closet experience, she had more questions-of course. What happened to my mother, where I went to live, where I was living now and why that occurred, and so forth. I was thankful that we were able to merely gloss over the particulars without discussing my "feelings" about them. Belatedly, I realized that she seemed to be rushing through as many details as possible. I wondered if this wasn't for the benefit of having the biggest possible picture for making her after-session "assessments."

"Your aunt, Esme," Dr. Carmen began while still writing on her notepad which had moved to her lap, "What's your relationship with her like now that you stay with Dr. Cullen?" she asked after I explained the sleeping debacle, carefully omitting the sexual attempts.

With a subdued grin, I relayed the first conversation we'd had since I... moved in... with Dr. Cullen.

It was Saturday afternoon. I had a pounding headache and was confident that I was experiencing mild caffeine withdrawal, so I had descended the stairs with the intention of obtaining a soda from the Cullen fridge. I hadn't seen her in weeks, so I was more than shocked to find Esme sitting in the living room when I entered.

She was sitting on the sofa, flipping through a magazine, and at my approach raised her gaze with an odd mixture of shock, relief, elation, sadness, and guilt that flooded her expression upon noticing me. She quickly recovered from the surprise of my presence and discarded the magazine with a warm smile.

"I was hoping I'd see you eventually." She chuckled nervously and swept her hair over her shoulder as I stood awkwardly in the path to the kitchen. "Would you consider sitting with me until Carlisle returns?" she asked with a hopeful smile and pleading eyes.

Crap. I inwardly denigrated my distaste for conflict as I shuffled to a nearby chair and dropped into its plush upholstery irritably. She smiled wider at my acquiescence and perched closer to the edge of the sofa, angled in my direction.

"What's Daddy C. doing?" I asked a little snidely, using Edward's particular term of endearment in placid amusement. I knew where he got that name from-as did Esme.

She subtly rolled her eyes at my jest but chose to disregard it. "He's changing his clothes. We're going out to lunch this afternoon. I don't suppose you'd be interested in joining us, would you?" she asked while wringing her hands in her lap.

I grimaced at her attempt and shook my head. "I'm not in the mood to go out," I answered honestly. Especially with you, I added mentally.

She pursed her lips and nodded solemnly. "And if we offered to stay in, I suppose you still wouldn't be interested?"

I felt a pang of shame for treating her so poorly and battled to force it away as I stood and faced her unwaveringly. "No, thank you," I replied semi-sincerely as I turned to leave.

Her voice forced me to halt at the entryway. "You know, Bella, even though I've been a nervous wreck the last month worrying about you, I've been outrageously patient with your insistence on remaining in this house and leaving you be. The very least you could do is offer me the courtesy

of polite conversation." Her hard words were softened by the strained whisper in which she spoke them in.

I turned to her with indignation and raised my chin. "What exactly should we talk about? Maybe we should start with your total lack of even attempting to see me. Better yet, we could also discuss the fascist manner in which you singlehandedly sought to destroy my relationship with Edward. Then again, that's not very polite conversation, is it?" I sneered as my fists clenched at my sides, Esme balking at my callous tone.

Her eyes grew wide and embarrassed, and I thought I may have heard her sigh as she pushed her hair behind her ear and shifted her gaze to her lap. "I know I made some poor choices when I forbade you from seeing Edward. I'm very sorry that I wasn't more rational, but I promise that I do realize that it wasn't my shining moment. I hope you'll forgive my failures and recognize my good intentions, however," she whispered while peeking at me through her lashes imploringly.

I clucked my tongue and crossed my arms over my chest sourly. It just wasn't as satisfying when she talked like that. Not at all satisfying. I could have continued berating her for it, but her agreement just ruined the pleasure of doing so.

"Peanut butter and jelly," she abruptly whispered, smoothing out the invisible wrinkles in her skirt.

"Excuse me?" I scoffed, shifting from foot to foot.

She met my gaze and lifted her own chin in return. "Last night you ate peanut butter and jelly." She rose from the sofa and put her hands on her hips. "You had a glass of milk and took a shower this morning at seven. Thursday night, you had tuna salad for dinner. You wore your blue sweater yesterday morning, didn't wash your hair, and scraped your elbow sometime between then and now. You didn't use a band-aid, but you did apply ointment." She stepped closer, eyeing the small scrape on my elbow that resulted from a minor mishap on the balcony, and continued, "You got approximately three hours of sleep last night, only one the night before, and two on Thursday. Wednesday night, you didn't sleep at all, and spent twenty minutes in the kitchen deciding if coffee would disagree with the frozen pizza you were cooking. Your cycle is regular, you're not gaining weight, but you're not losing it either. When you do sleep, you sleep with the light on, farthest away from the door, on your side facing the wall." She stopped in front of me and quirked an eyebrow before adding, "Oh, and right now, you have a headache because you haven't had any caffeine since yesterday evening."

I gaped rather unabashedly at the accuracy of her statements, though I was admittedly a little freaked out. "Are you like... spying on me or something?" I asked incredulously.

She threw her head back in a soft and musical giggle before shaking her head. "I'm not spying, Bella. You're my responsibility. Did you honestly think I'd just abandon my duties of ensuring your welfare?" she asked, tilting her head. When I didn't answer, she continued with an air of wisdom, "If I'd thought for one second that you weren't perfectly safe staying in Carlisle's home, I would have intervened without hesitation." She shrugged and made her way back to sofa, sinking into it with a smug expression as she grinned at me. "I'm a mother, dear. Just because you don't see me, doesn't mean I can't see you." She winked and picked up her magazine, returning to her casual perusal.

"How..." I trailed off questioningly, and she simply smiled without meeting my gaze.

"I spend many nights sleeping here and checking on you. Carlisle, Rose, and Alice also give me updates when I ask." She spared me a glance from her magazine before adding in a mumble, "I keep some spare clothes in the third floor guest room that I ask Rose to bring you every now and again. Alice sleeps there sometimes when I'm not comfortable leaving her home alone. Though, I did ask her to keep it between us and give you space, so don't be cross with her for not telling you." She licked her finger and turned the page of her magazine nonchalantly. "You should go see her sometime, perhaps," she mused while softly furrowing her brow at the page.

I was fuming by the time I finally reached the fridge and snatched a can of soda from the top shelf. It seemed like everything was a total ruse. All this time I'd been led to believe that I was being entirely independent, yet everyone had been helping Esme keep tabs on me. Her admission of knowing every little thing I did annoyed me to no end. I mean, I wasn't even keeping track of my cycle, and yet somehow she knew whether or not it was regular? It was disgusting and meddlesome to a disturbing degree. It was infuriating to know that she had been observing my every move so intently. It was creepy and intrusive and so... overbearingly motherly.

I desperately suppressed the annoyingly involuntary smile that tugged at my lips as I climbed the steps to the third floor.

Dr. Carmen chuckled, throwing all her black and glossy hair over her shoulders. "She's right you know," she added once she regained her composure. "A mother always knows," she sighed and began writing once again. "What's it like now, then?" she asked without shifting her gaze from the paper.

"We don't ignore each other, but we don't go out of our way to speak either," I added in response, remembering our brief interactions throughout the mansion. I had no way of knowing how often Esme stayed, but I got the feeling that it was frequent. If anything, I at least found comfort in the fact that Carlisle had somebody. Of that, I was thankful. Especially now. I'd been concerned when they didn't plan a Fourth of July shindig like I'd known they'd had planned since New Years. I'd wondered what the cause for it was: me or Edward. Maybe both.

She nodded thoughtfully before meeting my gaze again. "And Alice? What is your relationship with her like now?"

I continued with my recollection without hesitation, having grown somewhat comfortable with speaking to Carmen. I wondered when or if we could return to the closet issue and reasoned the faster I explained everything else, the faster I'd find out.

That night, I did decide to visit Alice, just in case she had slept over. I snuck across the hall, glancing around shiftily and half expecting to see beady Esme eyes in some nearby painting. When I approached the door on the other end of the hall, I immediately noticed the little sliver of light seeping through the bottom of the door. I smiled as I approached and was momentarily startled by the minute and rare spark of giddiness that rose in me.

Alice had given me space, and in all honesty, I hadn't spent but maybe five total hours in her presence since the summer had began. Rose was a good friend, and very easy to talk to, but I missed spending time with Alice and her infectiously excitable demeanor.

When I thumped on the door quietly, I was stunned at the speed in which it flew open. Alice stood in the doorway with a huge grin and bounced on the balls of her toes before I basically flung myself at her.

She giggled and returned the embrace with enthusiasm. "You have no idea how hard it is to give someone 'space' when you're only thirty feet away!" she exclaimed as she released me and ran to the bed with a flop.

I felt guilty for avoiding her and I frowned down at my shoes in shame as I told her so.

"Psssh." She waved her hand in a dismissive gesture and patted the space beside her. "I was thinking that 'space' actually meant 'if you leave her alone now, then later you can try out the summer hair trends on her, and she can't get upset'." She snickered with a glint in her eyes as I

joined her on the bed.

I rolled my eyes and laid down facing her with my head propped up by my elbow. "Hair guilt. Divine," I sighed, but my lips were twitching in comfortable amusement and I'm pretty sure she saw it.

"Don't be so solemn, now," she tisked as she mirrored my pose and added with a grin, "I'm growing my hair out this summer, honest to God. Nothing can make me cut it." I chuckled at her determination that always seemed to waver once it reached her shoulders.

We spent hours talking about various things of no consequence. She wanted longer hair, and she wanted to try out new things on mine. And I grudgingly gave her a pass because she was right about me being easily guilt-tripped.

By three a.m., she was yawning uncontrollably, and I put my foot down on our meeting so that she could rest.

"Wait!" She grabbed at my elbow as I went to lift myself from the bed. I quirked an eyebrow quizzically at her frantic expression. "You'll come back right? Maybe we could hang out tomorrow or something?" she asked with a hopeful gaze that made my guilt swell. I nodded and assured her that I'd be less "broody," as she called it before retiring to Edward's room.

I began feeling this odd sense of total alienation from those around me, and I couldn't quite place why. I mean, yes. I had been spending copious amounts of time locked away in Edward's bedroom while I waited for him to return, but seeing Alice basically beg for my attention gripped me in the most painful way. Even Esme was waiting around for me to regard her. They both basically abandoned the comfort of their home to ensure my welfare in this one. It didn't seem fair to them to stay and allow it to continue.

I sighed as I leaned my head back against the chair. Alice and I did spend more time together now, but not as much as we used to. She wouldn't make me talk about Edward or his mother and usually kept our interactions light-hearted and sisterly. I feared I was taking her companionship for granted, and the notion pained me.

Another startling issue that had come to fester over the months was my total lack of human touch. No one touched me, because men couldn't and women didn't think about things like that. I'd had this issue before Forks, before Edward, but now that I knew what it was like to feel real, honest affection, I knew what I was missing and I craved it. Alice hugged me maybe once every week or so when her enthusiasm merited it, but how was she to know that I was being

starved of all contact? She couldn't have known something like that, and I found myself doing unusual things when she was present: grabbing her hand, brushing her shoulder with mine, or just generally touching something with a pulse for once. She never questioned my casual and affectionate gestures, but I was afraid I'd start creeping her out soon. People just don't realize how vital the human touch can be. Edward used to touch me affectionately every day. I could feel the warmth of his love and the comfort of his tenderness through his electric flesh. Now I was entirely void of affection, and it made me feel less than human-completely intangible, like I'd somehow become the wayward ghost that haunted the shadow of his space.

"But you did stay," Dr. Carmen clarified, and I nodded in response. She seemed confused, so I elaborated with a shamed face, "I just couldn't bring myself to leave." Alice kept trying to subdue with my guilt with assurances that she and Esme weren't staying for my sake alone. She insisted that Esme liked staying with Carlisle, and Alice enjoyed her enjoyment. She also enjoyed the extravagant bathroom attached to the guestroom, and I was pretty certain that she was making plans to redecorate... everything.

She hummed in contemplation and crossed her legs under the desk while she wrote. "You use the word 'alienation.' That's an odd feeling. What about this Rose you spoke of before? Aren't you close to her?" she asked without meeting my gaze, and I swallowed tightly.

The throbbing in my chest grew for a split second and I frowned deeply at my muddy shoes. "I was," I whispered in a strained voice before clearing my throat and explaining, "She and Emmett left for college two weeks ago." They'd wanted to get a head start on settling into their off campus housing at WU. They were both so excited to go...

"Can I help?" I whispered tentatively from Emmett's doorway as he and Rose put clothes into a large cardboard box. Emmett's gaze lurched to mine and widened in surprise. I had never made any effort to approach him inside of the house, but I didn't want to do it alone. Rose was here now, so I was comfortable enough to at least offer my helping hand.

Emmett grinned widely and straightened from his crouch, crossing his arms over his broad chest. "Hmm, I'm not sure I'd be copacetic with you throwing out my nudey mags too." He gazed at me pointedly before emitting a soft chuckle and resuming his position.

My fidgeting fingers went to my hoodie sleeves. "You saw that, huh?" I grimaced as my cheeks burned with embarrassment that he had seen Edward's pornographic magazines in the waste basket. Rosalie simply rolled her eyes as she began packing away baseball paraphernalia.

"See, Bella, there are certain rules when living in a man's space," he began with a serious tone, and I wrapped my arms around my torso as it throbbed and ached with the emptiness of knowing that I really didn't live in Edward's space. I just lived in the shadowy impression of it. "Listen closely, Rosie babe," he added with a sideways glance in her direction. She ignored him as she packed another box and Emmett continued, "Men hold specific things sacred: porn, the remote-control, the non-existence of tampons, porn," he accentuated with a glare at me and continued, "alcoholic beverages, and for the love of God, Bella..." he trailed off and straightened from his crouch with a firm stare. "Never ever fuck with a man's porn," he finished disapprovingly.

I rolled my eyes but nodded so he wouldn't continue explaining his rules. "So, do you need help or what?" I mumbled shortly while hugging my arms tightly around myself.

Emmett furrowed his brows and tilted his head, likely because he was expecting a laugh, but I was in no mood to accommodate that. He nodded and shrugged one shoulder. "Sure," he answered softly while pointing to his desk.

I spent the next thirty minutes in silence packing away his books and papers into a box. With every new thing that left his desk, or floor, or drawers, I couldn't help feeling as though this was too much. After so long, I turned around and decided to tell him so.

"What about Carlisle?" I asked with a thick voice. Emmett met my gaze with a confused expression while Rose kept taking his things and shoving them into boxes. My fists clenched at my sides. "You're leaving him," I hissed with narrowed eyes. Logically, I knew that Emmett had to leave for college, but I couldn't stop the anger that swelled in me that someone else was abandoning Carlisle.

Slowly, he rose from his crouch and shook his head. "I have to go, you know? Carlisle will be fine, and plus, we're staying close," he attempted to reassure me, but something in his words only made my anger grow further.

I jutted my chin and glared at him defiantly as I allowed my fury to control my body and words. "Is that what you thought when you told Edward to leave? Because you were obviously wrong." I could almost see my hard words hit him as he flinched visibly and paled under my glare. He began shaking his head once more, and Rose had finally ceased her task to gape at me in blatant incredulity. I had never spoken like this around her and had certainly never made it clear that I was looking to place blame for Edward's departure on her boyfriend.

"I never told him to leave," Emmett whispered, but the minute edge of remorse that laced his tone betrayed his guilt.

"No, you didn't say the exact words, but you're the one who suggested it! You're the reason he left," I spat at him resentfully. The little alarm in my head was beginning to sound, reminding me that I was trying to argue with a man three times my size that could probably kill me with one hand before I had the chance to run.

This was the state of mind in which I anxiously fled the room and returned to Edward's.

That evening, Rose came to my room with a hard pound on my door. Before I even attempted to open it, it flew open and she stomped inside, slamming the door behind her.

"Who the hell do you think you are?" she demanded in a scathing voice that made my stomach lurch. I sat dumbfounded on the bed as she moved closer and scowled at me. "You childish, little... of all the people... how dare you?" she screeched, her pale skin turning a curious shade of red. I swallowed, having never been privy to this side of Rose's anger before. She began pacing the carpet while sneering at me, "Do you have any idea how guilty he's felt for this whole thing, and then you have to come along and be ridiculous enough to encourage it?" She halted in front of the bed, seething and downright beautiful in her fury as the platinum blonde of her hair accentuated the red in her puffing cheeks. "If you don't take it all back before we leave tomorrow, so help me, Bella-I will never forgive you for ruining what's meant to be a new beginning for us," she promised as her chest heaved and her sharp, blue eyes cut into mine.

Tears stung at my eyes, and I nodded without speaking, afraid that my voice would betray my fear of losing her friendship and the shame I felt for treating Emmett so callously.

Her face softened infinitesimally as a traitorous tear slipped from my eye and I swatted it away. "I'm not trying to be a bitch," she sneered with residual anger.

There was a pause, and then a maniacal chuckle escaped me. With wide eyes, I clamped a hand over my mouth, bracing for her anger once again for laughing at the contrast of her words and tone. Instead she rolled her eyes, a smile flirting at the corner of her lips as she flopped onto the bed. "Sorry," she mumbled, allowing herself one chuckle and a shake of her head. "I don't like it when people fuck with my man," she explained with a shrug.

I smiled and apologized in a quiet voice that she accepted before embracing me in a firm hug. Tears stung at my eyes once more at the meaning of this embrace. It was goodbye.

"I'm only a phone call away," she whispered into my hair as her arms pressed me tightly against her. I nodded into her shoulder and released her with a forced smile.

That night, I wrote Emmett a letter and slipped it under his door. Partly because I was too ashamed to face him in person, and partly because I didn't want to say another goodbye. A small part of me did blame him, just like a small part of me blamed Esme. Though I couldn't let it go, I did accept the fact that it was never their intention to drive him away.

Dr. Carmen stared at me for a really long time after I told her about that night two weeks ago. She kept her legs crossed and the pen lingering idly over her notepad. Her brown eyes bore into me with a neutral expression as she sat motionless. It made me uncomfortable, and I had this urge to keep talking, even though the memory ended there. I scratched my eyebrow and crossed my ankles, leaning to one side of the chair before shifting my position.

"Why are you here?" she asked after five minutes of charged silence. Her expression hadn't changed any, but the tone of her voice seemed controlled and decisive.

I bit my lip for a moment and my leg began to bounce anxiously. "I want to get inside of the closet," I answered truthfully with a tone that matched hers.

She shook her head slowly, and I noted that it was the only time I had spoken in which she didn't begin writing. "No, I want you to tell me about the exact moment you'd decided to come. Don't leave out any impressions or thoughts," she requested.

Though I was annoyed by her resistance to my explanation, I did as she asked and recalled the conversation between Carlisle and me three nights prior.

It was a Wednesday, and I was going to procure the credit card statements from my place on the sofa, but I was having another bad day. Rose and Emmett had just left, and Alice and Jasper were out camping-a last hurrah without parental observation before school resumed. I shuddered to think what they were up to.

Without much to keep me occupied, I spent my hours watching the closet door and wishing that I had the ability to overcome my fear. The circle was tiresome and I'd grown weary with attempting to open it, so I had to settle for staring at it.

I was more than happy to be in someone else's presence for a while, hoping that Carlisle's

conversation could distract me and make me feel normal for a little while.

When I reached the study, he was behind his desk as usual and gave me the time I needed to enter. The large envelope was sitting on the brown leather sofa, as it always was, and I pushed it aside before sitting in my perfunctory knee-hugging pose. Truthfully, I was always impatient to read the contents of the envelope. It was the only glimpse into Edward that I had anymore. I'd spend days dissecting the purchases he made and imagine what he was doing with them. It was downright pitiful, but it gave me something to look forward to.

But, I still craved the company of another, so I saved the ritual of obsession for after my time with Carlisle.

"Good evening," I managed to say without wavering in a quiet voice as Carlisle watched me from behind his desk.

He sank further into his seat, a familiarly relieved smile on his lips as he returned my greeting. "Are you excited for school to begin again?" he asked casually, resting his temple on his fist and gazing at me with fond eyes.

I scoffed and picked at the frayed hem of my jeans. "Elated," I replied dryly, eliciting a chuckle from Carlisle as I rested my cheek on my knee.

His chuckle ceased and his eyes became scrutinizing. "You look very tired," he sighed, appearing disappointed in my lack of sleep. I merely shrugged and drew my bottom lip between my teeth in avoidance. I slept when it was absolutely necessary. He brought his idle hand to his forehead and began rubbing it soothingly. "It's almost disturbing, how similar you two are," he whispered, brief gleams of both comfort and regret flashing in his eyes before he was once again neutral.

I knew what he meant, but his comment startled me so completely that I was reduced to gaping dumbly at his face. "I'm not like Edward," I insisted, feeling momentarily enraged at his suggestion. For some reason it had offended me to be seen that way. I knew how people saw Edward, how he treated others. I was shy and solitary, but I wasn't callous and harsh to others. I had bad dreams that kept me awake, but I didn't smoke or do drugs to escape them. I liked to be alone inside of his room, but I didn't spend my time clinging to the past by drawing and wallowing in my misery.

Right?

Carlisle's gaze turned apologetic, but instead of rescinding his insinuation, he elaborated. "Not entirely, but in many ways you are comparable. You both have mutual habits of avoiding sleep, but that much is obvious. You'd both rather be alone than in the company of others. You both have an obsession with remaining independent of any assistance whatsoever. Some days, when I hear you up in that room, it's almost like he never left," he mumbled, shifting his gaze throughout the room thoughtfully.

I narrowed my eyes until his eyes met mine. "You're comparing all the wrong things. I'm not mean to people, and I don't get into trouble," I argued firmly and he quirked an eyebrow at me.

"Not yet," he murmured, and I recoiled incredulously as I continued gaping. What on earth would make anyone think I'd ever turn to that kind of behavior, I wondered? Sensing my offended confusion, he continued with calculating eyes, "Just observationally speaking, you become more like him every day. It hasn't escaped anyone's notice that you've completely stopped cooking, which used to be your favorite thing to do. It's like you're shrinking to fit his shoes," he mused softly, pursing his lips in thought.

His summation was like an arrow through my already pained chest. What if I was turning into Edward? What if I became that same impervious soul that hurt everyone around me with denial and my own internal bitterness? What if I became the very evil I loathed most about the person I loved? What if I was already too far gone to be anything more than a girl who stares at a closet door all day and imagines an entirely different set of 'what if's'?

Fuck that.

I was better than Edward. I was more-and I was honest-and when I made a promise, I was sure to keep it. And that was really the nail in the coffin. Promises. They were meant to be kept and sealed with the trust between the two people involved. Edward had lost mine. It was only fair to return the favor.

I blinked back the burning tears of revelation and lifted my chin. I untucked my knees from my chest and planted my feet firmly on the floor. Carlisle was regarding me warily as my posture grew defiant and decisive. "What if I did want help?" I asked in a surprisingly still voice. Carlisle's brow furrowed in confusion, so I added the words that would keep me restless an anxious for days to come, "What if I wanted therapy?"

His creased brow slowly smoothed, and I think his lips momentarily parted in astonishment. The

sudden flash of unbridled excitement and elation in his eyes overwhelmed me before he visibly reined in his reaction. "I suppose that would make you very unlike Edward," he confirmed, straightening in his seat to rest his hands atop his desk. I could tell he was trying very hard to keep his expression carefully indifferent and failing rather miserably. I wondered why this excited him so much.

"Okay," I said suspiciously, having already made up my mind. "So what do you suggest?" I smiled, watching as understanding dawned across his face and his eyes widened.

"Umm..." he stammered as the overwhelming enthusiasm once again flashed in his eyes. His hand went to a rolodex on his desk and began flipping through it hastily while he spoke in a frenzied tone, "Well, I have a few colleagues that focus on the specifics of your condition. I've spoken to them before, and they all have different methods of practice. I think you could probably benefit from a veteran of the field. Considering your past experiences, someone firm, yet maybe a little unorthodox to keep you interested. A woman, of course. There are a few people in the area who focus on various techni-oh! Perhaps someone who specializes in cognitive-"

"Wait!" I ordered, lifting a hand while trying to process his swift words. I hated it when he got all doctorly on me.

He met my gaze and grinned widely. "Excuse my haste. I'm almost expecting you to change your mind at any second." His grin abruptly faltered and his gaze turned hesitant as he released the cards in the rolodex. "Bella, you should take some time to really consider this," he spoke in a dispirited voice, and the absence of his earlier enthusiasm deflated me. "I just couldn't bear getting... Esme's hopes up if you decided not to follow through," he clarified, his expression remaining carefully stoic. It didn't escape my notice that he said "Esme's hopes," but really meant "my hopes."

My grin returned as I realized why Carlisle had been so excited before. He knew that it would make Esme happy, but he was also getting something in return: the opportunity to help someone who needed it. This was a privilege that Edward never granted him, even though he'd likely spent years attempting.

Well, I was going to be that person. It only further solidified my determination. The pros were beginning to outweigh the cons.

"I always follow through on what I say," I reassured him tightly, realizing that was just one more

trait that made me unlike Edward. Plus, if I had even a fraction of a chance to get inside that closet, I'd take it.

He narrowed his eyes for a moment, scrutinizing my determined expression, before his lips slowly turned up into a forcibly subdued grin. "If you're positive then," he sighed, unconvincingly aloof.

"I am." I nodded, gaining much pleasure as the enthusiasm returned to his expression. In an effort to make him feel as useful as he undoubtedly desired I added, "And I trust you to find the right person." Truthfully, my nerves over the whole thing were beginning to shine through, and I made certain to add my restrictions as he began once again flipping through the rolodex, nodding at each caveat. When he discovered my fear of being locked away after being triggered, he assured me that Esme would allow no such thing to happen, and since she would be responsible for the legalities of it, it gave me a small measure of comfort.

I stood to leave then, tucking the envelope under my arm, and he gazed at me quizzically, the enthusiasm in danger of disappearing. I put on a bit of show, biting my lip and pulling at the ends of my sleeves timidly. "Do... do you mind, maybe...." I trailed off in a false show of uncertainty, "setting it all up for me?" I hedged with a cautious expression.

His grin broadened as he nodded and returned to the task of pilfering contacts, an air of contentment and achievement about him as he worked. I spared him one last glance as I exited the study, and I felt a pang in my chest as I realized that this was Edward's doing. He'd closed Carlisle out for so long that he'd lost faith in his own abilities. He wasn't being patronizing or condescending when he smiled in relief at my progress, he was feeling proud of me and himself. He was feeling accomplished and supportive and grateful for the opportunity to experience it with me.

That was Carlisle's place in the world, and without that purpose, he felt lost and worthless. He had more money than most of the population of Forks combined, but all of those things meant nothing to him. I'd wanted to repay him for so long for living in his house, and there were a variety of ways I could do that. I realized then that nothing I'd ever give Carlisle would be as cherished to him as the gift of giving him meaning.

Dr. Carmen smiled down at her notepad and spent several minutes writing while I waited. A glance at the clock told me that my 'session' had ended ten minutes ago. I was ready to return to the bedroom and idly considered going over the newest credit card statements once again as she wrote.

"Okie dokie," she exclaimed, finally sinking back into her chair as she grinned at me. "I'm ready to make my assessments Miss Swan," she gloated.

I rolled my eyes and waved my hand, "By all means," I grumbled sourly, wondering how long this would take. I'd humor Carlisle for the most part, but if she couldn't get me into that closet, that's all it would be. Humoring him.

She cleared her throat and used her hands to gather all of her glossy hair up into a knot atop her head. Her gaze was intense and calculating as it met mine. "You're not going to get better," she stated plainly, and my mouth opened to protest before she raised a hand. "No speaking while I assess," she ordered softly, and I closed my mouth with a glare at her scrutinizing gaze. "You're not going to get better because you aren't doing it for yourself. You're here to get back at Edward, and you're here to please Dr. Cullen and you Aunt, but you aren't doing it for you," she continued, leaning forward as my guilty gaze shifted to the window. "This whole obsession you have with the closet is just the manifestation of a desire for Edward's loyalty." She shrugged, and I met her gaze with an amused expression. *Seriously?* This really was psycho babble. She smiled and continued, "His room is symbolic of him, and the closet is that one little nook that you can't access. It's probably comparable to the part of his heart that he's reserved for his mother, but I won't elaborate on that." She waved her hand in a dismissive fashion, and I stifled a mocking chuckle.

Couldn't I just want inside a closet?

She continued, "You want to blame everyone else for his leaving because you're used to that. You can blame Phil for just about everything that's wrong with you-except for losing Edward. Instead, you choose to place blame on the nearest present bystanders while ignoring the fact that no one is to blame, in the grand scheme of things." She crossed her legs and sank back into her chair while I swallowed down the lumped that formed in my throat. I avoided her gaze as she relented, "You feel alienated because you alienate yourself from those around you. You had a brief period of time in which you allowed them to get close, but now you remember what it's like to lose someone you love, since Edward left."

I stood then and pushed my hair behind my ears, not necessarily disagreeing with her every judgment, but too weary to hear it if it wasn't directly related to the closet. When I stood, she rose with me and sighed, picking up the brown paper bag that she had entered with, and unceremoniously dumped the contents onto her desk.

"Cookies," she stated, removing a small sandwich bag with what appeared to be plain *Nilla Wafers* inside. I met her gaze and quirked an eyebrow, crossing my arms over my chest in exasperation. She smiled, "The daily cookies you once made were an expression of your companionship. It was special to you, and even though you might not realize it, it was even more special to them. Without that bridge you created, you have no way of linking them to yourself or showing them how you feel. That, Miss Swan, is why you feel so alienated."

I caught one last glimpse of her smug expression before I stormed out the door of her office. She was ridiculous and infuriating. I just wanted to *get inside the closet*. It had nothing to do with *Edward*. I could already tell that I'd have to go around my elbow to get to my ass with this lady. I doubted it'd be worth it.



It didn't hit me until one the next morning as I was lying in Edward's bed, and when it did, it engulfed me with such an instantaneous longing that I couldn't contain myself.

I flew out the door and sprang down the staircases, only managing to fall over my own feet once. When I reached the kitchen, my trembling hands found every switch on the walls and illuminated the stainless appliances with a bright fluorescent light.

I opened the bottom cabinets, shifting pots and pans too loudly for a house with slumbering individuals, but not in the state of mind to really care. I found a large sauté pan and threw it aside, a resounding clang reverberating through the room as I repeated it with yet another one. When I realized that what I sought wasn't present, uncontrollable tears stung at my eyes, and my hands worked feverishly to delve farther into the shelves.

Just as I'd moved to a parallel cabinet, and my hands began shaking violently with unrestrained eagerness that wasn't being satisfied, I noticed a form out the periphery of my vision. I gasped, lurching back onto the cold tile of the floor and covered my mouth in shock as I gazed at a very shirtless Carlisle who stood in the doorway.

His sleep-laden eyes squinted in the luminescence of the light, visibly only semi-coherent as he asked in a voice that was still thick with sleep, "What on earth is all the commotion down here?"

I might have felt guilty for awakening him and disturbing the peace of the house if the urgency of my sudden desire wasn't so overwhelming.

"Why don't you have a cookie sheet?" I screeched in a frenzied voice that even alarmed me .

Carlisle rubbed his eyes in confusion. "Pardon?" he mumbled.

My chest was heaving with breaths. "A cookie sheet, Carlisle! You don't own *any*!" Somewhere during our exchange, my tears began trailing down my cheeks, and now I was doing everything possible to suppress the sob building in my chest.

Just as the urgency of my voice must have finally made him alert enough to respond, Esme came barreling into the kitchen, her hair falling in a tangled mess with wide eyes that regarded me in alarm.

"What is it?" she asked, moving around Carlisle as he swiftly repeated my accusation of him not owning a cookie sheet. She furrowed her brows at my tear stained face as I hugged my knees to my chest.

"I can't make cookies without a cookie sheet," I clarified in the most pathetic voice that trailed off into a sob. I couldn't understand why I was being so utterly and irrationally ridiculous, but somehow I just needed to make cookies. It was so strong of a craving that I couldn't fathom leaving the kitchen until I did. I relayed this to Esme in the sanest voice I could manage and stared after her in panicked confusion as she fled the kitchen.

With much frustration, I returned to the cabinets to resume my search for something suitable to cook on. I wondered how badly cookies would turn out if baked in a sauté pan. Pretty bad, I decided in annoyance. Who the hell doesn't own a cookie sheet? More importantly, how the hell did I ever end up in a house that didn't have one?

Just as I was beginning to admit defeat and return to the bedroom to mock my absurd hysterics, Esme walked into the kitchen, still wearing her silk pajamas with a large box in her arms. Carlisle took it from her, still regarding me with an expression of concern as he placed it on the counter gingerly. I heard a very distinct 'clink' that alerted me to the contents of the box, and I jumped up from my position on the floor to approach it. Carlisle and Esme both sat beside the counter as I grinned into the box in relief. She had gotten everything I would possibly need to make cookies, and I used my hands to wipe my cheeks clean as I thanked her with embarrassment.

She smiled and ran her fingers through her disheveled hair. "No problem at all, dear," she

assured me with a yawn, reaching down to scratch her ankle.

I worked fluidly through the kitchen and they simply watched me with sleepy grins as the silence grew comforting. The echo of the wooden spoon whipping through dough soothed me beyond all comprehension. It was familiar and pacifying. My residual sniffles mingled with the consoling and soft sounds of my placing the dough onto the cookie sheets provided.

We waited for them to bake, and neither spoke to me while I watched the door of the oven impatiently. I wasn't accustomed to his appliances, but they were modern and well-kept, and I looked forward to using them more.

Once I could finally pull them out, I gave one each to Esme and Carlisle. They didn't seem to mind the fact that they were still hot and lacked proper cookie firmness. When I mentioned this, they both laughed at me, but I felt significantly better.

I was certain that Dr. Carmen had planted that into my head, and in any other case, I would have felt angered by her role in causing my momentary hysteria. But the empty throbbing of my chest lessened as I took a seat beside the closest people whom I could call my parents and shared my companionship as best as I could offer.

They were both elated when I informed them the following day that I'd much like to see Dr. Carmen again. Maybe going around my elbow to get to my ass wasn't so awful after all.



School was to begin only two weeks later, and Dr. Carmen had insisted that I participate in at least two sessions per week. As our preliminary sessions passed, it was easier to overlook her "unorthodox" methods and authoritative demeanor with each newly gained insight that I took home to Edward's bedroom. She made me backtrack to my life in Phoenix before the incident, and we gradually worked our way to talking about the particulars of it.

She was patient, much like Carlisle, and never voiced any immediate desire to trigger me. She insisted that we go slow and work our way up to anything that difficult. Even though some things were expected, like the small amount of medication I was now administered by Carlisle, she was completely unlike any of my previous therapists and enjoyed introducing me to untraditional concepts.

I was just beginning to exit her office the day before school began when she stopped me with another one of these unconventional ideas.

"What?" I asked dumbfounded as her smile widened and grew into a chuckle.

"I think it would be very effective for you. Nothing over-the-top, of course, and your instructor will be female," she shrugged, reaching toward her notepad and making a passing notation while continuing, "You can choose karate or just general self-defense. Really, the possibilities of kicking the crap out of a mannequin are endless," she chuckled once again, and I nodded my agreement, briefly remembering the catharsis of hitting Edward before the throbbing emptiness of my chest overcame me.

"That's fine," I replied in a strained voice before exiting, really grateful that our session was over and she couldn't discuss that particular reaction just yet. The firmness of her gaze told me that she would eventually, though.

I rode to school the next morning with Alice and Jasper. The car was silent and thick with despondency that we were returning three people short of our usual circle. The autumn leaves fell around the parking space where the Volvo should have sat as we exited the car. The people meandering the halls and quad were oblivious as to the gravity of the day's meaning.

I was starting over without Edward. I silently conceded there was no other choice. The emptiness from his absence, though lessened, never ceased. When I drew my hood over my head to begin my soft shuffle to the first class of my senior year, I remembered him. I imagined his arm around my waist, his tender electricity, and his glorious vigilance in keeping me safe and content.

But he was gone.

Chapter 47. Double-Stuf Oreos



Sunlight filtered in through an open sliver in the heavy curtains and bathed my sofa in a dusty beam. I swiftly closed my eyes as I heard her footsteps approaching the front door. I kept my breathing steady and knew she'd think I was asleep-I always made it a point to feign slumber when she left the house in the mornings. I knew where she was going, and I had only stopped her once.

But I almost wished I hadn't. She had gone the whole day and night without liquor, but her body had become so fucking dependent on the alcohol that the withdrawals incapacitated her. She couldn't lift her glass of water without her tremors spilling it over the rim, and she couldn't even keep it down when she eventually managed to drink it. So the next morning, I just acted like I was asleep when she left. I couldn't stop it, and I couldn't watch her leave to buy it.

I had been in Chicago for six weeks, and I had been living here for four of those. My relationship with my mother had become touchy, at best. At worst, it was non-existent. I kept trying to take care of her, and she'd constantly push me away, demanding that I leave so she could just fucking rot away in solitude. It was the most pitiful and pathetic thing I'd ever seen. She wasn't lying when she'd told me that she spent her days drinking herself into oblivion.

I didn't stay because I wanted to watch her wither away-I stayed because I had to believe this life with her-the life I'd dreamt of for so long-wasn't as awful as it had seemed on the day that I'd arrived. I stayed because I was greedy and craved her acceptance. I stayed because my father had raised me to believe that this woman was infallible and pure and worthy of our unconditional love and respect. I stayed because I wanted it all back-which was ironic, because I had come to let it all go.

The day I'd mailed the letter to Bella, I felt a little piece of my soul die. Not only was I breaking my promise to her, but I had no idea when or if I'd ever go back to Forks. Truthfully, I existed day by day because living in the immediate present was the only way of retaining a fraction of optimism. I could imagine her reading it, and I loathed being that motherfucker who probably

broke her heart. A little voice in my mind wondered if she wouldn't be better off without me anyways. After all, I was the only thing holding her back from getting better, having basically threatened to leave her if she ended up surrendering to the assistance of some stupid fucking shrink. Looking back, it was probably an unforgivable method of controlling her and binding her to me by limiting her options, and now I found myself hoping that she didn't listen to a word I'd said-now that I wasn't there to help her myself. I didn't let these thoughts wander for long, because I couldn't bear to think of Bella finding somebody better once she could, although I knew she deserved it. I'd always known. This whole fucking fiasco only further proves that. I couldn't decide if I wanted her to realize it or not.

After resolving to stay in Chicago with my mother, I'd done some shopping for this shithole. It felt wrong using the credit card that Carlisle had given me for emergencies, but I reasoned that he made a whole shitload of money anyways. I'd find a way to pay him back for it all later, because I couldn't buy anything with her money.

When I'd asked my mother how she managed to survive with no job, her answer had enraged me. My father had a policy that she received after his death, and the homeowner's insurance on my burned and ruined childhood home had wielded a hefty sum as well. She had been just fucking leeching off of these funds to feed her habits for the last ten years. It was disgusting and insolent, and if I hadn't thought it possible to lose any more respect for her than I'd already had, I was proven wrong. She had been ashamed to admit how the money that had been intended to put our lives back together had basically just been wasted on her addiction. That was how I had stopped her from drinking for that one day. I'd used her guilt over the money to convince her not to buy any more liquor.

Of course, now I was resigned to just listening to her leave the house, listening to her return, and listening to her bedroom door close while she consumed it greedily. I'd never felt so hopelessly fucking incapable of helping someone in my entire life. The alcohol wasn't just an escape to her anymore, it was a chemical necessity. Even though I realized that her problem was likely over my head, I swallowed back the fear of failing and resolved to do it anyways.

I bought her food and forced her to eat it. I cleaned her home-if you could call this place a home. I cleaned for days and set down an abundance of traps to capture the rodents that were living in the walls. While watching me mop the floors and scrub the walls and ceilings, she would insist that I stop, and upon realizing that I wouldn't, would meekly offer her assistance-which I always refused. I'd considered just moving her out of here altogether, but as shitty as this place seemed, she was comfortable here. Somewhere in my mind, I had likened her townhouse to her and figured that if I could make the floors and walls clean and livable, maybe

I had a little hope of fixing her too.

I bought her new bedding and pillows and spent hours scrubbing the grime from her mattress when she refused my repeated offers to buy a new one. The bathrooms were repulsive. She had sobbed various apologies while she watched me clean up year-old vomit from the tiles. My scrubbing eventually made a difference. After two weeks, I felt comfortable enough with the state of things. It wasn't pretty or shiny or pristine, but it was as close to inhabitable as possible.

My next task was to force her to clean herself. She had lost any habits with regard to hygiene, and it was more than a little appalling. The woman who used to force me to brush my teeth three times a day and wash every inch of my body had month old dirt on her feet. She'd protested before I'd threatened to strip her out of her clothing and toss her into the bathtub myself. Realizing that I had the physical upper-hand, she finally acquiesced. I used the Laundromat at the end of the block to sort through and wash her clothing. I threw away more than I washed. The whole business was a lot like taking care of a child, and the constant task of doing so kept my mind distracted from thoughts of Forks.

I heard her footsteps ascending to the door outside and remained motionless on the sofa as she entered. She wiped her shoes now that I had made an obvious effort to keep shit clean. I listened as she took her walk down the hall to her bedroom and closed the door.

Even hundreds of miles away in Forks, I'd never felt as far away from her as I did in that moment.



That night, after all of the cleaning of the last couple weeks, the questions began.

Not just mine, but hers as well.

"Please, tell me?" she pleaded for the third time as we sat at the dilapidated kitchen table and ate our takeout.

I sighed and gripped my fork tighter as I speared a carrot. "You don't want to know," I replied honestly, glancing up to meet her gaze. Her eyes were bloodshot, and I could tell she wasn't completely sober. She had a brief window of semi-sobriety around dinnertime that I always took full advantage of before she retreated to her room to reacquaint herself with the bottle.

She frowned down into her container of food and poked at it idly. She never ate enough. "It

was bad wasn't it? The people you were with?" she asked in a tiny whisper without meeting my gaze.

Half of my conscience was hesitant about relaying my full experience in the system because I knew it'd only add to her guilt. I didn't want to be the one responsible for furthering her already violent downward spiral. The other, far less moral half of my conscience, wanted to gain the vindication of telling her *everything*. And, shit, did I have stories that would keep her up at night wallowing in guilt over her mistake of sending me away.

I just couldn't do it, though. It didn't seem satisfying to watch a shell of a woman become a shell of a shell of a woman. It would have been counter-productive and malicious of me to tell her about those experiences.

I sighed and raked my fingers through my hair uncomfortably. "Not all of them." It wasn't a lie.

She met my gaze and tilted her head a bit in curiosity. "Will you tell me about *something*?" she requested while taking a small bite of her noodles.

It felt awkward telling her about Carlisle. It was like mixing oil and water, and I didn't like the idea of her knowing about that side of my life. Unfortunately, it was the only good experience I had to relay.

"When I was thirteen, I was in the hospital with the flu," I began, choosing to start from my very first interaction with Carlisle. She dropped her fork and leaned forward while listening intently. "Eat your food, or I won't tell anymore," I snapped in annoyance, and she quickly began eating once again. I took a deep breath and began telling her about the man I'd spent the last five years of my life with. I told her about his job and how well he took care of me. It was all very mechanical for some reason, but as I spoke I sort of remained emotionless. I noticed that the more I offered her, the more she ate, so I continued and told her about his mansion-sized house in Forks and our nights playing chess together. I even offered a brief description of the town. I sidestepped anything negative about our relationship and kept it as directly related to him as possible.

By the end of the story, she had eaten her entire meal and kind of frowned down at the empty container like she had lost her only means of receiving information from me.

"He sounds like a very nice man." She smiled after a pause and pushed her hair behind her ear. I was still eating so I simply nodded in agreement as she watched me. I had grown accustomed to

being watched while I ate, and a phantom smile tugged at my lips until I realized what I was doing-what I was remembering. "Maybe I could meet him someday," she hedged, and the noodle I had been swallowing lodged in my throat with a cough.

I shook my head vehemently while sputtering into my fist, cringing at the idea of those two coming face to face. I couldn't fathom the thought of Carlisle meeting this woman. It shocked me that I felt this way, but I realized that I'd be completely fucking embarrassed and exposed if he knew about how she lived. Once again, oil and water.

After a moment of mutual protest, she eventually dropped the subject, and I allowed her to retreat from the table to her bedroom.

I didn't sleep that night as I lay on the sofa and stared at the ceiling. It was risky, and I knew Red Bella was likely waiting for me to get just the right amount of incoherent to pop up again. I couldn't decide how I felt about that. She was really fucking annoying, but I hadn't seen her since the day I'd arrived and lost my shit. I was careful about sticking to my pre-Bella sleep rules. Once I'd begun to sway with exhaustion, I'd allow myself sleep to keep the worse symptoms at bay. I couldn't decide if staying awake intentionally for the purpose of seeing her was ridiculous or not. I kept the possibility in the back of my mind, though. If I ever needed her badly enough, all I'd have to do was stave off sleep for as long as possible, and she'd be there.



I gave my mother the rest of the week to ask her questions, always at the dinner table when she was the most clear-headed. She wanted to know about my grades and school, which brought up the obvious topic of me missing the last month of my junior year. I shrugged it off and avoided her inquiries about whether or not I'd planned to return. That was just thinking too far ahead-frighteningly far ahead. Nothing that might happen after the sun set each day existed to me. I couldn't bring myself to answer those questions for obvious reasons.

I didn't know where I'd be.

It felt like being on the other side of the fence again, and though the grass wasn't greener per say, it was familiar, and I had put myself in the position to be responsible for it.

As the evenings passed, she began asking me questions that brought a borderline panic into my chest. "How'd that happen?" she'd asked one night as we ate, her eyes fixedly scrutinizing the teeth-shaped scar on the side of my neck.

My fingers had twitched and I had to restrain myself from fingering Bella's mark on me. "Not sure," I'd evaded in a mumble, swiftly changing the subject. "Do you ever talk to Grandma?" I asked craftily, not really interested in discussing the other two people who'd abandoned me, but knowing that the topic would be enough to distract her.

Just as I'd expected, her gaze turned wide and anxious. "You mean Ed's parents?" she asked pointlessly while staring into her container of food. I nodded my response and gazed at her expectantly. Of course I didn't mean her parents. I'd never even met them before. I wasn't even sure if they existed. She sighed and spared me a brief and nervous glance from under her lashes. "They passed away a few years ago. Your Grandpa was first," she whispered, meeting my stunned gaze. "Heart attack," she explained with an apologetic expression. "Your Grandma had a stroke," she finished in a remorseful mumble.

I let the information of my grandparents' death completely permeate before responding. "Too bad I never got to apologize to them. They must have-" My words were interrupted by the sudden question of whether or not *they* blamed me for my father's death. After all, they made no attempt to contact me either. I had always assumed the three shared the same sentiment. But now that I knew the truth of why my mother sent me away, did that mean...

Her gaze wandered to mine and she swallowed loudly. "It's not what you think," she whispered, fingering a nearby napkin as her gaze shifted to its common absolute hollowness. "By the time they realized what had happened, I'd convinced them that you were likely already settled into a new home, with a new family," she explained in an impassive voice. "They would have wanted you, but I was afraid you'd still be too close to me, so I hid you," she finished, as if she were explaining the contents of her take-out container and not something that should be considered borderline child abduction.

I was so furious that my container of food was jettisoned off the table, splattering against the wall in a gruesome spray of sticky noodles as I seethed at her. Something else she fucking stole from me: any relationship I might have had with my grandparents-and now they were both dead, and I had no hope of mending the bridge between us. So many things she had stolen from me-so many ties to my real family-and instead of acknowledging my anger, she simply offered me a completely fucking unsuitable apology and fled to her room like a coward.

The following nights, we talked more about my grandparents and her rationale for hiding me from them. I wasn't satisfied with her explanations, and every night I'd leave the table frustrated and bitter with her insolence. Her apologies were empty and meaningless to me. She offered me no comfort, only confusion and resentment with her every confession.

As the evenings passed and my questions dwindled to idle and occasionally offensive comments regarding her poor choices and how much anger they instilled in me, she began taking the lead again. "That's very pretty," she whispered one evening. My gaze followed hers to my hand which was holding my fork. She was looking at the Claddagh ring. I remained silent as I ate without acknowledging her comment. It wasn't exactly a question, but her eyes were wildly inquisitive about the only piece of jewelry I wore.

Even more so than Carlisle, I couldn't fathom telling her about my girl. The thought alone of bringing her up in conversation felt like a defilement of her name. I didn't even want to say it in the presence of such unadulterated despair and hostility. She was special and sacred, and I wouldn't subject her name to being spoken aloud in this fucking hellhole. It was an impossible feeling to have her on the tip of my tongue and the edge of my soul, and yet never allow myself to recognize it.

It was hard keeping the oil separate from the water, and with every passing day, I began to wonder if the other side of the fence even realized how much I missed it. It was so fucked up. No matter where I went or who I was with, I still longed for something else and couldn't even keep up with what I already had. I wanted it all but knew that wasn't possible. It felt like every cell of my being was split in half between here and there. No matter how hard I tried to believe that I should be thankful for finally having my mother back, it was always short lived when my anger grew, and I unthinkingly thumbed that little bronze ring.



It was the Fourth of July, and I was finally sketching again. It had taken me a while to find a shop that carried my exact type of sketchbook and graphite pencils, but I'd managed to stock up on them. The fireworks and nearby street parades made muffled noises that drifted in through the exterior of the townhouse. Bright flashes of pyrotechnics illuminated the partially darkened living room, further defining the moment I was illustrating on the paper before me: Bella watching the New Years fireworks from the riverbank in Forks.

My vision was somewhat unfocused, and made the task of pencil precision nearly unfeasible, but it wouldn't be long now. A smile tugged at my lips as I swatted a lock of hair from my forehead and continued drawing in semi-contentment.

After minutes of listening to the boom and crackles and watching the colors flash over my paper, I heard a soft whispering that floated through my ears and piqued my full attention. I kept my eyes trained on the face in my lap as I strained to hear more, praying that she'd come

back tonight. I had rather shamelessly planned it like this, and my relief was palpable when I finally heard her clearly.

"Hmm," she hummed a soft vibration, and I slowly raised my gaze from my lap to the red figure standing in front of me. Bella was staring at the sketch, and I took a moment to appreciate every curl of her hair, every line in her red lips, and the softness of her brown eyes as she quirked an eyebrow. "I don't like it," she whispered, finally meeting my gaze with a disapproving frown as the lights of the fireworks danced across her luminescent skin.

I grimaced and raked my fingers through my hair while turning the page. "I know," I agreed and contemplated starting a new one while she wandered the bare room, her red skirt swaying almost illusory around her knees. Truthfully, I didn't like my sketches any more either.

They were never in color.

I couldn't show the fierce reds hidden beneath her brown hair or the soft pink of her blush. It was all fucking gray and flat with pencil and paper. *Unworthy*. Bella wasn't gray. She was red and brown and pink and blue and orange and just fucking... alive. There weren't enough colors in the spectrum to paint her in, but if I thought I could, I'd spend the rest of my life trying.

With a sigh, I tossed the sketchbook aside and focused my attention on Bella. She was scrutinizing each nook and cranny in the room that I had worked so hard to clean.

"Dusty," she murmured while running a finger along the sofa, pausing to glance at me before sitting down.

I grimaced again and idly tapped the pencil in my hand against my thigh. "I have no fucking clue how to clean a couch," I explained dryly, hating how she always managed to point out the very worst things.

She shrugged and leaned back into the sofa while I dissected the mechanics of hallucinations and whether or not her weight left an imprint.

Shit, I needed to get some sleep.

"We need to talk," she said in an abruptly sharp voice that briefly startled me. I was used to her being annoying and pestering, but not harsh. Her eyes narrowed sideways at me before shifting to nothing in particular. "You're missing something," she whispered in an oddly accusing tone,

and my brows furrowed in confusion. After a moment of silence she turned to me, tucking a leg beneath her skirt and resting her arm on the back of the sofa. "Something that was given to you, Edward. Don't play stupid with me," she sneered, and I actually fucking recoiled from her anger.

"I don't know what the fuck you're talking about," I spat in annoyance, considering going to sleep right that second. She wasn't being nice. She wasn't being anything like *my* Bella.

She huffed, a lock of her hair flying away from her face as her eyes flashed in fury. "The crest," she hissed venomously, and my heart fell into my stomach when I realized what she meant.

The night I'd left forks, Carlisle had wordlessly given me a token that I'd recognized as his family seal. I'd seen Emmett's ring before, and the pendant that Carlisle rarely wore, but I had never questioned why I had no similar token. Carlisle had silently slid the small metallic disc inside of my jacket pocket right before I exited the house. I hadn't even realized it until I'd been in the gazebo with Bella. I'd rubbed it between my fingers, using the scant moonlight to inspect it with my weary eyes before swiftly returning it to my pocket to focus on our exchange, deciding to examine it later, once I was gone.

"I forgot," I admitted in a strained whisper. I realized that it had been left in the jacket when I gave it to Bella that night. It wasn't my fault. I had been too tired to remember any finer details of the evening.

Bella snorted and her lip curled up into a sneer as she leaned forward, inches from my face. "You don't even deserve it anyways." Her disgusted glare bore into the side of my face as I swallowed down her words. She was right, of course, but I didn't want this version of my girl. She was mad at me. The only reason I had avoided sleep was so that I could see her watch the fireworks from the window as I sketched. Instead, she only came to rebuke my mistakes.

With a deep growl of frustration I knocked the sketchbook onto the floor and swiftly laid my head down onto the pillow at my end of the sofa. I fluffed it a few times and closed my eyes, ready for slumber.

"Hum to me," I ordered tersely while watching the back of my eyelids.

"No," she scoffed incredulously from somewhere at my side.

I closed my fists tightly and lurched up from my position to face her with a murderous glare.

"You're mine!" I roared into her face, really fucking pissed that this night wasn't going my way like I'd planned. Her face remained carefully blank as I spat loudly into her face, "You do what I say!" I emphasized this by pointing to my chest and she simply stared at me. "If I want you to fucking do something, you do it," I finished in a growl. Wasn't that how this whole hallucination thing was supposed to work anyways? Didn't I have any control?

Her red lips pulled up into a grin and she leaned casually against the grimy sofa. "Well, controlling me with threats has worked so good for you in the past, hasn't it?" she sang with a smug impression.

My fists went to my hair, and I gripped it tightly in frustration. "It's not the same thing," I insisted, just wishing she would cooperate with me, just this once. Her soft chuckle caressed me as I forced my eyes closed. "Just fucking forget it! I didn't want-"

"Edward?" A timid voice abruptly interrupted me from the entryway and my head jerked to the sound. My mother was slouching against the wall, obviously drunk as she squinted to focus on my face. "Who are you talking to?" she asked in a slur, swaying forward a bit before straightening again.

I released my hair from my grip, raking my fingers through it for a moment before lifting myself from the sofa and moving towards her. "Nothing," I mumbled shame-faced as I gripped her arm and led her to the bedroom. She was eyeing me suspiciously as I eased her down onto her mattress, but I knew she probably wouldn't remember this moment come morning.

Bella was gone when I returned to the sofa and eased my head back to the pillow. I didn't have the advantage of her hum, but the deep boom of nearby fireworks lulled me into a fitful slumber as I battled away the guilt over carelessly leaving behind Carlisle's token.



It was in this state of mind that I found myself at the city cemetery the following day. I'd asked my mother if she wished to accompany me, but she was too shit-faced to even stand straight. The familiar disgust of her condition consumed me as I searched the rows of headstones for my father's. I'd only ever seen his plot once-the day he was buried. Since I didn't really remember much from that day, I spent at least an hour scouring the southern hill of the grounds.

Finding it was far less profound of a moment than I'd expected. The surrounding plots were all decorated with flags and flowers and mementos from loved ones. My father's was just a solitary flat slab with his name and date of death engraved on it. It infuriated me. My mother

should have been visiting and leaving tokens of her love and affection for him instead of drowning in her sorrow like some fucking ingrate.

I spent the entire day sitting beside the gravesite, watching the sway of nearby trees and enjoying the tranquility of the area. I tried talking at first, because it was this really clichéd and commonly known thing for people to do when they visited graves. Mostly, I just felt stupid, so that didn't last long. It was a little too much outward insanity, even for me.

At least I could see Red Bella.

The heat of the July sun was uncomfortable, but I made no move to leave until the sun had begun to set. With a silent promise to return, I departed and ran my evening errands for the townhouse.

When I returned to his grave the following day, well... I probably took shit a little too far. I mean, it obviously wasn't a contest or anything. "My dad's grave has more flowers than your dad's." But it was the only way I had of showing people that my dad was special to someone. I wondered how many people had visited nearby gravesites and wondered about the one that was bare. The notion made me briefly choke on a lump in my throat as I gazed at his gravestone. His really fucking flowery gravestone.

I spent the rest of my week in that fashion, sitting beside his grave wondering various things: what he would say if he could see my mother right now, how disappointed he would be in my failure to make her change, what kind of advice he'd give me to be deemed worthy of his praise.

One Sunday evening, I abruptly wondered while I sat beside his grave, what it would be like to have a father at this point in my life. Just as the passing question echoed through my head, I felt a sharp sting of remorse for even thinking that. Carlisle had been something of a father to me. We weren't close, and he couldn't fill that role in any entirety-but that was all of my doing-not because of any unwillingness on his part.

I spent the following day musing about our distance and my habit of keeping him at arm's length. And then I felt guilty for thinking about Carlisle at my real father's grave. And then I wondered if guilt hadn't been my primary justification for keeping him away in the first place. I had never really grieved for my father nor had I accepted that he was gone. Didn't it make sense that I never allowed Carlisle to be "a dad" when my own father had never been let go?

It was confusing, and every night that I went home to feed my shit-faced mother dinner, these questions would follow me. I'd watch her stumble out of her room and take her place in front of me at the table. I'd always tell her about my visits to his grave, but I wasn't sure if I was doing it to make her feel better or to make her feel ashamed for not having gone herself. Both reactions offered me equal satisfaction.

But then it happened. There was that moment of clarity when everything suddenly came together and began making a little bit of sense. It wasn't some grand moment for me. It was very simple and automatic, like a natural reflex that had always been hidden somewhere beneath the confusion.

It was a Thursday night, and the take-out place on the corner was really fucking busy. People were crowding the small counter as I waited for my order to be called, but they were backed up and short of staff. I tapped my fingers impatiently on the Formica of the counter, letting my eyes wander the "inspirational messages" lining the wall that were actually poorly translated proverbs.

After many minutes standing and waiting, glaring at the rude people shoving me with their shoulders, the employee at the counter finally regarded me. Her long dark hair was sweaty and sticking to her face as she gazed at me wild-eyed.

"Name," she requested, and I barely suppressed my eye roll at the rare and exceptional disorganization of their customer service this evening.

"Edward Cullen," I spoke over the voices surrounding me, feeling perturbed as she shook her head.

"We have a Masen," she replied, holding up my bag of food and bringing it forward uncertainly. I paid with my credit card and snatched the bag out of her hand, fleeing the suffocation of the small space and the air of realization. Once I was outside and could think clearly, it really just fucking hit me.

I'd said my adopted name by habit or instinct, but I hadn't been using it since I'd arrived. And now Cullen sounded familiar and comfortable, whereas Masen sounded foreign and awkwardly forced. I wondered when I'd allowed that to happen... When did I become so alienated from my nature and so adapted to my nurture? I couldn't decide if it was the moment my mother had sent me away, or the moment I had taken Carlisle's name. Maybe it was long after both of those things, but the reality of it was evident.

That night, after my mother had thoroughly passed out, I found myself smoking a cigarette inside of the block's nearly ancient phone booth . The air was dry and hot, and without the gentle cooling breeze that the sunset offered, I was sweating fucking bullets inside the confined space. It was unforgiveable of me, but I dialed the number that I knew well enough to remember on whim, and inserted two quarters.

While it was ringing, I had one hand shoved in my pocket, cradling the phone between my ear and my shoulder as my eyes shifted the sidewalk in paranoia. I was hoping I couldn't be traced like this. It would do me no good to start mixing the oil and water now.

There was a click, then a gentle voice that I knew all too well, "Hello," Carlisle answered, and I could almost hear him removing his glasses as I envisioned him sitting at his desk.

I didn't respond. I never planned to. I just wanted to hear something tangible from the other side of the fence, if only for one second. It was really fucking stupid and careless but having the connection to the other side made me feel as close as I could possibly get given the circumstances. My ears strained to hear every miniscule noise in the background as he repeated, "Hello?"

I tried to keep my nose as far away from the receiver as possible so that I didn't sound like some creepy fucking perv calling the line in his study, but my smile was impossible to suppress. I could hear a brief and distant shuffle of papers as he repeated the same thing yet again, though this time quieter. If I closed my eyes and blocked out the noises of Chicago at night, I could almost imagine myself in his study, getting my ass kicked good and proper in a game of chess.

I chose that moment of idiotic reflection to return to my dirty antiquated phone booth, listening intently to the sound of his exasperated and static sigh into the receiver.

"I'm not especially in the mood to entertain bored adolescents," he insisted in a tone that made me snort despite my every attempt at containing it. I sucked in a sharp breath, determined to remain silent as I listened for one more moment, until he spoke again. "Edward?" he hedged in a guardedly hopeful whisper that made my entire body go rigid in alarm. I lifted my head from my shoulder, grabbing the receiver noisily and eyeing the silver lever of the payphone in panic before he continued hastily, "No, don't hang up," he pleaded, and I froze with my fingers lingering over the handle. "You don't have to talk if you don't want to," he assured me softly after a moment of silence, and I allowed my hand to slowly fall to my side. "I'm just glad to

know that you're okay, honestly," he sighed in relief.

There was a little ledge inside the booth that I could sit almost comfortably upon as I deposited more change and simply held the phone to my ear, letting my head fall back against the glass.

He sighed once more into the phone, and I took full advantage of my temporary lapse in judgment and closed my eyes, allowing myself to imagine being back in Forks. "Everyone here is well," he eventually spoke, and the sounds of paper had ceased completely as I remained silent. If he didn't mind me not speaking, then I was happy to keep that boundary. "Emmett's actually leaving for college tomorrow. I think he's impatient to move into the house with Rosalie. God knows I don't want to investigate that particular enthusiasm," he scoffed, and my smile widened as I imagined Emmett leaving for college. Then I stopped imagining it, because Rosalie was there, and that was a pretty fucking horrifying mental image. With every passing second, my mind was reeling from having a connection to the other side of the fence, and I was willing him with my every thought to say something about my girl.

Anything.

Unfortunately he continued without her name emerging. "Jasper is good. He comes by... more often than not," *What?* "Him and Alice have planned some elaborate camping trip, which is something else I won't be asking for details about," he mumbled in that oddly disgusted parental voice that made me smirk. I couldn't imagine Alice Brandon lowering her standards to sleeping in wilderness if I tried. Jazz, on the other hand-it was *just* like him.

Shit, I missed that fucking prick.

I kept depositing change into the payphone as he chatted about absolutely nothing of consequence. The soothing sound of his familiar voice was great and all, but my frustration over his blatant avoidance of all things Bella was growing to epic proportions as the minutes turned into hours. After hearing about the newly passed town ordinances, the incompetence of his landscaper, a patient with a screwdriver driven into his arm, and the latest drama of the skanky hospital nursing staff, I was confident that he'd run out of topics to discuss.

He proved me right as he eventually sighed into the phone, "Look, Edward... if this is Edward, and if it isn't, then I just look like an incredible ass for talking to myself for over two hours," he rambled in a mumble before pausing with yet another sigh. "I'm going to bed, but you're welcome to call again," he offered in a soft and sincere voice.

I slammed the receiver back into its place and exited the booth in annoyance. He knew exactly what he was doing. If he didn't mention Bella, then I'd be certain to call again until he did.

And I'll be damned if that sly motherfucker wasn't completely right.



For the remainder of the week, I spent the hot summer afternoons with my birth father, and the windy Chicago nights with my adopted father. I didn't speak to either of them. The cemetery was tranquil and serene as it always was, and the archaic phone booth was a little slice of heaven in hell-only because of the voice speaking to me.

When I'd called back the second night, the elation in Carlisle's voice had been evident. His topics remained careful and impartial, and I couldn't fathom why he wouldn't just give me... something. Anything at all. Like a fucking... description of her hair style or what shoes she was wearing that day. I wasn't being picky. I just wanted him to say her name-prove that she still existed. But he never did.

Wednesday night was peculiar. His line was busy, and I got the impression he was leaving it off the hook. It just wasn't like him to take calls in the evening on that line. With frustration, I kept attempting until I was sure it was too late for him to still be awake. When he did eventually answer, he didn't offer any explanation, but was unusually enthusiastic in his dialogue. His voice was lighter and inflected with an exhilaration that puzzled me-especially considering his topic of choice, which was the newest addition to the decorative hospital aquarium: Bob, the blowfish .

It was fucking torture not to be capable of asking him about Bella. I couldn't count the number of times I'd almost lost my resolve and spoken-that night particularly. But then at the end of his one-sided discussion, he once again voiced his frequent concern over whether or not it was actually me calling, and I was again reminded that it was for the best.

I knew if something truly terrible had happened to Bella, he would have likely told me, so I was again confused as to why he wouldn't mention her. He didn't even mention Esme, and mentions of Alice were scarce and always following direct mentions of Jasper.

When I'd return to my mother's townhouse at night, I'd lie on her grimy sofa and recollect his every word and comment, trying to piece it together into a visualization of the little town that I missed. Then, just as I'd wonder why I remained so determined to keep it at a such and obviously painful distance, I'd hear my mother vomit from somewhere in the house, and reality would consume me.

I fed her, kept her safe and as healthy as she'd willingly allow, cared for and borderline bathed her, and yet she was still empty and devoid of any light whatsoever. If I were being entirely honest, it made me feel numbingly insignificant to her-like I didn't offer her life enough purpose for her to recover and change her ways. Every single time she'd order me away-always insisting that she didn't want me to see her in this state-I'd feel another surge of fury and resentment, but it was always laced with rejection and hopelessness.



Okay, so takeout was getting old.

It was the first cool evening of September, and my mother was having a seldom good day. She hadn't vomited, she'd eaten breakfast before she left the house this morning, and she only had one bottle. This meant she was shit-faced and completely passed out by noon but didn't have any more to consume when she awoke at four. It was pretty fucking pathetic how something like that could lift my spirits, but it did. And I was tired of takeout.

I was trying something new in hopes that her evening could be as good as mine. In only three hours, I'd be on the payphone talking to Carlisle. Something to look forward to. I decided on pizza because I hadn't had any since I'd arrived, and... well, this was Chicago. Not Thailand. No more fucking noodles for me.

I drove back to the townhouse with the obnoxiously large box sending mouthwatering perfume wafting around me. I'd bought other items for the comfort of the evening like fruit punch, my mother's favorite ice cream, and... the *Double-Stuf Oreos* that had elicited a longing and painful response as I passed them in the aisle-even though I knew they didn't hold a candle to the cookies I truly craved. The city lights were bright and colorful, and I wondered if my girl had ever been to a city this size before. I wondered if Phoenix looked anything like it and doubted it could. I wondered if I'd ever be able to show it to her. I wondered what she was wearing, or listening to, or eating, and I wondered how her first semester of senior year was going. I wondered and I smiled every time I imagined the answers. I wondered, and I fucking died a little inside every second I had to wonder and couldn't know.

My smile was gone by the time I arrived and opened the door. The inside of the townhouse now smelled like a faint scent of bleach mingling with dust and distant mold. I wiped my shoes, because over the course of the last two months, I had become an anal-retentive motherfucker about keeping shit clean.

I shoved my keys into my pocket and walked through the foyer to the kitchen. As I passed the living room, I spotted someone on the sofa out of the corner of my eye. My smile briefly returned as I realized that my mother was actually in the living room, which was something she never did.

When my eyes fell upon her, my smile disappeared once again, and my vision went red. "What the fuck are you doing?" I yelled, visibly startling her as she flinched. The sketchbook that had been in her hands fell to the floor and her wide, vacant eyes were laced with curiosity and fear.

She wrung her hands while staring at my angered expression blankly. "I didn't know you could draw," she whispered, dropping her gaze to the sketchbook on the floor between her feet.

I stomped across the room, my hand curling into a fist as I dropped the pizza box onto the sofa and bent to retrieve the sketchbook. "And I didn't know you couldn't respect privacy," I growled, gazing into her red eyes with indignation.

She sniffed, her expression unchanging as she lifted the pizza box into her lap. "You haven't given me a speck of privacy, and this is my house," she returned wryly. I narrowed my eyes at her insinuation. In any case, privacy was earned. Sensing my argument, she shifted her empty gaze to the box in her lap. "I didn't mean to. I was just looking for you after I woke up, and I saw it there. I shouldn't have," she conceded in a sigh and opened the box to remove a slice of pizza which she began eating.

I neither agreed nor disagreed. I simply removed a slice and began eating on the sofa beside her. She was eating without my intervention, and I felt a brief sense of relief that I didn't have to force her like I sometimes did.

After a few moments of silence, the inevitable question came.

"So... who is she?" my mother asked in a cautious tone.

I didn't meet her gaze as I quickly answered, "No one."

Motherfucking blaspheme.

"Hmm," she hummed thoughtfully while chewing and I was pretty much just stuffing my fucking face. I reasoned that if my mouth were full, I couldn't be expected to answer anything. "She certainly doesn't look like 'no one,'" she murmured after swallowing, and I could feel her gaze

on my face as I chewed my pizza and felt the uncomfortable churn of oil and water mixing. I remained silently evasive, and I could tell it was eating at her as she hummed once more.

"Is she the one responsible for the ring?" she asked, a foreign and fleeting twinge of curiosity tainting her demeanor. When I failed to answer once again, the twinge of curiosity shifted to frustration. "Did you love her?" she asked softly, and I nearly fucking choked on my bite of pizza.

I met her gaze then, because it was physically impossible not to respond. Every fiber of my being protested her statement. "*Do*. Not *did*," I corrected curtly, fucking loathing the words being spoken in a past tense.

Something unrecognizable flashed in her eyes before they were immediately vacant once again. "Tell me her name?" she begged, and the way she crafted her question actually made me consider answering. It was a deep plea to show her something of myself-something she was just now realizing I'd kept hidden the entire time. She already knew that she existed and that I loved her, so I figured giving her a name wouldn't be the end of the world.

I sighed and lifted my second slice of pizza from the box as I answered in a defeated mumble, "Bella." And then because I was hopelessly uncontrollable when it came to this topic, I automatically added without thought, "Her name is actually Isabella, but she prefers Bella." It didn't make any difference, but I'd gone so long without even speaking her name, and I hadn't seen Red Bella since the Fourth of July. It was like a starving man's inability to stop speaking of his favorite food.

Her eyes once again flashed in that peculiar fashion as she discarded the box beside her and turned to me imploringly. "Show her to me?" she begged once again, reaching for the sketchbook and holding it out to me uncertainly. She wanted *me* to show her this part of myself. She didn't want to stumble across it by accident.

I was incapable of denying her request-being the starved man that I was. I deposited my partially eaten slice of pizza into the box and took the sketchbook from her hands. I opened to the first page, and she scooted close to me-closer than I was used to-and after a moment, gingerly placed her head on my shoulder.

It was awkward and temporarily staggered me. It was the closest thing to affection we had experienced since I'd arrived. I took care of her and touched her when I had to drag her drunk ass into bed, but there was no fondness whatsoever in our interactions-only necessity. It was

almost like we had somehow lost the humanity that made that kind of interaction possible. Maybe my father was the source of hers. Maybe Bella was the source of mine.

I filed it away for further contemplation as we both gazed down at the face on the paper. "She likes to cook," I offered timidly, because even though I'd only drawn her comfortable expression, the moment I'd stolen it from was the evening she had cooked for us in Carlisle's kitchen.

My mother lifted her hand and fingered the fine indentations of the lines of her face. "She's very beautiful, Edward," she sighed in contentment. *Contentment?* I darted my eyes to her face and they widened in shock at the smile she wore. It was an unbelievable expression of satisfaction—one that didn't eclipse the vacancy in her eyes, but at the very least, matched it. And that was a big fucking deal. "Tell me about her," she whispered, glancing up to meet my gaze briefly before once again fixing her attention to the page.

I was so appallingly pleased with her happiness that I couldn't *not*. "She's shy sometimes, and she hates dressing up," I offered, turning the page to another drawing, this one only half completed. My mother repeated the motion of tracing the lines as I continued, "Some people think she's stubborn, but they're wrong. She's just determined. She's a survivor." I grinned at the firm expression I had illustrated.

My mother smiled again, sparing me another brief glance. "Like you," she added, and I scoffed. I turned the page once more, but my breath hitched, and I swiftly turned the page again, almost ripping it in my haste to hide the image. *That* drawing was a little too much of Bella for *anyone* to see. My mother tisked her disapproval while I cleared my throat, distracting her with an image of Bella in the gazebo.

We spent almost two hours on the sofa as I showed her my girl. Her grin didn't waver as I relayed all of Bella's qualities and personality, and gradually, it transformed into stories of the scenes I chose to illustrate: her in the bookstore on our first date, her scowl at Alice the day she 'borrowed' her lucky spatula and returned it broken without explanation, and even the afternoon in the semi-meadow. Every time I'd turn the page, I'd take a cautious peek to ensure its PG-ness, and my mother would give me another disapproving look for drawing a girl wrapped up in my bed sheets.

But eventually she wanted to know things about Bella that the drawings couldn't show: why she couldn't touch other guys, why she had that scar there and why she slept in my bed. It was revealing far too much about Bella's past, and mine too—explaining all of these things.

But I kept doing it.

I couldn't fucking explain why I couldn't keep my goddamn mouth shut, but I just kept going and going. With every answer I gave, she had three more questions, and because they were about my girl, I just kept answering them. It felt wrong, not only mixing the oil and water but revealing these private details of Bella's past to someone who didn't even know her. But it also felt so good to talk about her, and the constant emergence of my mother's unfamiliar smile only encouraged my willingness.

Eventually, the pizza was cold, and my mother knew... pretty much everything about my girl. At some point during the discussion, she had taken my hand in hers and was now spinning the bronze ring around on my finger.

"So, what happened?" she asked, her smile wavering until it had transformed into a tight line that forced my lips to mimic them. "Why aren't with your Bella?" she whispered, still rotating the ring around my finger.

I frowned down at the ring and briefly contemplated the concoction of a lie before I thought better of it. "She's still in Forks," I shrugged evasively, not saying in so many words what we both probably already knew to be true: I wasn't with my girl because I was with my mother.

It was silent for a moment as the ring glided around my flesh until my mother abruptly shoved my hand away, pushing off of my shoulder and meeting my gaze with furious eyes.

"You fool!" she shouted in such an uncommon display of rage that I winced and recoiled. Her nostrils flared, and her fisted hands shook-either from fury or the effects of her six-hour-sobriety, I wasn't certain.

I'd expected her guilt and remorse and downward spiral, but not... *anger*. Her chest heaved as she seethed at me and stood from the sofa defiantly. "You had everything, and you threw it all away for *this*!" she yelled at the same time that she gestured to the room.

I couldn't fucking believe the nerve. "Well the apple doesn't fall far from the lunatic tree, does it?" I snarled resentfully, my anger quickly replacing my content Bella-moment. *Thanks a fucking lot.*

"You-" she paused and began pacing the room with a loud and frustrated roar. I was stunned. It

was the most blatant show of emotion she'd made since I'd arrived. Suddenly she spun to face me, her eyes shining with tears as she continued trembling before me. "You just don't get it, do you?" she growled.

I gaped up at her from the sofa, incredulous. "As a matter of a fact, no, I don't. Everything you do is fairly fucking unbelievable," I spat in frustration.

She shook her head vehemently, all of her hair flying around her face in a wild halo of darkness. "How I choose to live is weak and selfish, Edward, but not unbelievable in the least," she insisted, and I shook my head in disagreement.

"That's a bullshit copout. If you loved me, you'd want to get better," I differed venomously, my own nostrils beginning flare from the sheer ridiculousness of her argument before I added, "You'd let me help you." She dropped her head, still shaking it as her hair veiled her expression.

She was quiet for a moment, bringing her trembling hands to her face and cupping her cheeks before she spoke in a pained whisper, "I love you more than anything in the world, which is why I need you to understand that *you can't help me*." She lifted her face and the vacant oblivion of her eyes was piercing.

I sighed and dragged a palm over my face while continuing with an unfamiliar anxiety, "But I *can*. I know it's impossible for you to quit cold-turkey, but there are places... hospitals and clinics that specialize-"

Her humorless chuckle interrupted my explanation and angered me further. I'd spent so much time looking around the city for something suitable, and now she was fucking *laughing* at me. She met my gaze with a calculating expression, pursing her lips and remaining otherwise motionless.

Just as I was considering continuing, she sighed agonizingly. "Tell me, Edward?" she began, walking to the sofa and taking a position at my side. She took my hand again, uncurling the fist I'd made, and I restrained the urge to snatch it back as she once again began spinning the ring, continuing in a gentle whisper, "What would you do if you got the call right this second that your Bella was dead?"

I really did snatch back my hand angrily at that, pushing off the sofa and glaring at her. "It's not the same, and don't you ever, *ever*..." I faltered as a deep ache penetrated my chest, suffocating any words or breaths.

I'd fucking die.

If anything happened to my girl... it just wasn't even comprehensible.

I wanted to argue that I wouldn't be like her-that it wasn't the same-that I'd know that I'd only be hurting myself, but I had no way of knowing how true that'd be. If I could be certain that the people I loved could be happy without me? Maybe. I didn't know, and I prayed to any fucking deity that was listening that I'd never have to find out.

The most astonishing part of it all wasn't the fact she refused my help-because that was something I'd grown accustomed to over the months-it was how strikingly familiar the whole situation seemed to me. It took me an inexcusable amount of time to realize why.

I'd never fully understood Carlisle until I'd had to watch my mother turn away my every attempt at heartfelt assistance. There was no fucking misery worse than watching someone you love suffer while refusing your help. I felt a deep sense of dread as I gazed at her form on the sofa knowing that I had done this to Carlisle. Of course, my situation paled in comparison to hers, but I really didn't think severity mattered much.

And then I just fucking... got it.

For the first time ever, I really *got* Carlisle. I really understood his desperation to see me progress and grow past the pain of losing it all, and I truly felt like I *knew* him-like I *knew* the depth of his soul. It was so much more pure and respectable because I was a complete stranger to him, and *this*... this was my flesh and blood sitting before me. It'd never occurred to me that he never considered me as anything less.

Without another word, I turned and left her there, traveling to the only place in the city that offered my any comfort at all.

I lit a cigarette as I stepped inside the phone booth, cradling the black receiver between my ear and my shoulder as I fished the roll of quarters from my pocket and began inserting them. I entered his number with haste, feeling the tension of reality leave me as I listened to the reverberating ring.

First, the familiar click of the connection with the other side of the fence and then Carlisle's soft and expectant, "Hello,"

I sighed away from the microphone and situated myself on the ledge, straining my ears to hear the background noises as I often did. I never heard anything other than the occasional flutter of papers, but even the static sound of his study's silence felt recognizable.

"I was beginning to think you wouldn't call," he began. He sounded different. *Detached*. I was late, and I had to battle the urge to apologize for my tardiness as my teeth ground together in restraint. Another long pause of silence until he continued, "It's raining here," *Is it ever not?* "I saw on the news that today was cool where you are. I can't recall if you ever had a preference." he paused again, his sigh creating a hiss, and he couldn't recall it because I'd never told him my preference. "Emmett called this morning after his classes, and he seems happy. I think his coach might-"

My brows furrowed in confusion over his abrupt silence. I could hear his breathing coming through the receiver, but he just... stopped talking. I began tapping my toe against the ground in impatience as the pause drew on. My eyes shifted around the sidewalk outside, watching the traffic without really seeing it.

"Edward, I can't..." he finally continued in a whisper before trailing off into another silence. My hands balled into fists in frustration until he finished in a weary voice, "I can't do this anymore. If you want to talk to me, then talk to me. If you need help, then I'll gladly offer it. But I can't keep talking to nothing." He waited exactly five seconds before sighing and hanging up with the click that broke the connection to the other side of the fence.

He couldn't keep talking to nothing, and I couldn't offer him anything if I couldn't offer him everything. I knew this now. Before my mother, it would have seemed like a really dickhead thing for him to do, but I talked to nothing every day.

When I returned to the townhouse, the living room was empty, my sketchbook abandoned on the sofa. I wandered to the bedroom down the hall, and the door was slightly ajar. I nudged it open with my hand, my eyes immediately falling upon my mother's form sitting at the edge of her bed. The lights were on and she had a bottle in her hand when she met my gaze. I supposed she had bought two after all.

She stared at me numbly as I stood in the doorway for many moments until her lips curled up into an empty grin. "You understand now, don't you?" she asked softly.

I briefly darted my eyes to the bottle in her hand before once again meeting her gaze. "I can't

help you," I admitted with total defeat, even though my determination protested loudly in the thrumming of my veins.

As sure as I now knew Carlisle's misery, I knew the other side of the coin just as well, if not better. There was no helping someone who didn't want it-someone who didn't feel like it was even possible or deserved. It'd turn me into the detached man on the other end of the phone, waiting for someone to finally reach out and speak, all the while knowing they never would. It'd turn her into the bitter recluse who was forced to hide inside her bedroom, constantly annoyed and resentful of the one who'd never stop trying. Most importantly, she'd become even angrier at herself for not being enough to change for me. I knew, because I had been that person once before .

Her smile remained as she shook her head sadly, her glassy eyes drifting to my hand. "But I bet you can help someone else," she whispered, and I followed her gaze to Bella's bronze ring as I thumbed it gently. Her smile had fallen when I met her gaze once again and I watched her throat bob with a swallow. She stood, setting the bottle on the floor by her feet before walking to me.

She searched my eyes for a moment as she stood before me, and then she smiled once again, though the tears in her eyes betrayed her. "You tell your Bella she'd better be good to you," she choked, her eyes shining as I engulfed her in my arms and crushed her to my chest-because I couldn't stay if I couldn't help her. We both knew it. I buried my face into her shoulder to stifle the sobs that shook us both-hers and mine.

"Always brush your teeth three times a day," she sobbed into my chest, and I nodded. We cried in unison as we embraced, and I allowed her one last moment to be the mother she had wanted to be but couldn't. "Always say 'please' and 'thank you', and hold the door open for strangers," she gasped as we shook against one another, and I kept nodding as she sounded off just about every good manner she had ever taught me into thick mumbles against my chest .

My sobs had subsided into soundless tears by the time she had concluded her motherly orders, and I chose that exact second to begin following them.

"Thank you," I whispered into her hair and reluctantly released her while wiping my eyes.

When our watery gazes met, it was abundantly clear what I was thanking her for. I was thanking her for Carlisle and Bella and Jasper and Emmett, and even though it took me ten years to see it for what it was, I was thanking her for the gift of her sacrifice. Because even though she was

wrong in so many ways, and it wasn't always perfect, it'd led me to those people and that side of the fence. She could have kept me with her and I would have been happy never knowing anything different, but she wanted more for me than this. Her vision of my having complete perfection was oddly selfish in her insistence to put distance between me and any of my remaining family, but it didn't make it any less of a sacrifice. I could see that now. I could respect it. I could forgive it. I could never again take it for granted .

Her tear-filled eyes gazed back into mine gratefully, and we finished our impromptu goodbye with one last embrace and strained reminders that we still loved one another. She was still my mother, and I was still her son.

I turned to leave her in the doorway of her bedroom and her phantom smile followed me. I gathered my necessities into my arms. I left the sketchbook lying on the sofa so that she'd still smile when she saw my girl. I knew she'd imagine how happy she was making me.

I ran to the Volvo and shoved it all inside while trying to ignore the searing pain that engulfed my chest upon leaving my mother of my own accord. I drove away from the curb of her townhouse. I drove past the corner store she bought her liquor from and the dirty phone booth that had been my connection to the other side of the fence. I passed the takeout restaurant that had fed us for us the past three months-where I'd first realized that I was a Cullen. I passed the city cemetery's southern hill where my father lay-where I finally realized that being a Cullen didn't make me any less of a Masen. I drove out of hell and I didn't look back.

My mother wanted me to have heaven, and heaven was in Forks, Washington.

Chapter 48. Monumental Macaroons



It took me thirty three hours of continual driving to reach the Fork's city limit. I didn't sleep or eat, and I only stopped to get gas when it was absolutely necessary. I probably violated every speed restriction in the process, but I couldn't be bothered by such trivialities.

The drive was unlike the one to Chicago I'd made four months earlier. Then, no matter how much I'd tried to convince myself otherwise, I'd been running away from something: from Bella and what we'd done to one another, from Carlisle, from Alice and Esme when they'd found out-from every last one of my fuck-ups. But on this drive, I was running toward something and leaving something else behind. With every mile I put between my mother and me, I felt the portion of my soul devoted to her screaming in protest. In return, the part of my soul that needed mending-the part reserved for Bella, Carlisle, and everyone else-that part of my soul buzzed with impatience to rush to Forks.

The two conflicting sensations were warring with my every emotion, and I found it impossible to be either eager or grief-stricken for more than a minute at any given time. It was a lot like being pushed toward the west while being pulled toward the east. If I hadn't already made up my mind, I might have turned around.

When I finally arrived in Forks, I was a fucking mess of nerves. My mind had been so one-tracked during the drive that I hadn't even stopped to consider the time of day in which I'd be arriving. It was only eight in the morning, which meant that everyone would be at either work or school.

As I approached the familiar road that led to the white mansion-like home, I began scrutinizing every fern and domestic flora of the neighborhood for changes. There really wasn't much to take note of except that the trees now had leaves and needles. When I'd left, everything had been bare and just scarcely sprouting for the spring. Now it was lush, and even though the impending autumn was already beginning to take the leaves, it appeared lively and verdant.

I was getting sentimental over motherfucking *foliage*.

A self-depreciating smile tugged at my lips as I rounded the last corner and brought the house into view. But my eyes never had the opportunity to fully scrutinize it, because when I saw the Brandons' front lawn, my foot slammed on the brake and screeched the Volvo to a sudden halt in the middle of the gravelly road.

I was overcome with terror that I was too late and... *shit*. It was only just beginning to hit me as I gripped my steering wheel and gazed at the large "For Sale" sign on Bella's lawn that... it was entirely fucking possible that I'd never be able to get her back. It was the first time I'd ever allowed myself to really *consider* what I'd done to her.

From Bella's perspective, I'd... run away? Could she think that? Would she be wrong? The remembrance of that final day and what I had done hit me with a crushing blow of horror. I hadn't had the time in Chicago to consider it all fully because I was so occupied with my mother, but now... now it seemed like the most significant thing ever. Not only did I leave, and not only had she completely understood and had been supportive of my choice, but I'd broken the promise to return and had never even really kept in touch. I couldn't even bring myself to conceive the possibilities of how she likely felt about me now - of how she likely believed I felt about *her*.

Christ, I'd really made a cluster-fuck of everything.

Just as I was beginning to indulge myself in a really fucking horrendous meltdown full of self-loathing and regret, movement from the house next door caught my eye. I shifted my gaze to see a blonde head emerging from the door as Carlisle reached down to retrieve a newspaper. He didn't even glance up as he stepped back inside and closed the door. I was reminded that Carlisle could probably tell me where Esme and the girls had gone. It wasn't over, yet. I'd tracked my mother across the country. I could easily do the same for Bella. First, I had to get my shit together and face him, so I started toward the house and eased into the driveway.

And then, I was nervous as shit once again. I rolled my eyes as I actually checked my hair in the rearview mirror. My hair really should have been my last concern because my eyes were darkened from lack of sleep and still had the red and swollen remnants of my tearful goodbye and the agonized moments following. I spent a moment smoothing out my hair and the wrinkles from my clothing before I decided that it was a lost cause and exited the car. The air smelled of... wet and green and cool and life and just... home.

I was getting sentimental over motherfucking *air*.

I huffed in annoyance with myself and began approaching the house. It was a different anxiety than the kind I'd felt when I'd found my mother. This was impatience, not fear. I bounded up the steps, taking in the well-kept appearance with a subdued grin as I reached the door and paused in abrupt uncertainty.

I knocked.

I knocked because even though it was home to me, I had no way of knowing if I'd be welcomed or wanted. With every second that passed, my heart raced with the possibilities that I wouldn't, and then my impatience turned fearful. I wondered, if neither Bella nor Carlisle wanted me, would I go back to Chicago? I shook my head in objection to the fleeting thought. I'd stick around and keep trying because they were worth it. But I was growing fretful. Really fucking fretful. I shifted my feet and tried to find something to do with my hands which hung limply at my sides. I was lightheaded with anxiety until the door finally opened.

Carlisle kind of blinked at me as I stood in the doorway and shoved my fists deep into my pockets to occupy them. He looked exactly the same, right down to the part of his hair and the crease of his slacks. As the silence grew on, my really fucking fretful anxiety swelled, and I struggled to find something intelligent to say. Those are always the moments in which I decide to say the most retarded fucking thing possible, so I wasn't at all surprised by what emerged from my mouth.

"Sup?" I asked, feigning coolness and internally kicking myself in the head as I gazed at his blank stare.

Carlisle seemed to be shaken from his astonishment at the sound of my dense greeting. "Sup?" he seemed to mock, his lips twitching into a sad smile.

I was grateful at least for the change of atmosphere as I grimaced. "I was afraid you'd be working," I mumbled while diverting my gaze behind his shoulder into the foyer.

"I have a late shift," he whispered absently, answering my silent question as I fought to remain comfortable under his calculating gaze. I nodded with a light hum and shifted my gaze to the toes of my boots. I nudged a dampened red leaf and balled my fists tightly in my pockets. He gasped, almost inaudibly and stepped back. "I'm sorry, come in. Please," he offered in a panicked voice, and I breathed a sigh of relief as I extracted my clenched fists from my pockets and stepped forward.

The foyer was exactly as I remembered and he walked ahead, leading me to the living room, occasionally peeking at me over his shoulder. When I entered, I was taken aback by the changes in the large room. The furniture had been rearranged which was the most obvious change, but there were also new drapes and decorations scattered around. It looked nice and comfortable. The new arrangement of furniture made sense in comparison to the space. It was more colorful and vibrant. He turned to me with a tight smile and gestured for me to sit on the sofa, so I sunk into it, sighing in contentment as the soft and plush upholstery cradled me. I suppressed a frown as I observed the room. It was probably the most notable evidence of how much time had passed. I didn't really like that.

He sat directly across from me in a large arm chair and propped his ankle on his knee. "How are you?" he asked casually, but his watchful stare betrayed his caution.

"Okay," I shrugged, still allowing my eyes to wander the room. "You?" I asked, really fucking hating this eggshell walk we were doing. I wondered how ridiculous it would be to yank a grown man from a beige arm chair and just... hug the living shit out of him. Probably... pretty fucking ridiculous, I decided.

"Good," he nodded, shifting his gaze to his lap and reaching up to scratch his eyebrow. I hummed in response, watching as his lips returned to that same forced smile. "How long are you in town for?" he asked, finally meeting my gaze before adding, "Where are you staying?"

My heart sank into my stomach as I realized that he assumed I was just passing through. "What makes you think I'm not staying here?" I asked with a certain double connotation that I wasn't certain he'd catch.

He raised his eyebrows, the brief spark of hope in his eyes immediately extinguished. "You knocked," he explained in a controlled voice.

I huffed and raked my fingers through my hair. "I didn't know if I'd be welcomed," I defended and instantly struggled to reign in my annoyance.

He sighed, an oddly sad sound, and rubbed his forehead back and forth. "This has always been your home too, Edward," he muttered, but appeared frustrated before visibly composing himself and meeting my gaze. "What do you need?" he asked. I furrowed my brows in confusion, so he explained with a blank expression, "Money? Documents? Clothing?"

"What?" I asked while shaking my head, but he was already reaching into his back pocket to extract his wallet. "Jesus, Carlisle, I don't want money," I insisted in mortification. He seriously thought I'd come back here just to bleed him dry a little more? It was appalling. He met my gaze and sighed once again in frustration as he dropped his wallet. I was hurt and tired and disappointed as I stood. "Couldn't it be possible that I just wanted to come home?" I asked dreadfully as my eyes likely filled and brimmed with the pain of his humiliating assumption. I really didn't want to leave, but his insinuation was offensive and degrading. Maybe I should have gone with the hug, after all.

His blue eyes squinted for a moment, regarding my wounded expression carefully before his face and posture crumbled. "I'm sorry," he sighed remorsefully and looked away in shame. "I shouldn't have jumped to conclusions. I suppose it's just been-" He paused with an exhale before meeting my gaze and shaking his head. "I'm an ass," he said simply.

I released my tense fists and eased back down to the sofa, his eyes following mine fluidly. "That makes two of us," I whispered and wondered while he shrugged if he'd caught my silent apology. "Must be a Cullen thing," I muttered under my breath and raked my fingers through my disgusting hair. Showering was definitely a high priority, and I pondered the comfort of my large bathroom as I met his gaze, his expression cutting me off mid-sigh. "What?"

His brows were deeply furrowed as he gazed at me in silence for many moments. When he finally spoke, his voice was strained with some unfathomable emotion. "Do you even consider yourself a Cullen?" he asked while visibly attempting to control his expressive reaction.

My heart sank a little more as I looked away. I tried to consider everything I'd likely put him through over the last five years to make that one little question so enormous to him. It was really unforgiveable. I'd done awful things, and my behavior had been monstrous... more often than not. I couldn't imagine ever just letting all that shit go and accepting any apology I might offer. Apologies were shit. Apologies were words laced with sincerity that felt empty regardless. Actions spoke louder than words, and I could speak louder than anything if you pissed me off hard enough.

I met his gaze, Carlisle nearly flinching from my angry stare, but I wasn't angry at him. I was angry at myself for never accepting his sincerity and making him so goddamn submissive to all of my asinine antics. As I recalled the feeling of utter misery I'd felt when my mother pushed me away, I decided I couldn't let him feel that anymore.

"My mother's a drunk," I confessed quietly and his brows creased further. I leaned forward with

a sigh, resting my elbows on my knees, and began in a weary voice, "The night of the fire was their anniversary..."

It was everything Carlisle had ever wanted and more. I could now explain the full story from my side and hers as well, even though I was tired of talking about it and tired of living it and ready to move on. He was visibly taken aback as I abruptly plunged into my recollection of the fire and everything that happened following. His eyes, captivated and compassionate never left mine as I spoke. I could almost see him absorbing my words like they were the most important thing to him... ever. He never stopped to ask questions and I tried my best to make certain he'd have none. Everything, up until the day I'd been admitted into the hospital was explained in full detail, and his concentration didn't waver when I began recollecting the entirety of my stay in Chicago. His eyes grew wide and horrified as I explained the full gravity of my mother's condition, and I looked away in embarrassment as I told him of the townhouse and the way we had lived. When I told him of how I'd had to care for my mother, cleaning up her vomit and ensuring the simplicity of her hygiene, I felt vulnerable and ashamed. Deciding I couldn't possibly feel anymore humiliated, I even told him of my father's gravesite and the copious amounts of flowers I'd left.

It was a little soon to just start fucking... telling him everything. Admittedly, I'd just walked through the door and dumped it on him like a bucket of cold water. But I didn't have much of anything to offer anyone, Carlisle most of all.

I'd finally understood Carlisle's soul after caring for my mother for so long, and now he knew mine.



I think we were probably both exhausted after my mouth finally stopped moving. I relaxed my head against the soft back of the sofa and relished in the comfort of Carlisle's home. It wasn't just the expensive luxuries his money could provide. I couldn't really identify the exact cause, but it was more subtle and vague and just... secure-cozy even.

I was getting sentimental over motherfucking *furniture*. Shit, I really had to stop doing this.

With a sigh I met Carlisle's gaze, and he was eyeing me intently. There was pity in his stare, and I really hated it, but I didn't recoil or get pissed off like usual. He could pity me if he really wanted to. I was one pitiful son-of-a-bitch, after all.

He straightened in his chair, having had relaxed during my lengthy recollection and gazed at me

with utter sincerity. "Thank you," he replied softly, and I felt a foreign heat creep up my neck to the tips of my ears. He cleared his throat, disrupting my moment of embarrassment, and smiled. "We could discuss it later, when you're more rested, if you'd like," he added, and I really wasn't sure what was left to discuss, but I nodded my agreement. He pursed his lips, regarding me thoughtfully as I relax against the sofa and asked with doubtful eyes, "You really want to stay, then?"

I groaned internally, knowing I'd have to swallow my pride and just say the words because he deserved that much. When he'd adopted me, I'd never asked. His desire alone had led me to be taken into his home. It was off kilter and unfair to have that kind of upper-hand when he was the one offering me something of value.

I sighed and straightened, my limbs feeling heavy and stiff as I met his gaze and held it firmly. "Can I please stay here and... live with you, Carlisle?" I asked with earnestness, injecting every ounce of my desire for this side of the fence to penetrate my voice and longing stare. There was once again that weird sensation of heat at the tips of my ears as I watched his lips screw up into a knowing smile. My plea wasn't really necessary, and he'd never make me beg and grovel for admittance into his home. That wasn't really the point of it, though.

His smile grew wider, nearing a chuckle, until it abruptly wavered, and his face paled. I furrowed my brows, watching as he stood from his chair and diverted his nervous gaze to the staircase across the room. "I... have to make a brief call. Will you wait?" he asked in a bizarrely anxious voice, pleading with his gaze. Confused, I nodded and watched him cross the room and ascend the stairs.

Truthfully, I was a little mortified that I'd went through all the bullshit of sacrificing my dignity and he hadn't actually given me an answer. I bit back the fear that rose and waited for him to return. Eventually, I grew anxious and felt an overwhelming need to see my space once again- some kind of evidence that I had a space in the house to begin with.

I rose from the sofa and quietly climbed the stairs, absorbing all the little details that had changed since my absence. I found that all of the windows had new drapery and were... well... a little fucking extravagant and feminine for my tastes, but... if that was what Carlisle liked... whatever. The second floor hallway had new rugs running the length and I suppressed a mocking snicker at Carlisle's weird, new decorating fetish. I supposed since Emmett and I had been gone from the house, he'd probably been bored out of his mind. *Emmett*. I sighed as I walked down the hall passing his door, and made a mental note to get a phone number from

Carlisle.

As I passed the door of Carlisle's study, his hushed voice halted me, and I stood closely to the open sliver to overhear his conversation like an intrusive asshole.

"What do you mean?" he whispered and fell silent. There were no other sounds emerging as I strained my ears to hear him. "Because... it's important to me, and considering our... special circumstances, I need to know," he paused, and my brows furrowed at the context of the one-sided conversation. After many moments of silence, I wondered if he'd hung up before he eventually spoke again, in a firm and uncharacteristically demanding voice, "For all intents and purposes, he's my son, and I'll expect you to extend him the same respect that I give to your children, I will not tolerate-" His voice abruptly stopped and I almost considered entering to ask him who the fuck he was talking to before he sighed. "I'm sorry-I know, I know. I don't mean to be defensive, but can you honestly-I don't want to argue either," he agreed with the second-party and abruptly chuckled, relieved. "Now, *that*, I'd probably pay to see. Jasper did mention charred effigies," he chuckled again and his mention of Jasper ripped me from my focus and I once again surged with longing to see my bedroom.

I crossed the hall and climbed the second staircase, still carefully observing the little changes throughout the house. I stopped at my door and gazed at it pensively before gripping the knob and opening it.

I wasn't really certain what I'd been expecting; the destruction of my last memory, or the comforting norm of its usual appearance before that day. What I saw was really neither. It was mostly clean and the furniture was in the same location, but it was different. As I entered, I noted the brown comforter on the bed, a brief flash of remembrance forcing me to recoil and clench my eyes shut against the shuddering memory of my last moments on that bed.

I stepped further into the room, diverting my gaze away from the bed and observing everything warily. It didn't really feel like my room anymore and that really fucking bothered me. It felt different and lighter. The new, sheer white curtains hanging from the French doors amplified the rays of sun and illuminated the room, casting light where I'd always known shadows to linger. Belatedly, I began noticing things-little things like a pair of sneakers by the door that weren't mine and a hair brush lying on the dresser. Articles of my clothing peeked out from the laundry hamper that used to be located inside the closet, but was now sitting just beside it. There was a very small, dark shirt draped across the arm of the sofa, and I furrowed my brows at this article of clothing that was definitely not mine. It almost looked like it belonged to a girl.

I'd just bent to pick it up when I heard footsteps and turned my head to find Carlisle standing in the doorway.

My eyes were questioning as they swept the room. He simply stared at me as the realization struck me. "Someone's been living here," I observed and was surprised at the hint of jealousy that seeped from my voice. I wondered if he had found someone else to take in, and then... given them my room? It pissed me off and my hurt was palpable as I met his gaze with an accusing stare.

He grimaced, running his fingers through his hair as he nodded. "See, that's the thing..." he trailed off cautiously as I held his gaze. I raised my eyebrows expectantly, needing some kind of explanation as to why he'd just... give my shit away. Before I could grow fully enraged that someone had been in *my* room and had probably gone through all of *my shit*, he sighed, "This is Bella's room now."



We had gone downstairs because Carlisle felt uncomfortable being in *Bella's* room. We were standing in the kitchen where he'd insisted on getting me a drink since my mouth had gone bone dry.

Since the night I left. Bella had been living in my room since the night I left. I couldn't really wrap my head around it.

"Esme and Alice were spending so much time here anyways," Carlisle continued his explanation as his back stuck out from the fridge. "It just didn't make sense for her to keep the mortgage up. She can be very frugal as long as her children aren't involved," he babbled while extricating a glass from the cupboard. "Alice was in the guest room on the third floor, but once Emmett's room became available, she wanted the space." He stood in front of me, holding out the glass of... something as I gaped at him.

"I'm sorry. Could you go back to the part where Bella is living in my fucking room?" I asked, not necessarily angry, but still confused. His brows furrowed and he began re-telling the same explanation before I stopped him. "Why didn't you tell me?" I accused, narrowing my eyes. "All those times I called, why didn't you ever say anything?" I asked while setting the glass down on the counter.

His eyebrows rose before his lips turned up into a smirk. "So that *was* you calling?" he asked,

folding his arms over his chest.

I rolled my eyes. "If I'd known, I would've-" I paused as I wondered... what would I have done? I definitely would have said *something*. All those nights I'd spent just sitting there in silence, and Bella was right here. It was staggering.

He sighed and walked to the other side of the kitchen while speaking. "If I'd told you, it would have been an unfair exploitation to get you to speak to me." He paused before adding with a glance over his shoulder. "I wanted to know that you'd speak because you were ready, not because of a reaction to Bella," he finished and picked up a clear bag from the counter.

I supposed I could see his point, but... goddamn it. I could have been listening to her voice too. It kind of pissed me off. I couldn't deny my relief, however. Bella hadn't moved away. Not only had she not moved away, but she'd chosen to live in my bedroom. Maybe she had been waiting for me all this time. The possibility made me simultaneously elated and heartbroken. Elated, because it meant she'd wanted to be close to me, and heartbroken, because I had kept her waiting for so long, and now I had no way of knowing if she'd forgive it.

Carlisle stopped in front of me and raised his wrist, glancing at his watch. "My shift starts in ten minutes, but we'll discuss arrangements this evening when everyone is home," he instructed, and my stomach filled with anxious twinges realizing who "everyone" included. Bella would be here. This evening. I barely retrained a completely emasculating reaction to this notion. "I'll be home first because Esme has the drive and Alice and Bella have... prior engagements. In the meantime," he continued, and pushed the bag his idle hand held into my chest, smiling brightly. "Have a cookie."

I gazed down at the bag in my hands as he exited the house, the clear plastic familiar and cool in my palm. The black ink on the front of the bag had Bella's careful title gracing the little white rectangle. *Monumental Macaroons*. I smiled.

A million thoughts raced through my head as I wandered the empty house, fingering the new, heavy fabrics that graced the walls and reacquainting myself to the mansion while clutching the bag of cookies in my hand. I made a few plans, like deciding to finally take a shower and cleaning out the Volvo. But once I was left alone and all distraction had ceased, my thoughts turned to my mother, and I wondered what she was doing. I imagined her drinking as she often would have been just beginning to do this time of morning, and a sudden panic invaded my chest.

A million possible and equally ridiculous scenarios flooded my brain, and even though I realized how random they might have been, it worried me.

What if she fell down the steps? What if she asphyxiated on her own vomit when she passed out this evening? What if she didn't get enough to eat and starved? What if... what if something happened and I never knew and she had no one else to help her? What if my concern and worry over her well-being ruined any chance I had at enjoying anything?

There was only one way to assure she'd be cared for, and I knew I only had to ask Carlisle to make some calls, and it'd be taken care of. I'd done enough research on home care when I was in Chicago to know that it was the most realistic option. They wouldn't be family, and I had no way of knowing if she'd accept it, but I'd try. And Carlisle would be pleased that I offered him the opportunity to ease my anxiety. I'd put what I could in his hands because I knew that sharing what I carried on my shoulders would only bring us closer. I cursed having to dump it on him, even though I realized he'd be more than happy to help.

Really, I cursed my enlightenment more than anything. I hated it more than the alcohol my mother drank or the feeling of seeing my girl screaming and bloodied on the gym floor. It was necessary, but that didn't make me hate it any fucking less.

Once I chose, there was no middle, and no going back. The fence separating the two sides had become an impenetrable and massive barrier. There'd be no letters between my mother and me. No silent phone calls or promised visits. If I ever spoke to her again, it'd be because she found me, and I knew better than to expect that. The link between us was severed irrevocably when we released from that embrace inside of her bedroom.

If I didn't know the damage it would cause, I could still keep in touch. I could have a semblance of happiness and normalcy with Carlisle while still reaching out to my mother. I could continue my futile attempts of convincing her to recover. I could experience milestone after milestone of my youth and feel the resentment of knowing that she won't be there to experience them with me. I could spend my coming years growing attached to an impossible vision of a life in which she was present and healthy and happy because I would still have hope. I could hate her and myself when it never happened.

I'd never be capable of happiness-of making anyone else happy. It would become a vicious circle of obligation and resentment and I'd be responsible for all of my mother's self-loathing when she failed to make my visions of our happiness come to fruition. The only way to please

anyone was to sever the tie and never look back. All or nothing - the crushing reality of decisions. Monumental, indeed.

I continued to curse the enlightenment that forced me to see this logical truth instead of heeding the aching desire to have it all. It wasn't about being selfish or selfless for once. It was about accepting that ideals weren't achievable, and choosing the best possible alternative for everyone involved.

Where I gained, I lost. My confidence in my decision hadn't faltered since I'd left Chicago, but it didn't ease the pain of knowing that I'd abandoned every single ideal that I'd been grasping towards for the past ten years. It didn't erase the pain of losing my mother, once and for all.



The smell of gym and leather ignited my senses and my fist flew to the bag in front of me with ease. It smacked dully, but didn't really move or shift under my minimal strength. That didn't matter to me. I kept jabbing and my hands felt like marshmallows with the boxing gloves I wore.

Alice's were pink.

She grunted from my side while making her own jabs and her reddened face was almost comical. She had this little scowl on her face as she punched her bag like it had personally offended her in some way.

Irina's hard voice broke my scrutiny. "Eyes forward, Swan," she admonished from across the gym and I refocused my attention to my punching bag. I took a deep breath and tried to do what Alice was doing-what Carmen had encouraged us to do. I envisioned it as an offender and began jabbing. I probably looked like a total spaz with my fists flailing ahead. These boxing classes weren't really meant for the purpose of perfecting my form. It was just supposed to be cathartic and releasing. And it was.

My lackadaisical approach to her sport displeased Irina. "Keep your shoulders straight, Swan," she instructed, and I inwardly growled as my punches grew harder and stronger. Anger was

always a good emotional projection for this activity, as Carmen often reminded me.

This was only my third class for boxing. It was a little too early to say whether or not I enjoyed it, but I couldn't deny the release it granted me. Unlike Alice, I preferred it to yoga-or as I call it, "Limb Torture." My favorite so far would have to be the Judo courses. Judo was really intriguing and low-impact. It wasn't about my own strength, but using others' strengths against them. It was okay to be a little girl in Judo. In boxing... not so much.

"You're hitting high again!" Irina scolded in obvious annoyance, but the triple ding of the overhead bell indicated that time was up. I inwardly smiled. Saved by the bell. Irina took her position a little too seriously.

Alice huffed and turned to me with a big grin. "I'm getting really good at this!" she exclaimed and held up one, hot pink gloved fist enthusiastically.

I rolled my eyes, sweating a little and awkwardly swatting a dampened lock of hair from my face while slapping her glove with my plain, red one. "Sure, Al. If I were a punching bag who met you in a dark alley, I'd be petrified," I mumbled, making her smile slightly waver. Guilt consumed me at managing to deter her enjoyment of the activity. "I'm playing," I smiled. It felt hollow. It probably appeared so, too. There was another hollowness, one that wasn't visible and concrete to the people I loved. I was thankful for its hidden nature and that I could carry its burden on my own.

Alice shrugged, and we spent our time extracting our gloves and tape in the locker room. Alice was too good to me. When I'd told her of Carmen's plans to enroll me in all these classes, she was eager to accompany me. It was sweet and selfless of her to be so supportive when I was obviously awful company. Her enthusiasm rarely faltered in regards to it. She had gone pretty full-out with picking out necessary-and occasionally pink-equipment and researching ways in which to excel. It brought a pang to my empty chest that my spirit commonly spoiled our afternoon lessons.

She was unusually quiet on the ride home as I gazed out at the green vegetation that blurred past, and I hated myself for upsetting her. It was late September and getting cold again. I wasn't certain if I welcomed the change of season or resented it. I wanted to freeze the summer and remain in the stagnation that had given me hope, and yet I wanted it all to pass and become a distant memory.

"Want to do something for the weekend?" Alice's voice broke me from my silent reflection and

I shrugged in response. We didn't usually do anything on weekends. Mostly, I just did nothing whatsoever. Tomorrow morning, we'd have yet another lesson with yet another instructor and that would keep me occupied for the morning until I repeated it.

My existence was dull and full of schedules that were meant to keep me distracted and focused all at the same time. Mondays were Carmen, Tuesdays were Judo, Wednesdays were my evenings with Carlisle, Thursdays were Carmen, Fridays were boxing, and Saturdays were yoga. It was an empty loop of school, offices, gym, the kitchen, and the bedroom.

I hated to appear ungrateful of everyone's support. Carlisle, Alice, Esme, and even Jasper were beyond fantastic. Carmen had spent numerous amounts of hours constructing the perfect course of treatment, balancing traditional medicine and her own methods of therapy into something I'd gain maximum benefit from. In the grand scheme of things, it was effective, as far as I could tell.

I still couldn't enter the closet, but I could feel myself growing more comfortable with attempting, having already given up on trying weeks prior. I'd thought I had a breakthrough the previous day when Jasper somehow convinced me to give him a brief fist bump. I'd been annoyed with him as we sat in the lunchroom and he'd extended his hand across the table, gently encouraging. At the time, I couldn't comprehend his sudden interest, and Alice had been incensed with his persistence. I mostly did it so that she'd cease her shrill protests in his ear, but a little ache in the distance of my mind wanted the release of the absolute breakdown it was supposed to grant me. Instead, I quickly knocked his knuckles with my own and withdrew before Alice could even realize it was over.

I was shocked that even though it felt uncomfortable and fleetingly alarming for my skin to touch his, I'd managed it without any major anxiety at all. It was small, and I wouldn't be attempting anything beyond that one simple gesture, but I'd grown hopeful and excited at the proof of my progress. Jasper had been smug and strangely excited as well. I supposed that he'd felt a little advantaged, being the only guy beside Edward that I had touched successfully since the incident two years ago.

Unfortunately, Carmen had disagreed and soured my feeling of accomplishment when I'd told her. "It's just the medication clouding the response," she'd informed me with a sad smile as my own fell in return. She didn't want me to get false hope from the artificial effects of the medication, and while I respected it, I resented it all the same. It had felt good to know that progress was being made. She assured me that the improvement was there, but it wasn't solid and substantial to me. I wanted proof. Resistant and clinging to the only glimmer of positivity

that I'd had in months, I ignored her and made *Monumental Macaroons* in a refusal to abandon my sense of accomplishment.

Now, the whole thing seemed ridiculous and trivial and impossibly dimmer. I sighed as we rounded the corner to our street and idly pondered what to make for dinner. I only ever cooked three nights of the week, and tonight was Carlisle's night. He liked beef. I was quickly constructing a mental list of side-dishes when I saw it.

My eyes flashed to the driveway and caught a twinkle of silver.

My heart stopped beating, right before it began thrashing against my ribcage. I could feel my face pale and my lips part as the entire world froze and my mind went blank. And then I was slammed with a maelstrom of thoughts and emotions that made my hands tremble as they instinctively reached for the door handle and began fumbling to open it.

"Bella!" Alice ripped me from my near-exit of the moving car, and I met her gaze, because I couldn't trust my mind enough to know if it was real, which should have bothered me-but it didn't. The expression Alice wore as she stared ahead at the driveway-and the Volvo that was parked there-confirmed my vision and made my heart thump impossibly harder, until it was an erratic "*whish woosh, wish woosh*" that fuzzied my hearing. Alice met my frantic gaze, and her brow was furrowed deeply in concern. I couldn't keep my hands or breathing steady, and I could feel my lips go dry and cold. I couldn't remember feeling so much of anything since the day he'd left.

I was concerned about fainting, and my concern only served to magnify my erratic pulse. I was so alert that I could feel every tiny thing, my senses hyper-aware and unconsciously seeking out a soothing current of electricity that might be close.

"Alice," I gasped my plea and my shaky hand remained on the handle of the door as she stared at me. The car was only going at a crawl as her eyes bore into mine, conflicted for a fraction of a second until they finally snapped ahead. Something in my gaze must have settled her conflict, because her foot suddenly slammed on the gas. We were lurched backward into our seats as she swiftly closed the distance between the Porsche and the driveway.

I was out of the car and darting to the door of the mansion before Alice could even get her car door open. It didn't seem real that he could actually be here, in this house, at this very moment. It made my chest vibrate faster as I barreled through the front door. My feet carried me unthinkingly through the lowest level of the house in search of his presence. When I didn't find

it, I darted up the staircase to the second floor, only barely realizing that Carlisle's study door stood ajar and illuminated.

I flew into the large office, expecting to find what I sought inside, but instead finding Carlisle behind his desk on the phone, Esme stoic at his side. He shot up from his position and dropped the receiver to his desk as I entered. I'd turned to leave, to continue searching until I found him, but Carlisle's panicked voice stopped me.

"Bella, wait!" he called. I was barely capable of planting my feet to the floor to regard him, but I did.

I faced him and was startled by the panicked expression both him and Esme wore. It terrified me. "Where is he?" I grated, my voice thick and heavy with an emotion that momentarily frightened me further. I flinched at the pure desperation that colored my voice and actions, but couldn't be diverted-even though I realized that this particular reaction was hardly suitable.

Carlisle raised his hands in some kind of submissive gesture as his alarmed eyes stared fixedly into mine. "You're getting yourself worked up, Bella. You need to calm down before-" But I'd already turned and exited the study, because Esme's minute and fleeting glance at the ceiling above us gave me the information I needed.

I ascended the second flight of stairs, Carlisle's voice following behind me as I took them two steps at a time. I ignored his calls because my body was acting of its own accord-requesting what it knew to be in close proximity and growing impatient with its prolonged absence. My tunnel vision led me down the hall and to the closed door of the bedroom that had known only my loneliness for the past four months. I barreled through this one as well, no longer capable of handling the anticipation and anxiety of finally seeing him.

And he was there-on the bed, shirtless and lying on his stomach with his face buried into a pillow.

My body became an independent vessel that hummed in eager delight as I gazed at his bare back rising and falling in a steady rhythm. It could feel the edges of his buzzing static, and it wanted closer. My heart ached at the sight of him-painfully constricting my chest and making it swell with months of the restrained and neglected emotion that had been reserved for him alone. And my mind... my mind screamed its steely objection to both reactions, because...

My Body, heart, and mind-he'd wounded them all.

I saw his back rise with a deep sigh as he suddenly mumbled into the pillow, "I'm not avoiding you Carlisle. I'm just... tired," he spoke. I think I might have gasped at the sound of his voice-my body, heart, and mind all recognizing and reacting to the velvet mumble in various ways. My arms wound tightly around my torso as I felt the void fill and briefly contemplated whether or not to even allow it.

Edward, likely having heard my gasp, jerked his head to the side and faced me. When my eyes finally met his, locked, and widened, it was like being torn in three. My arms tightened around my torso in restraint. His eyes were dark and tired, red and swollen, dull and empty, until he met my gaze and they suddenly sparkled and shone. *Gorgeous*. My body, heart, and mind flooded my instincts with confusing and overwhelmingly contradictory urges.

I wanted to hug him.

I wanted to kiss him.

I wanted to stab him in the fucking chest and tell him to get the hell out of *my* room.

My feet held me firmly grounded and glued to the carpet as he rolled off the bed in one oddly clumsy motion and stumbled to the floor, eyes never leaving mine. His lips parted as he stood at the other side of the bed, but no sound emerged. He was just gaping at me with an unreadable expression, penetrating me with his piercing and shining green stare. His hair was falling in his eyes, longer now than I'd ever seen it. If I could have looked away from his captivating gaze, I probably would have been looking at his bare chest.

Or stabbing it.

My knees were weak, and the pure contrast of my weakness to the strength I'd felt only minutes before made me angry. So much so, that my hands curled into tight fists under my ribs and trembled with... some emotion. Too many emotions. My chest felt tight and aching with pressure. The "*whish woosh*" in my ears began to garble and crackle. My vision grew distorted and cloudy and I worried that maybe Carlisle had been right about my being too worked up. I wondered, as Edward's expression transformed into one of abject fear, if he could see the emotions on my face as I trembled. I wondered why he'd be afraid. I realized, far too late to rein them in, that tears had formed and began trailing down my cheeks.

"Bella." Carlisle's voice from behind me violently ripped me away from mine and Edward's

locked stare. I gratefully turned to where he stood just beyond the doorway, in the hall. He was looking over my shoulder at Edward, then darting his eyes back to mine. "We have a matter to attend to," he stated tightly, his blue eyes firm and unrelenting, because he knew that it was time for my medication, and he probably figured I really, *really* needed it.

Unbelievable...

I tried to raise my chin in some kind of show of defiance, but failed miserably as it quivered. "It can wait," I whispered as more of a plea than a demand.

Slowly, Carlisle shook his head in objection. "If you get it out of the way now, you can have all evening," he reasoned in a soft and coaxing voice, attempting to pacify me. I swiveled my head to see Edward out of the corner of my eye, pulling on a shirt, and I swallowed in anxiety over just leaving. "He's not going anywhere, Bella," Carlisle soothed, correctly reading my hesitation.

Defeated, I exited the room, scooting past Carlisle and descending the steps as they had a brief exchange of glances that I was all too curious about. Carlisle trailed behind me as I entered the study and went straight for the little clear cup and bottle of water on his desk. Esme had disappeared, and I wondered how long it would take for her to become meddlesome about all of this.

I tossed back the little cup and swallowed the medication as Carlisle rounded the desk and sat in his chair. I knew better than to think he'd simply let me leave.

"Have a seat and relax for a minute," he pleaded softly as my hand shook the bottle of water ferociously. I snorted and it emerged as a whimper as my eyes went to the slightly agape door. But my chest hurt far too much for my liking. I needed to breathe and think and center myself before I could even begin considering approaching Edward.

I went to the sofa and sank into its comforting leather. I laid my head back and closed my eyes, going through the various Carmen-recommended visualizations that were meant to relax me. Carlisle remained silent and still as I battled to calm my racing heart and irrational emotions.

All this time he'd been gone, the memory of his effect on me had seemed abstract and remote, but it all felt perfectly familiar now. I tried to trap the portions of my instincts that yelled and jumped and told me to go to him right that second. I locked them away and they rattled their cages, fierce and feral in their need for his electric hum.

It was unhealthy. I could see this now. Before Edward's departure, I would have jumped in that bed with him and let my instincts and emotions consume me. Now, the concept seemed utterly appalling. It would fulfill my body and perhaps even my heart, but certainly not my mind or conscience. I realized now how important they were. I allowed myself a short moment of pride for becoming a semi-rational individual-even where Edward was concerned. Even when it felt impossible.

I'm not certain how long I sat with my eyes closed, but it must have been a good while. Gradually, my chest began feeling lighter, the pressure decreasing to a bearable throb, and I remained still as I felt my breathing and pulse steady. When I opened my eyes, the darkness outside the windows surprised me, as did Esme's unannounced presence beside Carlisle. I wasn't in as much of a hurry, and though the cages still rattled, I was in a better position to confront them.

I sighed and straightened in my position as I met their concerned gazes. "I feel better," I informed them, suddenly exhausted as my cheeks flushed in embarrassment. "I don't know what came over me," I lied. I knew exactly what came over me, and their skeptical expressions made it clear that they weren't buying it either.

Esme's face transformed into a grimace, her eyes flickering nervously to the door. "You should stay a little longer, Bella," she whispered.

Let the meddling begin...

Carlisle's expression was controlled, but his sideways glance at his partner gave away his worry. I think Esme had probably been a little jealous of mine and Carlisle's relationship over the months, and I felt minutely guilty for it. I'd pushed her away, argued with her frequently, and chose to embrace his compassion instead of hers. Few things could have driven her crazier-one of them being upstairs at that very second.

But it wasn't about her, and it wasn't about Carlisle or Carmen or Alice or Emmett or even Edward. This was about me and nothing could have stopped me from rising from the sofa and exiting the room.

If anyone asked, I couldn't say exactly why my next reaction occurred as I opened the bedroom door and spotted him on the edge of the bed. It was a complete three-sixty to what I'd felt the first moment I'd seen him-desperate, longing, impatient, and rabid.

Now, he's staring back at me and looking concerned and loving-rising from the bed and stepping towards me. Now, the electricity buzzes, but feels almost too tangible as my traitorous fingertips squirm and twitch for contact. Now, I wonder why he's returned and what he could possibly expect from me. Now, I feel enslaved by my desire and reactions, and terrified of ever surrendering to them again. Now, I'm downright furious that he's given me these things and taken them away.

"Get out," I growled.

He froze, mid-step, his expression contorting to one of pain. "Bella, let me-"

"Get out!" I repeated, my hands trembling again. Not in weakness this time, but in useless strength. The entire scene felt all too familiar of our final altercation and it made my fury swell. "This is my room, and I want you out. Now." My voice shook as I traveled to the dresser and pulled open drawers, flinging his clothing at him as he stood in the middle of the room, frozen and aghast.

His hands were barely extended as they absently caught the clothing I flung at him. "Can't you just let me talk?" He asked in a frustrated voice that forced me to halt my actions.

I spun to face him and my furious mind was pleased by the expression of utter panic that replaced the frustration I'd heard. "You've had almost five months to talk," I snarled and tossed the last piece of clothing at his face.

Admittedly, it would have made sense for me to at least hear what he wanted-if he wanted me-but the segment of my mind that was kept for protecting me was terrified of finding out. My anger wasn't empowering like it should have been. It was entirely hollow and systematic.

His jaw was taught, shoulders rigid as he broke my heated gaze and stared at his hands full of shirts and boxers dismally. "I just wanted to-" But my mind didn't want to know, so it went on the offensive.

"Return for a repeat performance of 'fuck-and-duck'?" I spat, my heart weighing heavily with my words that I knew to be a low-blow, but not really caring. He'd already taken his share of his low-blows at me. It only seemed fair.

Edward's head snapped up, and the expression on his face was simultaneously relieving and staggering. His wide eyes and paled face only amplified the gape of his parted lips and the

realization that he hadn't been expecting my reaction. I took his moment of horrified astonishment to pull open another drawer.

Since he wasn't making any move to leave, I walked across the room, choosing a wide path from the edges of his electric hum, and darted to the guest bedroom that Alice had vacated weeks ago. I shoved the clothing through the door without even bothering to enter, and returned to the drawers, gathering more clothing and heaving hard breaths. Edward remained frozen and stunned as I made the second trip and grew angered that I couldn't empty his closet, too.

By the fourth trip, Edward was slowly breaking from his unmoving pose and followed me into the hallway as I pitched my final armful of clothing through the door and slammed it shut behind me. I turned to him, and we stood in the hall; me puffing and trembling with empty fury, and Edward wearing that same expression of sheer panic that confused me. I wondered if he were expecting me to hit him again or something. His panic was perplexing. Truthfully, hitting him seemed senseless and unfulfilling and I damned his heartbroken gaze for taking the satisfaction it would have granted me.

His gaze never left mine as his arms released the clothing he held, dropping it to the floor with a ruffled thump. His eyes, tormented and frightened, discomfited me. "God, Bella," he spoke desperate and pleading and began moving closer to me with cautious steps-like that of a predator approaching its skittish prey. I moved back, but hit the door as he approached. "It wasn't anything like that, you have to believe me."

My body was excited and eager as the edges of his static ensnared me. My heart, reluctant but throbbing, willed him closer. My mind screamed and reeled as he grew close enough for the surrounding air became a full-on buzz that crackled over my skin. My resistance, though painful, could be achieved if he just... didn't touch me. I pressed further into the door and shifted my eyes around the hall, searching for an escape, but only finding Edward's haunting stare.

"Just let me explain," he coaxed in his lilting voice, but was betrayed by his own trembling as I recoiled from the comfort his proximity created. He was so close now that I could smell his scent and count his eyelashes. I could see the scars on his neck and lip that I'd inflicted and I focused on them to keep me grounded. I shook my head vehemently as he raised his hand and reached out to me. I clenched my eyes shut and resisted the twitch of my fingertips that demanded the sensation of his flesh.

All at once, his hand was cupping my cheek and sending bright, viciously soothing sparks

reverberating through my body. I gasped and involuntarily melted into his perfect touch, every ounce of anxiety and fury melting into the distance beyond the static. And then his warm cheek was against mine and his body was cradled against me. I felt helpless as the cages rattled and exploded in satisfaction. It was the sweetest torture...

"I'm sorry," he whispered against my cheek and stroked my hair. When I was capable of fully feeling my anger once again, I knew it'd be directed at his taking advantage of his effect on me. Bitter, I raised my hands to his shoulders to push him off, but it was weak. I was weak. He made me weak. I loathed it.

Warm tears pricked at my eyes again and I was disbelieving as he sighed against me in unconcealed happiness. *Happiness?* He was happy. My mind kept chanting this fact over and over. I'd spent the last nearly five months feeling empty, insignificant, and alone, and now he was feeling happiness.

"I've never been so close to hating you," I choked and pushed harder, because it was absolute truth.

His body stiffened around mine as I attempted to push him away once again and his contented sighs turned to panic gasps. "Please," he begged, a satisfying sound against my flesh. I pushed harder and his arms encircled me tighter as he repeated his plea with a palpable desperation that might have broken my resolve if I didn't know better. I kept pushing, resisting the sedative consequence of his electric hum as he kept pleading against my cheek and grasping me tighter, until he abruptly dropped to his knees. I stared in a stunned astonishment as he buried his face into my stomach and embraced my thighs tightly. "Please," he begged again, burying his face deeper. My arms were limp and uncertain as I gazed down at his head. After a moment, I began feeling the wetness of tears penetrating my shirt and dampening my belly.

He wants me. Staring down at his unkempt hair nestled into my stomach was surreal, and I briefly wondered if I weren't imagining this whole thing. He was on his freaking knees, groveling. Surreal would be the understatement of the century.

My body, perfectly pleased with his contact, was satisfied. My heart, hearing his pleas and feeling his tears, ached to accept him because *he wanted me*, and surely nothing else would matter. My mind, watching his show of dramatics, rolled its eyes in exasperation and was further enraged at his attempts. I pried him loose because of none of those things, however.

Carlisle and Esme's eyes met mine as they ascended the staircase with caution, surveying the

scene of discarded clothing and Edward's crumpled form as he gripped at his shaggy hair and chanted, "Fuck," to the carpet in a strangled whisper. It was tormenting to know that I'd caused his pain. Bittersweet.

I realized they had likely come to assure my well-being after my earlier reaction, but I didn't need it, and my firm gaze darting from them to Edward told them... *he* might-if he'd even allow such a thing. I turned and left him in the hall with Esme and Carlisle standing behind him, awkward and uncertain. I entered my bedroom, locked myself inside, and tried not to grieve the loss of the electric purr.

My soul outranked my body, heart, *and* mind, and it was desperate for the peace required to find its own desire. Edward could wait for it to come to its conclusion. He owed me at least that much.



"Goddammit," I cursed again as I watched her door close pitifully, releasing my hair and wiping away my tears. I was so fucking sick and tired of crying. I was so sick and tired of messing everything up.

I am so fucking fucked.

She hated me. It was even worse than I'd allowed myself to imagine. The fact that Carlisle had accepted me back like the prodigal had given me a false sense of hope that she'd just let me explain it to her, and she'd understand. But she didn't and I wasn't entirely sure if I could blame her. I've never looked like such an asshole, and that's saying a lot. I fucked her and left with next to no communication whatsoever. How could she feel anything *but* hate for me?

She had a particular emptiness in her eyes the first time our gazes met in the bedroom, and I just knew I was fucked. It reminded me of how she looked that first night we met: tired, numb, and existing without living. Skinny. Too skinny. And pale. And she was still the most beautiful fucking thing I'd ever seen.

A shuffle from behind me, followed by a familiar sigh, alerted me to Carlisle's presence on the stairs. *Great*, I thought bitterly at the fact he had seen any portion of what had just occurred. *Add insult to injury*. Looking back at my behavior as I begged Bella to listen to me-on my knees-

was humiliating. My inhibitions were lost in the emotions that our reunion had produced. Now I felt like a complete moron and there were witnesses. *Perfect.*

I didn't turn to acknowledge him as I dropped my face into my hands and mumbled aloud, "She hates me," as if this explained my theatrics and absolved my shame.

I heard the soft shuffle of footsteps grow closer, and then felt fingers in my hair, caressing my scalp gingerly. It was an oddly affectionate gesture that briefly puzzled me. It wasn't like him at all.

"Let me talk to her," a feminine voice that definitely *wasn't* Carlisle's startled me and my head jerked toward the sound above my head in fear. Esme stood over me, softly stroking my hair and smiling at me warmly. Her Bella-like eyes were familiar and soulful, but didn't hold any of the disdain I'd expect. Her expression was one of motherly compassion—one I hadn't *really* seen bestowed upon me for ten years. It was like I'd somehow been transported into some distorted version of the "Forks Twilight Zone." I rose slowly, infinitely more humiliated and uneasy. I darted my nervous eyes to Carlisle's where he observed her maternal manner with an expression of elation. Yes, I decided. *Definitely a Twilight Zone moment...*

My eyes followed her as she walked to Bella's door and knocked, softly requesting permission to enter. And then I panicked, wondering what she was going to say to her—how she was going to wedge us even farther apart than we already were, because that had to be her intention. She hated me, too.

She continued knocking, and the sound of Bella's protests were heard through the wood. Esme turned toward Carlisle and me and rolled her eyes, mouthing, "girls." Carlisle chuckled softly, and I honestly didn't like the idea of her interfering but was too chicken-shit to say so.

After a few moments of Esme's gentle persuasion—and an admittedly awkward tension that filled the hallway—the click of the lock sounded, and Esme was able to enter.

Carlisle came to my side and stood, staring at the closed door with me as no sounds emerged. We waited for what felt like forever, neither of us speaking as we strained to hear what was occurring inside. I wished for x-ray vision or super-sensitive hearing or fucking... mind reading.

Abruptly, a shriek penetrated the walls, incredulous and disbelieving and fiercely Bella. "Are you freaking kidding me?"



Carlisle tried to cajole me into eating dinner, but I didn't have an appetite. Four hours later, Esme still hadn't emerged from Bella's room and my unease multiplied with every passing minute she didn't. Carlisle kept insisting that he'd "seen these two go at it before" and it was "neither brief, nor pleasant." The shrieks had ceased and filled the third floor with a curious silence that unnerved me.

I felt nervous wandering the house because it was uncomfortable. I still didn't know what Esme was playing at, and I cringed to think of the greeting I'd receive from Alice. I stayed in the guest bedroom for the evening because of these reasons. Also, it was as close to Bella as she'd let me get.

I was fairly fucked where she was concerned and spent too much of my time pondering various methods of returning to her good graces. I had plenty of time, after all. We lived in the same house. She couldn't simply avoid me forever, I reasoned, and I'd do anything. I'd follow her anywhere and make sure I was the one to give her what she needed. I'd open pickle jars she couldn't budge and get the plates from the top shelf she couldn't reach. If she'd ask, I'd humiliate myself in disturbing ways just to make her smile.

I'd eat motherfucking dirt for Bella Swan. Dirt, bugs, all of that gross shit.

As hopeless as it seemed, I continued concocting plots of grandeur-riding in on white fucking horse and all that nonsense. It was ridiculous and pathetic. She had that effect on me. I was teetering on the line between acceptance and determination. Acceptance was a depressing admission of defeat that Bella might not ever be my girl again. That notion was unthinkable. But determination had its own fine line between sweetly endearing and really fucking creepy. The balance was impossible to find. And with the swell of individuals that now resided in the house, I was outnumbered with siding parties.

And there was still so much I wanted to know, like the "matter" that Carlisle and Bella had to attend to earlier which he refused to explain, and what had been so monumental to her yesterday. I'd missed so much of everything and now I felt intrusive and excluded-the outsider that I'd always wanted to be, except now, I wanted *in*.

At ten, I heard Esme surface. I was lying on the guest bed, in the dark so that I could see the light from under the door when hers opened. I shot up from my position and strained my ears to hear the movement of Esme descending the stairs. It was silent after that and I

contemplated going to her door. Unfortunately, giving her space seemed like the right thing to do, so I didn't.

Doing the "right thing" often sucked like that, I noted.

Instead, I lay on the bed and watched the sliver from under my door, hoping she'd emerge for something later that night. I waited for two hours, eyes fixed on the space between the carpet and the door, just hoping. I didn't know if she'd be sleeping, but there was no way I possibly could until she spoke to me again. I just knew my dreams would be worse since I'd decided to leave my mother. I knew it'd be awful and painful and I had to have something that made it feel worth it before I could willingly subject myself to it.

I pondered Bella's memories and nightmares. I imagined her falling asleep and awaking scared and frightened, and my chest stung. I'd go to her, I eventually decided. I'd break down the fucking door and lay with her to give her sleep. Maybe Esme would kill me, but it'd be worth it.

By midnight my eyelids were fluttering and my steady breathing was lulling me into sleep. The drive had been long and exhausted me. I was considering just surrendering when I saw the sliver my eyes had been fixed on slowly illuminate. I jolted myself back to complete consciousness so quickly that my fucking head spun. I listened to the soft thud of her footsteps and willed her with my mind to stop at my door and knock. She didn't, though. She just kept walking until she descended the stairs. I exhaled a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding and stood.

I exited the room and decided to follow her, even though I realized I was crossing that fine line into really fucking creepy. I mean, there was always tomorrow to be all agonizingly considerate. I walked quietly through the dark house, expecting to find her in the kitchen, but coming up empty when it was just as dark as everything else. I was growing frustrated and desperate by the time I decided to check outside, and I felt like an idiot knowing that I likely wouldn't find her there. I was going to double back and see if she had managed to return to the bedroom without me noticing when I saw her.

My heart fucking soared when I saw her dark silhouette beyond the gazebo. It was significant and meaningful to us, and she still went there. It was the first time since our confrontation that I felt a glimmer of hope. Then I remembered her words and how she basically told me that she hated me, and I felt nauseous. I swallowed and went to her, imagining that this was probably the end of everything at the exact place it all began.

She was down by the riverbank when I reached the gazebo, and I spotted something black on the wooden table. I reached down and felt the cool leather of my jacket. I immediately dug in the pocket and extracted the small medallion that I'd fretted for so long over in Chicago. I tried to remind myself, I still had Carlisle. I put it on because the midnight air felt cold and wet.

In no hurry to have my fucking heart ripped out, I stepped up onto the bench and planted my ass on the table as I watched her. She was standing on the rocks, gazing out over the river with her arms folded across her chest. The dull silver of the scarce light didn't make her hair shimmer or shine or any of that stupid shit. It made her look grey, like my sketches.

With what appeared to be a sigh, she finally turned to me and began crossing the dark field between us. If I'd had the energy necessary, my muscles would have been coiled tight, bracing for the inevitability of that bitter frown that tainted her face. She never met my gaze as she approached and chose a beam to lean against. She didn't want to be anywhere near me. This only fueled my nausea.

My brows furrowed as she stared out over the water and reached inside the chest of her hoodie. What she pulled out was a large, thick envelope, and she tossed it onto the table with an angry 'smack' that startled me. She didn't even remove her eyes from the ripples of the water as I cautiously reached over and picked it up to inspect it.

What I found inside were pages and pages of credit card statements, from May to September. I focused on the purchases I'd made to get some kind of an idea as to what she must be thinking. It was all pretty boring shit: cleaning supplies, food, gas, and cigarettes mostly, until...

"The flowers were for my dad's grave," I explained, breaking the silence of ruffling papers abruptly. It was a little presumptuous of me to assume that she'd think they were for some other girl, but I felt compelled to assure her.

She tucked a lock of wayward hair behind her hair and nodded without meeting my gaze. I frowned as I returned the sheets of paper to the envelope, at a loss. I didn't know what she wanted. That mind reading thing would have come in really handy right about now. Knowing my luck, she'd be the only person in existence immune to it.

She wouldn't look me in the eye. "You left me," she suddenly whispered, accusing. Her fists were balled up tight below her rib cage as she hugged her torso.

I could feel my eyes and jaw tighten. "I'm here, now," I defended, unable to argue this.

Her eyes abruptly jerked sideways, meeting my gaze and flashing with what some might mistake for fury if they didn't know better. I did. "You just don't get it," she spat, the false fury she projecting forcing me to swallow thickly. "You just... *left* me. And if you would have thrown your ring in my face and told me it was over, I would have been better off," she growled, and in a much softer, sadder voice added, "At least then I wouldn't have been-" Her voice broke and she shifted her gaze back to the river without concluding.

Her eyes were suddenly reflecting months full of something that I couldn't even really comprehend, and I fucking hated not knowing the depth of it. I had this weird and really annoying moment of mental stupefaction in which I couldn't find an appropriate response, and my feeling of estrangement swelled to a frustrating degree. I mean, she had basically just admitted that I'd ended us-or at least that she'd been thinking I had for God only knows how long. I couldn't think of anything to say that wasn't full of anger and self-disgust. The fact that this whole *conversation* felt like it might decide the fate of my entire fucking future with her wasn't really helping, either. It was an unbelievable amount of pressure.

Uncertain and cautious, I responded in a breathy whisper that I wasn't sure I even wanted her to understand, "Just because I was gone, doesn't mean I wasn't yours." I really wanted to ask her if she was mine, but figured I wasn't ready for the answer to that just yet.

She stood motionless against the wooden beam with no indication that she gave a shit. "You're an asshole," she whispered, the muscles in her jaw twitching and taught.

I dropped my head in shame and sighed. "Yeah," I agreed. "But I'm trying really hard not to be," I declared, searching her features for consideration and finding none.

Her hair whipped around her face with a strong breeze and my fingers twitched to brush it back. "You should've let me in," she spoke to the river, still and unrelenting in her refusal to meet my gaze. "I would've understood if you'd just... called or something, but-" She abruptly paused and then seemed as if she wouldn't continue.

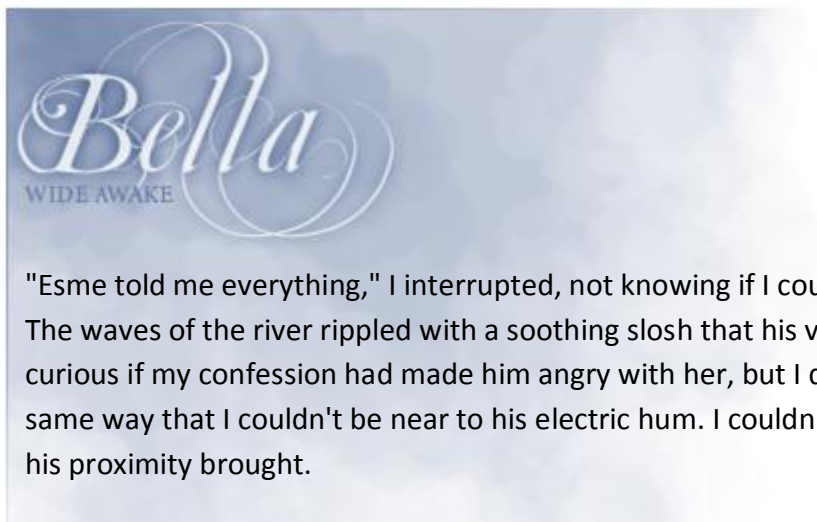
But...

But she couldn't understand.
But she couldn't forgive me.
But she hated me now.

The silence drew on and I grew frustrated and angry that she couldn't complete her sentence. I was uncertain whether or not a response would be wise, but I needed her to know I wasn't just shutting her out. It occurred to me that as much as I felt like excluded from all of the little knowledge of her life during the past months, she felt like an outsider in mine. I wondered how I could ever possibly convey how much I'd been through to get here-to this moment with her-and if it would make any difference.

That desperation was beginning to mount, and I figured I could use her silence to finally try. With a deep breath I began, "When I got to Chicago and found my mother, she was very-"

She cut me off with a terse reply, "Esme told me everything."



"Esme told me everything," I interrupted, not knowing if I could handle hearing it all over again. The waves of the river rippled with a soothing slosh that his velvet voice didn't disrupt. I was curious if my confession had made him angry with her, but I didn't look at him. I couldn't, in the same way that I couldn't be near to his electric hum. I couldn't think clearly with the distraction his proximity brought.

When Esme had entered my bedroom hours earlier, I'd expected her disapproval of Edward's affections toward me to comfort the portion of myself that regretted leaving him there, in the hallway crying. It was admittedly the only reason I'd allowed her to enter in the first place. Clearly, I had been shocked when she'd defended him.

"He's been through so much already, Bella," she'd uttered with a certain glint of distinguishable pity in her gaze. I was beyond incredulous and frustrated, but once she had sat down and began relaying what Carlisle had already told her, it all became very clear.

Much in the same way a mother pig adopts a litter of neglected puppies, Esme felt drawn to Edward's abandonment and his mother's poor treatment of him. It all made perfect sense. Any mother who had half a heart would be sorrowed by Edward's story. It made her maternal nature blaze because he was Carlisle's son, and she was, in many ways, his other half. She was falling into her role with enthusiasm, ready to protect him from those who would cause him harm, because Esme was simply Esme.

It was the sweetest, most annoying thing ever.

I'd spent hours contemplating everything Edward had endured while in Chicago. His mother being an intolerable child, and the obligation he'd felt to care for her as if she were one. Honestly, I didn't understand her logic one bit. I still hated her with every cell of my being. I felt no pity for that woman. A true mother wouldn't have let anything deter her from caring for her child. Esme knew what Elizabeth didn't: your children come first before everything else—grief included.

Edward was torn between two obligations. That, I could understand. I could understand him choosing his mother over everything else. What I couldn't understand was why he closed himself off. Even worse, I couldn't understand why he'd even decided to return.

I steeled my nerves as I finally turned to him, eager to have my curiosity quenched. He was still sitting atop the wooden table with his feet on the bench. His gaze was fixed on his hands which floated, clasped, between his parted knees. His hair was so much longer, hiding his eyes from me.

"You'll go back," I stated with confidence. His eyes finally rose to meet mine, dark and green and confused. I elaborated, "You know she's out there, and she needs you. You'll go back to her again." I couldn't restrain the tremble of my voice. I'd been thinking about it for hours now, and my mind always came to the same conclusion: He *would* leave again.

He shook his head in objection, but I shook mine right back.

My voice was still trembling with emotion. "You act like you're the only one who's ever lost your mother," I charged and swallowed while trying to keep my gaze on his, but it was difficult. My vision grew watery with tears that wouldn't be suppressed and I blinked them away, sending dripping trails falling hurriedly down my cold cheeks. I hugged myself tighter as he visibly struggled to appreciate the meaning of my words, tilting his head and narrowing his eyes in concentration.

His sharp intake of air and my erratic breathing was all that could be heard for a long moment. I used this time to attempt to rein in my emotions, but it was futile. I'd been holding them back, even for Carmen, and now they wouldn't be contained. My jaw trembled as I finally diverted my gaze away from his grief-stricken stare. I knew then that he understood what I'd meant.

"You'd choose her over me," he stated in a soft voice that elicited an abrupt, unintentional sob from my chest.

I wanted to deny it, but I couldn't. My love for Edward was endless and infinite, and yet for one moment with my mother, I'd willingly throw it all away. It was unforgiveable. I couldn't remember my last words to her or the way her hair smelled, and I would have given anything to have it all back. If I could have turned back the hands of time and been that carefree fourteen-year-old whose mother was her best friend, I would have. Really, I'd throw everything away: Alice, Esme, Carlisle, Forks-everything. I couldn't reconcile the two conflicting conclusions that it made me both a fallible human being and a complete monster. Guilt wasn't a strong enough word for what it made me feel. They all deserved so much more.

For the better part of the day, I'd felt above Edward for being rational and in a healthier state of mind. But now it was obvious that Edward had surpassed me in his own resurgence. He was willing to finally let go of his past and move on, while I had this dormant truth lying beneath the surface that told me I'd never stopped clutching at what was gone.

I was exhausted from the day and the week and the last five months and two years. I collapsed against the wooden beam I'd been leaning against and hugged my knees tightly to my chest. I turned my face away from Edward as I cried because I didn't want him to see this weakness in me. It robbed me of the upper-hand that I'd thrived on for most of the evening.

Through the sounds of my own muffled sobs and grinding teeth, I couldn't hear him jump down from the table and approach, but I could feel it. I didn't really care. My weak submission to his white noise seemed inconsequential in the grand scheme of things. I could feel him stop short of touching me and it was infuriating to know that my earlier behavior was depriving me of what I obviously wanted.

His voice was genuine and guarded as he spoke. "It's okay," he comforted me, and I shook my head against me knees ferociously.

"I'm an awful person," I choked, because I wanted him to disagree, and I had no idea if he would. There was a moment of charged silence in which I could almost sense the warring conflict in his mind. I could also sense when he finally decided to chance it and moved close enough to reach out to me.

I didn't fight him off as his arms surrounded me from my side, sending his soothing current flowing over my flesh. My sob transformed into a sigh as I raised my head and unfolded my

knees, eager for whatever comfort he'd give me. I leaned into him, feeling his relief at my acceptance as he sat, pulling me into his lap and holding me tightly as the darkness and his hair obscured his features. The smell of his neck and the sensations of his hands rubbing my back were completely euphoric, but I couldn't smile.

"It's okay," he repeated, this time into my hair. I could feel him taking a long inhale and pushing his nose deeper. His arms around me tightened, crushing my shoulder into his chest in way that must have been painful. "If it was possible and I could do it, I'd want you to choose her anyways," he said in an earnest voice into my hair that drew another guilty sob from my chest, because I couldn't be so sacrificing with him. His arms tightened further around me and I pivoted my chest so that my shoulder wouldn't be digging into his sternum.

Surrendering, I breathed him in greedily to subdue my sobs and erratic breathing. His firm embrace and constant nuzzling of my hair eased my guilt minutely because I knew I still wielded some power over his happiness. It didn't absolve him, and it didn't make me willing to forgive his every error, but it eased my confusion-albeit a little unfairly.

When my sobs finally ceased and I was able to turn my face to the river, resting my cheek on his chest, I felt peaceful. The slosh of the river and the feeling of his hands, face, and body against me were unequivocally serene. In any other moment, it would have been utter perfection. Instead I had all of these questions and confusing anomalies that eventually penetrated my tranquility.

Without meeting his gaze, I pressed myself closer to him and asked, "Why didn't you call me or keep writing, or... something? Anything?"

His arms tightened, impossibly more unyielding. "I was so fucking weak, Bella," he sighed against my scalp, warm and shuddering. "I'm not sure I should justify it," he muttered, but continued before I could protest. "There were probably a million reasons. I didn't want to burden you and I didn't want to be... tempted by something easier. Also, you're my oil," he shrugged, as if that were something that made sense. Confused, I furrowed my brow, but he quickly added, "Nevermind. It's really fucking stupid."

"It is," I agreed in a curt voice, unable to comprehend his justification and still unwilling to pretend I did. He inhaled as if he were going to speak, but quickly released it and remained silent as he held me. My disagreement hadn't tainted the peacefulness of the moment and my eyes felt heavy.

After many moments, he sighed into my hair, long and seemingly defeated. "I know it doesn't mean much, but you're wrong about me leaving again. I won't," he promised. "I'm going to make this work, you'll see. Even if—even if you *hate* me now," he breathed. My hair and the softness of his declaration made his final words difficult to hear, but not impossible.

I rolled my eyes and pressed myself closer. "I don't hate you."

I love you, you melodramatic asshole.

I disliked the necessity of denying any amount of ill will, so I kept that fact to myself.

"Really?" he asked, uncertain but hopeful.

My frustration flared, and in a moment of unrestrained emotion, I couldn't bare him not knowing just how much pain he'd caused me. "It's not you I hate, Edward. I hate that you broke my heart." I ground out through clenched teeth. There was a sharp intake of air against my scalp before his arms tightened and crushed me impossibly closer.

He spoke hurriedly, in a panic-stricken voice. "Shit, Bella. I'm so fucking sorry. Please, believe me. I never wanted to—I always want to make you happy from now on. Just tell me how, and I'll do it," he insisted fervently, one of his hands fisting into the hair below my ear as he pressed my face closer to his chest.

I could feel his strength faltering in his arms as he tried to keep it firm and unrelenting. Knowing how it felt to be so absolutely fatigued in every sense of the word, I sighed and felt much older than I should have. "I'm tired. I want to go to bed." I replied, turning my face away from the river and into his chest for one final lungful of his fragrance.

With a pause and an agonized sigh, he lifted me from the ground and warily reached for my hand. His eyes were still dark and sorrowful, the perfect lines of his lips drawn downward into a hard frown as he scrutinized me. I took his hand without second thought and led him to the house, leaving the envelope of papers discarded on the table, because I didn't need them anymore. We walked in silence, his footsteps uncoordinated with my own, and I wondered how it was possible to feel so simultaneously lighter and heavier.

We entered the house quietly, and I pulled my hand from his as I climbed the staircase. A glance over my shoulder at his crestfallen gaze made his unhappiness with this apparent. The darkness of the hallways and the silence of the house made his shallow breaths seem laborious

as we ascended to the third story.

I stopped at the door to the guest room and turned to him, but he was already still, staring down at his shoes.

"Can we talk tomorrow?" he asked in a whisper, glancing dismally at the door I stood in front of. I rolled my eyes and turned the knob, watching his brows furrow in confusion as I entered and flicked on the light. I entered and spotted the clothing lying haphazardly on the floor where I'd thrown it.

As I bent down to retrieve a pair of his dark boxer shorts and a white shirt, he entered behind me. I turned to him with a timid grimace and clutched the clothing to my stomach. "I sleep in these," I mumbled in explanation and his eyes momentarily widened. My embarrassment was clear as I swallowed anxiously. "Rose confiscated my pajamas," I defended, recalling the day in which she'd insisted I get out of bed and had refused to give me back my only pair of pajamas. I was happier sleeping in Edward's clothes anyways, but was too uncomfortable admitting it to him directly.

A rueful smile tugged at his lips before it disappeared and was replaced with an emotionless mask. "Goodnight," he said and held the door open for me as I scuffled toward him. The look of bewilderment on his face when I laced a finger through one of his belt loops and tugged him forward into the hall with me was nearly comical. "What?" he muttered, visibly puzzled.

I rolled my eyes again. "I said I was tired. I want some sleep. You said you'd do anything to make me happy, right?" I asked, raising my eyebrows expectantly. For one split second, his eyes once again shone and sparkled in that elated fashion, before he sighed.

"That's probably a really shitty idea, with Esme and all..." he trailed off into a nervous voice while shifting his gaze anxiously down the hallway. *As if I'd care.*

"First of all," I sniffled residually, and kept tugging him forward until his feet moved with mine and his footsteps followed me down the hall. "You and I are both eighteen." I opened the door to my bedroom and didn't bother turning on the light as I entered. "And Esme has proven to be... unpredictable. She'll either kill me or throw us a party. There's really no telling with her anymore." I shrugged and turned to him.

He had a look of regret on his face so pure that it startled me. "I missed your birthday?" he strained as he stood awkwardly in the doorway. I nodded and quickly turned away from him to

enter the bathroom.

I closed the door to change and tried to shove down the resurgence of hurt remembering my eighteenth birthday one week prior. It had been an uneventful day in which everyone had attempted to lift my spirits, fruitlessly. Regrettably, I was completely insufferable and found no cause for celebration.

When I emerged from the bathroom in his clothing, he was standing in the middle of the room with his hands shoved deeply into his jacket pockets. He looked as if he felt out of place, but really, he looked like he was always meant to be standing there in the dark, in that position with his eyes shifting the room.

When his gaze jerked to me, my face felt warm and flushed. I hesitantly wandered to the bed, feeling his eyes on me the entire way. His boxer shorts felt comfortable and familiar as they hung limply from my waist, but I felt naked and exposed, so I quickly jumped onto the bed and slid under the cover of the blankets.

He stood uncertain in the middle of the room before he slowly removed his jacket and tossed it onto the sofa. He bent down to unlace his shoes, taking them off and setting them aside. I was restless under the sheets, impatient for his presence, and watched anxiously as he traveled to the opposing side of the bed and pulled down the covers. His eyes were fixed on mine as he lifted himself onto the mattress and settled at my side.

It was quiet and still as we both lay on our backs in the dark, and even though I was impatient and anxious to be in his arms, I was tentative.

"You know," I whispered, and felt his head turn on the pillow toward me. I swallowed. "This doesn't make everything okay," I warned, finally turning my face to meet his gaze. His eyes bore into mine with a painful intensity. "I just... I don't want any misunderstandings," I clarified, unable to conceive leading him on, but needing the sleep, comfort, and affection he granted. It was possibly a little unfair and I hated feeling as though I was using him. I gained a little reassurance from scrutinizing the dark circles around his eyes that indicated his own need for rest.

He nodded sullenly, his throat bobbing, before turning his face back to the ceiling. Just as I was beginning to turn my body into his, he whispered, "Do you think, maybe..." he paused, closing his mouth abruptly. I stilled my movements and looked to him imploringly. He glanced at me sideways, tense. "Do I have any chance?" he asked, rigid and motionless and beseeching.

I frowned and finished my shift to my side, tucking my hand underneath the pillow as I gazed at him. I considered the likelihood of Edward being here and present and keeping his promise of never leaving, and I knew he had every chance. He already had my heart and soul. It was unfeasible to fight that kind of longing for happiness and love-especially now that I knew what it was like to be void of it. But I simply nodded without adding any of those things aloud, because trust was gained and I'd finally realized just how fragile my body, heart, and mind could be. At my nod, he noticeably eased, closing his eyes with a thankful sigh, and then turned to me.

His arm draped across my torso and pulled me to him tightly. The feeling of his chest against my cheek and legs tangling with my own was familiar and soothing and *right*. The jeans he wore were thick and scratched against my bare legs, and I wracked my brain to recall where his pajamas had gone. I wondered if he'd taken them with him to Chicago, and figured he must have. Then I felt ridiculous for thinking of it and turned my attention to what his hand was doing in my hair, caressing and fingering it down the length of my back.

His hair was soft. The added length from his months away made stroking it feel somehow different, yet also calming. It was Edward, just more of him. His time away had changed him in some way, and I was both excited and frightened to discover how.

I felt his weary and relieved exhale into my hair, his lips on my scalp, his toes on my ankles, and I smiled. For the first time in as many months it was natural and unforced, and I allowed myself to let my fear and anger and hurt melt away as I began humming that familiar song. It might have been fleeting moment of pure joy, but I reveled in the sensation of his affectionate hands and toes and lips. I simply didn't know the depth of his devotion or determination, and maybe he never knew the depth of mine. I felt a heavy weight of unease knowing that so much had gone unsaid. I vowed then, as I felt him slipping into unconsciousness, to put just as much effort into giving Edward a chance as he'd put into fulfilling it.

Tomorrow I'd begin looking for the bigger picture. But tonight, cradled inside the white walls of a revived sanctuary, we would sleep, peacefully entwined.

Chapter 49. Flotsam Florentines



Blueberries or raspberries? I silently mused, the vivid purple appearing more appealing than its pink companion. My eyes jumped from one to the other, assessing the pros and cons of differing flavors with syrup. And whipped cream. And sprinkles. And chocolate?

Ooh! Chocolate chips...

When Alice had knocked on my door to rouse me for the yoga class (that I had *no* plans of attending), I'd been annoyed and borderline homicidal. The warmth and comfort of Edward's arms and shallow breaths against my hair had been impossible to abandon. With a gentle tenderness that my anger made nearly unfeasible, I'd ducked out from under his arm and stepped out into the hall.

"Oh my God." She'd smiled while standing in the hall, having seen Edward asleep in the bed before I could close the door. "You were being cuddly and gross, weren't you?" she'd teased, eliciting my sleepy shock at her immediate acceptance. I'd really been expecting her to make a scene, so her casual teasing and large grin was more than slightly surprising. When I questioned her strange approval, she'd simply shrugged. "I've missed your 'Edward Face,' and anyways, I always knew he'd come back. Call it *intuition*." She'd winked, tapped her temple, and then she'd skipped down the hallway, promising to cover for me if Kate, the yoga instructor, questioned my nonappearance.

I hadn't seen her so jovial in months, and I was curious if she'd been hiding her happiness from me the entire time, or if Alice was merely happy because she'd realized long ago that Edward was my key to contentment. Perhaps that was the depth of her sisterly love for me. I'd be lying if I said I couldn't honestly relate. I loved seeing her 'Jasper Face' after all—not that I was conceding to even having an 'Edward Face.'

Now, the chill of the open fridge was gradually making my grogginess dissipate, transforming

into a desire I was all too familiar with. Cooking. There would be little to no hope of ever going back to sleep now. With a tugging smile, I chose blueberries and set about gathering everything necessary on the granite counter tops. I stood on my tip-toes, bouncing a bit as I flittered about the kitchen and worked. It was amazing how much of a difference a mere eight hours of undisturbed sleep could make.

Carmen had once given me a stern lecture on the importance of sleep. She'd droned on and on about its effects on emotional health as well as physical. I'd sort of shrugged it off because we hadn't gotten to the point where discussions involving my sleeping habits weren't met with my annoyed evasion.

I hated it when she was right.

I felt revived and clear-headed from the night of uninterrupted sleep. The lifted veil of exhaustion made everything seem vivid, opaque, and obvious like everything I'd needed before was just too close to be seen. Now, my muscles felt stronger, my mind felt sharper, and my eyes, though heavy and mourning the loss of slumber, were wide and more alert than I'd been accustomed to for months.

Eager for an outlet for all of this vigor, I made Edward pancakes with blueberries and excessive toppings. I arranged his bacon and eggs into one of those disgusting happy faces that usually made me nauseous. I squeezed him fresh juice and was too excited to be embarrassed by the all-too-familiar need to flaunt my meager aptitudes. I made a bit of a mess in the kitchen and didn't pause to clean anything up when I was finished.

I packed up his extravagant breakfast and carried it upstairs, battling the conflicting urges to both sprint faster and take my time. When I reached the door, I carefully opened it with two fingers, licking my lips in concentration and cradling the breakfast tray carefully.

My brows creased in confusion when I didn't find his slumbering form lying in the bed until a noise from the bathroom alerted me to his presence. I was calculated as I arranged his breakfast atop the mattress and awaited his emergence. I plucked a blueberry from the tray and popped it into my mouth as my stomach rumbled, but really, I didn't want to eat. My Edward-induced sleep high made little things like food seem inconsequential to the excitement of watching *him* eat it. I remembered how much he enjoyed my cooking, and I was eager to enjoy his pleasure after the turmoil of the previous day.

The door handle finally rattled, and I stared fixedly as it opened. Edward's eyes were once again

hidden by his hair, but his face was pale and fretful. He wore the same things from the previous night, wrinkled and unkempt in his appearance. It was an oddly random, passing thought that made me want to do stupid things, like brush his hair and choose his outfit for the day. And then feed him. And then hug him. And then kiss him. And then... I inwardly rolled my eyes.

He froze as he spotted me in the middle of the bed, sitting ramrod straight, eager-eyed, and with an entire feast spread out in front of me. His shoulders visibly eased. "I was worried you left," he muttered and swept his hair away from his forehead. I remained wordless and strangely timid as he finally assessed the offering of food that graced the small tray before me. His brows furrowed in confusion, and I could feel my face burning as I looked away, swallowing anxiously.

"You didn't eat anything last night." I shrugged one shoulder offhandedly while fingering the hem of his boxer shorts. The heat in my cheeks intensified.

"Oh," he breathed in obvious surprise. I could feel his eyes on my inflamed face as he tentatively wandered to the bed, taking a position mirroring my own and settling comfortably. "You shouldn't have made me anything," he finally sighed in a dejected voice that gripped my chest and abruptly sent my soaring morning plummeting to my feet.

I snapped my eyes to his and controlled my expression as I assured, "It's okay if you don't want it." Unfortunately, my stupid voice had to betray all the hurt that his rejection of my offering had caused. I reached down to remove the meal before him when he swiftly exclaimed, "No!" and his hands forced the tray into his lap.

"I want it," he insisted, his eyes wide and puzzled.

Tense and apprehensive now, I wrung my hands as he cut into his stack of pancakes, hurriedly plunging the fork into his mouth. I took this time to indulge myself in a moment of irrational dread for not using the raspberries. Or chocolate chips. Or sprinkles. His eyes closed as he chewed, sighing softly through his nose. Unable to discern his reaction as either positive or negative, I pulled my knees to my chest and hugged them tightly.

When his eyes opened, I was so overcome with relief to see his lips curl up into a small smile that I immediately released my knees. "Fucking hell, I missed your cooking," he chuckled lightly and cut off another bite, enthusiastically devouring it. I eased myself down onto my elbow, propping my cheek on my palm as I observed his enjoyment with familiar comfort.

His green eyes danced with satisfaction at my expression when he glanced at me. He smiled wider, eyes crinkling at the edges. “Aren’t you hungry?” he asked. I merely shook my head. His smile faltered and I quickly lied, “I already ate,” to ease his concern. He eyed me skeptically but resumed without pushing it any further, and I was glad, because watching him eat was far more gratifying than eating myself. I continued observing him in silence and it felt indescribable to watch and hear his obvious pleasure with my creation.

As we sat without any exchange of words, I began growing cautious and pondered the best way of approaching our obvious estrangement and issues. There was a whole list to choose from, and *he* didn’t even know the full extent of *my* betrayals yet. I wasn’t so far into denial that I couldn’t accept my fair share of blame.

I could have found him.

I’d known where and how and had *felt* it deep in my soul that he’d needed me, and yet I’d chosen not to. If I were being entirely honest, it’d had more to do with my own insecurities—insecurities that had flared in his silent absence—than my insistence to give him space. This was only one truth in an endless sea of hidden facts. Neither of us had them all.

The way the added weight made his hair fall was new, foreign, and the lines of his forehead appeared more defined. He’d only been gone for five months, and the cavern separating us felt too enormous to bear. I figured that Carmen would give me some crap about remaining “true to my feelings,” and since I’d discovered that she was rarely wrong, I decided to do just that.

“Tell me about Chicago?” I eventually implored, breaking the silence. I felt alienated from him, and I was realizing—unlike with the others I cared about—no amount of cookies or food could ever remedy that. I felt at fault as his eyes flashed with a painful despair, and I immediately rescinded, “You don’t have to. I’d just rather hear it from you than Esme,” I explained. It felt weird having all these outside parties relaying our information back and forth. I wanted—no, *needed*—the inclusion that Edward’s communication would grant me.

He smiled tightly and shook his head, his hair falling back into his eyes. My fingers twitched to push it back. “I’ll tell you, it’s just... it’s just kind of fucked up,” he confessed, appearing oddly embarrassed and vulnerable as he nibbled at his bacon and avoided my gaze. Before I could offer my gentle encouragement, he grimaced, swatting his hair away from his face so that he could see me. His eyes were guarded and tired. “I just want to be honest about everything, and to tell you the truth, I’m pretty fucking terrified that you’ll think less of me,” he explained, tense and unmoving.

I frowned and lifted myself as I gazed at him, devastated that he could ever think any such thing and knowing that it was my own fault. “I already told you, Edward,” I mumbled with a swallow and looked away from his intense stare as I prepared to give surety the only way I knew how. “Nothing could make me love you any less.”

The room was silent, and though I didn’t regret my words, they lingered in the air between us with an unspoken magnitude that made me uncomfortable. Edward and I were a given—like rice crispies and marshmallows; when you put them together you get a treat, but separated, they’re nothing but ingredients, bland and tasteless. We might have been experiencing a gigantic hurdle, but I hadn’t become so pessimistic as to believe that we couldn’t jump it. The soft light from the sheer curtains of the balcony door illuminated the wall that my eyes were nervously trained on. I couldn’t decide if I wanted him to acknowledge my cryptic pledge or just disregard it entirely.

Instead of doing either, he simply began with a quiet, “Well... it didn’t take me long to find her...”



We spent the whole day on the bed, the breakfast tray discarded on the floor at our side as he was finally granted the opportunity to speak. I already knew the gist of it and only disrupted when I had questions. Edward was uncomfortable, but was more honest than I could ever fathom being.

When he told me about how his *hallucinations* of me, I was shocked. I didn’t really know how to react and he refused to look me in the eye. “She mostly just annoyed the shit out of me, but... you know, she was... it looked like you, so...” he trailed off with a nervous swallow, scratching the back of his neck. I was frightened for him, and a part of me was relieved to discover that he hadn’t any reoccurrences since Chicago. Yet, another portion of me was... flattered? And then another portion of me felt guilty for being pleased about something that was clearly disturbing. It was impossible to reconcile, and I was praying that his lack of sleep alone was to blame, because that was something that could easily be avoided.

I listened, captivated with every detail, and eventually stopped trying to hide my legs, sitting comfortably exposed as he continued. I wanted to know ridiculous things, like if she was kind or cooked or hummed him to sleep while he was there. I didn’t feel jealous or possessive, just curious.

Grimacing, he shook his head and responded, “I think we had a hard time being close like that,” he admitted quietly. I supposed it must have been awkward, and he agreed, dismal that his behavior had been insensitive at times, which I found to be a little stupid. He quickly changed the subject when I told him so, so I figured it best to remain silent.

Hours upon hours were filled with Edward’s soft voice, and my attention never waivered. I rose twice to use the bathroom, always returning to my position on the bed in front of him, unconsciously moving closer to him as the hours passed. He did the same, and something odd began shifting in the atmosphere between us as the hours wore on.

The first time I’d ever seen Edward blush was when he began telling me about the state of his mother and his responsibilities while caring for her. My protectiveness blazed when I envisioned him in such a poor and unsuitable environment.

“Rats and mold all over the place. It was so fucking... repulsive, Bella,” he confessed with his gaze cast downward. “And even getting her to take a shower was a battle. It never really got better,” he whispered, desolate and flush with shame. That was the first moment in which I’d ever actually been *thankful* for what Elizabeth had done to Edward. Even the simple idea of him spending his entire life burdened with thatkind of misery was unbearable. It was at that point that another sudden desire struck me.

The night prior, I had ached for his affection. But as I sat across from him and heard the details of his suffering, I wanted to be the one to comfort *him*. I wanted to take the pain out of his eyes as he stared into the distance and spoke of his father. He looked like an island, lone and solitary in his grief. It wasn’t right.

I reached for his hand without hesitation, scooting a little closer to him so that I could cradle it in my own comfortably. His eyes rose to meet mine, soft and questioning as our knees touched and I rested our clasped hands in my lap. I used my finger to trace the veins between his knuckles, staring at our merged hands fixedly. After a moment, I felt his other hand graze my cheek, moving to tuck my hair behind my ear as he continued speaking.

I knew Carlisle and Esme were likely curious about our non-emergence from the bedroom as the afternoon came and went, but they never disrupted us. I had the feeling they both likely knew what the shifting atmosphere between us had made quite evident: we weren’t avoiding them. We were just trying to find that place where we met, connected, and became the same team that had once helped each other, no matter how ridiculous our methods, like my searching for non-existent hair clips, or Edward spending hours attempting to fondle me.

Carmen had been right about my cookies being my connection to the people around me, but cookies weren't a strong enough connection for me and Edward. They had been months ago, but not anymore. I needed something stronger, more solid. I'd made the breakfast subconsciously hoping that it might bridge that gap and make our interaction feel familiar, but that had only succeeded in making me feel like a proficient cook. Him showing me the side of himself that he'd been ashamed of and my subtle touches of affectionate, nonjudgmental comfort—*this* was our strongest for now.

By the time evening had begun approaching, I think Edward had run out of things to talk about. He sat still and silent in front of me, watching my finger play with the bronze ring he wore as my finger glided over his hand, feather light. I glanced at the clock, realizing how late it had gotten and remembering my failure to make Carlisle his dinner the previous night. I didn't want to lose the strength of my bond to others just because Edward had returned home. I'd never even made my nightly cookies. I was disappointed in myself for being incapable of finding a proper balance.

I sighed, Edward's gaze finally rising to meet mine. "I want to stay," I whispered truthfully, squeezing his hand for emphasis. "But I really want to make something special for dinner," I pleaded for his understanding with my stare and was rewarded with a measured nod.

"I don't want Carlisle to think I'm avoiding him either," he murmured, and then paused, doing that same gesture of tucking my hair behind my ear. I smiled as I met his gaze. "And you didn't eat breakfast," he sighed knowingly, eyes tightening around the edges.

I'd opened my mouth to recite my automatic lie before I snapped it closed in shame. Here he'd been entirely honest with me and I'd already begun lying. Instead, I firmly held his gaze and relented, "I'm sorry I lied."

He sighed, furrowing his brows in gentle annoyance. "Don't start that 'sorry' bullshit. Just... eat. Take better care of yourself." His voice was low, tender as his eyes once again fixed on our gripped hands.

My chest swelled, pressured with the enormity of such a simple request and I instinctively flung myself at him. He was clearly startled as my arms surrounded his neck, pulling him forward while I buried my face into his warm neck. The tears that followed as he recovered and returned the embrace with enthusiastic vigor weren't caused by longings or desperation or bitterness or even regret.

I cried because Edward never wanted an apology, yet always forgave. I wanted to be that kind of person, for him most of all. I buried my face deeper, seeing the scar I'd inflicted when I'd been a stranger to even myself, and though I knew he'd never let me, I ached to tell him how sorry I was for it. I shifted my face and apologized with my lips as I pressed them to the crescent shaped mark. His nuzzling against my ear and his hands pressing me closer confirmed that it had been the most appropriate apology possible. I could feel his own apologies on the tips of his fingers as they caressed my hair and in the warmth of his lips as they pressed against my temple.

We emerged from the room ten minutes later, holding hands and stealing askew glimpses of one another as we descended the stairs. It had been only a brief moment of absolution, our kisses littering necks and ears and saying everything that words couldn't, but its meaning was infinite.



The sounds of forks and knives scraping against fine china filled the room and I peeked at the table's occupants with wary eyes.

We were all eating the dinner that I'd spent two hours assembling. Esme sat at one end of the table and Carlisle at the other. Alice had invited Jasper who really hadn't said two words since he walked through the door—with the exception of a quiet "welcome back" to Edward, punctuated with one of those weird back smacks that guys often do. I figured he could probably feel the palpable tension surrounding the entire event. He and Edward had shared a succinct and meaningful glance that I supposed signified an understanding to speak later. Edward and I sat across from them, our quiet contentment from our earlier embrace replaced with apprehension.

It was now quite evident that *everyone* knew we'd slept together last night. Glaringly obvious. Alice's dark eyes flittered from person to person around the table, her expression an odd mixture of worry and annoyance. Jasper was eating his food with caution, casting nervous glances to Edward who sat across from him. My mind trilled its easy observation of the atmosphere as Esme and Carlisle stared at their food in uncomfortable silence.

Awwwkwarrd.

What I wouldn't have given to have had Emmett sitting across the table, his prone tension-breaking skills in tow. Instead, Edward sat rigid at my side with ears the colors of tomatoes. I

watched his hands cutting through his beef with unnecessary precision. For the millionth time that day, he lifted a hand to swat his hair away from his eyes.

Carlisle was the first to speak, and even he seemed tense and uncharacteristically evasive. “Everything’s absolutely delicious, Bella. Thank you,” he declared, raising his glass. Everyone else met my gaze with murmured agreements and nods, before returning to their silent discomfort.

All of the tension in the air was getting to me. My muscles were stiff; my shoulders and neck ached. My earlier revitalization from the sleep was quickly falling by the wayside. My hands had a slight tremble that shook my drink despite my attempts to calm my nerves. Edward glanced at me from his periphery, inspecting how the water in my glass rippled. Swallowing, he uncertainly moved his hand to my knee beneath the table. But I wasn’t okay with simply letting him ease me. I’d already discovered that his electric purr was only effective for short-term. Even though it would have helped, it was something to be cherished, not abused. And his touching me for the sole sake of easing my anxiety—and my eager acceptance of it—was definitely abuse. I sighed and drop my fork with a loud ‘clank’ that made everyone flinch.

I was about to make Carmen a very proud woman.

“Okay!” I exclaimed, unable to bear it any longer and earning another collective flinch as everyone’s gazes rose to meet mine. I lifted my chin and crossed my arms over my chest. “Let’s just air this out because it’s making me edgy, please?” I asked, but everyone seemed to be gaping dumbly, so I continued without answer and looked Esme in the eye, “Edward and I are sleeping together,” Ten eyes grew wide. “I mean—in the same bed.” I huffed and rubbed my forehead in annoyance. “Yes, we had a bit of a... fight, but we’re trying to work things out. It doesn’t have to be such a big deal. We’re all adults here, so can we please stop pretending and wave to the pink elephants in the room?”

My shoulders eased at having had addressed the tension verbally, and I was beyond thankful. My chest felt a little lighter, and I could breathe easier. I sighed, smiled, and recaptured my fork to continue eating. I could feel five very distinct stares burning into my face, but for once, I felt light because of it. I’d done what none of them could accomplish. Like a dog wanting a treat, I couldn’t wait to tell Carmen about this.

Esme’s gaping lips slowly thinned. “I’d like you to keep the door open,” she replied softly. Because it was clearly a request and not an order, I boldly met her stare and nodded my agreement. It was a simple request to grant, and I’d gladly work to gain her trust. She sighed

and returned to her meal with a soft, “And you’re going on birth control.” I was grateful that Edward had stopped eating to gape at me because his sudden sputter surely would have made him choke. His eyes flashed in an odd fashion as they darted to me and back to her, incredulous, panicked, and... hopeful? Esme looked him in the eye. “And your hair is too long. I see it frustrating you and that frustrates me. I’ll make an appointment,” she added in a no-nonsense voice, not missing a beat.

Edward still had that bizarre expression on his face, but hesitantly nodded his acquiescence, his ears and neck growing an impossibly redder shade of shame.

I smiled brightly at her. The birth-control comment had humiliated us, but she had waved to her pink elephant, and I was pleased that she wasn’t making a fuss over the whole sleeping thing.

Alice was next.

She perked up in her chair with a somber expression. “I’m tired of all this ridiculous sulking. We—Are—Living—In—A—Mansion—People!” she punctuated her words with hard taps, as if she were speaking to morons. Jasper’s lips pulled up into a grin with a barely discernable shake of his head. Alice continued, “We all have somebody special, a bottomless pit of money, and no major health defects. Why the anguish?”

Carlisle interjected with an injured stare, “It’s not bottomless, Alice.”

She rolled her eyes and dismissed his objection with a swift, “Oh, and if we’re ‘airing stuff out,’ I broke that vase on the second floor,” and took a swift gulp of her drink. Esme’s eyes lurched to Alice, but before she could scold her, Jasper abruptly cut in, surprising us all.

“So if you two get married,” he mused while waving his fork back and forth between Esme and Carlisle, “wouldn’t that make Bella and Edward, like... cousins or some shit?” The expression on his face was one of pure curiosity as he pursed his lips.

Edward’s eyes rose with a fluid slowness. “No, and bringing it up is a really prick thing to do,” he whispered with a steady glare.

Jasper rolled his eyes. “Technically speaking, though, you would be. Like... adopted-step-cousins, right?” he implored to the other parties. “Right?”

Esme and Carlisle then appeared contemplative as they stared at one another. I prepared to deny that logic.

Instead, Edward stiffened and spat with a frenzied haste, "Alice, Jasper was the one who scratched your BMW," and quickly shoved a large spear of broccoli into his mouth.

Jasper's head lurched upwards, meeting Edward's avoidant gaze with a paled expression. "Dude... What. The. Fu—"

Esme disrupted with a stern face, "Language, please."

Jasper's stunned and wounded expression was pitiable as he whispered venomously, "*Backstabber*. You just wait 'til Rose comes back..." He made a show of not-so-subtly dragging his finger across his throat. I furrowed my brows in confusion, uncertain of what he'd meant.

Edward's attention was captured as he raised his gaze and asked, "Wait. Is she the one burning my effigies?"

Alice's eyes darted back and forth between them, confusion etched across her delicate features as she interrupted, "What do you mean 'it was Jasper?'" Everyone remained silent as she visibly pieced it together and abruptly turned to Jasper with furious eyes. "It was you?!" she screeched.

"Stop!" I quickly exclaimed, foreseeing an epic battle of screeches that I really hadn't intended on inciting.

Alice locked her jaw as she stabbed at her food with unnecessary force. Jasper kept his narrowed glare glued across the table at Edward, who still hadn't completely recovered from his mortification and kept his gaze diverted to his plate. I internally groaned as everyone continued eating in this fashion.

Jasper, never one for letting anybody have the last word, responded in an even tone, eyes fixed on Edward with a smile pulling at his lips, "I still say you're one gay midget short of being Springer-worthy."

The table suddenly erupted into Edward's annoyed vulgarity; Alice's angered shrieks; Jasper's affronted defense and semi-amusement at them both; Esme's soft chiding of various expletives; and Carlisle's futile attempts at placating them with his voice. Their eyes were all flashing in

varying degrees of fury, irritation, panic, and disapproval.

It was probably a little inappropriate, but laughter bubbled up inside of me so abruptly that it escaped in a deep, Rosalie-like guffaw.



As I climbed the stairs, I longed for the safety of my hoodie to hide myself. *That's what you get for never wearing it in the house.* I knew what had to be done, and I knew there'd be no avoiding the questions after I did it. I paced in the hallway for a moment, preparing myself and wishing that Carlisle and I were close enough to have some kind of secret code for these things.

He and Edward were in his office discussing his return to school and other things that I couldn't concentrate on. I'd just finished baking my batch of *Flotsam Florentines* for the evening and had put off taking my medication just short of being long enough to expect a very insistent Carlisle, hunting me down. I kicked myself for putting this task in his care. I could have handled dispensing my own medication, but I'd wanted to make him feel as involved as possible. Now I was regretting my decision as I inhaled a steeling breath and entered the room.

Edward sat across from him in the corner designated for chess and was chuckling, in a better mood since my fit of inappropriate laughter had melted the tension at dinner. His back was to me, his elbows resting on his knees as he assessed his chess pieces. Carlisle was leaning back with a grin and had just opened his mouth to say something when his gaze met mine.

"Bella," he exclaimed in greeting, his eyebrow curving upwards. "I was expecting you hours ago." His subtle chide wasn't lost on me as Edward pivoted to meet my gaze, his eyes and grin both widening in surprise at my sudden appearance. Of course, to him it would seem sudden. Carlisle's head bobbed casually toward the desk. "It's waiting," was all he said as he intended to continue his game. I attempted to shove down my annoyance with his laid-back reference to the little cup sitting on his desk. He had no idea the questions and answers that would follow between Edward and me.

I wrung my hands, pulling at the ends of my sleeves as Edward's gaze wandered to the cup in confusion. I briefly pondered the consequences of asking him to leave. Carlisle would grant me privacy without question or hesitation, I was certain. But even though I realized this, I also knew that I was finished hiding things for the sake of avoiding conflict. Better to get it over with now.

I unflinchingly walked to the desk, feeling Edward's puzzled stare on me the entire way. I

quickly snatched up the cup, lifting it to my mouth and downing the two pills inside. I swallowed with the bottle of water that waited at its side and turned. Edward's face was blank, lips parted as he stared at the empty cup and water. He'd just opened his mouth when I swiftly interjected.

"Tired?" I asked, my voice far too buoyant to not arouse suspicions. Carlisle narrowed his eyes at me, tugging at his earlobe and glancing at Edward, whose eyes never left the desk. He tilted his head, a curious crease formed between his eyes. "*I'm* tired, you?" I repeated.

Edward slowly met my gaze and nodded, turning to Carlisle with a blanched face. I shifted my gaze away as he and Carlisle said goodnight, feeling intrusive, but too paranoid to risk leaving them alone. I followed him out the door with my head down, already feeling the panic of the coming confession and the results of doing so. After the third stair, his hand brushed mine, interlacing with my fingers and staring at me.

"What was that?" he finally asked, halting his steps at the top of stairs and turning to me with worried eyes.

Drawing it out like a moron, I asked, "What was what?" I stood for a moment before him, holding his hand and sweeping his face with my eyes. His lips had the slightest part and were moist, full, and inviting. I couldn't remember such a sudden desire to kiss him in the entire ten months we'd known each other. I trained my eyes on the fine creases of pink and longed to wrap my fingers around his neck, drawing him in and touching my lips to his. What if this was my last chance? Even if I never told him about therapy, I knew better than to think he'd ever allow himself to be physical with me again after *that day*. What would we even have left?

Maybe just a kiss...

I tipped my face in consideration, inclining my body to his unconsciously as I dragged my tongue across my bottom lip. His brisk intake of air disrupted my moment of idiocy. I stiffened and quickly turned, walking until we reached the room. I should have learned by now what throwing myself at him would accomplish.

I felt his stare following me as I opened the drawer to the dresser, having already replaced all of his clothing earlier in the evening. Turning to him, I made a show of illustrating this and evaded, "I keep all my clothes in the guest room. Doesn't make sense to have an empty dresser," and shoved it closed with my hip.

His lips pursed as he leaned against the door jamb, staring down at his feet. “You’re taking medicine,” he stated, peeking at me through his lashes and hair. Feeling my heart sink and thrash simultaneously, I nodded without elaboration and prepared to stand my ground.

I really wanted to be proud of myself for progressing in therapy, not ashamed or frightened. I wanted to be able to share it with Edward because he had been my best friend and that’s what best friends were for. But I was an idiot because his face was taugth and hardened as he gazed at me. His nostrils flared and his jaw locked, his fists clenching at his sides.

“It’s okay if it’s private,” he ground, teeth clenched as I swallowed nervously. “But if you’re sick, please tell me.”



I had to be the unluckiest motherfucker on the face of the planet. Everything was going so good. *Too good.* Too good to be true. I really should have known.

Esme wasn’t being a total bitch, Alice hadn’t threatened the welfare of my testicles, and Jasper had understood despite my outing him to Alice. He’d even promised to come over and hang out in the evenings. Carlisle had crafted a plan to get me back into school with hopes that I wouldn’t be held back a year for my absence. He was happy to have me home, and had already arranged care for my mother. He didn’t give me any details. I didn’t want any. Things between us were becoming easy and we could talk freely now, without any bullshit coming between us. It was a good day. The first good day I’d had since I could remember.

And, Bella... well... we’d had a whole night of sleep, an entire day just sitting on the bed and being close, and shit was getting better. She’d all but told me that she loved me this morning, and she hadn’t told Esme that birth control was completely unnecessary. I wasn’t happy by the prospect of her needing it or anything. It just meant that *she* wasn’t jumping to deny that we were intimate. If she’d had no desire to be with me whatsoever, she would’ve said so. I had so much hope in that moment that it almost eclipsed my total humiliation. Not to even mention, she’d come *so* fucking close to *kissing* me back there, I felt it. And now... now *this*.

So goddamn typical.

She held her clothing in her hands—my clothing—and her jaw kind of dropped a bit as she

gaped at me. I kept my rigid posture, bracing for reality to finally come and crush me like I knew it would. She shook her head. "I'm not... well not technically *sick*, just..." she paused and walked to the sofa, lowering herself to the leather and folding her legs beneath her. Her eyes darted to the space at her side, guarded and wary, and I pushed off the wall, answering her silent request with trepidation.

I'd had more than enough of this suspenseful bullshit for one lifetime. "Just spit it out, Bella," I pleaded as I sank into the leather at her side. So many circumstances were going through my head, making my worry bloom into a full-on panic.

She ducked her chin, shielding her face from me as her fingers fidgeted restlessly with her sleeves. I knew that gesture well enough by now to know that she was really fucking troubled. "I'm scared," she eventually admitted, peeking at me through the veil of her hair.

Few things scared Bella.

My breaths began coming in sharp gasps as I foolishly ran through the possibilities of various life-threatening illnesses. *Cancer, blood disorders, organ failure, bone degeneration*. Most were random things I'd seen over the years, all of the patients replaced with Bella, suffering and deteriorating in a hospital bed. Living with Carlisle for so long had made me privy to seeing so many awful things. My scoff sounded strangled as I responded, "*I'm* scared." I didn't honestly know if I could handle it if something was wrong with her. This was supposed to be heaven, not hell.

She inhaled a slow breath and pivoted her body toward me, her eyes already glistening and fearful. Her fingers were still pulling at her sleeves and I swallowed as I fixed my eyes on the trembles of her fidgets. "You'll leave," she choked, grasping the material tightly.

I snapped my eyes to hers, incredulous and a little pissed off. "What the fuck would ever make you think something like that?" I asked, finally stilling her fingers as I covered her hand with my own, prying them loose and smoothing them out. "Tell me, *please*," I begged as I clung to her hand, searching her eyes frantically.

Her jaw and lips trembled, making my panic escalate as she whispered, "That medicine was prescribed by... my therapist." She closed her eyes and held a grimace, loosening her grip on my hand.

I blinked as I stared at her stiffened form for many moments. Her brown eyes were frightened

and alarmed as she slowly opened them. Still recovering from my shock, I finally asked, “So, you’re not... sick?” When she shook her head, slow and measured, I finally allowed myself to be relieved. I pulled her to me and crushed her to my chest, burying my face in her hair. “Don’t ever fucking do that to me again! Fucking Christ, Bella, you scared the living shit out of me.” I tried to calm my voice and panic while breathing her scent, letting it soothe me.

“You’re not... mad?” she asked into my chest, still rigid in my embrace. I didn’t really give a shit if she had boundaries or what-the-fuck-ever. I was still reeling from the relief of knowing that she wasn’t going to die in the very near future. She always made me so goddamn irrational.

Burying my nose deeper into her hair, I shook my head truthfully, knowing that we’d have to discuss it but feeling too exhausted now to expend the necessary energy. I kissed her on the head as I pulled away, wishing that we could skip past all this shit and just be happy, like at dinner when she’d laughed. Her eyes were still cautious and puzzled as she disappeared into the bathroom to get ready for bed.

I followed, having already unpacked my pajamas and barely took the time to brush my teeth before I was exiting the bathroom. Neither of us moved to close door as we climbed under the covers, greedily embracing each other in our familiar pose. I clung to her softness and warmth, longing to have every particle and piece of clothing between us just vanish. I wanted to feel her heat and pulse against my skin as a constant reminder that my mother’s words were just a fictitious, passing possibility, and I would never have to live her sorrow. Bella’s soft hum had me asleep within minutes, the soft light spilling over us from the hallway a comfort rather than a hindrance.

Saturday was my day, but Sunday was Bella’s. She was sitting next to me on the leather sofa as she nibbled on her sandwich. I had shamelessly inhaled mine like a motherfucking Neanderthal. How she wasn’t completely repulsed by me was beyond my understanding, but there she was, all fucking smiles and subtle movements to get closer to me. I inwardly rolled my eyes at her failed stealth, just willing her to stop being so fucking apprehensive.

When I’d awoken to yet another over-the-top meal waiting for me, I was a little annoyed. She couldn’t possibly do this shit every morning. Sheepishly, she’d admitted that she’d been hungry and simply didn’t like the idea of making food for only herself. Skeptical yet pleased that she’d made an effort to fulfill my request from the previous morning, I’d eventually joined her on the sofa to eat.

“Yoga is the worst,” she continued with a sour expression that made me chuckle lazily. She had been explaining her schedule to me for the last hour. Before that, she’d explained therapy and

her medication in more detail. Our thirteen hours of sleep had made her eager and uncharacteristically open. Or maybe it had just been her freeing honesty from dinner the previous night, I wasn't sure.

She tried to get more discussion out of me about Chicago, but I wanted to spend a day without having to think or talk about it. It was so fucking emotionally exhausting. After I'd told her this, I'd asked her to tell me about *her* summer instead. And therapy, of course. I wasn't thrilled about the concept of Bella divulging everything about us to a complete stranger. It made me uneasy and wary when she'd admitted that I'd come up on more than one occasion. I also wasn't thrilled about the idea of her boxing with someone that could knock her pretty little teeth out.

But I sucked that shit up and plastered on a smile, because what I *was* thrilled about was the glimmer of accomplishment and pride in her eyes when she spoke of it. I kept telling myself that was all that mattered.

"Yoga," I pursed my lips and flung my hair out of my eyes. "Isn't that where you get all flexible and shit—with the weird names, like 'Humping Zebra' or something?" I asked, grinning. Her trilling giggle was like a breath of fresh air, and I reveled in it unabashedly as she threw her head back and snorted.

"Pretty much," she nodded with a wry smile. "It came highly recommended by Carmen, though, so..." she trailed off with a shrug, sighing. This Carmen woman had come up more in the last two hours than Esme and Alice combined. I felt envious that this stranger probably knew more about her than I did anymore.

I glimpsed at Bella's creeping proximity and sighed, exasperated with her timid bullshit. Without much thought, I moved closer, her eyes guarded as our sides met. I probably should have been a little more careful as I sank deeper, but I eventually decided, *Fuck it*, and just rested my head on her shoulder. I yawned, slapping the hair out of my eyes and was secretly grateful that Esme had been insistent on getting it cut. She turned her head a bit, looking down at me as she slowly relaxed into the suddenness of my proximity.

We sat in silence like that for a long time. I picked up her hand and traced the lines of her palm with my finger, like she'd done for me the day before, just generally enjoying the casual touching that we could sometimes do without awkwardness. I wondered how long it would be before that wore off completely. Maybe it never would.

Disrupting my silent mulling, she eventually whispered, "Can we talk about the day you left, when we..." She trailed off as my body went rigid.

I squeezed my eyes shut, uncertain if I was ready to even begin thinking of it, let alone talking about it. "Do we really have to?" I asked, pleading as I tilted my head to gaze at her.

She frowned and looked away, biting on her lip before answering, "It seems kind of important, you know?" Her eyes darted to mine, just as anxious as I likely felt and I ground my teeth. She probably needed it more than me, I decided. As insecure and nervous as she'd always been, I figured that entire day probably destroyed any good I'd ever done for her confidence and anything else.

I lifted myself away from her and quickly blurted everything that I knew would never be enough. "I didn't mean any of that shit I said, I was just kind of... out of it and crazy. I took it out on you like a dickhead and then..." I paused as I recalled her palm smacking my face and sighed, "I deserved what you did and more."

She shook her head, her lip still trapped between her teeth as she objected in a stricken voice, "No one deserves that, Edward," and pulled her knees to her chest. *Great*, I sighed, hating seeing her in that goddamn fetal position.

"Even Newton?" I forced a smile in an attempt to lighten shit up, but it didn't work.

She shifted her eyes to the floor and swallowed. "I made you make love to me."

My jaw dropped in disbelief, and I scoffed. "Bella, that... *that* was *not* lovemaking," I replied, my voice seeping with disgust that I had never even given her proper basis for comparison. That day was all she really knew, and... I couldn't even remember treating trash like Stanley that atrociously. My chest burned as the images flooded my head, unbidden. My fingers in her flesh, shoving and bruising. I shuddered away from the memory and diverted my gaze, unable to look her in the eye. I was bitter that it had been brought up when things had been going so pleasant.

Bella sighed, "I don't care about semantics. It was my fault."

I shook my head, chucking humorlessly as I avoided her gaze. "It takes two."

And so we spent the next hour going back and forth, fighting like greedy dogs over the entirety of the meaty blame. She blamed herself for losing control, but so did I. She blamed herself for

victimizing me, and I blamed myself for victimizing her. She blamed herself for being emotionally unpredictable, and I blamed myself for being a total fucking lunatic.

“But, Edward,” she huffed, her face reddened and aggravated. “I *knew* what I was doing. It was textbook manipulation,” she nearly screeched, all flustered from our heated exchange.

I shook my head, grinding my teeth. “And I *knew* that you were manipulating me, Bella. Fuck,” I growled in frustration. “Give me some credit.”

Ignoring my logic, she continued, “I knew you’d regret it.” Nodding her head in certainty, she added, “I was just being selfish.”

I couldn’t stand hearing her downing herself so fucking completely. I kept arguing, “I *let* you do it and I couldn’t even stop myself.”

She scoffed. “I didn’t want you to.”

“I didn’t want you to want me to,” I countered.

Raising her chin, her eyes flashed in fury. “Well, I told Alice and Rose all about the fire and your mother.”

Unfazed, I shrugged and replied, “And I told my mom all about you and Phil.”

Impossibly more frustrated, she spat, “Well, I only went to therapy to piss you off.” She paused, still a little huffy before adding, “And so that I could snoop in your closet,” in a low voice.

Confused and a little disappointed in her confession, I almost stopped and asked her to go on. Instead, I rubbed my face and sighed, “Doesn’t matter,” in almost full sincerity. “You’re not going to convince me that you’re some awful bitch, so please, stop trying.”

She groaned, dropping her head to the back of the sofa. She peeked at me sideways, silent for a moment before whispering, “Say something bad about me?”

“What? No,” I refused, aghast as I shifted further away from her.

“Please?” she repeated.

"I really think this is something you need to mention to your therapist," I said with wide eyes, because that *couldn't* be healthy.

She huffed and sat up straight, looking me in the eye. "Don't you see, Edward? You put me on a pedestal and I'm not perfect." She raised her chin, jutting out her chest with confidence. "Say it. I'm not perfect."

Looking away, I shook my head. "No."

Annoyed, she puffed again. "There has to be something about me that just... annoys the crap out of you." When I failed to answer, she heaved a sigh of defeat. Truthfully, the fact that she thought so little of herself annoyed the crap out of me, but before I could say it, I met her gaze and knew that it wouldn't be enough. Her eyes were closed and she had a deep frown gracing her lips as she spoke, "Living up to your skewed interpretation of me is... it's just so much pressure, Edward." She opened her eyes, sad and pleading.

Fuck, I groaned and sank into the leather, battling the urge to kick my feet like some petulant two-year-old. "Fine," I replied curtly, pinching the bridge of my nose and closing my eyes. I searched for something about Bella that annoyed and frustrated me that wasn't related to her own skewed interpretation of herself, because she'd see it as cheating. Truthfully, I had a hard time coming up with anything and my eyes drifted open. I stared off into space, wondering how that was even possible. Even Esme and Carlisle annoyed each other, I was certain of it. As painful as it was to do, I could even remember my mom and dad arguing when I was little.

Bella was waiting, licking her lips in anticipation as I fought to find a flaw in her. She was right. No one is perfect. I narrowed my eyes as I inspected her face, replaying the last ten months as best I could, and it finally struck me.

"You're," I began and she perked up, an enthusiastic gleam to her eyes. "Sometimes, I mean, you can be a little..." I trailed off, worried about hurting her feelings, but her nod of persuasion drew it from me in a swift breath. "Unreasonable." There. I said it. Bella was unreasonable. I braced myself for some sort of bitterness, but instead, she grinned and nodded. Encouraged, I added, "Irrational, even?" and shrugged.

She threw her hands up in the air. "I know, right?" She began laughing, a deep, freeing sound. "I'm totally crazy, I swear!" I watched her as she giggled and snorted and composed herself after many moments. "Thank you," she eventually sighed, appearing relieved as another rogue chuckle escaped her lips.

I pursed my lips as I observed her and suddenly, I was curious. “Do me,” I asked.

She shifted her gaze to mine and asked, “Huh?” her smile faltering.

“Do me,” I repeated, rolling my eyes. “I have my own pedestal here. Knock me down.”

She blanched, her eyes growing wide. “Why? No way,” she insisted. “I already called you an asshole, doesn’t that count?”

I narrowed my eyes. “No. That’s completely fucking unfair. I showed you mine, it’s your turn,” I persisted before adding meaningfully, “Stop being *unreasonable*,”

She swallowed nervously, wringing her hands, and I waited. She drew her bottom lip between her teeth, chewing on it and appearing in deep concentration. Now understanding her earlier behavior, I leaned forward in anticipation, curious and eager. *We are one fucked up pair*, I thought in amusement, getting our jollies from insulting one another. Her Carmen would have a field day...

Suddenly she stirred, turning to me with a hesitant expression. “I’ve got one,” she declared, and I nodded enthusiastically, furrowing my brow in absorption. She cleared her throat and said, “You’re too hard on yourself and—”

“Doesn’t count.” I interrupted brusquely, remembering how I could have used the same cop-out.

She met my glare and scowled, “You didn’t let me finish.” With another sigh, she continued, “You think you aren’t deserving of certain things, so you deprive yourself and sometimes... it ends up hurting m—other people’s feelings,” she finished, resting her hands in her lap.

I could feel the crease between my forehead deepen as I frowned. “How so?” I asked.

She shifted uncomfortably, diverting her gaze to her hands in her lap. “You know, like with the food yesterday,” she whispered, peeking at me through the thickness of her lashes. At my still-blank expression, she elaborated, “You didn’t think you deserved it, right? Even though you wanted it?” I nodded in honesty, recalling how awful I’d felt that she’d spent so much time making me breakfast. “Well, it wasn’t your intention, but I put a lot of effort into it, and all I heard was you not wanting it,” she finished, her face a curious shade of red as she gulped.

“Oh.” I pursed my lips and nodded in understanding, though I’d already figured this much at the time. I knew her far better than she gave me credit for. I smiled at her, but she shook her head.

“It applies to *other* things, Edward,” she added, raising her eyebrows in significance and growing redder. Feeling as though I was missing some cryptic meaning, I awaited further explanation. She groaned, lolling her head back to her shoulders and closing her eyes. “Other... *couple specific* things,” she clarified in a terse whisper. When she finally opened her eyes, I could only imagine what expression I wore, blank, disbelieving, fucking... confused, or something in that ballpark.

“Like sex...” I hedged flatly. I’d only been home for two days and I didn’t even know if she was still mine. I began wondering if this issue would decide the fate of that, and I didn’t like it one bit. I could feel myself pulling away and shutting down at the thought of it.

“No!” she shook her head vehemently, her hair flying around her face. “I don’t care about sex, I promise. If you don’t want it, it’s... pointless and half-empty. It’s not even really worth arguing over—” *Ouch*. “—if you think about it. I just mean simpler things...” She was tense again, anxious and tugging at her sleeves as she finished and stared at me tellingly. It was just like last night. She licked her lips, darting her gaze to mine and blushing further before blurting, “It’s kind of confusing.”

“Yes,” I agreed fervently, and then frustrated, I asked, “Can I expand on my earlier flaw-choice? Because your mixed signals are seriously topping everything else.” I raked my fingers through my hair and shook my head in annoyance. First she makes me beg and grovel just to get her to speak to me, tells me I’m an asshole, and basically tells me I’m fucked. Now, she’s almost saying she loves me and pretty much asking me to kiss her. Confusing wasn’t a strong enough word for it.

Grimacing, she nodded and rolled her eyes. “Crazy person, remember?” she grumbled, pointing to her chest and flopping back onto the sofa with a soft squeak.

My face fell as I leaned my head back against the sofa and watched her, playing with the ends of her hair and squinting her eyes in concentration. Her subtle scratch of her head betrayed her perplexity as she became lost in deep thought.

“Hey,” I whispered, disrupting her focus as her gaze met mine once again. I lifted my hand to her cheek, brushing away her hair. “I don’t think you’re crazy. And you may not be perfect, but

you're perfect to *me*." I tentatively dropped my finger to her neck, swallowing nervously as I descended the softness of her flesh. She searched my eyes quizzically as my fingertip dipped below her collar, exploring just below it and finding what I sought with relative ease. I couldn't suppress my shit-eating grin as I tugged on the chain, releasing the necklace from the dark cotton of her sweater. Admittedly, I'd been looking for it for the last two days but she'd always kept it hidden. I'd had no way of knowing if she even wore it anymore. It was really all the proof I needed. Everything else from the last two days was just icing on my cake of validation.

"What?" she smiled confusedly, glimpsing down at the horse pendant I'd given her for Valentine's Day. She lifted her hand, fingering it gently as she knowingly assured, "I never take it off," and batted her lashes a bit, seeming intentionally sheepish.

My confidence surging, I leaned closer as I released the chain around her neck. Moving my palm to her cheek, I thumbed the fullness of her lips, silently beseeching. Her eyes grew heavy and glazed as she mimicked me, our faces drawing closer to one another until our noses were grazing. I savored her warm breath against my skin as I angled my face closer, finally touching my lips to hers. It was just like us to have our first kiss since my return like this, no fanfare or epic declarations. Just blame hoarding and simple truths over roast beef sandwiches and abandonment issues.

My kiss was gentle and about as tender as my excitement could manage. She sighed, curling her fingers around my neck and pulling me closer. I could feel her lips tugging upwards, suppressing a smile as my hands tangled in her hair. I allowed myself to deepen the kiss just enough to feel the tips of our tongues emerge and barely touch.

We pulled away at the same time but remained close as we sank into the leather. I draped my arm over the back of the sofa, touching my lip with the tip of my tongue and smiling as she grinned up at me. She grabbed my hand hanging over her shoulder, playing with the ring some more as I smelled the flowers and cookies of her hair.

With an abruptness that I definitely hadn't been expecting, she suddenly blurted, "I went through all your things and threw away your porn."

Yeah. That stopped me. My eyes unconsciously traveled to my bedside table before quickly darting back to hers. She looked up at me with a guilty, reddened face and nodded. "The letters and *everything*," she whispered lowly, suggestively, meaningfully.

If there would have been a hole in the middle of my floor, I would have crawled into that

motherfucker and died of shame. Instead, I sighed and kissed her temple, heat creeping up my neck as I swallowed and mumbled against her skin, "I accidentally showed my mother a drawing of you, half-naked."

She met my gaze with wide eyes. "You didn't." I nodded apologetically as she slowly returned to her comfortable position against my side. We sat perfectly content, both considering different things as the silence drew on around us comfortably.

It felt like an enormous weight had been lifted from my shoulders that I hadn't even realized existed. We still had our flaws and conflicts, but it was abundantly clear that neither of us were going anywhere. I was still her total fucking lunatic and she was still my girl.

My unreasonable, confusing, nosy, porn-hating girl.



"No, no. See here?" Jasper muttered, shoving the paper beneath my nose and pointing. "It says one-and-a-half teaspoons of baking *soda*. Not baking *powder*." He snatched the paper away and began inspecting it closer while I furrowed my brows.

I glanced down into the mixing bowl dubiously. "What's the difference?" I asked in annoyance, adding more bullshit into the sifter.

Cocoa powder, cocoa soda, whatever—fucking cryptic internet recipes.

Jasper shrugged, pursing his lips at the paper and tilting his head. "'Whip the cream to stiff peaks'? What the fuck is that supposed to mean?" he mumbled, finally meeting my gaze and quirked a brow. "Where the hell did you find this recipe? It's starting to sound kinky."

I groaned and snatched the paper back. "Stop trying to confuse me. This is hard enough as it is." I took a cleansing breath and set back to doing my task, Jasper watching me in unmasked amusement as I clumsily stumbled about the kitchen for round three of *Edward v. Appliances, et al.* I'd already finished my horrific load of homework for the night, so I had enough time to try again.

I had so much fucking make-up work to do for school that I'd been forced to accept Bella's assistance in getting it done. It was either that or go back a year. Carlisle seemed a little bothered that his money wasn't pulling as much weight as it normally would have, but I didn't mind working for it. It was my own fuck-up, after all. The week had gone by in a blur after I'd

started back. It wasn't nearly as weird as I would've expected. School, unlike the house, really hadn't changed one bit. I still walked Bella to classes, carrying her books when she'd let me, though she didn't much like my relaxing her anymore. She really didn't need it as badly anyway.

"Which attempt is this?" Jasper asked, sitting atop the counter and tossing the little bottle of vanilla extract from hand to hand. He came over with the excuse of waiting for Alice and Bella to return home from their Friday Night boxing lessons, but I knew better. That motherfucker was enjoying every second of this shit.

Absently, I answered, "Number three," and continued pilfering the ridiculously stocked pantry for powdered sugar. I wasn't accustomed to seeing so much shit in Carli—*my* kitchen. There were things I had zero hope of expecting to be present, but lo-and-behold, Bella had an entire bottle of cherry liqueur, just sitting there, waiting for me. It was a sign, I could feel it. It was official as a search of the top shelf revealed a can of tart cherries: this new recipe was a winner.

Jasper hummed and asked from behind me, "And which kind of cake is this one?"

I turned to him, having found the sugar and mumbled, "Black Forest." I was trying to butter Bella up for my big request, but wasn't certain if desecrating her kitchen was such a good method of achieving it anymore. I had plenty of time to fuck-up and start over before they returned home, but I didn't know if cleaning could be managed.

Also, I'd missed her birthday like a complete asshole. I knew she'd never accept a real gift, and she'd made me cake for mine. I was trying to find that tit-for-tat thing again. Of course, baking was so far from being my element that it was laughable. The gruesome spatter covering my shirt confirmed it: *I should have drawn her something*. "I feel like a dumb ass," I admitted as I looked down at my shirt.

The experience was making me just short of being pussy enough to don one of my girl's aprons. There were large clumps of flour and raw eggs and... something that I couldn't even remember the name of covering my chest. It was sticking to my arms in a grotesque and uncomfortable fashion. I mulled over removing it before eventually conceding and pulling it over my head. As I removed my shirt, thankful that I'd left my undershirt on after I'd awoken and dressed hastily for school, I plotted various methods of revenge against the electric mixer responsible for my predicament.

They really need to put a warning on that motherfucker...

"You *look* like a dumb ass." Jasper laughed, dodging the shirt I'd chucked at his head. "I can't believe you're wearing a wife beater. I was right about you going all trailer park on me," he continued, apparently amused with himself as I ignored the hundredth "Springer" reference of the week. Secretly embarrassed, I considered explaining that I liked sleeping in it with Bella—having less between us... in a very non-sexual way. I decided that he'd never understand that and rolled my eyes as I carried on. He watched me as I began measuring the sugar, furrowing my brows in deep concentration. Disturbing my total focus, he asked, "Why won't you let me help, again? I've baked a cake before."

I unwaveringly dumped the sugar into the sifter. "Because it's... it's one of those things that's more special when I do it myself," I huffed and pondered trying my luck at cracking another egg. I'd already destroyed an even dozen.

He shook his head and inspected the bottle of liqueur. "I don't know if Bella will agree. In fact," he sighed and met my gaze, stoic and grim. "I think once she sees her kitchen, she'll probably use all that Judo shit to beat you down." The serious expression on his face was both amusing and worrying. I mean, she'd make an exception for me. At least, this was what I kept telling myself as I licked my lips and tried to crack another egg.

Two hours, six eggs, one argument with Jazz that he couldn't get drunk off the cherry liqueur, and two broken mixers later, I was icing the ugliest fucking cake I'd ever fucking seen.

Carlisle had come in once to see what all the laughing was about.

The horrified expression on his face had frightened me. "She'll either find this endearing or appalling," he'd said before adding, "Are you asking her today?" Annoyed, I'd nodded and watched him exit, casting a nervous glance at the mess covering the counters.

"Why," I tilted my head, morose as I spread the icing over the cake. "Why is the cake all fucking crumbling like that? That's not right, is it?" I asked, pursing my lips in deliberation. I supposed making the chocolate curls was a little fucking pointless.

Jazz watched the knife with a sinister smile. "Dude, I *think* you're supposed to wait for it to cool *before* you ice it." I narrowed my eyes at the inconvenient timing of this information before the distant sound of the front door closing startled me. I looked to him with frantic eyes, but it was too late. Bella and Alice came striding toward the kitchen, Alice's face excited and flush and Bella snorting in laughter.

Jazz jumped down from the counter, both of us frenzied as we stood in the middle of the obliterated kitchen: me covered in sticky batter and him looking suspiciously guilty as he swiftly hid the bottle of liqueur he held behind his back.

“Did you see her pa—” Bella came to an abrupt halt, eyes wide as they surveyed the kitchen, aghast.

Shit, I inwardly groaned.

Jazz’s smile grew vindictive as he stepped away from me. “It was all Edward,” he blurted, his finger pointing to my anxious face. I narrowed my eyes as he mouthed, “*Payback is a bitch*,” and sidled up to Alice. He shrugged indifferently as he slung his arms over her shoulders, “I tried to help.”

Prick.

Manning up, I turned to Bella and forced a smile. “It’s a birthday cake,” I explained while sweeping my hand over it in introduction. My teeth ground at Alice’s delicate snort as she gaped at the horrific lump of dark brown. Bella furrowed her brows and darted her eyes back and forth between me and the atrocity of a cake. She wasn’t wearing her hoodie, but instead, a tight fitting shirt that was probably meant to be suitable for her boxing class. Her hair was tied up into a ponytail that hung over her shoulder as she gaped. Thankfully, all teeth appeared to be present and accounted for.

Alice chimed to Jasper in bemusement, “You never made me a cake,” and pouted. His glare at me intensified.

“You... baked... cake?” Bella asked, as if trying to make the words fit and finding it impossible to do so.

Swallowing, I nodded and awaited her judgment as she stared back and forth with a blank expression. *Endearing. Appalling. Endearing. Appalling.* Her lip twitched once, twice, and then it transformed into a bright, disbelieving grin.

Endearingly Appalling, it is.

I smiled back at her in relief as she slowly wandered to me across the kitchen. Milking this endearing shit for all it was worth, I smiled wider, swatting my yet-to-be-cut hair from my eyes

and informed, “We might need a new mixer.”

She stopped at the counter, her smile momentarily wavering as I watched her jaw lock before she rolled her eyes. “That’s okay,” she chuckled and leaned over the cake to inspect it. I met Jazz’s incredulous stare and mouthed “*Endearing*,” mockingly.

He clucked his tongue and tugged a disappointed Alice out of the kitchen.

Bella was still smiling and even blushing a little as she dipped her finger into the icing. “You know, I always figured you for the box mix kind-of-guy,” she mused, popping her finger into her mouth and licking it off. My eyes fixed on the gesture, watching it disappear between her lips.

Down, boy.

My confused expression must have been apparent as she rested with her elbows on the counter and explained, “You know, the premade mixes in the box,” and shrugged.

“There’s pre-made box mixes?”

Grinning sadly, she nodded until her eyes took in my full appearance, widening. I grimaced as I inspected my front, recalling how the second mixer had been even more violent than the first.

“You... you have a little something...” she trailed off, her hand pausing in uncertainty as she reached for my chin, sweeping her thumb over the skin and inspecting it blankly.

“The mixer won the battle, but trust me,” I quirked an eyebrow defensively, “*I won the war.*” I gestured to the now-mangled appliance that lay helplessly beside the trash-can and smirked. With a steeling breath, I turned to her, ready to cut to the chase before she realized that I’d actually destroyed two mixers, though, in my defense, the first had been entirely accidental.

When I met her gaze she was staring at me with the same blank expression. Worried and realizing that it’d be just like my girl to have some kind of freakish attachment to electrical appliances, I asked, “What’s wrong?” and prayed that I hadn’t destroyed one of her favorites or something.

She kept blinking and staring before she took a step toward me and replied in an oddly strained voice. “Edward, you’re... you’re *covered* in chocolate. In... the kitchen, wearing...” Unable to continue, she paused with parted lips, her gaze growing intense in a way that I recognized.

It'd been almost a week since the kiss on the sofa, but that uncertainty was still there, lingering in the air between us like a cancer. We stole innocent kisses as we passed in the hallway, whenever someone would leave the room, and before we got into bed, but it wasn't really the same. I figured we were probably both scared shitless of just unleashing the full force of our desire like last time. It was why I'd wanted to butter her up and finally ask her what Carlisle had been suggesting for days now—at an annoying frequency.

I couldn't be sure if it was the thought of me cooking or seeing me covered in chocolate, but... she was *clearly* turned on by it. Her head tilted infinitesimally, eyes focusing on my lips as she worriedly tugged at her ponytail. She mouthed something that I swear looked like, "*filthy*," before she met my gaze again, dropping her hair.

Like teenage hormonal magnets, we were both standing still one second and colliding in the next. I eagerly crushed my lips to hers, pulling her waist to me as she fisted her hands into my shirt and pulled me closer. Our lips parted at the same second, boldly pressing our tongues together and darting them in and out of each other's mouths for the first time in months. It was the least graceful kiss I think I'd ever experienced—our teeth and noses knocking as she stumbled back, tugging with her hands and mouth before she hit the counter. She lifted herself without breaking the kiss, now level with my height and pulling me closer as we both trembled with excitement.

I allowed myself five seconds to feel her tongue against mine, our breathing erratic and uneven before I yanked myself away, panting. "Too much," I gasped, shaking my head and burying my head into her shoulder. This was really our problem from the beginning. We kept bottling shit up until it erupted into a volatile tangle of tongues and emotion. It made us unpredictable and reckless. Her hands stroked my hair gently as I fought to calm my raging... everything, my arms hugging her waist to me tightly. She kissed my neck, a silent apology that really wasn't necessary as she eventually returned my embrace with a sigh.

Finally ready to admit when I needed help handling the delicacy of our situation, I lifted my head. She'd come so far and had done so well. I was tired of being excluded, but also, I wanted to know how to do it right, how to be with her, and only one person could really tell me.

Like had been happening frequently as of late, I began considering her progress in therapy and once again disliking how I meant to willingly exclude myself from it. Even Carlisle and her were close enough to talk about it and yet I'd been only bare-minimum-supportive. It bothered me more than I wanted to admit that I couldn't be good enough to actively encourage her. It was

obviously something she took great pride in. I wanted to trust that she wouldn't just move on to the next motherfucker once she was well enough. And maybe if I could show her that trust, I'd gain hers back again eventually.

Meeting her apologetic gaze, I locked my jaw and uttered the request that had plagued me for days. "I want to meet Carmen."

Chapter 50. Secretive Sandies



The sounds of a purposeless and soothing jazz number floated through the lobby of Dr. Carmen's office. It was fairly early, the sun's rays still shining intensely through the large window beside the entrance. I rubbed at my eyes with the sleeves of my hoodie and grimaced, my leg bobbing up and down. The wait was excruciating. I strained my ears to hear something, longed for x-ray vision, or some kind of superhuman hearing, but I caught nothing. Not a murmur or muffled voice. Just the generic jazz music.

I felt trapped inside *The Weather Channel's* local forecast.

I tugged at my sleeves and lolled my head back, my restlessness seeming to annoy the blond receptionist. *Fuck her.* She spent way too much time reading gossip magazines. The plastic chairs, curved and modern and designed for comfort, made my bones ache. My eyes fixed to the knob of her door, willing it to open and for Edward to emerge, smiling.

Dr. Carmen had not let me join them when Edward and I came in that morning. I'd actually sat myself on the sofa in her office beside him, expecting to be present during their discussion. But Dr. Carmen had walked in and promptly kicked me out. Some crap about "honesty being easier between two" and "three being a crowd."

I'd been rather upset about her dismissal, looking to Edward for support, but instead, I found him to be just... accepting.

Maybe he had wanted to speak to her alone all along.

I couldn't locate the source of my anxiety over the meeting. I was worried about Edward disliking Carmen, of this fear I was certain. There was nothing I wanted more than his full support, and that was already shaky at best. I felt as though their conversation this morning would shape his impression of therapy in general. I had more reasons than my own to hope he emerged with a positive one.

Conversely, I wanted Carmen to like Edward. I feared that she would see something in him that would force her to discourage our relationship. Already over the past week, she had offered more relationship advice than I could stomach at times. She wanted me to, "Chill out, and let it happen," and "Find out what he's looking for before I 'jumped the gun.'" (She'd winked with that one.) She wanted us to "Build the kind of trust and comfort that made us admit to gross and horrible things," and "Look out for 'number-one' before I let 'number-two' make us a 'three.'" *Whatever the hell that's supposed to mean.* She wanted me to learn from our "Many, many, *many* screw-ups during our time swimming in the river of de'Nile," and use that wisdom to "'Get' what a relationship is really meant to be." She wanted me to "Be open, even if it makes me look like a sappy, girly moron," and give him time to "Adjust to Cullen life, and the overload of estrogen in his once testosterone-filled household."

She wanted me to be "Patient."

Fuck patience. I thought bitterly.

Patience was obviously necessary, but living with Edward wasn't nearly as glamorous as I'd once dreamed. There was this invisible wall separating us that was only dropped in private, and even then, only partially. I wondered how long I'd be forced to tap on it before that wall would finally fall and we could be "us" again. I couldn't decide who was even responsible for its presence. I was probably still a little skeptical about the depth of Edward's commitment, but he had his own reservations, whatever they were. How wrong was it of me to just want everything to be perfect for once? I filed this question away for a later discussion with Carmen or Carlisle, or even Edward if the time was right.

This last week had been awkward to say the least. Edward and I had put our reconnecting on hold for his return to school. He'd been swamped with all of the make-up assignments and had agreed to let me help but only after a *very* long argument. Thus, we'd wake up, get dressed in separate bedrooms, go downstairs and eat with Alice, Esme, and Carlisle, and I'd ride to school with Alice while he'd pick up Jasper. When we'd arrive, Alice and I would part ways while Edward walked me to class. It was mostly as it had been before, with minor deviations.

Our first morning back, I'd decided that I didn't want his electric hum soothing me as we entered the school. He'd appeared a little hurt when I'd first shrugged him off, but I couldn't *not*. I hadn't wanted him believing that his touch was my motivation for being at his side. I walked with Edward because I *enjoyed* his company, not because I *needed* his calming effect.

It'd been difficult to deny myself and sacrifice what could have so easily made every experience pleasurable, but I'd done it. Edward had been worried about my recovery. He'd feared it would make my desire for him dissipate because I'd no longer need him. If I could show him that I didn't need him now, then maybe he'd understand that I was with him because he was kind

and understanding and funny and beautiful and loyal and the sensations of his fingers against my flesh were only one reason in a long list of what made my desire for Edward so permanent. When I'd told him how much it'd meant to me to do it on my own, he'd understood somewhat, and it had shown in his small grin of encouragement. But I knew it bothered him, and in turn, that bothered me.

All in all, our interactions had grown benign—which wasn't necessarily a bad thing. It wasn't like the connection had dimmed. It was just being... *controlled*.

Well... until Friday, I smirked absently, recalling what had happened after I'd returned from boxing with Alice.

The way in which I'd attacked him really was unforgivable. The delicious smudge of brown batter right below his jaw was begging for the attention, and my tongue had longed to grant it. He met me halfway as I flew at him, wrapping his fingers around my waist and drawing me closer as our lips met. I was praying as I parted my lips that he'd *really* kiss me for once, and I was rewarded in full when his tongue plunged into my mouth. Every bit of air escaped my lungs, my eyes rolled back, my knees went weak, birds sang, clouds parted, the distant melody of "hallelujah" could be heard—all of that clichéd crap that just basically meant, *your tongue rocks my freaking world*.

Edward - t-shirt + cake batter x (boxing + endorphins) = horny Bella.

It's an elementary equation.

But it had been too much. The trickle had gone from a drip to a rushing cascade in mere seconds, and we'd been unprepared for the intensity of it. Truthfully, I probably would have humped him on the kitchen counter, and this only served to prove how irrational my state of mind was.

We weren't there yet. Even a complete moron like me could see that. He'd just given up on his mother, losing the only blood tie he had in this world, and I was only just beginning the fight against my condition and accepting how very slow and difficult that might be. Edward and I were fragile and delicate. It might have taken me a long time, but I was finally beginning to appreciate the responsibility of our many burdens. I had to give them the attention and respect they deserved if I was ever going to get better.

With this thought, my mood sank impossibly lower, and I frowned at my worn sleeve cuffs. The evidence of the last year in Forks was apparent in the fraying of its dark fabric. I furrowed my brows as I inspected it and pondered buying a new one, but that didn't seem right.

Before I could let my mind wander far enough to completely distract me, I heard a curious noise coming from her office. My spine straightened. It was like... a muffled murmur in a deep voice. Definitely Edward. I furtively slid my chair closer to the door, my eyes fixed on the magazine-absorbed receptionist. I settled a couple feet from the door, my ears straining in the direction of the dark wood.

Then there was nothing but silence.

It was downright eerie. I gnawed at my lip and began absently bouncing the heel of my foot once again. My eyes remained focused on the knob as I battled to hear anything further. The soothing jazz number finally ended, transitioning to a new song with a static silence.

That's when I heard it.

An entirely undeniable, "Who the *fuck* do you think you are?" came billowing from the room in the form of Edward's enraged voice.

I flinched so abruptly that the legs of my chair squeaked on the linoleum.

The receptionist didn't even appear phased as she licked her fingertip and turned a page.

I was still processing the new occurrence when the door suddenly swung open. Every muscle in my body tensed as Edward emerged, brows pulled together and nostrils flared. He clutched his jacket in his hand, his fingers curled into it in a shaking fist as his eyes searched for me. When his furious gaze landed on mine, I blanched, swallowing loudly, but then, something about my expression made his own face soften infinitesimally.

He held his hand out, palm up, to me and implored, "Can we leave?" He was visibly trying to reign in his anger, his eyes fixed to mine as his fingers flexed into the leather.

I took his hand without hesitation, and it was warm and gentle as his fingers laced with mine. I caught Carmen's eyes and small grin as we passed her door.

She called after us, "I'll see you soon, Edward!"

His steps were hasty and loud against the floor as he called loud enough to make a scene, "Fuck you very much!"



Across from me, Edward propped his elbow against the back of his booth seat, glowering out the window mutely. He'd insisted on taking me to breakfast, though I couldn't fathom why. He was clearly not in the mood to go out anywhere.

The ride here from Carmen's office had been anything but uneventful. Two cars in front of us had turned without signaling. This produced a number of expletives and Edward's raging tirade on what he referred to as "The Forks Turn Signal Massacre," for which he'd personally volunteered himself to manage the protest. The shoving of various turn-signal-levers up asses was mentioned with frequency. Then, when we'd arrived at the diner, the man exiting had failed to hold the door open for me. Edward had managed to restrain any direct dialog with him, but I was fairly certain, had I not been present, there would have been an *interesting* exchange of words. When we ordered our food, the waitress's lack of necessity to write down our orders had peeved him and resulted in his promise to "seriously lose his shit if she fucked our order up."

His attitude was stressing me the hell out. I ground my teeth and pressed my lips together and let him work through his frustrations before I said something to make it worse. And I *really* hoped that he was working through his frustrations as he sat there, flicking his fingers as his arm hung off the booth. I worried sometimes that he wasn't sure how to do that anymore. Before, he'd smoke a cigarette or take it out on Emmett or just avoid people all together. He didn't have any of those luxuries anymore. Now he just had to let everyone see it and learn to let things go.

Letting things go was *not* Edward's forte.

When our food arrived, he narrowed his eyes at the plates and did a mental checklist of everything we'd asked for: French toast for me with powdered sugar and a side of bacon, and ham and eggs for him, scrambled with cheese. I suppressed an eye roll when he asked a little tersely for our napkin dispenser to be re-filled. The waitress didn't seem at all bothered by his attitude and quickly accommodated his every request. I reasoned that she probably dealt with assholes a little too often for her own good.

We ate in complete silence. Not companionable or comfortable, but uneasy and stifling. The air between us was so charged with his frustrated tension that it was infectious. I almost snapped at the waitress myself when she asked to refill our drinks for the fourth time. Eventually, I'd lost my appetite and had begun prodding at my toast disinterestedly.

"You're not hungry," Edward observed in a questioning voice. When I raised my gaze to him he was staring at his plate, stabbing at his ham as his eyes tightened. "You didn't eat much last night," he accused, dropping his fork and raising his eyes to mine.

Curving a brow, I asked, "Just how much did I eat?"

Without pause he answered, "Half of an enchilada and two bites of rice," and took a hard pull from his straw.

I simply stared blankly at him, my fork impaled through my two pieces of toast. "Well, I wasn't aware someone had been keeping track of my caloric intake," I replied dryly.

He rolled his eyes, quirking one side of his cheek upward. "You said you'd take care of yourself. Excuse the fuck out of me for caring." He diverted his gaze to his plate once again, his eyes now impossibly more irritated.

Just great...

"This won't work," I murmured, dropping my fork and pressing my back against the booth with a sigh.

Sparing me a brief glance, he huffed, "What won't work?"

"This!" I snapped, waving my hand back and forth between us. Instead of looking me in the eye, he rigidly turned to the window at his side, glaring out of it unseeingly as the muscles of his jaw tightened. "Are you going to tell me what happened this morning or just spend an indefinite amount of time in a crappy mood?" I asked.

He rolled his eyes again, but didn't meet my gaze. "I'm not in a crappy mood," he responded brusquely, propping his elbow on the table and running his fingers through his hair.

I simply waited, watching as the edges of his eyes crinkled as they squinted against the sun.

Finally, his eyes swept over the table and fixed on my own. I raised my eyebrows skeptically. The slight softening of his features indicated his defeat. "Okay," he grumbled, retrieving his fork. "I'm in a shitty mood. Sorry," he admitted, sparing me a brief, almost apologetic glance.

I inhaled a deep breath, trying to abate my own frustration because it would only feed his. "It's okay," I finally assured, tucking my hair behind my ear.

But his face fell as he protested, "No, it's not," and pushed his plate of food to my side of the table with a drawn clank. Before I could question him, he rose stiffly from the booth and walked to my side, sliding in next to me. He snaked his arm around my waist and pulled me close, pressing a quick, hard kiss to my temple. "I'm a dick," he berated as he scowled at the table.

Settling into his still-rigid side, I gazed at him and considered arguing. Of course, with Edward that was pointless, so instead, I just cut to the chase and asked, “What happened?” I knew it wasn’t any of my business, and Carmen’s office was a verbal sanctuary of sorts, but my curiosity was gnawing at me mercilessly. I knew what Edward had planned to discuss with her. I’d have to be stupid not to.

We were progressing in our emotional relationship. We still had little moments like these—small, insignificant quarrels I’m certain every couple has. But they were fleeting and rarely made my confidence in us waver. There were other, seemingly insignificant but wholly telling moments, though.

He’d save me from tripping over curbs without thought, like second nature. He always knew which book to pull out for me in the evenings when we weren’t yet tired enough to go to bed. He let me have the fluffier pillow, and I *knew* he wore that wife beater because he wanted to be closer to me. In return, I took onions out of every single recipe because he hated them. If I saw his iPod lying around somewhere, I’d put it on his dresser because he always lost that damned thing. I spent two whole days talking Esme down from remodeling the third floor because I knew how much he enjoyed routine and familiarity. He knew whenever I wore the brown sweater that was a little too tight to tell me how nice I looked, because it made me self-conscious. I knew that sometimes he liked to use his touch to ease my anxiety because it made him feel valuable, and I’d eventually let him.

We were synced in the oddest ways, but it worked. Every day brought the promise of a new lesson, a new piece of knowledge about the other, which we added to our growing stockpile. As a couple, Edward and I were a certainty. It went without saying. Our love would only grow with time. It was definite. Our emotional relationship was a lot like planning an elaborate, Italian dinner: we might spend our morning screwing up batch after batch of pasta, but come six, we’d have it ready, because we’d start over until we got it right.

Our *physical* relationship, however...

His jaw tensed as he evaded my eyes, staring at his eggs and prodding them with a tine of his fork. The curves of his lips were pressed into a thin line, and the hair framing his face accentuated the shadows of his scowl.

His refusal to answer, mingled with his mood was dismaying, and I could feel my own face fall. “Is it that bad?” I asked, looking down into my lap and fingering the frayed ends of my sleeves.

Obviously, my condition was a huge obstacle — for us both. It shouldn’t have bothered me since I’d come to terms with my physical limitations before I even knew Edward was returning to me. Yet it *did* bother me. Our previous carelessness in regards to our sexual relationship had

been stupid, but undeniably satisfying—regardless of our failures. But I refused to be reckless once again. If Dr. Carmen discouraged a sexual relationship, I would follow her advice.

Damn it all to hell...

"Don't fucking start that shit, Bella. Not now," he begged in a frustrated voice, his fingers shoving themselves into the mess of his hair. He closed his eyes and clenched his teeth. "You blame yourself for fucking *everything*, and trust me —" He chuckled bitterly, shaking his head. "—t his one is *all* me." His throat lurched with a quick swallow and he leaned away from me, narrowing his eyes at nothing in particular.

"What?" I asked, confused.

He cleared his throat, shifting to the side a bit and propping his elbow on the table. With a sharp exhale, he repeated, "It's me, not you." His gaze was evasive and anxious as the silence wore on. When he finally caught my bewildered stare, he huffed, rolling his eyes. "She said you're fine, okay? She said that—," he paused, shifting uncomfortably again, before he whispered under his breath, "—that getting... *aroused* or *what-the-fuck-ever*... was like, your hurdle or something." A hot flush crept up my cheeks as he finished, "If we took it slow and... followed her advice, you could..." he trailed off, waving his hand suggestively, albeit a bit hostilely.

I was a little stunned.

And giddy.

And ironically... aroused.

"Really?" I squeaked, my spine straightening as I pivoted to him.

The sight of my sudden pleasure seemed to make his eyes brighten a bit, but it didn't take long for them to dim again. He faced forward with a blank expression and added, "She said there's still a lot of shit she wants to cover with you, though."

"Like what?" I asked, my enthusiasm only wavering infinitesimally.

Puffing out his cheeks, he released a sharp sigh and ruffled his hair. "Shit, Bella. I don't fucking know. Some bullshit about 'intimacy' and 'affection,' and God only knows what else," he scoffed.

"Intimacy versus affection?" I mused curiously. I never knew what topics to expect, so it came

as no surprise that I had to filter through the technical definitions in my mind. I didn't really see much of a difference between the two and wondered how subjective it was.

Edward's hand, still wrapped around my waist, squeezed me until I met his gaze. His eyes were searching and had an edge of anxiety to them that I couldn't explain. "You understand the difference, don't you?" he asked while tapping his foot against the floor. Slowly, I shook my head, curious as to his opinion on the subject. But at my answer, his foot stilled and a brief flash of anger swept across his features. He locked his jaw and looked away, murmuring sharply, "Just one more thing I fucked up..."

Seriously?

A little piqued, I pivoted my body to him, bending my leg at the knee. "What do *you* think the difference is?" I asked, because his question had been worded a bit condescendingly. I wasn't emotionally stunted or anything. I might not have had his level of experience, but he'd basically insinuated my answer was wrong and that he was to blame for it. It made me feel like some impressionable five-year-old, which I most certainly was *not*.

He turned his head to face me and removed his arm from my waist. "Intimacy is..." he trailed off, furrowing his brows and tugging absently at his napkin on the table. "It's like..." He paused again, closing his mouth and seeming incapable of finishing. He released a frustrated exhale and suddenly leaned into me. He pressed a kiss to my forehead with no apropos. He held his lips there stiffly, his breath warm and tickling the top of my scalp. I let my eyes fall closed and sighed; pleased at the direction this was turning.

Until he pulled away and nodded decisively. "That was affection without intimacy," he explained, though his voice wasn't patronizing. It was just matter-o-fact. I didn't fail to notice that he'd pretty much just admitted to only offering me affection since his return, as little forehead kisses had become annoyingly customary with us.

Before I could mention this thought, however, his lips suddenly crashed to mine. I gasped in surprise as he forced my lips open with his tongue and pressed himself closer. My hands went to his shoulders to steady myself until I realized that he was *kissing* me, kissing me. I wanted to kiss him back but was unable to keep up with the quick darts and strokes of his tongue. The hard lines of his body were oddly unpliant and tense against mine as I worked to match him. It wasn't that I didn't enjoy the kiss, but it was just so... *fierce*. It felt greedy and sudden, which wasn't necessarily unenjoyable, but it reminded me of that empty feeling from the day we'd had sex, before he'd left.

I was almost thankful when he yanked himself away after only a few brief seconds. He sucked his bottom lip into his mouth and remained stiffly hovering over me in the booth, one hand

bracing him on the back of it. His eyes softened as our eyes met, and he brought his palm to my cheek.

“That was intimacy without affection,” he sighed, eyes darkening. Before I could fully connect the dots, his lips were on mine again, but this time, more gently. He pursed his lips against mine languidly, caressing my heated cheek with the pad of his thumb, and it held none of the frustration or impatience of the prior kiss. He almost seemed... tender.

I returned the kiss with a sigh, and he let me push him back, my fingers finding their way to his hair. When our lips parted, our tongues slid against each other smoothly, ducking back into our mouths and peeking out once again. When he pulled away the final time and settled back into his spot, he didn’t need to explain his last example to me.

I discovered that I much preferred a combination of both, and I’m certain he could sense it in my dazed smile as I cleared my throat and righted myself. ❖

That night as I finished washing the dishes from supper, I was flustered and... a little pissed off. Edward’s earlier demonstrations had completely distracted me from my initial question. I wanted to know what had caused his petulance and total rage earlier. On the drive home, I’d asked again but had only been granted a cryptic and terse, “There are some things you just can’t talk to some random fucking stranger about, Bella.”

Well, I could talk to Carmen about anything. In fact, her being a stranger made it somehow easier for me. I’d never see her in anything but that capacity, and I knew my privacy was a responsibility that she took seriously. She would not tell Edward about my treatment.

But I couldn’t simply dismiss his discomfort.

Edward and I weren’t alike in all respects. I was a private person, but he was a damned fortress. It had taken me almost a year to wiggle myself inside his mind, and even now, I felt like he only showed me what he wanted. Frustrated and defeated, I stood by Esme and dried the dishes, nodding along to her passing comments on the second floor, which was her newest designing challenge. I was already tired by the time we’d finished. I usually spent my evening with Alice and Esme in the living room, but I wasn’t feeling up to it. I didn’t even feel up to making the *Secretive Sandies* I’d been inspired to bake that afternoon.

Edward had gone up to the study with Carlisle as they always did after dinner. Thoughts of Edward’s bed made my limbs feel heavy, and I hoped he wouldn’t mind calling it an early night, considering we’d woken up so early to go see Carmen. It would also give me a chance to really talk to him. At least there, in the bed, I knew his personal wall was flimsier—I felt closer to him in some way. Maybe I’d try asking him again.

With heavy steps, I ascended the stairs and approached Carlisle's office, ready to take my regular dosage and determine whether or not Edward was tired. When I reached the door, it was cracked open, as always, and their voices floated out dimly into the hallway. What I heard made me stop dead in my tracks.

"... then just out of nowhere, that bitch mindfucked me with her therapy voodoo horseshit, Carlisle." Edward's voice was low, but clear. "It just seemed so... trivial with everything that's happened between then and now, but... but now I'm mindfucked and it's like a constant fucking nagging, you see?" My eyebrows furrowed at his anxious tone and I shifted, leaning against the wall.

Carmen is the mistress of the mindfuck, I thought in agreement, thinking back to my hysterics over the cookie-sheets after my first session with her. I could only imagine what his version of the cookie-sheet was. The possibilities were endless.

Edward continued in a flat whisper, "I just... it seems so fucking masochistic to... *you know...* and then... feel that again. What if—" he paused and his voice dropped, a foreign vulnerability lacing his murmured, "—what if it hurts like before?"

Carlisle answered immediately, in an appalled voice, "I think if you don't find out, you're going to a doctor. End of discussion."

A million thoughts raced through my head with his words.

It didn't take long for Edward to respond in a muffled groan, "Not you too."

"It could be serious," Carlisle persisted in a concerned tone. "If it's so bad that you're scared to try, then maybe you should go anyways."

There was Edward's airy huff and then a gentle shifting of fabric. "I'm not scared," he muttered stiffly.

"Oh?" Carlisle asked dubiously. "So it's perfectly normal for an eighteen-year-old male to abstain from masturbation for five months, then?"

"Fucking Christ, Carlisle," Edward hissed under his breath. "Where the fuck did your subtlety and discretion go?"

Carlisle's sigh sounded exasperated. "It's nothing to be ashamed of, Edward."

Edward snorted and there was a soft thump that sounded much like a chess piece. “For normal people, there’s nothing to be ashamed of. But *normal* people don’t feel orgasms in the form of searing pain, so I think you can spare me the clinical ‘It’s perfectly natural’ bullshit.”

It was then I knew that Edward had gone to Carlisle for whatever he didn't feel comfortable speaking to Carmen about. It made sense, and though I was glad he chose to speak to anyone at all, I'd never been so confused— so I kept listening. Eavesdropping rather shamelessly for another five minutes taught me everything that I needed to know: Edward's last orgasm had been with me. It had been painful. *Excruciating*. He was too embarrassed to go to a doctor and too frightened of feeling it again to determine if it had been nothing more than a fleeting symptom of his lack of sleep and heavy drug use.

I waited for their discussion to shift to something else before walking through the door. Edward's eyes were downcast as I quickly took my medication. I mumbled something about being tired and quickly left the room, sprinting to the third floor and throwing myself on Edward's sofa. I pretended to work on my English paper while I sat in silence, but I wasn't.

I was furious that he'd kept this from me, all this time.

I stared at the paper and my anger grew to a hot, burning pressure behind my eyes. I didn't even look up from my book when Edward entered the room, closing the door softly behind him. He stood in the middle of the room for what seemed like ages as my eyes fixed on the page. I could see him in my periphery, regarding me and darting his eyes around the room. His gaze seemed conflicted as he just stood there; occasionally raking his fingers through his hair and releasing stuttered breaths, as if he might say something, even though he didn't.

Eventually, I could hear him shifting, his breathing accelerating subtly.

“Uh,” he began, but paused. My teeth were clenched as I darted my eyes to him, taking in his rigid expression as he stared at the bathroom door with a pale face. His lips parted with a quick inhale as he decided with tight eyes, “I’m going to take a shower real quick,” and swallowed visibly. He lowered his head and huffed as he walked to the bathroom, flinging the door open and closing it a little too forcefully.

Edward never showered at night.

My fury grew.

It swelled and pushed at the insides of my ribs until my breaths were erratic and uncontrollable. Edward hadn't even taken clothes with him, so focused and nervous that he'd probably forgotten. Tears stung at my eyes with every second that I didn't hear the shower start.

He was in there—*stalling*.

It took twenty seven minutes for me to hear the sounds of the tap coming on. I slammed my book and threw it onto the leather with a flat "clap." I stood and paced and tugged at my hair and stubbed my toe and growled at the bed and... *how dare he?*

I felt possessed as I stormed into the bathroom, only belatedly thankful that he didn't even think to lock the damn thing. Steam had already begun to fog the large mirror as I stared back at myself, nostrils flared and eyes lined with red.

But my fury faltered as I heard Edward's voice. "Bella?" He was behind the frosted glass, and I could only barely make out his silhouette. Something about the sound of his question, his vulnerability, and the pitch of his voice tugged my heart enough to abate the swelling of my rage.

Mostly, I was just hurt.

"How could you?" I choked, closing the door behind me. He was silent as I walked to the shower and pressed my hand against the glass, water running down it like crystal tears. "How could you keep that from me?" I demanded, though it emerged as insecure and hurt as I likely felt.

I sank onto the lone step by the glass door as he remained wordless. I let the steam envelop me until the ends of my hair began coiling into random frizzes against my head. I watched the wayward sprays of his water hit the glass and slide down slowly.

"You heard me talking to Carlisle, didn't you?" he accused, yet his voice was strained and echoed oddly against the tile and glass.

"Yes," I confessed, and after a moment added, "You should have told me." My anger was returning with every second of his silence. "Why wouldn't you tell me?" I asked, my frustration seeping into my tone with hard inflections. "We're supposed to work together," I finished, looking through the glass and seeking his still form.

He eventually released a sigh but remained motionless. "Bella, I can't— "

"How bad was it, Edward?" I asked worriedly. To say I felt awful would have been an understatement. I'd never fully understood his reaction that day as he'd rocked us back and forth on the edge of his bed. I'd figured he'd just needed some sleep. Never would I have imagined...

"Bad," he offered in a curt voice.

Annoyed at his continued evasion, I prodded, "And you haven't... since?"

"No."

I sighed, leaning my head back against the door and fixing my eyes to the curling ends of my hair. "Maybe Carlisle's right," I whispered, swallowing fretfully. "If it's that bad... maybe you should just go to a doctor."

"It's nothing," he scoffed, even though his every word and action contradicted him.

"Then are you going to..." I trailed off, my confidence wavering as my cheeks began growing hot. Realizing how stupid I was being, I rolled my eyes and blurted, "Are you going to jack off, or what?"

I could vaguely discern the shape of his arm, rising as his head fell, his palm covering face. His mutter was a muffled, "God, please kill me..."

"If you want privacy, I can leave," I offered with a huff, frustrated that he refused to even discuss it with *me*. I now understood his inability to discuss it with a stranger, but I was so far from being one that he should have been able to. Instead, he was standing in there, ashamed and wordless. With every second he refused to speak, my anger burgeoned. The fact that I'd sacrificed my dignity in the past to have a similar conversation about my own inabilities to pleasure myself only made me feel impossibly more irate. Had we always been so off balanced? Furthermore, this new realization that he felt the need to be ashamed made *me* feel shame about those moments for the first time ever.

My resentment was palpable.

In an irritated tone, he finally began, "Do you have any idea how completely fucking mortifying this —"

He was cut off by the slam of my fist against the glass, the loud rattle amplified by the slick walls.

My voice was incredulous as I interjected, seething, "Mortifying? You're telling *me* about mortifying?" The room seemed even more silent than before as my breaths escaped in hard puffs. My fists clenched, nails digging into my palm. "Like having my boyfriend spend three months using a 'technique' just to put his hands on my tits? How about losing my virginity to

him and having the entire moment ruined because I couldn't handle a modicum of pain?" When he still remained silent, my head shook, and I began thinking back to those months, against my will. I continued in a disbelieving voice, "Good God, Edward. I couldn't even say the word 'orgasm' to you. You think I was never embarrassed, talking about stupid fucking unicorns all the time?" Astonished, I chuckled, finishing, "I happen to know a thing or two about being completely fucking mortified, thank you."

I stood then and swept my hair off my neck, stepping off the small platform and walking to the door. My chest ached and bubbled, and it wasn't fair that I could show him my flaws while he kept his hidden. He had a chance to give that back to me, to show me his, and instead, he chose to deal with it behind closed doors, when I could have easily done the same and saved myself a lot of humiliation. But I was only willing to push him so far. Until he met me in the middle and gave me the chance to accept every part of him, I was stagnant.

My fingers curled around the brass knob, slick with condensation as I turned it and prepared to leave him there alone, scared and worried.

Then I heard a sharp, resounding "click."

I turned slowly to see the shower door cracked open, my fingers sliding off the knob.

"Get in."



The mirror was almost entirely fogged when I finally stood naked in the middle of the bathroom. I looked back at my fuzzied form and wondered why I was suddenly so nervous. I'd taken a shower with Edward before. He'd already seen every part of me, really. Somehow I felt different, though. I was skinnier now, and I knew he hated it, but my new routines at the gym made me appear more toned. I supposed I was even more attractive now than back then. I was happy with the small size of my waist and the firmness of my few curves. I was a thin eighteen-year-old girl with long hair and nice teeth. What could be so awful?

My boobs got smaller when I lost weight, I remembered.

I frowned as I looked down at them. The scars scattered below just felt like an extension of me now. I'd talked to Carmen about them all at length, had divulged my insecurities and how determined I was to hide them. It was all useless. The scars were just as much a part of me as the birthmark on my calf, I eventually realized. I was in no hurry to flaunt them but looking at them didn't make my stomach turn like it used to.

Taking a deep breath of the hot and steamy air, I decided that Edward and I had proved already how very little scars meant to one another. I rolled my eyes and padded to the shower, holding up my chin as I swung open the door and stepped inside. I closed it behind me with the same "click" and found Edward under the spray, his back to me.

I swallowed as my eyes swept over him, the defined muscles of his back sharp as the water exploded over his flattened hair. It ran down his body in clumsy streams, tracing the smooth line of his spine and curving over the firm roundness of his ass. I watched his muscles tense as I stepped closer, the sounds of my feet smacking against the shower floor. I splayed my palm across his back, and he jerked, the water crashing and falling around his shoulders.

I wrapped my arms around him and rested my cheek on his hot back, letting the water find my flesh as I diverted its path. It ran over us as though we were one body, my breasts crushed to his skin as his back rose and fell with quick breaths. But he didn't move.

"Edward?" I whispered, peeking my head around to see his face. He moved his hand back and flattened his palm against my thigh but remained otherwise motionless, staring anxiously ahead. I asked quietly, "Should I...?" and let one of my hands wander until I felt soft, wet hair. His breath hitched as my fingers brushed his length, the muscles of his back stiffening against my chest.

"You don't have to," he responded stiffly, placing his hand on my wrist and nudging it away.

I sighed in annoyance, but acquiesced and waited for him to do it himself. His hand remained on my thigh, his thumb rubbing circles into my skin.

And then there was this kind of awkward air. The one that occurs when you want to jack your boyfriend off to find out if it'll hurt him, but he doesn't let you and is too chicken-shit to do it himself. What exactly does one do in this position, I wondered, shifting my feet against the tile.

Well, I did have a new penchant for honesty, didn't I? "Stop being chicken-shit," I finally sighed, even though I was inwardly panicking myself. I wouldn't let him see my own fear of causing him pain yet again. "It'll be like—" I paused, gnawing at my lip. "Like ripping off a band-aid." —*that ejaculates...*

"I'm not chicken-shit," he insisted, but the tremble of his voice betrayed his nerves.

My eyebrows rose, and I considered pointing out his blatant cowardice but figured that wouldn't help matters any. So instead, I challenged, "Then prove it," and sought him with my hand yet again. I curled my fingers around his length, and his breathing deepened, the fingertips on my thigh twitching. My mind raced with curiosity as his only partially-erect penis

began growing inside my palm.

His back rippled with tension, but he didn't push me away.

I turned my head and rested my forehead against the space between his shoulder blades. My hand stroked him slowly from base to tip, calling forth what I remembered from our times before. His breathing accelerated as he pressed his back further into me. I couldn't tell if he was trying to get closer to my body or farther away from my hand.

I started when I felt his lathered hand wrap around mine, lacing through my fingers. It was trembling. I thought he might force me to stop. Instead he began guiding me along his length, his head falling as he released an uneven, agonized sigh. The transfer of the soap made my hand slide easier against his skin. His shaking fingers tightened around mine, setting my rhythm as his hips began shifting minutely into our palms. He tucked his chin to his chest, and I figured he was watching our fingers sliding over his erection in tandem. Wordlessly instructing me, he twisted our mutual stroke around his tip, and my own breathing began to pick up. My hips shifted with his, never allowing our skin to part as the hot water rushed over us and splashed against our knuckles.

I lifted my face to press a firm kiss against his heaving back, craving the softness of his lips as my fingers explored him. It was then that he finally turned, our skin slick against each other as he released my hand only to replace it once facing me. His idle hand cradled my cheek as I watched his fretful stare rake over my body. He gulped, eyes darting over me nervously as his fingers tightened around mine.

I wasn't really nervous anymore, being seen like this. The downward hunch of his brows as he slowly resumed our stroking and stared at my chest made his desire for me evident. His thumb caressed my cheek and it was a little more awkward stroking him in this new position, so I pressed myself closer, angling him upward.

When his eyes met mine, I realized he was releasing brief pants, and our hands sped. I couldn't totally decipher what his eyes held as they fixed to mine, locks of his darkened and wet hair matted to his forehead, but it was troubling. His brows pulled together and he exhaled raggedly, gazing into my eyes with a conflicted stare. He embraced the feeling, bucking his hips, and yet he resisted it, clenching his teeth as his hand moved with an uncertain, mechanical rigidity.

I wrapped my other hand around his neck and pulled his face to mine, offering him an encouraging, chaste kiss. It was difficult to pull him to me; his body so stiffened with tension, so I stood on the tips of my toes and lifted myself to him. His lips were set into a firm line, and it took a moment for him to yield, returning my kiss hesitantly. But then when I tightened my

fingers, he groaned against my lips and the muscles of his jaw constricted.

His pleasure was steadily overcoming his fear.

His hand accelerated once again, the hard biceps in his arms flexing as our bodies began jerking to the movement. I was a little intrigued, wondering if he always went so.... *fast*? He kept a steady pace as he held his lips to mine, breathing against me raggedly as the water lurched from our flesh with the motions of our arms.

And then he whimpered as his brows pulled tightly together, and I became scared that it was hurting him. Fortunately, his hand slid from my cheek and grazed the side of my breast, and I realized that he was enjoying it—wanted more, even. I arched my chest to him in offering, silently thankful that we at least had *that*. His conditioning to my mind and body hadn't been ruined by his absence.

With a grunt as our hands tightened, he cupped my breast and began kneading it, his lips parting against mine as he gasped wildly. Our lips slipped against each other as the tense jolts of his arms moved his body. He lifted his face and his eyes were dark, hooded with enough lust to evidently distract him from his nervousness. I licked my lips, and though my arm was beginning to burn, I ached to go faster just to revel in his reactions. He stepped closer and watched his fingertips massage the skin of my breasts as our hands bounced between us. His brows pulled together tighter as he flicked his thumb over my nipple, his teeth capturing his bottom lip and forming the drawn "Ffff" of a presumably restrained "Fuck."

He gripped my breast and pulled my upper body to him, dropping his face into my neck. He began planting clumsy and urgent kisses below my ear, his hand no longer trembling as it guided me with quick, sharp thrusts along his length. His voice was husky and strained as he spoke into my skin, "So fucking good..."

I couldn't deny my own arousal as he grunted into my neck and continued massaging my breast. My hips moved and I was panting, rubbing my thighs together as my arm burned with exertion. Without warning, his hand was dropping from my chest and pressing itself into the juncture of my thighs. The feeling of his sudden and eager fingers made me moan, my stomach beginning to coil in that only barely familiar way. My head grew clouded and I gasped as they spread me, forcing themselves deeper and touching all the right things. But I found it difficult to concentrate on his face and breaths as our hands moved, so I grabbed his wrist and returned his palm to my breast.

Though he complied and continued kneading me, he pleaded, "Let me touch you," and opened his mouth against my neck, sucking the flesh as his grip loosened around mine. But I simply ran my free hand through his hair, trying to ease his worry as I kissed the top of his head, because I

was smarter than he gave me credit for. By focusing on me, he could forget about himself, and I'd be too distracted to even realize it. I finally understood his reactions to my touching him while he desensitized me all those months ago.

I could feel his legs suddenly tremble as our arms bounced rhythmically, the flesh inside my hand growing impossibly tighter as his erection swelled. I could tell when he was close because his grunt transformed into a keening groan and his hand slid to my shoulder, grasping it in alarm. He raised his face with an abrupt lurch, and his eyes were wide, lust and longing and love laced with utter terror. When I felt his movements faltering, I locked my jaw and sped my strokes, his open-mouthed whimper confirming that he liked it but was chickening-out again.

His forehead fell against mine as he started panting loudly, his hips pushing into our palms involuntarily. I felt him jerk once in my hand. "Shit," he suddenly hissed.

When I looked at him, his eyes were screwed closed, every muscle in his body going rigid as he locked his jaw and shuddered. I kept my eyes fixed on his expression for any signs of pain, caressing his hair as his erection began pulsing in my hand.

"Holy. *Fuck*," he growled breathlessly, his nose wrinkling in a way that I couldn't determine as either a positive or negative reaction. But then I felt something warm hit my stomach, and his hand was tangling in my hair, pressing me closer as he emitted a long and shrill hiss through his tightly clenched teeth.

Then his hand stilled mine, and I could feel tension dissipate from his body, his chest heaving with loud, erratic breaths. His body slackened as he released my hand and shoulder, only to snake his arms around my waist and quickly bury his face in my neck.

"Is that... good?" I asked shakily, enveloped by him and still uncertain as I threaded my fingers through his wet hair. It was the first time I realized how very similar pleasure and pain appeared on someone's face.

He panted into my skin, crushing his chest tighter against mine. "So good," he answered in a fatigued, yet satisfied voice, before amending, "Motherfucking fantastic."

My smile must have been big enough to split my face when he finally dragged his lips across my skin to my mouth. He brushed the wet hair from my face as he kissed me languidly, sweeping his tongue against mine briefly before parting, only to plant another, soft kiss to my forehead. When he leaned back, he looked so relieved and relaxed that his eyes shone as he gazed back at me. He returned my grin with his own lazy, crooked smile.

Then he dropped his eyes to my chest and curved an eyebrow, lifting a hand to fondle me

playfully.

We spent the next hour reacquainting ourselves with *intimacy* in the foggy shower, lathered hands tracing places that were never forgotten—but definitely missed. Our fingertips massaged scalps and we granted each other random, soft kisses and brushes of skin. Because intimacy was fine all on its own. As was affection.

But together, the two were perfect.

Chapter 51. Tarty Charted Motherfuckers

Edward WIDE AWAKE

My first one-on-one conversation with Carmen did not go well.

The look on Bella's face as she walked out of the room was almost comical. She had these wide eyes and her bottom lip trapped between her teeth, picking at her hoodie sleeves. She glanced back and forth between Dr. Carmen and me like she was leaving a rabbit and a lion in the room together. As I sat there on the sofa and watched her leave, I wondered who the lion was.

The door closed behind her with a click, and I met gazes with this Carmen chick. She was wearing something I think Alice referred to as a "pencil skirt," but to me, it just looked like something out of a decent librarian porno. She had tanned legs too. Like... *really* tanned. And one of those tight, white button-up shirts with the quite liberal number of *three* buttons undone. Long hair, long legs, big tits, red lips. *Cleavage, cleavage, cleavage.*

If I weren't hopelessly in love with Bella, I'd want to hit that.

As it were, I only had eyes for one, so I enjoyed the view for a moment and then put on my game face. The Carmen chick was pretty on the outside, but she was this oddly integral part of Bella's every decision. Therefore, she had power over me already. I hated to get all caveman and shit and "stake my claim," but I couldn't deny the threat I felt. I figured my options were to either rebel, or kiss ass and pray to fuck that she liked me.

The shit I do in the name of love...

"Mr. Cullen," Carmen greeted, finally settling into her seat. It took her like twenty minutes just to get from the door to her desk with all the shit she'd had piled in her arms. Her office was a complete fucking disaster area too—files and papers and books scattered all over the place. My attention was drawn back to her at the sound of her pen-click. She reclined in her seat and began writing something, swift little scribbles.

I'd bet anyone ten dollars she had handwriting like chicken-scratch.

"I've heard so much about you!" she exclaimed, finally looking up to meet my gaze. Her lips curled up into a wry smile, and she propped her elbows on the desktop, resting her chin on her knuckles. "I'm surprised to see you here today," she added in a quizzical voice.

I was doing my whole, comfortable, non-flinching thing as I explained, "I had some questions about Bella."

She raised an eyebrow. "Why ask me and not Bella herself? She has a nice voice, that one. I'm sure you'd rather hear it as opposed to mine. I've been known to babble," she babbled.

At least she was honest.

I clarified, "I had questions about Bella's condition. I talk to Bella all the time, she just doesn't have the info I'm looking for."

"Hmm," she hummed, nodding. "You came to a therapist to ask questions?" she asked. I nodded with a "duh" expression, and she grinned. "Asking questions is *my* job, but I'll make you a deal..." She retrieved her pen and pad. *A deal...* I'd only talked to her for three minutes—*three*—and already, she annoyed the living shit out of me. She began scrawling some more as she finished, "I'll answer every one of your questions for every two of mine that you answer." Then she looked up at me expectantly.

Fuck, I inwardly groaned. I should have known she'd pull some shit like this. Just like I already knew I'd put up with it because... anything related to Bella had that kind of effect on me. But I wasn't going to like it.

"Two for one isn't fair," I sighed in this I've-already-given-up sort of way.

Her slow little half-smirk showed that she realized this.

Of course.

"Life's not fair," she winked and transformed her posture to one of utter focus—arm against the desk, eyes down, pen moving, back straight. "How do you feel about being here, Mr. Cullen?" she began.

"I feel fucking peachy. Next."

"Nah-ah-ah," she tisked, glancing up at me through her lashes with an impish grin. "Nobody likes a smart ass, Mr. Cullen."

I smirked. "No one likes a nosy bitch, either, but you get a paycheck, right?" Okay. That was a little too harsh of a burn, even for me. I felt guilty. A little. Not really.

Her smile just grew as she replied, "Yes, I do. It'll be growing when I charge Dr. Cullen for two patients this week, instead of one. Unless, of course, you'd like to cooperate..."

My smile fell slowly and shifted to a hard scowl. This bitch was fucking *bribing* me into talking, and I'd only just returned to Carlisle. The last thing I wanted to do was cost him unnecessary money and bullshit. *What a whore.*

I huffed and battled down my annoyance. "I feel annoyed." See? I could do that honesty shit too.

She nodded, clearly pleased as she wrote something between the little yellow lines of her legal pad. Probably something like, "*Gets annoyed by nosy bitches.*"

"How have things been since you've been back in Forks?" she continued.

"Things are fine."

"Fine?"

"Good," I clarified.

"Good?"

"Yes. Fine. Good. *Fuck,*" I muttered the last part, but she must have heard.

"Fuck?" she repeated, glancing up at me. "Have you been doing any of that?"

I balked. "I'm sure Bella would have told you," I answered, though... I was honestly a little taken aback and wondering whether she hadn't.

She grinned patiently, responding, "She would have, but Bella isn't the only piece of ass in the county, if you catch my drift."

My jaw fell, and I was too busy with being stunned to be insulted.

For about five seconds, at least. "I haven't fucked anyone but Bella since we met, not that it's any of your goddamn business." My annoyance was swiftly turning to indignation, but I had earned my question, so I asked it before she had a chance to reply. "How can I help Bella?" I asked stiffly, the tone of my voice a sharp contrast to the intentions of my question. This was the whole reason I'd come here in the first place. I wasn't sure how to proceed anymore. I didn't just meant our sexual relationship, of course. I mean, yeah, *obviously* that was going to be a bridge that required crossing—but I was in no hurry. I just needed to know how to handle her.

And then, thinking about her in that way, I felt kind of fucked up for regarding her like someone who needed "handling." But Bella wasn't like she used to be. She was once shy and timid and quiet. Now, when something pissed her off, she let it out. She was more blunt and didn't like bottling shit up. I was certain this was a product of her treatment—the fighting lessons and the constant encouragements to purge her emotions.

I didn't even know how to kiss her anymore. I didn't know when it was okay to touch her or when it was acceptable to be protective and pissed off. I didn't know when to pull her chair out or open her car door. I didn't know when to hold her or where my hands should go. I didn't know if I could be a active part of her therapy and offer my... advantages of touching her.

I didn't know what kind of love she needed me to show her now.

She furrowed her brows and cocked her head back. "Well, that's fairly broad, Mr. Cullen. If I had known you'd play dirty, I woulda' gone a little tougher on you." Her lips turned into a little pout, but she eventually answered with a sigh, "You can help Bella by being there for her, showing affection without expectation, and most importantly, getting your shit together. Now, Tell me about your mother."

"First of all, that's not a question," I evaded. "And what do you mean 'affection without expectation?' Does she think I expect something?" I asked, a little frustrated.

"Do you expect something?" she asked evenly.

"Do you expect me to expect something?" I retorted, because it seemed as though she did. Then again, everyone did.

She responded with a calculating stare, "Do you expect me to expect you're expecting something?"

Whoa. "What? No. Stop that," I demanded. "You can't answer questions with questions."

"You answered my questions with questions first. Is that your preferred method of avoidance?"

Some calm, inner-part of me sighed as the other, far less rational motherfucker sprang forth and snapped, "No, my preferred method of avoidance would be telling you to go fuck yourself, which is about one question away from occurring, just so you know."

Her back straightened, and she fucking *beamed*. "Oh, you're fun!" she exclaimed giddily, snatching her pen up and moving it swiftly over the paper with a giggle.

This was how the next twenty minutes seemed to go. I'd give her curt answers about my family or past or whatever random fucking questions she tossed at me, and in return, I'd get one more grain of knowledge about Bella to add to my admittedly small arsenal. I gave her the whereabouts of my mother and father, and she told me how soothing and affectionate a simple back massage could be to Bella. The fire and my meeting Carlisle was explained in return for her suggestion to offer Bella half of my dresser, since she'd never use my closet and—I suspected—disliked not being able to call my room hers anymore.

It wasn't until her questions suddenly shifted to mine and Bella's previous fucking that I grew uncomfortable.

"Would you like to tell me about what happened that day you left town?" she asked.

Without thought, I answered, "No."

"No?" she repeated, raising her brows and halting her pen. She crossed her legs behind her desk and reclined back, cocking her head. Her expression screamed "*paydirt*" as she asked, "Why's that?"

"It's just... not something I'm proud of. There's no point in talking about it. Bella and I already

hashed all that shit out," I reasoned. I shifted in my seat and rolled my shoulders underneath my jacket. I wished I hadn't worn the son-of-a-bitch. It was suddenly hot. Stifling.

"I'm aware you discussed it with her, but I'd like you to discuss it with me. And, no no. Don't try that 'it isn't a question' crap."

Shit. Bitch saw right through me.

I swallowed and made it quick. "Hadn't slept in a long time, took some pills, saw some trippy shit, got in a fight with Bella, fucked her, felt a shitload of agony, and left town." *Fuck*, my throat felt all tight and shit. I lifted a hand and cleared it covertly, then ran it through my hair and began staring at my shoes.

"Edward," Dr. Carmen began in this soft, serious voice. "This isn't something you should be detail-skipping with. I don't like this game anymore," she decided, shaking her head. With a sigh, she concluded, "You tell me everything about this one day—every little detail possible, and I'll give you the rest of the hour to ask me anything you want. I'll even extend it, no charge to Dr. Cullen."

My eyes snapped up to her and narrowed in response. I was pretty fucking skeptical and wondered why a paid professional would barter their paid time for something like the details of one, dark day. To my surprise, she looked utterly serious, and so I considered, because for one, I was a little masochistic, and two, all I ever really wanted was information on Bella. Most of the questions I had would definitely *not* be suitable for our current, sparring format. I needed a chunk of time for drilling without judgment or interruption or catty retorts. But the fucked up thing was that I couldn't lie or edit. She'd probably know, comparing my version to Bella's.

Could I honestly tell Naughty Librarian about fucking my girl like a complete savage?

Fuck my life. I'd be a bastard for not trying.

I reminded myself that the cause was more than worthy as I took a deep breath and began, "I don't know how long I'd been awake for..."

It was odd how Dr. Carmen's demeanor changed when shit got heavy. She remained still as I relayed the tale of Red Bella. Like... scary still, with the exception of her hand. Sometimes, she didn't even look down at the paper as her pen moved from left to right. I kept staring at it as I spoke, oddly uncomfortable with making eye contact. She didn't even appear to be blinking. It

made my eyes burn.

And hot. *Fuck, it was hot.* I felt sweat beading on the back of my neck as I relayed my time with Bella at school that day and storming off like an insane asshole. My back started itching when I explained how I'd torn my room apart looking for the hair clips. My skin crawled as I remembered my argument with Bella aloud, the slapping, the pleasure, the red and the white—everything.

When I got to the part about pinning her against the wall, my throat constricted, and I hated myself and my dick for getting hard as I recalled it. When I explained the actual sex and my barely existent frame of mind, the room felt almost humid.

I removed my jacket and she scrutinized me closely, which made me squirm.

And then I just wanted to get it over with and leave, so I quickly relayed the conversation I'd had with Emmett, then Carlisle, then Bella, then my steering wheel as I'd left Forks. I think I'd told it to "Stop fucking looking at me like that."

Shit, I was so crazy.

"Wait. You're leaving something out," she eventually interrupted, holding up her hand. Her brows were furrowed and confirming my earlier suspicions, she compared my version to Bella's and wondered aloud, "Right after... what you refer to as 'shameless fucking'... something was wrong, no? You—" She paused and began flipping through yellow pages as I sat rigid in my seat, realizing already what I'd left out. "Ah!" she breathed as she halted on a page and squinted her eyes. "You were crying and rocking back and forth. Why?" she asked, looking up to meet my numb gaze. She tilted her head, her inky hair spilling over the paper. "Were you sad about what had just happened?" she hedged.

I could have easily gone with that, but for some reason, it just didn't sit well in my stomach. None if it did. What does one do when they can't lie and can't bear the thought of telling the truth? I rubbed the back of my neck and opened my mouth, but ended up closing it again. I wasn't sure how to say it exactly.

"Man up and spit it out, Cullen," she ordered patiently.

My eyes narrowed again and I huffed, the back of my neck and ears ablaze as I blurted, "When I got off, it hurt like a motherfucker."

Her eyes didn't seem to widen or change for what seemed like forever, until she eventually furrowed her brows and asked, "Like a burning sensation? They have antibiotics for that sort of thing—"

"No!" I disrupted in an affronted voice. "It wasn't... physical or anything, it was just like... pain felt good, so... pleasure—getting off... was kind of like... *fuck*, you know what I'm saying," I finally muttered, looking away, peeved and... *Christ*, I was fucking *embarrassed*.

"Oh," she breathed with a nod, finally comprehending as she began once again writing.

I took the opportunity to begin with *my* questions. My recollection was over. "I want to make love to Bella," I said unabashedly. I'd earned the right to say this, I figured, so I continued, despite her surprised expression at hearing me speak again. "I want to do it right. I fucked it up last time and I know it'll come up again because we're eighteen and we sleep in the same bed and live in the same house and have all the right equipment. It'd be really fucking unfair to Bella to just avoid it indefinitely. She—" I paused and suppressed a sigh as I explained; "She's always been a little over-eager for that kind of shit." I rolled my eyes and quickly amended, "I don't mind waiting."

After my brief word vomiting, Carmen observed, "Bella craves affection *and* intimacy. I believe she just has difficulty telling the two apart, so it manifests more strongly in either way. I'd like the opportunity to cover that with her before the two of you start fucking like jack-rabbits," she added dryly, but I was biting my tongue.

My girl knew the difference between affection and intimacy. I'd taught her all that shit myself. Instead, I continued listening to Carmen's confidence in Bella's ability to have a physically sexual relationship and controlled myself. It was what I needed to know: with some time and patience, Bella could easily get a go-sign for the sexing.

I stood when she'd finished and grabbed my jacket, ready to bolt as fast as possible.

"Has it happened since?" she suddenly asked, creasing her forehead and halting my steps to her door. At my confused expression, she elaborated, "The painful orgasms?"

"Wouldn't know," I answered awkwardly, shifting from foot to foot.

She met my gaze with a knowing look and inquired, "You've haven't had one since?"

My breath sputtered and all I could do was shake my head and avoid her eyes. I mean, *goddamn*. I'd been a little busy over the summer. The last thing that had been on my mind was jacking off or getting laid.

"Hmm," she hummed, her lips forming a slanted line on her face as she concluded, "Bella's more ready for sex than you are, Mr. Cullen. You don't even know if your problem still exists."

She had a point.

I swallowed as I imagined going through *that* again, and involuntarily shuddered. *No fucking way*. And then I was kind of appalled that I hadn't even considered it. And then I was just... speechless, because sex was suddenly—subconsciously—off the table for me. It was a deal breaker. I'd be celibate before I'd ever go through that torment again, plain and simple.

It felt like I'd just done all this shit for *nothing*, and on top of that, I now had to shake off any and all advances without ever making it known that I was sexually dysfunctional.

Fuck my life, indeed.

"You could always give it a go, you know? I can't be certain, but high doses of methamphetamine and that much sleep deprivation is an easy explanation for that," she shrugged.

"Give it a go?" I repeated confusedly.

"Yeah, you know. Spank the monkey. Stroke the salami. Polish the one-eyed gopher, do the five-knuckle-shuffle, rub 'n tug, pet the snake..."

I really should have interrupted her so that she'd stop looking at me with the stupid fucking condescending expression. But I couldn't find my voice. This bitch was suggesting that I jack-off—and she didn't even know me. She was asking me to risk feeling excruciating pain and *smiling* as she came up with more creative variations of the term. It was un-fucking-believable.

"...clean your rifle, scour the tower of power, take a load off. You know, wrestle the dragon," she finally finished with a shrug. "Of course, if you don't, I recommend seeing a doctor as soon as possible. And if you don't do that, then I recommend you seriously reconsider being in a relationship in the first place." At this she returned to her notepad and added, "Bella needs

someone who's willing to admit when there's a problem, and you... well, you need more than I can offer in one session. You should come back," she offered, but then at my expression, sighed and rested her chin on her palm.

She knew I wouldn't do it.

I could see it in her piercing stare and her pursed lips. "You're a troubled boy who can't admit to something as simple as being scared of jacking off for the sake of this 'love' you supposedly feel?"

I remained silent and rigid and *really* just wanted to leave.

She frowned and looked away. "I'm actually a little disappointed. Bella could really benefit from *that* type of attention from a *healthy* individual. I think all three of us were hoping you'd be him, but maybe you're not," she decided.

Just like that.

Just like it was no big deal that she'd basically admitted to discouraging mine and Bella's relationship. Just like she wasn't basically saying that Bella wouldn't be better off with some other motherfucker.

I couldn't breathe. Bella held this bitch's opinion so fucking highly, and it wasn't on my side. It was the worst possible outcome for the entire morning, and I was... fucking heartbroken and ashamed.

But I wasn't good at being heartbroken and ashamed.

I was good at being a dickhead.

My fists clenched and my vision turned red as I exploded, "Who the fuck do you think you are?" and clutched my hand so tightly in my jacket, it shook. She looked up at me, but I was already headed to the door, flinging it open and searching for Bella in my haste to get the fuck out of there.

As I stomped away, holding Bella's little hand in mind, Carmen said she'd see me soon.

I never expected that bitch to be right.



It was Monday afternoon, only two days since the last time I'd come here to Dr. Carmen's office. I really didn't like being in this room. Bella's soft sigh beside me consoled my anxiety a little, but not nearly enough. *What the fuck am I doing here?* I wondered for the millionth time since this morning.

It wasn't that I was some closed-off freak or anything, but... *fucking hell*, this Carmen bitch was *crazy*.

Not like *my* kind of crazy. Not like any normal kind of crazy. She was the fucking *scary* kind of crazy because she didn't *seem* crazy. So, I'd stormed out. Because this time, it'd been *my* mind and body holding us back, and I wasn't like Bella. She was good at handling that kind of shit, and I was just...

Good at avoidance.

And this was what I fucking hated about Dr. Carmen. She'd been right that morning, and she knew I knew she was right. She also knew I was too fucking proud to ever admit that shit, so she'd let us walk away, knowing I'd be back.

And I'll be fucked if I wasn't here—two days later—sitting on her goddamn couch and kissing my every shred of dignity goodbye. Dr. Bitch was a mindfucker. Plain and simple. She could see into my head and twist it so that one little comment struck a nerve and made me panic. She'd used that against me. She'd wiggled her way into my head and planted seeds of doubt—had made me feel like I'd hold Bella back and that she'd be better off with someone else. She knew how to use my worst fears against me to get shit done. It was sadistic. It was evil. It was unethical.

It was also so fucking... *cool*.

Maybe that's why I was here now. I was too intrigued with the art of mindfuck for my own good. I mean... *shit*. How the hell did she *do* that?

After I'd actually jumped my own hurdle, I was left analyzing the session and her series of questions. At the time, I hadn't noticed any rhyme or reason to them, but the more I dwelled—and shit, I was really good at dwelling—the more I began seeing subtle patterns. I wanted to see more.

But I also knew the allure of her mindfuckery prowess wasn't the reason I was here right now. I was here because there was a beautiful girl at my side this time, and she needed me to deal with my shit before I could even hope to deal with *our* shit. I knew the second we stepped out of that shower that I was a goner. Her eyes were so fucking light and happy and... well, okay, she was a little horny too, but mostly, she was just happy.

There was no better feeling in this world than seeing her happy—feeling as though *this* could work. This could be permanent and good in all the right ways.

All I had to do was get Dr. Carmen to see my devotion.

Come hell or high water or excruciating orgasms, I was determined to make this shit work. There was no other option for me.

I looked over at my girl sitting beside me, sipping on a cappuccino with her feet tucked underneath her. She looked so fucking comfortable in this office, all nestled into the sofa. And cute. She spilled a drop of her coffee onto her black hoodie and swiped at it sourly. "Shit," she cursed under her breath, her brows puckering into a little scowl.

Christ, I've given her such a dirty fucking mouth.

Maybe I could give her something worth having this time around. And that was really the gist of it, I figured. The art of mindfuckery was intriguing, but it was nothing compared to the opportunity to help her... understand her.

Bella caught me staring then and met my gaze, rolling her eyes as her lips twitched. I smirked back.

I'd given her more than my dirty mouth, I supposed. She had my bedroom, my home, my bathroom, my heart... my balls. She had it all, for as long as she wanted it.

She wasn't the cause, she was the reason.

When Dr. Carmen walked in, she didn't even look surprised to see me sitting there, the brilliant, crazy bitch. She just fumbled with a bunch of shit in her hands and flopped in her chair, retrieving her pad and pen and looking up with a sly and knowing grin.

"So nice to see you again, Mr. Cullen. Let get this party started, shall we?"



I only accompanied Bella to her Monday sessions, leaving Thursday for anything she wanted to discuss with Carmen in private. She insisted no such discussion existed, but I didn't give a shit. I didn't want her editing things for my sake, and Carmen agreed it was for the best.

Carmen also suggested I get my own Thursday session, with another, male therapist if I preferred. She kept pushing it, saying how much individual attention might help me get shit off my chest. She had many recommendations for the position of the sorry bastard she wanted me to talk to for an hour a week, but I always declined.

One mindfucker at a time, please.

I wasn't used to hearing Bella talk so much. She seemed so at ease, chatting with Carmen as I usually watched and analyzed their interactions. Then we'd leave and go home, and she would always cook something specifically for me. It was never said, but I always knew it.

Nights had their own routine. Bella and I now showered together.

When it had been brought up to Carmen that we had already done it once, she hadn't seemed against it. Not necessarily, outwardly *for* it. But not against it. Bella and I had left that session with knowing gazes.

It wasn't a "no."

Neither of us had had to even mention it aloud when the time came. She'd just followed me into the bathroom and had stripped with me. I took back every single "Fuck my life," reference I'd made that week as we'd stepped into the shower that evening.

Showers with my girl were the best part of my day. It was a common known fact that I was a morning showerer. Always had been. I liked how it woke me up and washed away the shittiness of the prior night. But nights were no longer shitty, and mornings were rushed. Rushing naked-shower-time was un-fucking-acceptable.

We found that showers were a perfect place to be intimate and close. Our bed was nice and all, but Esme was really a real fucking stickler about the door bullshit. It was *always* open. If it

weren't for the shower, we'd never have a speck of total privacy. I couldn't possibly bitch, given that we could still sleep together, and even Bella had declared that we were both eighteen and couldn't be told to keep a door open. But we were living under Carlisle's roof, and we did it more out of respect than anything else, so the showers were our singular opportunity for total privacy.

Sadly, they weren't really erotic or anything.

With the exception of washing it, she hadn't touched my dick since that last evening. The same went for her. I was trying to follow her course of therapy, and waiting for some indication that *that* kind of intimacy was acceptable. Carmen probably had some kind of plan or checklist or some shit. We had likely expedited the process a little, but it had worked out. If nothing else, we were at least comfortable naked around one another and touching without immediate the promise of getting off.

But I never jacked off, either. Bella's hand around my dick had kind of ruined it for me. Now, it felt fucking boring. Lame. Pathetic.

Thus, just because we never got sexual didn't mean I wasn't sporting wood from the second we stepped into the bathroom until she hummed me to sleep. Bella was quite acquainted with my boner by now. It stood between us in the shower and crushed against her when we lay in bed.

They should have been on a first name basis by now.

September turned into October, and I'd never been so fucking content with a routine in my entire life. I now realized why I liked routines. I knew what to expect, when to expect it, and the little surprises in-between were just enough to make my days feel appropriately unpredictable. From sunrise to sunset, I followed our new flow.

We woke up and went to school. I busted my ass to get my grades up and make-up the classes I'd missed. I chilled with Jazz and picked on Alice. Bella focused on her little challenges, like wearing her hood down more or walking farther away from the lockers. It wasn't some speedy recovery or anything. The changes she made in her day-to-day rituals were so subtle that most would never notice.

I did.

I liked seeing her hood down and I always made it a point to say so when I'd meet her in the quad.

Then one Monday at lunch, she burst into the lunch room. My shop class had been graciously let out early, and I hadn't waited for her, even though I felt like the most pathetic little lost puppy whenever I walked without her. I ended up arriving to the table before anyone and had been staring at the door, waiting, for at least ten minutes.

Her smile was visible from across the room, and my lips automatically shadowed her grin. She had her hood down, like she usually did at lunch. Her hair was unusually wild as it fell around her face, appearing wind-blown or some shit. I held her gaze amusedly as she tapped across the room, sprinting toward me. My back straightened at her eager approach and I couldn't contain the widening of my eyes as she leaped on me.

Straddling me.

Fucking *straddling*.

Her weight was subtly bouncing as she rested her legs over my hips and threw her arms around my neck, planting a kiss—fast and hard—onto my lips and pulling away. She was flushed and panting, and she scooted closer to my hips as she leaned away to meet my gaze.

I gulped as my hands went to her thighs and barely noticed the scandalous stares of the lunchroom crowd.

Then I realized she was talking. "I touched Tyler," she began in one breath, releasing my neck and still smiling like a fucking Cheshire cat. "I brushed his shoulder, totally by accident, and I didn't freak out or anything," she inhaled a breath, continuing her swift recollection as she waved her hands animatedly, gesturing to her left shoulder. "I still felt kind of... I don't know—*off*? Weird, maybe? But it wasn't like a full-out panic, you know?"

I smiled back and listened as though I was enraptured. Though, admittedly, her bouncing straddle was making it difficult to concentrate, her inner thighs surrounding my hips. She was wearing the tight, brown sweater beneath her hoodie today, and I could perfectly envision the way it hugged her little hips and perky tits. It was distracting me.

Well, that and the fact that I wanted to bust Tyler Crowley's motherfucking face.

It wasn't that I was insecure, but I just wasn't used to seeing Bella like that. Her occasional fist bumps with Jasper already made my chest burn wildly. I wanted to dive over the table and take

him out, even though I realized that it was *just* Jazz. He wouldn't hurt her, and he only had eyes for Alice's ass. But it still made me feel... like a possessive asshole or something.

I couldn't put my finger on it.

Because it was busy being curled into a tight fist that wanted to break Crowley's fucking face.

I smiled tightly and clenched my teeth as I lied, "That's so fucking awesome, Bella." The strain in my voice must have betrayed me because her smile began to slowly fade.

"What's wrong?" she asked worriedly, a little crease forming between her eyes.

It was then that I realized my stupid bullshit was ruining this for her. It was such a big deal, one of the biggest accomplishments thus far, and I was sitting here with a beautiful girl on my lap and spoiling her happiness with my possessive shit.

Smiling with as much ease as I could muster, I leaned forward and gave her a kiss, promising, "We can talk about it later with Carmen."

She frowned and lifted herself from me, taking the seat at my side and nodding. She retrieved a book and began reading wordlessly. I felt like I'd just been punched in the gut. She came to me smiling and eager and happy, and one little tone of my voice had the ability to kill it. Dead.

I spent the rest of the day trying to question her on the event, hoping to stir her enthusiasm once again, but it was always half-hearted.

That afternoon, Dr. Carmen was waiting for us in her office. When Bella and I had finally settled, the first thing out of my girl's mouth was, "I touched Tyler Crowley today, and something's wrong with Edward."

Wow. She works quick.

Dr. Carmen and Bella both looked to me expectantly, and I squirmed under their scrutiny. "Well, something's right and something's wrong. Let's tackle the latter first?" Dr. Carmen asked when I didn't voluntarily offer information.

"It's not wrong," I insisted, turning to Bella and repeating, "Really, it's not wrong. I was just... caught off guard or some shit. It's... it's stupid." *And embarrassing.*

"Stupid?" Carmen asked.

"Like... not even worth mentioning," I shrugged.

She hummed, nodding as she scribbled. "Not worth mentioning. Why?"

"Yeah. Why?" Bella asked with this annoyed expression.

They were both looking at me. I fucking hated when they did that. It was a rarity for everything to focus on me all at once.

"You should get it off your chest Edward," Carmen warned in a lilting voice.

Huffing, I decided that it was better than being stared at like this for a whole hour, so I confessed, cracking under pressure, "I kind of want to stab every motherfucker that touches her."

Bella's lips parted as if she weren't expecting that answer, but Carmen... Carmen knew what I was going to say before I even said it. She smiled patiently. "Are you feeling jealous?"

"No."

"No?" she asked. "Possessive, perhaps?"

"No," I lied, then at her measured stare and lowered face, admitted in a low voice, "Maybe."

"What!?" Bella interjected heatedly turning to me with an incredulous stare. "That's ridiculous! Today was really huge for me and you..." She ground her teeth and hissed, "Tyler Crowley smells like a locker room—filled with weeks of decaying food. He's repulsive, and even if he weren't, I'm not a possession."

Dr. Carmen interjected, "Bella, Bella. What do we say about responding to honesty with anger?"

At the suggestive chide, Bella took a deep breath and settled into the sofa, grumbling, "Tantrums are for toddlers."

"Right," Carmen chirped, and I smirked, rather pleased that *that* stupid fucking phrase wasn't being directed at me for once. "Wipe that smug-ass smirk off your face, Cullen, and tell me why you don't trust Bella."

Bitch.

"It isn't Bella I don't trust!" I insisted. "Look," I began as I turned to Bella with a huff.

She had her arms over her chest, eyes narrowed.

Flatly, I explained, "Guys our age only ever think about one thing, okay? If it weren't for team athletics, every guy in our school would have a serious circulation issue. All their blood goes straight to their dicks."

Bella's jaw dropped and she gaped at me for about three seconds. Then her eyebrows furrowed, and she began picking at her sleeve cuffs. "You don't do team sports," she observed.

Smirking dryly, I confessed in a whisper, "And my skin is really pale, isn't it? Especially in the shower. Do the math," and turn to Dr. Carmen, feeling as though my point had been adequately made.

Bella knew by now where all my blood drained to.

She was all kinds of pink and flustered as she puffed, "Doesn't make a difference. Even if they wanted it, they couldn't have it." And then she cocked her head to the side, and her hair flicked over her shoulder, and she looked down, and I'll be damned if her lips didn't twitch.

We spent the rest of the hour discussing my possessive tendencies and Bella's conflicting resentment and enjoyment of them.

"It's not that I like it," she amended when Carmen asked. She looked to me with a curious gaze, searching my face. "It's just more like... I've felt it before? With Edward and Lauren and that skank, Jessica who totally pines over his penis. She said so once in a letter I found in his room a few months back." I rolled my eyes, but she continued, "And I guess it means that he must feel the same way about me as I feel toward him? Like equal footing," she finished, noting, "My competition is endless."

"Edward?" Dr. Carmen asked after she finished. "Would you like to say anything about that?"

"Other than any competition existing being utterly fucking ridiculous, no," I responded dryly. "But... I'm really in no place to say so, seeing as I how I battle with the same..." I trailed off and finished in a grumble, "insecurities."

Okay, okay. I was an insecure motherfucker.

Dr. Carmen smiled softly when I finally admitted it.

That night as I climbed into bed, all wet and clean thoroughly blue in the balls, Bella stood in the doorway, staring at me. Her hair hadn't been brushed yet and it was all wet, tangled tresses, cascading down her shoulders in thick locks.

"What?" I asked as I pulled the blankets back and patted her spot at my side. She had this odd look on her face – lips pursed as she regarded me. She was so clean and wet and... *fuck* her nipples were erect, poking out from under the thin shirt she wore. But then again, showers had a way of making my mind completely fucking one-tracked.

Erect was the word of the night.

Was it weird that seeing her in my shirt and boxers just as sexy as seeing her standing in the shower completely fucking nude and lathered?

"Nothing," she shrugged, but began this kind of... sultry-sway-thing as she strutted to the bed. I raised an eyebrow and... *did I just get harder? Fuck.* "What color shirt was Lauren wearing today?" she suddenly asked as she approached, climbing onto the bed in... an unusual place. At my feet.

My breath hitched as she climbed over me and I flattened my back against the bed, watching all of her wet hair brush over my legs and thighs as she crawled up my body.

Fucking straddling me. Again.

The collar of her shirt dipped and I caught an eyeful of her tits. *Definitely, definitely erect.*

"Uh, I don't know," I answered uncertainly as she stilled, straddling my hips. I suppressed a groan and darted my eyes to the open doorway. "Esme," I warned in a whisper, even as my hands went to her hips. She was wearing my boxers, and my waist was bigger than hers. They sagged off her hips and exposed the top of her pretty little panties. I pressed her closer and

kind of smiled and grimaced at the same time because there were no thick blankets between us, and *fuck*... I could feel her. I closed my eyes and pressed my head into my pillow, bucking my erection into the weight of her body.

It wasn't exactly involuntary. After all, a big part of our therapy was learning to take advantage of indulgences without guilt.

Yes, that was meant to be directed toward living in Carlisle's and Esme's home and accepting their love.

Yes, I was twisting its meaning to justify rubbing my dick against Bella.

No, I didn't give a flying fuck.

"Hmm," she hummed, bracing her palms on either side of my head and leaning down to whisper in my ear, "Esme never comes up here, and you know it. And Lauren was wearing that red scoop neck with her boobs just pointing right at you." Then she rocked her hips and I made this really disgusting sound that was somewhere between a choke and a "fuck." Her breath was hot against me, tickling my earlobe as her breathing deepened audibly.

My eyes lurched to the open door once more and I... indulged myself by thrusting into her. My stomach tightened and I answered distractedly, "I didn't notice. You were wearing that brown sweater... low and... so fucking tight..." My voice trailed off into this anguished sigh and my hands moved to her ass. I ducked my fingertips below the boxers she wore and caressed the skin there.

I met her gaze for a split second, too paranoid about the open door to hold it. In my glance, her eyes were closed and her cheeks were flushed as her lips parted.

"Kiss me," she breathed.

I captured her lips and immediately, her tongue was pressing against me. I opened my mouth and met her tongue, groaning softly as I rubbed my dick against her, pressing my fingertips into her ass and massaging her soft flesh. It seemed like we never kissed like this—horny and uncaring. My eyes were still open, trained on the doorway, and the kiss was lusty and paranoid and full of her small panting and her hips grinding against my cock and... *goddamn, why couldn't we have done this shit in the shower?*

When she pulled away, she rested her forehead on mine and breathed raggedly against my face. She licked her flushed lips. "Whenever I get jealous or whatever, I picture you in bed waiting for me and pulling back the covers like you just did," she whispered in explanation and brought her lips to my neck, kissing me blow my ear. I was panting and writhing and watching the door and harder than...

I was too fucking incoherent to even muster up an apt analogy.

And I was motherfucking *great* at analogies. *That's* how hard I was.

But then she swallowed and it was loud and nervous and her breath stuttered into my ear. Her next words emerged in a shaky whisper, "It makes me... *wet*."

My body stiffened and my breath caught in my throat. I mouthed, "Holy mother of shit," jerking my head to the side to meet her gaze. Her eyes were sheepish and she bit her lip, trapping the fleshy skin between her teeth. I tried to find my voice. It was lost somewhere in '*Bella-says-new-naughty-things-ville*.'

"Christ, Bella, you can't... you can't just... *say* that kind of shit to me," I insisted, her words echoing in my mind on repeat. Repeat. *Repeat*.

"Because you don't like it?" she asked in this small voice, thighs tightening around me.

Shaking my head, I breathed this groan-slash-chuckle and answered, "No, because when you do, it makes me want to investigate, and we both know I can't." I punctuated this truth with a slide of my fingers, dangerously close to where she likely wanted them, and a glance at the doorway. I pressed against her and pushed her into my cock, writhing a little because I was an insecure, horny bastard who was learning to indulge.

I heard more than saw her smile when she replied, "You can always investigate what's yours, you know. I wouldn't be opposed." and then she slid against me, working her hips back and running herself along my dick, all wedged between us.

"Esme," I choked again, but put my hands on her hips to let her know just how much I liked that whole sliding business. In fact, 'Sliding business' was officially my new thing. It had been too long. One-half of a hand job in six months was not enough to contain the teenage hormonal motherfucker within.

Of course, now I realized that the teenage hormonal motherfucker didn't exist.

He was just an excuse to want something I didn't believe I deserved to have.

Fucking hell, why am I thinking of this shit now?

With a sigh, she repeated, "I already told you. Nobody comes up here. Have they ever?" she asked, and then pressed her tits against my chest, grinding harder against me. Her weight on top of me was minimal, but so fucking heavy at the same time. It constricted my chest and made it feel as though breathing was impossible. It bubbled within me and expanded me and it was just too goddamn vague to ever mentally describe.

Strained and rigid, I reminded, "But... Esme and... Carmen, and... it's not where... when, you... *fuck*, Bella, why couldn't we have done this shit in the shower?" I asked, echoing my earlier thoughts because new thoughts were obviously pretty fucking impossible to coherently verbalize.

"Stop," she whispered, finally stilling against me and remaining silent until I met her gaze. When I did, her eyebrows were all furled and creased and a little huff escaped her parted lips. "I didn't do this in the shower because i wanted to do *this*," she explained, sliding against me once more. My jaw locked and i bit back a groan, watching her hooded eyes. Breathily, she continued, "And things tend to get... slippery in the shower. Accidents can happen and when we do have sex, it won't be an accident, right?" she asked, raising her eyebrows expectantly. I nodded and swallowed, still glancing back and forth between her and the door.

Now I was curious about this sex business. I was wondering if we could set a date or some shit, but figured that asking something like that would be a little fucking deplorable. I then wondered when I'd become so fucking greedy.

With a sigh that crushed her tits harder against me, she begged, "Please," and rocked into me again, her eyes sliding closed as her lashes fluttered and her lips parted. In an uneven, almost inaudible whisper, she breathed, "It's been so long, Edward..."

And then I realized that Bella had probably gone longer without getting off than me. I remembered how she'd told me that day we'd made up how I was flawed—in that I denied others what they wanted for my own belief that I was too undeserving to reap the consequential benefits.

Well, I figured I could make progress one orgasm at a time.

"Like this...?" I asked, still staring at the doorway and sliding her up my length, lifting myself into her with a sharp intake of air.

And then she moaned. It wasn't really a loud moan, just one of those humming type moans. It reverberated, from her throat to her chest to our connected groins and it made me fucking *shudder*.

"God, yes," she answered, repeating the motion. She lifted herself onto her palms once again and peered down at me as she rocked and sighed. Her wet hair shielded our faces and made it difficult to watch the doorway. Of course, after about five or six more of those delicious fucking hip slides, it was a little like... "What door?"

She lifted herself and lingered above me, minimizing the contact of herself against my cock to a mere grazing. "This..." she sighed, just rolling her hips and brushing her clit against me. Her eyes were dark as she moved, whispering, "... feels so good to me..." And so I mostly remained still, just letting her do what felt good as my eyes guarded the door. The movement of her hips was so unbelievably *wanton*—the little sweeps against me and her panting as she sped her movements, making them erratic in the sexiest way. It felt so fucking... private. As if I were somehow spying on this little moment of complete non-restraint. She didn't hide anything. Not her hip rolls or the way she moved to the side to get the contact of the head of my dick. She let me see her focused expression, hear her mewling and ridiculously sexy and uneven breaths.

She was... using me to get off?

The notion made me fucking insane. My head was clouded with her hot breaths and grazes over my dick as I coached in a whisper, "That's right. Just feel good..." And then I thought, "*Fuck the door*," and focused on her face, all flushed and creased in concentration. I moved my eyes down—to the junction where we met, and watched her moving against me. And then I swallowed. And then I began panting with her, craving more friction and restraining myself until she got hers.

She moved frantically, fixing her eyes to mine, but clearly focused as her face grew bright with a thin sheen of bubbling sweat. "Touch..." she panted, arching her back into my chest. Without hesitation, my hands removed themselves from her thighs and ducked under her thin shirt, seeking the soft flesh of her tits and fondling them quite eagerly.

More moans.

I kneaded and caressed as she moved urgently against me, spurring me on as my hands grew more insistent, pinching her nipples and palming them excitedly.

I couldn't remember ever having this type of experience without feeling some kind of shame or guilt. I had often wondered what all the fucking hype was about. Getting off was fun and all, but what about after? What about when I lay in bed at night and realize that I'd experienced pleasure and had used someone to get it. It was wrong, and yet now, it was right.

Because Bella wasn't using me to get pleasure.

She was giving me the gift of watching her experience pleasure—showing me some side of herself that was probably reserved for embarrassing late-night exploration or some shit. It was so real, watching her come completely undone in that way. It was almost like she didn't care if she looked ridiculous. She could get past that and let me enjoy it with her.

It was really kind of epic, watching her writhe and squirm and brush. One of her hip bones popped and it was loud and neither of us really gave two shits about it.

Then she looked down at me with this crazy serious expression and it was almost comical as she breathed, "I'm really close," like I might do something to inadvertently make her lose the orgasm.

I kept telling myself not to laugh. Her voice had been so fucking admonishing. She just held my gaze with that same '*Don't fuck this up*' look and went impossibly faster. I still had her tits in my hand, only remembering sporadically to grope and massage them. And then her thighs tightened around my hips and her brows pulled together, lips sucked into her mouth as she began to quiver. When she released her lips, they parted and she moaned, "Oh, God..."

I knew when it was happening because she finally—*finally*—pressed herself completely onto my dick and writhed atop it with her eyes clenched tightly closed. Her teeth pressed together, she whimpered and rocked hard against me, shuddering as the heels of her feet dug into my thighs.

Releasing hard, sharp breaths, I pressed back into her and finally allowed myself to do what felt good to me. She collapsed atop me, panting as I lifted my hips and slid my dick against her, eyes ever-vigilant and fixed on the door. I grabbed her little hips and moved her in opposition to my

thrusts, meeting her exhausted gaze with what was probably a really desperate and impatient expression.

I mean, I was dry humping her for fuck's sake.

What the fuck was I? Twelve and fingering-deficient?

But it did the job, and I was already close when she began kissing my neck and half-purred, half-huffed in my ear, "I just came so hard on your dick..."

And then a little piece of me fucking died and went to Sliding-Business-Heaven.

And then I grabbed her hips and grunted and shoved my cock into her. And then I came.

In my pants.

Shuddering, I twitched between us and clutched her tightly, groaning into her wet hair covering my face. I threw my head back into the pillow and hissed as I pulsed and writhed against her, riding it out gloriously.

When I was finally reduced to a heavy-breathing, incoherent-mumbling mess, I held her tightly and forgot all about the door and the fact that I'd need to clean up again.

I didn't feel any guilt that night—only Bella's little, contented breaths against me.



"I'm like... *this* close to vomiting," Alice said as she stood in the doorway and gnawed on a stick of celery. She held up two fingers to indicate exactly how close she was, but all I could focus on was that stick of leafy shit.

Who the fuck eats celery? Just... all by itself?

"Lovely," I murmured into Bella's hair. "Could you do that somewhere else, though?" I asked absently, rubbing little circles around Bella's hip bone.

My girl had just gotten home from her Thursday session, and I'd pulled her down with me onto the sofa. We never just chilled around the house like this. Usually, Esme would freak me out or I'd just feel generally uncomfortable. Today was different, however. Today, my girl was in one

of those despondent moods and I didn't give a shit.

Bella sighed on top of me, her back pressed into my chest as we lay on the sofa, against the armrest. She was cradled between my legs, twirling her ring around my finger. "Don't you have something to do, Alice?" she asked flippantly, resting her head on my shoulder.

Alice shrugged and chewed. "Jazzy's out with his mom."

I chuckled, bouncing Bella a bit as I breathed mockingly, "Jazzy..." into her hair.

Bella barely cracked a smile.

Alice seemed to actually use her powers of observation and finally left us alone.

After she was gone, I sighed and sank deeper into the sofa cushions, crushing Bella against me tightly.

"How was your session?" I asked cautiously, because it had obviously affected her. After school, she'd been fine.

She shrugged and tucked her hair behind her ear—a blatant non-answer.

That shit wouldn't suffice.

Sighing, I pressed my lips to her neck and pleaded into her skin, "Please don't let shit fester." I didn't want to be pushy, but to see her mope around the house like this without knowing why was going to seriously turn me into a broody bastard.

She turned slightly and closed her eyes, pressing her face into my neck. "We can talk about it on Monday," she promised in a small voice and tucked her hands below her chin.

Well, that was pretty fucking insulting.

"So... what?" I asked, leaning up slightly until she met my gaze. "We can't have a conversation unless Carmen is there to mediate?" I felt my forehead pucker and my arms loosened as I regarded her Oh-I-kind-of-fucked-up-a-little-didn't-I? face. *Yes, you certainly did.* Stiffly I decided, "That's really shitty."

"I didn't mean it like that..." she insisted with a frown.

Inclining us to a full sitting position, I turned away and chuckled, raking my hands through my hair in frustration. "I know you didn't, but I think this relationship is getting a little fucking crowded, don't you? You know, there was a time when you could just talk to me without going through a process." Sure, I'd used the "Let's wait to talk to Carmen" bullshit myself on one occasion, but that had been different—a shorter wait—and I hadn't done it since.

It was all shit that she had already been expecting me to say. I could see it in the slump of her shoulders as she looked down at her hands, playing with her little fingers guiltily.

Now, I was cool with Carmen, and I was good with the sessions we had, but what use were they if we couldn't ever begin applying them to real life? I could tell Bella was already expecting me to say this as well, because she simply looked up at me, defeated, and rolled her eyes.

"It's college," she grumbled, but immediately looked away and sank into the sofa.

"Oh" was my incredibly fucking lacking response. I had been expecting something... well, I wasn't sure what I was expecting but "college" was far from it.

Then, the more I thought about it, the more I realized it was probably a bit obvious. Jasper and Alice had been looking into colleges since I returned home—probably long before then. They jabbered about it at lunch. Alice made charts weighing the pros and cons of various locales. Jasper would stare at her tits and nod along rather happily. Bella and I would ignore them and be busy discussing something really fucking un-high-school-like, like cognitive behavioral therapy or why I left my towels on the bathroom floor or how nice her tits looked all lathered up and in my hands when we took a shower...

Okay—so that was a little high-school-like.

"You haven't even thought about it," she whispered knowingly.

I met her gaze.

She didn't even look disappointed or anything. In fact, she looked kind of relieved.

"Not really," I confessed.

She sighed and tucked her feet beneath her, fingering the ends of her hair. “Well, I don’t know if there’s really a point anyway.”

“Why do you say that?” I asked.

Now that it had been brought up, I realized that it was fairly important. I couldn’t figure out why it had slipped my mind. Back in Chicago, I’d only been focused on the there-and-then, and here, I was only focused on the here-and-now. I’d never even paid Carlisle much attention when he brought it up on rare occasions. It had never occurred to me that I would ever have a future to consider, but now that I did, I was actually getting a little... *excited?*

Fuck Alice. I could make charts that would put her little black and white bar graphs to *shame*. I mean... come on. It’s an entire professional career being planned for. I’d think I could, at the very least, spring for some really fucking extravagant colored pencils or some shit. Better yet, I was confident we could go all kinds of Kinkos on that motherfucker.

Bella’s face fell, and she looked away, huffing. “Let’s be real, Edward. I can’t—” She shook her head, and her voice cracked.

I saw where this was going and I didn’t like it. One bit. “I can’t” was not something to be said—*ever*.

I reached for her again, but she shook me off and continued in a frustrated voice, “My recovery is too slow. I only just got comfortable here, and... to move away to some crowded dorm... I just... can’t.” With a swallow, she finished, “There’s always correspondence courses or something to take online. It’ll do.”

No way in fuck was my girl going anywhere that she described using the words “It’ll do.”

Completely ignoring the community college horseshit, I reasoned with a shrug, “So we’ll get off-campus housing.”

She met my gaze and quirked her cheek, all fucking dismissive. “Come on! We can live together. It could be a fuck-load of fun,” I emphasized this with a furtive glance around the room to be certain we were alone, and then a *very* suggestive kiss below her ear. I leaned in and pressed my lips to her skin, ducking out my tongue and tasting her with a hum. “Doors won’t matter,” I whispered huskily.

She didn't seem to share my enthusiasm as I leaned back. In fact, her face grew darker, and her jaw tightened. She began in a thick voice, "I'll have to memorize the least crowded route to every class. I'll have to find a seat farthest away from people and expect special attention from the professors. Even off campus... it's just one more house with countless closets to remind me how far away I am from being..."

Normal.

I supposed she had come a long way, deciding not to use that *very* subjective term. Not that it mattered. I wanted to tell her to stop being such a fucking baby, but... she'd been patient with me when I was nothing but a petulant asshole and I couldn't.

Then, she turned away and murmured, almost inaudibly, "I'm still twenty-six inches away from yours," and shoved a lock of hair behind her ear.

"What?"

"Twenty-six inches," she repeated with a scowl. "It's how close I can get to your closet before I completely freak out." And then she hugged her knees, which was clearly her closing herself off.

"Fuck, Bella," I groaned, tugging at my hair. I was having difficulty remaining patient, so I took a deep breath. "This is all a bunch of bullshit. You've been doing better," I reminded softly.

"Remember Tyler?" —*and how I wanted to stab him in the nut sack?*

Frustrated, she slapped the loose tendrils of hair from her face and glared straight ahead. "Fuck Tyler."

It was then that I realized that it was one of *those* days. One of those shitty, annoying, Fudge You All days. *Possibly some P.M.S. type shit*, I mutely noted, having learned by now after living with so many women that it was to be thought, but never, *ever* said aloud.

I decided that I was sick and fucking tired of *those* kinds of days. I knew they'd come and go, and my girl would probably fail more than she'd succeed, and I'd have to sit by and watch that shit like it wasn't killing me.

But not tonight.

She was welching. That's right. Fucking welching. Here I was busting my ass to go to therapy to

learn more about helping her, and she was backing down. It was so un-fucking-fair. I refused to allow what was some kind of blatant regression or some shit. She'd come too far. I'd come too far.

We'd earned our stupid fucking color-coded college charts.

I stood up, extended my hand and ordered, "Come on." She pretty much just kept glowering at the wall, so I grabbed her hand myself and lifted her off the sofa.

She questioned me with a haughty glare as I dragged her up the stairs, irritated and grumpy, and killing my chart-buzz.

Don't point out the Midol in the medicine cabinet, I chanted with every step.

Then when we stood in the room, thirty inches from my closet, recognition dawned on her face and her eyes widened. My closet wasn't much. I knew she'd gone to therapy with the initial intentions of both pissing me off and snooping in my shit. That little space was inaccessible to her, and I figured it drove her crazy. After all this time dwelling, I wouldn't be surprised if she had formed over-the-top impressions of it. Her skewed version probably included something like porn and photos of girls from school—and God only knows what else. In reality, my closet was pretty fucking boring.

It also terrified her. She avoided that whole section of the room and always had. I kept my laundry hamper outside of it—like she'd had it set up before I'd come home—and she kept her clothes in the guest bedroom or shoved into her half of my dresser. Honestly, I couldn't personally understand it. Some really asinine and simplistic part of me wondered what was so damn difficult about going to a door, opening it, and going inside. But that was ignorant and I knew better.

Even though entering that closet seemed easy to me, her fear of it was as real to me as the closet itself.

Rationally, I knew that I couldn't ever understand that portion of her mind. That was just as fucking frustrating to me as her limitations were to her. My frustration was mostly due to my ignorance though—my inability to comprehend it or take it all on myself.

She turned to me then and met my gaze. Her expression made me seriously reconsider this whole thing.

Her eyes were actually teary. “I already told you I can’t,” she insisted in this small, shaky voice that tugged at my chest. She looked so fucking apologetic, like she was letting me down by reminding me that this little task was beyond her abilities.

So I grabbed her shoulders and spun her around, pressing her back against my chest as I shushed her and pleaded, “You can do it with me here.”

We both knew what I was asking. She probably needed to do it on her own, but this wasn’t about some bullshit dependency that Carmen liked to harp about. It wasn’t even a gift from me to her. If she allowed me, then I’d be at her side every single day to get her into a closet. When she needed her shoes or needed to put her clothes in the laundry hamper or just wanted to get out her winter jacket, I’d be there. It was a promise.

There’s a big difference between dependency and commitment.

I watched her face as she stared ahead at the door, contemplating my offer. It was obvious that, with all of her recently large accomplishments, her smaller failures made more of an impact on her confidence. She’d already been told the clichéd “Rome wasn’t built in a day” bullshit. She knew she needed patience, and technically, she had been more patient than most would be in her position. Carmen could tell her what *Carmen* believed her biggest hurdles to be, but my girl knew what accomplishments meant most to *her*, and this closet was obviously high on that list. The slow curling of her lips into a watery smile told me that she was alright with attempting to cross that off, once and for all.

“Okay,” she finally whispered with a small, nervous nod. Her little grin and subtle bounce betrayed her anticipation.

I wanted to chuckle, but I didn’t, because I realized that it was still very possible that she would be incapable of making it, and I’d have to watch that disappointment and anguish when she didn’t.

With a steeling breath, I replaced my hands to her shoulders and instructed her to close her eyes.

I began kneading her muscles, utilizing the knowledge I’d gained from Carmen on helping her. She sighed, and her shoulders began to gradually relax, her hands going limp at her sides.

I shoved my fingers beneath her shirt collar for skin-to-skin contact and buried my nose in her hair, because Carmen might know all of that technical bullshit, but I knew the subtle methods that worked best. When she began swaying with my knees, I knew she was as relaxed as she could possibly get without collapsing, so I nudged her forward.

Her eyes opened, and she took the steps to the presumable twenty-six-inch mark. She wasn't "freaking out," but I knew that my presence was responsible. I continued massaging and kept my toes at her heels, forcing her to take steps with me. Her back would tense with every small step, and I'd have to work that much harder to relax her again.

When we finally made it to the door, her breathing began to change. It was a discreet deviation in rhythm. I trained my eyes on the pulse point on her neck which accelerated minutely. I frowned as my fingers molded against the skin of her back. We hadn't even opened the door yet, and already, this was the point in which I'd stop.

It took longer to relax her, and I wasn't even able to do *that* entirely. Her back moved against me, rising and falling in shorter, sharper breaths as we stared at the white, painted wood. Her palms rubbed against her denim-clad thighs, and her eyes grew wider with every second. She was dwelling.

When I reached for the knob, she began shaking, her breath escaping in small, erratic gasps.

"I can't," she rasped, pressing back against me and turning her face to meet my gaze.

What I saw there fucking tore at me.

Her eyes were red-rimmed, and silent tears trailed down her cheeks. It wasn't even about disappointment or failure anymore. This was pure, unadulterated fear. Getting away from that closet was—at that moment—the most important thing in her world. Her eyes said, "*Fuck college, fuck Carmen, fuck 'normal.'* Get me the hell out of here." Her feet shuffled back, but were blocked by mine.

I couldn't decide which would be better: easing her in the short-term, or pushing her now and gaining more for the long-term?

Admittedly, my girl had me wrapped around her little finger. I was a total fucking pushover. I would give her anything to make her happy, but that was a given. Could I make her suffer now, if it meant making her happy later?

I decided that I hated it—fucking *loathed* it, really—but I *could*.

She did it for me and it was worth it. I just needed to get her to see that frame of reference again. Her fear was clouding it. Thus, I held her gaze with a firm stare and decided, “In the words of a very pretty girl, ‘stop being chicken-shit.’”

She whimpered and snapped her gaze ahead, realizing just how meaningful my words were. She nodded but also began breathing more heavily, her intermittent shaking transforming into violent, alarming tremors. She seemed to have her mind made up that she was doing it, and this seemed to amplify her anxiety ten-fold.

“Shhh,” I whispered in her ear and ran my hands along her arms, but they were covered. So I grabbed the hem of her sweater and brought it over her head, only just barely managing to slip it off without losing contact.

Her plain white t-shirt beneath was thin, and my palms rubbed soothingly on her now-bare arms, up her neck, and across her stomach. And then I took her hand in mine and put them on the knob. I almost expected her to yank it back, but she didn’t. She gripped that motherfucker so tightly that it rattled with her vibrating arm.

Her breathing was starting to worry me, but I still turned the knob, slowly guiding her hand to fully twist it. I refused to let her down by conceding.

She’d thank me for it later—I *really* fucking hoped.

Together, we pulled it open in one swift motion, and then, I was staring at my rack of hanging clothing and darkness. Our hands were still fixed on the knob and Bella *wheezed*. It was this weird, high pitched sound that reminded me of a dying animal.

The rattling of the brass knob grew louder, and her inhales were so short that it seemed as though she couldn’t get any air at all.

My heart began racing.

Panicked and scared a little shitless that she’d just black out; I hastily shoved my hand up the front of her shirt and flattened my palm to her chest. I crushed her tightly against me and instructed urgently into her ear, “Visualize, like Carmen said. *Fuck, Bella*. Feel my breathing and

match it, okay?" She nodded fervently and closed her eyes but continued wheezing.

I decided to give her one minute before I drew back and slammed the door closed. It was worth a lot, but it wasn't worth her immediate health. I swept her hair back from her face—pale and taut—and whispered stupid, ridiculous things in her ear. With my every word, her breathing gradually deepened, so I kept going. I said stupid shit like, "The king of hearts is the only king without a mustache in a standard deck of playing cards," and "Evian spelled backwards is 'naïve,'" and "The Nobel Peace prize is totally gay because it's three naked motherfuckers just standing there, touching each other," and "The word 'testify' was created by men in the Roman court who would swear on their testicles," and "A barnacle has the biggest dick of any other animal in the world in relation to its size, and iguanas, koalas and Komodo dragons all have two."

At this, she cracked one eye, meeting my gaze and furrowing her brow. "Two dicks?" she asked, her breathing now nowhere near normal, but at a far less terrifying tempo.

I nodded and smirked tightly, continuing, "A whale's penis is called a dork."

She nodded, raising her eyebrows. "You sure do know a lot about dicks and testicles and gay men and mustaches and... designer drinking water." She punctuated this with what I assumed was meant to be a mocking glance—though a weak one.

I explained, "I chose what I thought might be points of interest to you. I know you sure are interested when you're washing mine," and then I winked.

With a small grin, her almost-blush brought back some color to her cheeks, and I felt myself breathe a sigh of relief. Turning back the closet, she tensed again, but didn't start wheezing, so I simply removed my hand from her shirt and continued massaging her stiff shoulders.

"Edward," she said nervously, her body slowly relaxing under my fingers.

I hummed in response and heard her loud swallow.

"I'm standing in front of the closet. And... it's open..." she trailed off, and I couldn't discern whether or not she was scared or proud.

One look at her face revealed a pretty fucking even mixture of both.

Feeling as though she could go farther—accomplish more—I kneaded her muscles until she was as relaxed as I thought was possible under the circumstances. Her lip was between her teeth and her hands were still rubbing against her thighs anxiously, but I could see her eyes. They were wandering over the space with a hint of curiosity, landing upon the box that lay on the floor and the mini-shelf that was crammed in the back.

She was so fucking nosy and adorable.

Then, out of the blue, she inhaled deeply and nodded, turning to me with determined eyes. She decided, “We’re going in there.” And I didn’t need to suggest it because she pointed at the black space like she could totally own that bitch.

So I turned her away from the closet and snaked my arms around her waist. I figured it'd be better for her not to see it, coming at her and dark and obscure and scary. Her confusion was short-lived as I backed us into the darkness slowly. She clenched her eyes shut, and some of her shuddering returned, but she continued to match my breathing, pressed against me tightly. I supposed she was visualizing as we finally halted, smack in the middle of my closet.

Standing there seemed kind of stupid, so I decided... if she could sit down, it'd make it that much more enormous.

It's easier to make a quick getaway when you're standing, I mused. I'd learned that her mind knew this, instinctively. It was also why she preferred to sleep farthest away from the door, and facing it at nights. She probably never even realized it until I'd pointed it out one afternoon. She was in a constant defensive state, without even knowing it.

With a shaky breath, I slowly lowered her to the floor and into my lap, spreading my legs out before me and easing her between them. Carefully, she sat and began rocking a little, hunched forward and squeezing her eyes shut. Worried that she was headed downhill, I put my arms around her and encouraged in a chant, “You’re doing so fucking good, Bella. So good.” Then I kissed her cheek and neck, and I swayed with her, pressing my cheek to her shoulder as I watched her face carefully. Our heads brushed the bottom of my clothing that hung above us.

It seemed like forever as we both sat there, rocking slowly back and forth as I murmured affirmations and told her how proud I was of her. She didn’t seem to be listening, but I kept going and hoped that she’d understand how pretty fucking monumental this was. She was sitting here, in the closet, no tears or panic attacks. It didn't matter that I was here to ease it. It didn't matter that she'd been working through these fears now for months. It didn't even

matter that she was taking meds to help her along.

What mattered was that she was doing it.

Maybe it wasn't a *Fudge You All* kind of night after all. Maybe she'd go for *Monumental Macaroons* for the third time this month.

"What are you visualizing?" I eventually asked after a good twenty minutes, just out of genuine curiosity. Her face looked so fucking... focused. I wanted to know where she was so that maybe I could be there too. My voice echoed oddly in the small space and made my whisper seem louder than it really was.

Her brows were furrowed in concentration, and when she answered, she did so absently. "That... meadow place by the river."

A slow smile spread across my face, and I suggested, "We should go out there some time."

Her rocking slowed a bit, and she nodded, finally opening her eyes and darting them around the space anxiously. "Before it gets cold," she murmured in distracted agreement. She wrung her hands in her lap, searching for sleeves that weren't present, and pivoted her head, assessing the boxes and shelves and shoes around us.

"What's that?" she immediately asked, gesturing to a small, cardboard box of some old sketchbooks. They were mostly full of my failed attempts at drawing subjects other than my parents or Bella herself.

"Old drawings. Pretty boring still-life type shit," I answered.

She stilled her rocking entirely and craned her neck, her hair falling over her shoulders as she leaned toward them tentatively. "Can I see?" she whispered, a trace of thrill in her voice as she reached for them.

I snickered and stopped her hand with mine, raising a brow. "Can we talk about college some more?" I bartered cunningly, and more than a little impressed that her urgings to snoop in my shit trumped her anxiety of the moment.

Her hand lingered in the air and she pursed her lips, scanning the space once more before nodding in concession. With a smirk, I allowed her to pull out the five books. I figured she'd

want to leave the closet as soon as she got her hands on something interesting, so I prepared to stand.

I was a little fucking shocked when she pressed into my chest and opened the first one, reclining against me, not comfortably, but not nearly as tense as she should have been. It was pretty fucking miraculous.

This wasn't even a Monumental Macaroons kind of night. Something like this got its own cookie, I was positive. And after she made them, I'd tell her to bake me up a batch of Tarty Charted Motherfuckers, because if she could conquer a closet, then she could do anything.

With a shrug, I rested my elbow on one knee and began, "So if you could go to college anywhere, where would you want to go?"

She was flipping through the pages of half-completed drawings, tracing the lines and tilting her head. "Wherever you are, of course," was her answer.

I scoffed at this, but persisted, "As if that's even a question. Seriously. I'll go wherever you are. I—" This is where I paused and frowned. "My G.P.A. is really fucking horrendous," I mumbled remorsefully.

She simply nodded. "It really is."

Rolling my eyes, I craftily figured, "But if you want Ivy League or something, I can find something close by to accept me."

Bella snorted and finally tore her eyes away from a really shitty drawing of the Stevens' chow to meet my gaze. "You act like my G.P.A. isn't only just barely better than yours." Sighing, she returned her eyes to the book and declared, "I'd like to stay close to Esme and Carlisle and... Carmen."

I silently agreed with this but preferred not to say so. Instead, I asked, "Washington?"

She nodded and peeked up at me through her lashes. "University of Washington has a really excellent business program," she whispered before diverting her eyes to the book once again.

"Business?" I murmured, furrowing my brows. "I really hope you aren't referring to me, because I could never own a business, Bella." *Fucking Christ*, I'd have to go by that old, bullshit

adage, *"The customer is always right."* Fuck all that shit. The "customer" is usually a complete dick and deserves to be told so. Which I'd do. Frequently.

She breathed a silent chuckle and shook her head. "Not for you. For me," she clarified in a small voice, avoiding my quizzical gaze.

"You want to go into business?" I asked in disbelief. It wasn't that I doubted she could do it. I'd just always assumed she'd major in literature or something.

"Well," she began, pivoting to me and now resting against my upturned leg. She flitted her eyes around nervously before meeting my gaze and explaining, "Seattle has this art institute that's renowned for its culinary program." She looked away and bit her lip, shrugging as she dropped her head. "It's probably kind of stupid, but..." she trailed off, as if embarrassed.

I hedged, "But you can apply business to cooking and... what? Open a restaurant?"

She glanced at me and replied, "I haven't gotten that far, but there are all kinds of things I could do with it. Delis and bakeries and gourmet shops..." She had this little flash of excitement in her eyes upon mentioning the variety of possibilities.

I was in awe that she could even feel something like that, given the fact she was sitting in the middle of a dark closet.

At my gaping, her face fell. "It's stupid isn't it?" she asked flatly.

Recovering, I rushed to insist, "No! No, I don't think it's stupid. I think it's perfect." I punctuated this with one of those crooked smiles that I knew made her red and flustered.

"Really?" she asked, and I nodded, pleased with her sigh of relief as she began flipping through the pages once again. "What about you? Art?" she asked curiously, holding up the book.

I scoffed and shook my head. "No fucking way. That's a hobby, not a profession." Drawing was something I used to get away from bullshit. Lawyers hated law, accountants hated money, and whores hated sex. No point in ruining a perfectly enjoyable thing. Plus, *art* wasn't something I felt I could ever be proud of. Nothing I drew was ever good enough. It didn't change lives or make a difference.

"But you're really good," she insisted with a frown, shoving a page with a sketch of Jasper's old

acoustic at my face.

Eager to get the attention off myself, I noted aloud, “You’re doing really good, you know? Being in here. You don’t give yourself enough credit.”

At this, her back suddenly tensed, as if she were just now realizing where she was. I brought my hand to her neck and tried to work out her blatant tension. Her wide eyes slowly relaxed as she slowly, but gradually eased back into my touch.

She sighed and returned her eyes to the book. “It’s all you, Edward,” she replied, but she didn’t do so glumly. A grin graced her lips as she peered up at me. “Thank you,” she whispered, her voice full of gratitude and unfathomable sincerity. It gripped something in me, the same way it always did whenever she made me feel needed or valuable or like I could actually do something and not fuck it up for a change.

With a shaky inhale, she added, “And you’re better at *this* than you give *yourself* credit for.” I figured she was going to start harping on the drawings again, but instead, she waved her hand between us and gestured to the closet and returned her eyes to the book.

I probably had a good amount of defining moments in my life. My first one was unbearable to remember—a recollection of a crumbling reality and the charred remains of what could have been a perfect life with two parents who loved me. The second was finding another parent who could love me, just as unconditionally. The third was falling in love with my girl. The fourth was letting my mother go so I could return to my girl. And the fifth was occurring right this second, sitting on the floor of my closet with someone who—by all reason and logic—shouldn’t have been able to even open the door. She’d crossed it off her list, and we’d had an entire conversation, just sitting here, planning our futures. She was going to go into business, and then become the world’s best cook or chef or baker or whatever the hell she wanted to be.

And in that second, as I gazed back at what was—by far—*my* greatest accomplishment; I knew what I wanted to do with my future. Those words from my final night in shitty old Chicago had never been clearer.

I couldn’t help my mother, but I could help someone else.

I could learn everything about my girl’s condition in the process. I could come as close to understanding her as possible. I could work my ass off for it and when the time came, maybe I could give back some of the hope that had been given to me, to the fucked-up people of the

world who had none. I could do it, and I could be happy.

I could be Dr. Edward Cullen, Mindfucker, PhD.

Chapter 52. Fated Failure Fortune Cookies

Edward WIDE AWAKE

October was full of busy assignments and really fucking annoying praise. “Bella went in the closet!” Hence, it was with big smiles that Alice and Esme fawned over Bella’s accomplishments and shoved all my shit aside in the closet for hers. Esme didn’t even care that we were now referring to the closet, and the entire room, as *ours*. She was too happy about her progress to really give a shit.

Carlisle was another story.

“Happy” was the understatement of the year regarding Daddy C.’s reaction to our decision—or more specifically, *my* decision to enter the medical field. At first, he’d been confused and skeptical, a low brow stare and slouching spectacles as he regarded me dubiously, but then, when he realized that I was, in fact, totally fucking serious, he was speechless—well, for about ten minutes—and then I couldn’t get the fucker to shut his goddamn mouth.

Apparently, by going into medicine, in any form, I was following in the footsteps of generations of Cullen men. His eyes were alight as he’d reminisced about his med school days, the late nights, the hard work, the professors who’d molded his opinions and views, the tests, the essays, the... drunken nights spent pretending that he was *already* an M.D. for the sake of getting laid.

I was *regaled*.

And that’s not a word anyone will often hear me use, because it’s fucking flowery and uptight.

Then he’d gotten serious and had told me not to get my hopes up, seeing as how my record didn’t make college aspects look promising at all.

I’d busted ass.

Bella had busted hers.

We'd shamelessly sent in two of the most depressingly fucked-up and pitiful college application essays ever.

I probably ought to have felt guilty about using my extremely personal and traumatic past for the sake of getting accepted, but I refused to feel that way. It was about fucking time something good came out of that shit.

Thanksgiving wasn't anything like last year's. Bella made a fucking huge and delicious feast, but she allowed Esme and Alice to help, though I had to hear her bitch more than once about the most ridiculous shit. Apparently, there was a certain way to cut vegetables, and a temper tantrum when Alice tried to use the electric mixer to mash the potatoes. She was so fucking cute when she wrinkled her nose behind their backs and worked around them, cursing lumps and "gummy" textures.

Rosalie and Em came home for the holiday, and it was so goddamn uncomfortable that I nearly feigned some kind of flesh-eating bacteria to get out of it. Rosalie hated my fucking guts. She went about admitting it openly to the whole room of people, but though she might appear bitchy and rude to any casual observer, our small circle knew better. Rosalie had been in Bella's shoes at one point in time and had somehow managed to invest herself emotionally in the outcome of my fucked-up decisions, so I just let that shit go and hoped she'd see how much better things were.

Before she and Emmett left, Rosalie had looked back at me leaning in the doorway and sent me a look that clearly said, "Fine, motherfucker. But you fuck this shit up one more time, then your balls are mine."

I winked at her, smirking as I closed the door.

Christmas was... interesting. I'd never been a big player in all the holiday bullshit, and it felt like I was being thrust into something I clearly wasn't ready for. I begged Bella to help me find gifts for everyone in the house. And by begged, I mean that I cornered her in the shower, got her right on the edge of cumming and screaming my name, and bargained orgasms for gift-tips.

New Years was yet another loud and flashy fireworks show down by the river. It must have been an even better show than last year. No one even noticed that Bella and I had snuck away to the gazebo to make out before, during, and long after the countdown.

When February came, Bella began checking the mailbox obsessively for news from the college. I kept trying to tell her that it was very possible that they'd taken one look at our shit and laughed their asses off. I didn't want her to be disappointed, should my shitty luck rear its ugly head.

Bella continued making goals and meeting them. The first being going to school for an entire day without her hoodie. The second was her moving up two rows in her calculus class, since her

current position behind "My hair needs its own fucking area code" Stanley made it impossible to see the board. She sat next to Cheney. When she met me at lunch that day, she had this serious look on her face and when I asked her what was wrong, she only replied, "That dick keeps asking me for pens."

It didn't take very long for our waiting to turn stagnant, her little feet carrying her to the mailbox each day. She tried to appear nonchalant, making casual talk as I followed her with wary eyes. She'd even open it without looking, staring into my eyes as she talked like she wasn't completely fucking focused on what was inside that hollow hunk of aluminum.

The third week of February, she stood by the box and opened it, tapping the tab with her finger as her mouth moved. Then her eyes darted down and her words suddenly stopped, her hand emerging with two envelopes.

Her eyes were so fucking wide that I thought they might pop out of her head.

Then we had this battle of, "No, you open *yours* first," as we stood in the middle of the yard. It would have been funny if my stubbornness were any match for hers.

It wasn't.

But then again, when I flashed the acceptance letter in front of her face, it was totally worth all that bullshit. After all, if they'd accept a fuck-up like me, my girl was a shoe-in. Apparently, they agreed, and Bella squealed so loudly that I think my eardrums will still be recovering long after we graduate from the motherfucker.

But... yeah.

I got a blow job that night.

Good times.



February twenty-eighth.

Important day.

Fucking *epic* day.

I'd be a liar if I said that I didn't have it clearly marked on my school planner. There was a little red circle around the small, black "twenty-eight." I hid it from Bella because it made me feel like a motherfucking pervert, but in all honesty, I'd been counting down the days.

There was another mark—much darker—one week from today.

We'd seen it coming for over a month now, had known that it was barreling toward us, had been just fucking ignoring it like we weren't both thinking about it at night when we went to bed. It loomed over our heads like a black cloud, following us through our days like a death sentence. *Fuck*, I hated being dramatic, but I couldn't help it.

One night per week, starting in seven days, we were going to sleep alone.

The first time it had been mentioned, I'd thrown a fucking fit—had used my concern for my girl to mask my extremely palpable disdain for the suggestion. Truthfully, it had shitloads of merit. We'd never know if our minds were healing if we kept using each other to bandage over the wound. We had to know if there'd be dreams. But I was in no fucking hurry to find out. So what if we were hiding? Who was it hurting? Eventually, I'd grown weary and exasperated with hearing how "necessary" it was, so my tantrum was short-lived.

Bella had agreed, so fucking blinded by her thirst for recovery that she'd never even shown an ounce of worry over it. There was a trace of bitterness, on my part, that I battled to shove away. I didn't want to be a selfish prick, especially toward something that was obviously important. I knew better now than to think she'd leave me behind. I realized that she loved me and, to her, I would still be the most important person in her life. It wasn't insecurity that drove my fear.

I was worried. Things were perfect, as is. Unfortunately, it hadn't been about me. If my girl really wanted to know if she could sleep alone, then so fucking be it. I kept my fucking mouth shut.

I just wished this one thing could remain--could be forever ours, untouchable and sacred.

Luckily, I still had a full week before we were forced to serve that sentence, and today's agenda was the only thing I wanted to think about. It was a stark contrast to that other deadline. Instead of looming, this one skipped through the door with a shit-eating-grin on its face.

My pencil ran over the crisp, white page of a new sketchbook, pressing into the fibers with the sweeps of my hand. It seemed so fucking simple and automatic to me: see something, focus, mimic, tweak, accommodate, refine. Maybe in some other life, I could have found the same enjoyment from something like music—hear, focus, mimic, tweak, accommodate, refine.

Fuck. Why was I thinking about this shit?

I was *trying* to get laid, dammit.

With a sigh, I peeked up from my sketch, only just realizing that I'd already completed half of her face. Scant rays of sun shone through her curled hair, accentuating the red highlights at her

tips as she furrowed her brow down at the book in her lap. The grass was browner now since winter had come and gone, and I was glad that the warmth I'd expected for the day was holding up. I'd checked forecasts for the entire week to choose the right time to come out here. The bubbling of the nearby river and the sway of the grass made the atmosphere feel comfortable.

"You look..." I tilted my head and frowned at her expression as she leaned against the tree in front of me, feet curled beneath her, "...contemplative."

Contemplative wasn't necessarily my plan for the day. We were always fucking contemplative. I was sick and tired of being lost inside my head and thoughts. I wanted to just fucking *be*. I wished that I could turn my thoughts off, if only for one afternoon, and simply think of... nothing.

This is why drugs win.

After the grueling winter, this was a break we'd needed—reaping the benefits and all that...

"Hmm," she hummed, pursing her lips as she finally met my gaze. A wayward lock of her shiny fucking curls fluttered with the breeze and stuck to her lips, shiny with the pink, glossy shit that Alice had applied hours ago. "Would you ever use a toaster?" she asked randomly, her eyes wandering the area as she... contemplated.

Quirking a brow, I answered, "Well, it *is* the only appliance I can safely and successfully use."

She nodded and sent me this relieved look, jotting something down quickly.

"What's this for?" I asked as I returned my eyes to the drawing. I decided that that lock of gloss-glued hair was a must.

"I'm making a list for the apartment," she answered in an absent murmur. "You know how Carlisle never gave us a budget or... really... any limit whatsoever? Well, yeah. I'm kind of taking advantage of that," she explained, with only a hint of shame in her voice.

I smirked.

Bella fucking loved the idea of us having our own place after getting over the initial freak-out. Admittedly, she had been dwelling on it ever since we'd gotten the acceptance letters a week ago—but in a different, far more acceptable way. She'd somehow contracted the infection of designing from Esme and Alice, and firmly refused to let anyone have any say in the state of our affairs unless it was her or me.

I sighed.

My girl was so fucking cute when she got obsessive compulsive over shit.

As far as housing went, there had been suggestions for complete isolation—mostly from Esme and Alice—and some for just going the dorm route anyways—mostly from Carlisle and Jazz — throwing her to the sharks now so that she’d be able to handle the crowded college situation a little better. We compromised and decided to go the route of a spacious yet modest apartment. That way, there was isolation when we needed that shit, and yet, there were still people everywhere.

And yet, I was still sitting here in the grass frowning because... this hadn’t been a planned discussion for the day either. “Can’t we save that bullshit for later?” I sighed dramatically. “We have six months.” Her lack of attention was seriously ruining my smooth-operator moment.

Glancing up to meet my gaze, she gnawed on her lip and tapped her pen against the paper. “I don’t want to forget anything,” she worried, squinting her eyes as she looked to the sky and pondered, “Like... I don’t drink coffee, so I wouldn’t need a coffeemaker, but... then what if I decide to like it later, and I wake up one morning and want coffee, but I have no way to make it.” Her eyes were narrowed, yet shifty, her shoulders anxious and stiff.

Sensing her tension, I scooted closer to her, reaching out to grab her hand. I was really fucking startled when her whole body flinched.

In a high, screeching tone, she persisted with wide eyes, gazing at me, “Coffee comes in like... a *million* different flavors. I don’t even know what kind I’ll like! What if I get something gross and —”

“Bella!” I stopped her with an upturned palm and a wrinkled nose. “There must be something like a thousand Starbucks in Seattle, okay? I can just go buy you a motherfucking coffee whenever. This is no big deal...” I trailed off in confusion, questioning her with my eyes as her mouth snapped shut.

Then she suddenly continued with a breathless ramble, “And then there’s travel. I mean... how am I going to get around? Is everything within walking distance? Or should I save for a car —”

“Fuck, Bella, we’ll have the Volvo,” I interrupted with raised eyebrows. Now, it felt like she was just making up shit to fret over. As if we didn’t have plenty already...

“No, Edward. *You’ll* have the Volvo. But what if you’re gone or—?”

“I won’t ever be gone,” I argued incredulously.

“You don’t know that!” she exclaimed, throwing her hands in the air. Her curls bounced around her shoulders, falling over her modest cleavage and drawing my eyes to her necklace, nestled warmly in the crevice created by her Alice-approved push-up bra.

Something was off, and I knew it. We had so much time to plan and prepare for the move that it shouldn't have been sinking in like this yet. Even in therapy, we'd already begun lengthy—and admittedly, really fucking boring—discussions on the whole matter. She'd always seemed fine with it—excited even. So then why, on this day of all days, was she deciding to get all fucking worry-faced over it?

Then it all just kind of clicked.

She. Was. Fucking. Stalling .

I berated myself for not paying closer attention to her cookies the night before. I'd figured that the "Failure" portion of the name was in regards to her comically lame, double folded fortunes.

"He who picks his towel up off the floor gets many kisses" just hadn't seemed that clever. Shit, at least I bribed with actual orgasms.

This day had been mentioned weeks ago but not since. It was sort of unspoken between us that today was *that* day. Even coming out here was a little fucking obvious. Seriously, I'm the dumbest shit in the world and even I knew what we were doing out in silent isolation, no parental in sight for hours. The only time we had discussed it was in Carmen's office, when Bella had admitted how she'd been nervous about having sex again. Some bullshit about failure and disappointment and how she feared that, "Maybe we were just never meant to have sex. There is such thing as celibate couples."

This was not my girl's normal attitude toward sex.

Her *normal* attitude toward sex was "Give me ten minutes to shave my legs, and then you can mount me."

Now, I regretted not talking about it beforehand. It had just seemed so fucking unromantic to discuss it, to openly plan for it, to act as if it were some kind of appointment instead of making love. And now, there was no way I could possibly go through with it, knowing that those fears that I'd *thought* we'd put to rest were resurfacing and thoroughly cockblocking me in the process.

I wasn't a stupid motherfucker, though. I knew her well enough to discern fear from nerves, and she was clearly nervous—not *afraid*. Her eyes met mine and she swallowed her throat bobbing lightly as she likely recognized my knowing expression. She knew by now that she couldn't hide from me, no more than I could hide from her.

I inched closer through the grass on my knees, approaching her slowly. The tree she leaned against was shedding its winter bark, and a few pieces of it crunched beneath my knees as I moved forward, holding her anxious gaze. When I was nothing but a breath away and she got that kind of hooded, dazed stare, I hooked my hands around her calves, opening them and

spreading her legs. Her eyes widened, and she was resistant, but not entirely, flattening her palms to the ground and pressing against the tree.

I brought myself between her legs when they opened, lacing my bent knees under her thighs as I leaned back on my ankles, as close to her as possible. I hoped that my eyes were all fucking intense and smoldering as I assured, “We don’t have to.” Her breath stuttered and deepened and her hands came to my hips and *fuck*, she was so easy.

“I *do* want to,” she whispered shakily, the gloss on her lips thick and shining as they barely moved. I could see the tip of her tongue sweep against the inside of her bottom lip, and just like that, I was hard.

She’d planned for this shit too. My girl fucking loathed lip gloss and push-up bras.

I tilted my head and slowly quirked an eyebrow, resting my hands on her thighs and pressing my thumbs into them. “We can just do what we always do,” I promised, not a trace of disappointment in my voice as I leaned into the crook of her neck and just barely kissed the flushed skin there. I sealed this promise with a sweep of my hand, trailing it to the inside of her thighs and pressing my palm against the warmth of her crotch.

She emitted this little gasp and arched into me, pulling my hips closer. I smiled against her skin, moving my thumb to where I knew she wanted it and began what was a particularly well-practiced series of activities with us.

Hands above clothes first, then under, then mouths, then... well, the shower usually ran cold as we came.

It was so fucking far from being boring or tedious, though. I’d happily live with only oral my entire life. My girl’s tongue could do glorious, magnificent things to my dick.

And I hated to sound conceited but... I was quite sure my tongue was pretty fucking awesome too.

She'd told me so.

Rather regularly.

Even as Jazz—the *fucking prick*—goaded me daily by finding industrious ways in which to work the term “sexually active” into his every sentence, I didn’t care.

Not really.

Honestly.

"But—" she sputtered incoherently as my tongue moved across her neck, my fingers pressing into spots that I'd long ago memorized. I was fairly confident that I could make her cum with one fingertip alone. Her fingers pressed into my hips and she finished in a breath, "You want more..."

Shaking my head I assured in a murmur, "This is fucking perfect."

Unfortunately, her hands came to my shoulders and she nudged me back. Relenting, I met her gaze and stilled my hand, though I refused to remove it.

She leaned against me and I almost smiled at her acquiescence, but then her hand pawed the ground behind me and emerged with my bag and my smile turned to a grimace.

My sex bag.

She cocked an eyebrow and opened it without meeting my gaze. She began emptying the bag, listing off, "Blanket, massage oils, towels, iPod with speakers, sanitary wipes, plastic bags, and God only knows what you plan to do with this." She held up a can of whipped cream — chocolate-flavored, of course —and shook it back and forth in my face.

So what? I'd come prepared. Sue me.

She wasn't the only one nervous about fucking this up. While she had been making lists for the apartment, I had been making lists for... sex. I had every base covered. If she kept going, she'd find a hairbrush—so that we wouldn't go home looking like we'd just been sexed up—two changes of underwear for the event that our burning hot, passionate love-making and my über strength shredded panties—bug spray because nothing kills an erection like a mosquito bite on the ass—and my new cell phone.

I'd either be using that to call Carmen, totally panicked, or to call Jazz, gloating shamelessly about my completely *active* sex-life. And even though I *really* wanted to gloat—because, honestly, that prick had it coming, and I did *not* have any problem with embellishing my performance—I didn't require it any more than she did. Anything she wasn't ready for was fucked up and tainted and not worth it. We both knew that shit.

My lips curled up into a lazy smirk, and I took the can from her hands, dropping my voice suggestively. "One doesn't require penetration to lick chocolaty... whipped-creamy-shit from one's body. Know what I mean?" I asked, winking playfully, because I knew she could still fully enjoy plenty of other activities.

Because I'd jacked-off two hours prior to avoid any embarrassing premature ejaculatory mishaps.

And because we weren't leaving this field until we were both satisfied and made use of at least half of those items.

Her lips parted a bit, eyes clouding over as she stared at the can and creased her forehead. The breeze picked up and lashed random tendrils of her hair around her face as she met my gaze. Her eyes were darkened, and she licked her lips.

I. Fucking. Had. Her.

Hook, line, and food fetish sinker.

Fuck, I loved it when she got freaky.

"Alright," she decided, shoving the can from between us and crushing her lips to mine. They were warm and urgent; and I pushed her back into the tree trunk, moving my hand against her once again. When my tongue came out to taste her, I got a thick taste of her lips' gloss and hummed. *Strawberry-flavored*. Our tongues ducked and darted and dodged, and eventually, I moved my hands to her ass and pressed her against my dick, pushing her into the tree as her hands went up my shirt, through my collar, and wrapped around my neck.

"The blanket," I panted as she removed my shirt, and I dug through the bag, removing it with calculated movements.

Then I had some really fucking annoying issues with the wind and couldn't manage one of those easy, one-sweep motions where the blanket was *supposed* to spread perfectly over the grass. *Fucker*. I glared at it and had to arrange the fabric myself, taking off my shoes to use as weights for the corners. When two had been anchored I whirled around and was about to ask for Bella's.

And she was standing there below the tree.

Naked.

"Nice," I breathed in appreciation, my eyes trained on her pale flesh, brow furrowed as my hands went to my jeans, unbuttoning them clumsily. "I wanted to do that, you know," I added, shoving everything off my hips in one swift pull.

"Next time," she promised, watching my erect cock bounce as I balanced on one foot and tried to get the fucking jeans off my left ankle. I was usually a pretty graceful bastard, but the impatience of the moment and the distraction of her tits as she stood in the sun, completely unabashed, rendered me incapable of balance.

I swayed and just barely remained upright as I finally tore the jeans off that foot. I then tried futilely to just... shake them off the other, so as to avoid another almost-busting-my-ass-naked-

in-front-of-bare-titted-Bella moment. All this shaking, of course, made my dick do this little jiggling thing that made her giggle and cover her mouth and... *fuck that shit*.

You never giggle at a dick.

Never.

Ever.

Ever.

I bent down and scowled hard at my jeans as I ripped them off my foot, finally free of them and standing in nothing but two socks, half-way off my feet as they hung low at my ankles. The ends of them kind of flopped when I walked to her, and I felt like a fucking clown. I stepped on one end, removing it successfully with a step, and repeated with the other.

I decided that, in our apartment, pants and socks were going to be optional.

And shirts.

Just because.

Her giggles dying down, she watched me use her shoes to complete the four corners of the blanket and then I kind of gestured to that motherfucker with a final huff of achievement, feeling as though the worst part *had* to be behind us.

Right?

Wrong.

We began making out on the blue, plaid blanket, naked and eager. And then the sun disappeared behind the clouds and it got a little colder. My balls wanted to both climb back inside of me and shower her with jizz.

It was quite paradoxical.

As we lay on our sides, the heat of our arousal gradually making the chill of the air bearable, I kissed her deeply, my hands wandering her chest and massaging her tits. For some reason, I felt like it'd be all fucking tender and special to run my finger through her shiny curls.

Well, fuck hairspray up its ass.

My fingers got caught, and she hissed, yanking away from my lips as I *tried* to extract my fingers from her hair. I glanced at her apologetically and then glowered at my fingers as I gingerly removed them, stroking her bare hip with my other hand.

When we finally resumed kissing, she rested her head on my bicep and pushed into me. Our bottom halves began the inevitable gravitation toward one another with breathy moans and traipsing hands. And then she threw her leg over my hip and ground against me.

And then my arm fell asleep.

“Shit,” I hissed, flexing my fist and feeling the sting of pins and needles as she lifted her head. As the circulation began to slowly return to my arm, we both stared at my fist, covered with her curls as it clenched and unclenched.

And I was beginning to wonder if maybe we *weren’t* sex-cursed after all.

With mutual sighs of exasperation, we hesitantly met one another’s gazes and I groaned. “You want to just pack the fuck up and go home?” I asked, feeling as though the afternoon was unsalvageable.

We could make out wherever. At least in the shower or the bed, we weren’t freezing our asses off and swatting away bugs.

When she didn’t answer, I took it as a “yes” and sat up, reaching for my bag, and began to shove shit back into it. She sat up with me, handing me nearby items with an apologetic expression.

Then she reached for my sketchbook and paused, curling her feet beneath her and furrowing her brows. “Is this from today? Just now?” she asked as my eyes wandered the space, searching for the evil pants that had started the chain-of-sex-failure.

I only glanced for a moment and nodded in confirmation, lifting a corner of the blanket up as I resumed my search.

She was silent for many moments until I finally met her gaze with a sigh, bracing myself to stand. “You were supposed to be drawing nature,” she said in a toneless voice as she stared down at the book in her hands. The white of the paper reflected light back into her face and made her almost appear radiant as she sat atop the blanket, nude and exposed to the air. I watched her eyes flit over the image, absorbing her pose from earlier.

Shrugging, I answered, “There’s nature in it. The tree, see?” I reasoned, gesturing to the outlined figure behind her in the drawing.

Glancing at me sideways, she pursed her lips and curved an eyebrow.

"Okay, okay," I relented grumpily, taking the book from her hand. "I fucking cheated, alright! But it's not my fault. Nature shit and still-lives are boring as fuck, and art isn't supposed to be work. If I don't like the subject, I can't draw it," I explained, slamming the book closed and tossing it onto the blanket with a muffled 'smack.'

I was *supposed* to be broadening my mind's eye. Apparently, I was too focused on Bella, and by drawing something else, I'd be taking time to see other aspects of the world that deserved my appreciation... or some bullshit.

I didn't give a fuck what Carmen had to say about it.

No one "appreciates" a tree trunk.

Unless there are tits in front of it.

I was just about to stand and get dressed when her hand surrounded my wrist, pulling me down. I looked to her, half-expecting a chiding for not following through on my own goals when her lips curled up into a soft smile.

She tucked one of her wayward curls behind her ear and rubbed her thumb over my skin, asking, "So, I'm kind of like... your muse?" Her legs were spread from her position, and it was surprisingly easy to remain focused on the depth of her brown eyes, boring into mine, even though I knew I could easily get an eyeful of pussy.

I inwardly sighed in relief that she was letting the sketching go and nodded, kicking my legs out before me and resting back on my palms.

"That's really cheesy and sweet," she replied through a large grin, inching closer to me and curling into my side. I smirked as I lay back, granting her access to the crook of my shoulder and kissing the top of her annoyingly hair sprayed head.

"I'm a cheesy and sweet motherfucker, what can I say?" I joked, rubbing my hand up and down her spine, tickling her with my grazes over her skin.

Reclined on our back, we couldn't help but look up at the sky, and it was just... cloudy. It wasn't one of those perfect days like I'd tried really fucking hard to plan for. It was just a light grey, misty above the treetops, and kind of cold. I spread my arms out and grabbed two handfuls of the blanket, folding it over us in a comfortable cocoon as we lay peacefully.

Maybe this day wasn't a complete bust.

Her hand glided along my stomach and chest, her fingertips tracing the edges and outlines of my scars as she breathed evenly against me. Her hand wandered, lowering down to the spot

where I should have had one of those sexy happy-trails, had that patch of flesh not been scarred by flame all those years ago.

And then her hand kept going, and I closed my eyes as she caressed my dick, one fingertip gliding from my tip to my base and back up.

She lifted her head, and I didn't even need to open my eyes to find her lips with mine. They were like magnets, drawing us together and moving my body down a bit so that I could reach them more comfortably.

And then we were making out again, but this time was better and slower and definitely not the picture of fuck-up like it had been only moments before. I turned on my side, and she hooked her leg over my hip, stroking my tongue with hers languidly and pushing herself closer. Her hand moved from my dick, only to go to my hip, where she grabbed it and yanked me closer.

My dick was then nestled in wet, slippery heat and I furrowed my brow, threading my fingers through her hair and angling my head to deepen our kiss. My breaths turned all fucking erratic and eager as I slid against her and groaned into her mouth.

I pulled away, licking my lips and still tasting the faint trace of strawberry from her lip gloss as I moved my hips and stared into her hooded eyes. She sank her teeth into her lip and pressed hard against me, seeking more friction. I could always tell when she was getting *really* into it, because she always got super-focused and all fucking breathy.

A lot like she was doing now.

On my dick.

"So fucking beautiful," I breathed, moving my hand to her ass and crushing her against me. I loved seeing her like this, above all else. Call me a hormonal motherfucker, I didn't give a shit. When her lips parted and dried with her gasps and created these little crevices, and when her feet hooked over my calves to draw me closer, and when I could see the skin on her neck vibrate to the tempo of her pulse, she was fucking beautiful in this way that only I would ever see.

She puffed and moaned, touching her forehead to mine as we moved fluidly despite our awkward positions. Her eyes looked down between us, the muscles in my stomach rippling and contracting as I moved. She stared at my body, murmuring, "You too."

Her hands grasped my back, and I could feel the crescents her fingernails would make in my skin. Her hair fell over her shoulder and left it bare, exposing her neck and collarbone to me. I reached down and licked it as we rocked, pushing her down and pulling her up minutely with every motion. My eyes closed and I just enjoyed the sensations of her slick warmth, gliding over me as she panted into my skin, her leg already beginning to quake around my hip. I went faster

to accommodate her finicky, fleeting orgasm bullshit. I'd learned by now how annoyingly delicate that moment was. My dick glided with the motions of our hips, sliding along rather happily until there was one brief, little slip.

And then things kind of fucking... lined up.

I froze, the tip of my cock halting at just the right spot for this to go far beyond the act of wet humping. Her body was warm and still against me as we breathed against each other, her face in the crook of my neck and my nose in her hair.

Sensing our dilemma, she leaned back to meet my gaze, resting her cheek on the blue blanket beneath us. It was just... *right fucking there*. It was hot and wet and practically smiling at my dick and flashing a sign that said, "Hey, you! Come in here and have a shitload of fun, yes?"

Breathless and uncertain, I swallowed heavily, tightening my firm grip on her ass cheek and consequently... only spreading her wider for me.

Oops.

Her chest heaved, crushing her tits to my chest with every huff and she looked at me, flushed. "Yeah?" she suddenly broke the silence with a breath, her eyebrows furrowing upward and creating this little divot in her forehead. Her hand, still clinging to my back, tightened, and it pushed me closer.

She was horny and utterly fucking perfect.

"Kay," was my whispered response, and I granted her one second to back out, because I was considerate, but goddamnit, I was horny too.

She licked her lips in anticipation, and I could see her bracing herself, eyes wide and eager as her leg tightened around me, the heel of her foot pushing into my thigh. We didn't need anything else. All the preparation was dumb and stupid and this was supposed to be natural, like breathing.

But with more thrusting and a really fucking messy climax.

I didn't even realize I was holding my breath as I spread her wider and began a gentle push of my hips. My eyes were trained on her face, my ears on her breathing—all of the shit that, by now, was just involuntary. I'd ruined the sanctity of the safe word like an asshole. We'd retired it, along with the use of the "unicorn" euphemism, and had just agreed that a simple fucking, "Ow. Stop." would suffice. Still, I was perfectly in-tune with her every reaction, whether I wanted to be or not.

So I *was* holding my breath, and I only realized it when I was suddenly reminded of how ridiculously tight she was. I made this weird, gritty choking sound as I eased myself forward and up, her eyelids drooping as her lips parted with a gusty sigh. Her fingernails dug deeper into my skin, and I might have been worried about it if she hadn't been breathing in these little gasps, laced with a mewling sound upon each exhale.

I'd never had sex without a condom before, and every feeling was amplified, tickling, pulsating as I eased further into her.

In a strained voice, I asked, "Does... is it...?"

She only nodded, pressing me closer and urging me forward without words, and if she'd wanted me to stop halfway inside of her, I would have been perfectly happy with the limitation.

Half a pussy is better than none, any day.

Resting my lips against hers, I stared into her eyes, blurry and crossing as I pushed deeper, trembling with the restraint necessary to go shallow and slow, and I knew—was entirely confident—that there would be a day when I *could* pound this shit—*lovingly*—if we could only manage this one moment without fucking it up.

Impatient, I pulled away slightly, the tightness of her squeezing me in fucking glorious ways. And then I thrust gently forward and was unable to suppress the broken, strangled groan that escaped my lips upon finally, *finally* feeling the sensation of that first, full thrust. I turned my face a bit and stared over her shoulder, dropping my eyelids as I concentrated on that feeling, hot and burning and tightening the pit of my stomach with the urge to do it over and over and over and faster and harder and deeper and *thank fuck I jacked that shit before we left the house*, because I'd totally be exploding by now.

She inhaled deeply, her jaw hanging slightly ajar as her breath chilled my cheek and she pushed me closer, deeper, tighter.

I could feel a quiver in her inner thigh and the slight, unconscious rocking of her hips.

Her brows pulled tightly together and she asked against my cheek in a thick voice, "Alright?"

"Shit... it's just... so fucking... *Christ*," I attempted, curling my lips around the words and trapping one between my teeth as I repeated the motion—pulling back and pushing forward.

"God," she moaned, the sound vibrating against my skin as my hips halted and pulled back once more, and to a casual observer, I'd swear that we'd sounded religious or some shit.

It couldn't be sold in a porno, but my girl and I were officially having intercourse.

Drunk off the lust and sensations of her surrounding me so tightly, I turned my face and captured her parted lips. They were dry and cold, but her tongue was wet and hot and it amplified the feelings of my slow thrusts below. Our kissing, all fucking distracted and sloppy, was stop-and-go. I'd pull out and push in and we'd forget to move our mouths, abruptly remembering and quickly shifting our tongues and lips at the same time. She remained perfectly still, letting my hips do all the work.

And then suddenly, she began to stiffly roll onto her back, and I didn't even freeze or falter because I was beginning to realize that there was a certain flow to this shit, and the more I interrupted it, the less likely we were to follow through without incident.

Without hesitation, I rolled with her, settling on top of her and flattening my palms against the blanket to lift the weight of my chest from her. Her legs spread, and I fit perfectly between them, staring down at her pink face and resuming the motions of my hips without any disruption.

Her chest lifted and fell, the peaks of her nipples hard and taught and pointing toward me as I was able to push deeper, the freedom of the position allowing our hips to finally meet.

Her breath deepened once more and her eyes, glassy, shone as she weaved her fingers through my hair. And then, without warning, her still body came to life, and she lifted her hips and writhed against me, meeting my hips and creating the friction she likely desired. I hissed through clenched teeth, because it felt tighter and closer and if that one little hip movement were a picture, I'd motherfucking frame that shit.

She froze and looked up at me, alarmed, as if she didn't realize what she'd been doing. "Is it... did I...?" she worried, suddenly uncertain. I could feel the tightening of her legs and see the stiffening of her shoulders, and I hurried to reassure her.

Cupping her ass, I lifted her to me and encouraged, "Good... up... there, see?" And then she ground against my pelvis with more confidence, the sweetest little moan escaping her lips as her brows hunched downward and she lifted higher.

Removing my hand from her, I braced myself against the ground once again and set a slow pace, rotating my hips lower and emerging almost completely from her slick warmth with a groan. Her hips matched mine and soon, we had set a synchronized rhythm of pushes and pulls and rotations and grinds.

I'd never fucked like this before. The girl had always been on top, bouncing above me as I'd just pulled her onto me greedily. This was so much different and so much *better*. Her soft body beneath me was inviting, welcoming, and we were grounded as I softly slid myself into her over and over.

Then again, this wasn't fucking at all.

Her neck stretched upward as our tempo increased and I could discern the tightening of the chords in her neck as she gasped for breath, staring absently at the sky through hooded lids. I surrounded her chin with my mouth and fisted the fabric of the blankets in my palms, the grass below tearing from the soil beneath it as my breaths escaped my nose in brief and sharp hisses.

Her moans soon transformed into breathless mewls and her intense, almost fucking *pleading* stare, as our rocks turned more and more succinct and exact, eventually penetrated my own. My arms began shaking as my knees dug into the soft ground and my thrusts turned more and more erratic. I kissed her and she pressed higher, and I whimpered against her lips, pressing clumsy kisses wherever I could reach and clenching my eyes shut.

“Don’t... almost...” she choked, her body rigid with tension as our rocking hips ground and retreated in shorter, firmer motions. I fisted the blanket tighter, my hands fucking trembling as I ground my teeth and fought to stave off my extremely imminent orgasm. She grew wetter with every second, and I was growing desperate to bury myself deep inside her, grab her hips and just fucking explode already. Her body began quaking, but I couldn’t be certain if it was from pleasure or exertion. With a breathless groan, I pushed myself higher and stared into her eyes, locking my jaw as I relented to my urge and gripped the blanket tightly, thrusting hard into her with a grunt.

Our fucking skin clapped.

Then her eyes grew wide, and her hands came to my ass, grasping two handfuls of flesh and pushing me onto her as she threw her head back, arching her body into a delicate bow and pressing her tits against my chest.

I watched her eyes close tightly as she shuddered and writhed against me, all fucking flushed and holding her breath as she tightened around my dick. Her mouth opened with a silent cry, and I knew she was cumming, so I dropped my lips to her neck and gave her two final, skin-clapping thrusts before I was unable to hold it any longer.

I shoved my mouth into her neck and grunted into her skin, burying myself deep inside of her. My growl, muffled by her wet skin as my tongue pressed against it, reverberated through my chest until I lifted my lips and it was nothing but a whimpered, “Shit, Bella. *Fuck.*” The blankets bunched in my hands as I pulled my fists toward her head, jerking and twitching inside of her. I shuddered and pushed and fisted the fabric so tightly that I felt my nails through it. I could feel her fingers in my hair; her legs and arms limp as I ground against her one final time.

Then I collapsed, panting as she stroked my hair and heaved beneath me. The cool air was a little fucking welcome *now*, and it chilled the light sheen of sweat covering my neck as I turned my head and kissed her throat, seeking her lips with mine.

Our kiss was brief, and I retreated, slipping from her only to rest my forehead on her stomach before looking into her eyes.

They were warm and exhausted and this lazy little half-smirk spread across her face. I smiled back and turned my face, staring at the swaying trees and just... tired—in good ways.

In one week, it was entirely fucking possible that we'd lose that one, sacred connection that had bound us for so long

At least where we lost, we gained.



Failure.

It was a word that seemed to dictate my every habit nowadays. I feared it, hid from it, eluded it at every possible turn —terrified that I'd lose all this forward momentum. My thoughts raced as he rested his cheek on my stomach, his knees bent at my hips, my legs still wrapped around him and my fingers running through his hair.

It was soft and slightly dampened at the roots, his eyes staring out over the trees. He'd occasionally hum as my fingers caressed his messy locks, sometimes shivering, even though he insisted that he was anything but cold.

I locked my feet around him, and we lay perfectly still, his hands flattened to the sides of my breasts and sporadically stroking my skin.

It was like I was waiting for something to happen. Maybe the sky would open up and unleash a bolt of lightning, or my heart would palpitate, or Edward would get one of those really mortifying leg cramps or something.

But nothing happened.

This wasn't a failure.

It was almost too surreal to even consider. Sure, I *may* have been hyping it up in my head, thinking through all the various ways in which I would ruin it, but who could blame me? I'd

been convinced after I set that date that there'd be no way. Likely, Esme or Carlisle would choose to be all annoyingly parental that day, or I'd start my period, or something would happen between then and now to render one of us physically incapable.

Even as I'd been indulging my weird, Chinese cuisine kick, my worries had wormed their way into the previous night's atmosphere and had created a contrary recipe of *Fated Failure Fortune Cookies*. I hadn't been able to shake it.

I just wasn't used to things going right. Hell, I'd resigned myself to a cautionary life of abstinence, for Christ's sake. I'd convinced myself that sex really wasn't all that great anyway.

God, was I wrong...

It was like losing my virginity all over again—without all the pain and crying and humiliation. It was nothing like the other times. It was... sweet and slow and tender and yet still, completely freaking hot.

And I knew that Edward figured it was only him, but... I couldn't wait to rub this in Jasper's face.

Edward suddenly sighed, shifting his head slightly to meet my gaze. Enough time had passed for the sun to move, almost completely behind the trees, and it illuminated his copper hair with a pale, orange glow. My legs were getting stiff from lying in this position, but it was still comfortable, so I said nothing. His reddened lips were set into a thin line, his green eyes searching mine as I quirked a brow quizzically.

"Next week..." he began, his tongue darting out to wet his lips as his eyelids dropped. He turned his face, pressing a kiss to my stomach below my bellybutton.

I interjected before he could continue, "It's just experimental, one night is nothing. Seven hours? We've gone longer," I assured, only vaguely realizing my subtle dig at his leaving me when his hands pressed firmly into my skin, eyes darkening as his chin poked into my stomach. Voice heavy with remorse, I apologized, "I'm sorry. I wasn't meaning it like that..." and he nodded, though his gaze remained laced with sadness that I loathed myself for creating. On top of this, I knew he was worried about me, however useless it may have been to fret over.

I could see the tightening of his jaw as he wiggled his hands beneath my back, bringing his arms around my torso and squeezing me. "You don't seem too bothered by it," he murmured into my skin, peeking up at me through his lashes.

I used my fingers to push his hair from his forehead, exposing his eyes to me as I reasoned, "You'll only be twenty-two steps away."

His lips curled up into a tight smirk against my skin and he raised an eyebrow. "So you've counted the steps to the guest room?" he asked, his warm breath tickling my skin. At my nod of

admission, he chuckled silently. “Maybe we should get walkie talkies or some shit,” he joked, eyes flashing as his brows raised.

I rolled my eyes and weaved my fingers through his hair, shoving down the inkling of anxiety that rose in my chest as I dismissed dryly, “I think we’ll survive.” Secretly, I couldn’t really think about it. I didn’t want to show him my hesitation or nervousness over the coming experiment. He’d been with me during every step up until now and I couldn’t bear the thought of disappointing *anyone*. I had to do it. I *could* do it. I just had to push back the fear and stop dwelling on it, and I’d be fine. I *had* to be fine.

His chuckles abruptly ceased, and he was merely gazing back at me, intense, green eyes boring into mine as he swallowed and finally lifted himself. He ran his fingers through his hair and looked away, muttering, “Right.”



Exactly one week later, I awoke panting, clutching at the blankets in my fists as my eyes sprang open. I lurched up and whipped my head around me, trembling and sweating as I searched the darkness. The room filled with my erratic breaths, loud and echoing off the bare, white walls as my heart thrashed wildly in my chest. Immediately, my feet itched to move my body from the room, but there was the obstacle of the space beneath the bed, and, suddenly, I had visions of hands grabbing ankles. That fleeting vision terrified me far more than it should.

I was a fucking adult, not a frightened little child.

I closed my eyes and tried to steady my pulse, imagining myself in the grassy expanse of the sunny meadow beyond the river. I tried visualizing the breeze and Edward’s arms around my waist, holding me, safe and sound. He’d whisper in my ear and play with my hair and smile against my neck. The vision of this calmed me enough so that I could open my eyes.

After my chest had regained a steadier rhythm, I laid back down stiffly, turning on my side. I stared at the wall blankly, bunching the sheet as I curled it beneath my chin. The shadows from the trees beyond the balcony door filtered through the sheer curtains and painted the walls with long, branching veins, climbing to the ceiling and reaching for the light fixture. The moon beyond the clouds bathed everything in blue, and I shivered, pulling the blankets higher. My eyes flitted to the closet, and I swallowed, watching the knob anxiously.

Five months ago when I’d very first allowed Edward to coax me inside, the feeling of entering it had made me feel proud and empowered, but now—now it made me shudder to think I’d been in that one little space. Everyone had been so excited that evening—a far cry from the somber mood of the house on this particular night before we’d all gone to bed. Edward had been helping me inside since then, once a day for the mere purpose of acquiring and depositing clothing.

I could hear the wind sweeping through the lawns outside, blowing the remnants of the leaves from the winter through the yard with an eerie howl. This suggestion of Carmen's was insane, and she had no idea what she'd been asking at the time. Looking down, the bracelet that Carlisle had given me for Christmas reflected the blue hue of the room and illuminated my pillow in a soft glow. The embossed, Cullen family crest was set in silver, attached to a simple, leather band that was fastened comfortably.

He'd given Alice a necklace—silver with gemstones and far flashier than mine. I allowed the memory of her face on that day to soothe my anxiety, closing my eyes with a shaky sigh. Alice had never known her father—had seen various father-daughter functions throughout her years in school and surely felt emptiness when Rosalie and Mr. Hale attended without her. She'd never confided this sadness to me, but that day, I'd known for sure that it'd always existed. She'd thrown her arms around Carlisle's neck, burying her face into his shoulder and hiding her tears.

She hated being seen as emotional.

Everyone had been particularly surprised by her reaction, Carlisle's eyes wide and fretful as he'd sought Esme's watery, rueful gaze.

Cheesy bitches.

Edward had told me about Carlisle's nervousness about giving us each one. Before I'd even had a chance to open the gift, Edward had begged, "It means a whole fucking lot to him, okay? If it makes you feel weird wearing it, then just... smile and hide it away somewhere." Edward had feared we wouldn't understand it's meaning, or that we would feel as though Carlisle was making an attempt to replace our fathers.

Well, I, for one, was perfectly pleased with being a part of Carlisle's family—had never known my real father, and had already considered Carlisle my own anyway. Free jewelry that wasn't all ornate and flashy and gross was just a bonus.

A distant scratching broke me from my musing, and I stiffened, my legs pulling farther into my chest as my eyes wandered the darkened room. The bathroom door stood ajar, Edward's towel peeking out from where he'd left it four hours ago. My breathing transformed into shallow gusts as my eyes searched the darkness, the silence of the room heavy and suffocating.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up, and I felt as though someone was definitely watching me.

It was stupid and totally irrational, I realized this.

There was no way anyone could get into the house with Carlisle's extravagant security system. He'd even upgraded it a week prior for this specific purpose. He knew I'd be up here, in this dark room, all alone, and he and Esme were trying to make this easier on me.

And Edward.

I tried to imagine him in the room, just right down the hall. He was nearby, and this *should* have made me feel a modicum of peace, but it didn't. I couldn't feel his proximity or see his face or hear his breaths. There was nothing tangible enough to soothe me. It was torture knowing that he was so close, yet so far.

All I had to do was open my mouth and produce the loudest, most blood-curdling scream I could manage, and I knew I'd have a room-full of people standing before me, Edward among them.

In my dreams, my screams were silent, my throat producing no sound, no matter how hard I tried to cry out. I knew this wouldn't be the case now, and yet my throat felt dry and parched, and my confidence wavered.

What if I couldn't scream? I panicked. I supposed from my state of total alertness that the sleeping meds that I'd taken before bed to knock me out had mostly worn off, even though my limbs still felt heavy and slow. Without them, I wasn't confident that it would have been possible to even fall asleep like this in the first place. Every inch of the room was black and blue and it made me remember my old room, next door. I didn't like this memory one bit. It put me impossibly more on edge, my body rigid under the covers. I feared if I moved, I'd ruin the whole night with my ridiculous, stupid fears by bolting from the room.

I imagined Carlisle's face when he realized that I'd failed this test, so patient and understanding, yet inevitably disappointed. I imagined Esme and Carmen and Alice and... most of all... Edward. Everyone was counting on me, and even though succeeding in this one task actually meant very little to me when compared to the notion of giving in, my *family* was a different story. This was important to them. This was tangible progress, even more monumental than my being inside the closet that day.

So why couldn't I focus on anything but the feel of the carpet beneath my feet when I finally fled?

Of course I had a choice. I *always* had a choice. It was weighing which choice was best for all invested parties that was impossible. It was learning to be selfless and strong and facing that fear of being alone in the darkness that was so difficult.

But I didn't *have* to be alone, and who—given the choice—would ever choose it while they lay in bed frightened and tense and so terrified of moving that their muscles began aching?

It was utter madness, I decided, rolling onto my back and staring at the empty, cold space next to me. This was how I'd felt when Edward was halfway across the country, completely lost to me. I would have given anything then—would have likely sold my soul and sworn myself to the devil—had I been offered the opportunity to have him next to me.

But Edward was no longer hundreds of miles away and untouchable.

Twenty-two steps.

Twenty-two steps and I'd be at his door. It was at that moment that I heard another light scratch and my head snapped in the direction of the window, a lone branch tapping against the siding of the house. My neck was still damp from sweat; tears dried on my cheeks as my eyes flitted wildly about the room and peered into black crevices and corners. Swallowing loudly, I threw the covers off my body and sprang up once again, grasping the sheets as my eyes fixed on the door to the hallway.

Twenty-two steps.

That was all it would take to be in his arms, safe and content and peaceful.

My chest constricted the longer I sat motionless on the mattress and felt the darkness of the room surrounding me, drawing in from the corners of the walls and pressing ever closer. I couldn't shake that feeling of eyes on my form, watching me as my breaths began emerging in sharp puffs through my flared nostrils. My pulse quickened and my hands were clammy, cold, and damp, and I simply couldn't fathom remaining one moment longer.

Succeeding suddenly seemed so pointless.

I peeked over the mattress and fearfully searched the sliver of black beneath the bed. And then I leaped, my feet flying across the floor as my heart raced. I began counting steps as I approached the door—five steps less than it might have been, had I not been so impatient to leave the room. Opening the door wasn't nearly as comforting as I'd thought it might be, the hallway just as black and obscure as everything else. My footsteps were dull thumps against the carpet as I sprinted down the hallway, the door to the guestroom fixed in my sight, tall and white.

I threw myself at it, louder than intended and grabbed the knob, turning it and shoving the door open.

To my surprise, Edward's head snapped up from where he was sitting in the middle of the bed, already awake. Two white cords hung from his ears as his hand paused over the sketchbook nestled in his lap. His hair was messier than usual, a clear signal that he'd been fretting a significant portion of the night. His eyes were dark and tired, lips pressed into a grim line as he

regarded my wild, watery eyes. His hands came up and yanked the little ear buds from his ears and I was already flying toward the bed.

His arms already open by the time I hurled myself on the mattress, caught me as I jumped on him. Our chests collided and shook the bed's frame as I captured his neck in a tight, trembling embrace. Our bodies fused and molded, his warmth seeping through my thin shirt as his palm came to the back of my head. He wove his fingers through my hair and pressed my face further into his neck. He pushed his nose into my hair, breathing in deeply and seeming to hold it, chest wide and expanded against me.

And in that moment, I could finally smell his skin and feel his arms surrounding me and I felt selfish for not coming *sooner*. I'd been so damned focused on not failing that I'd never even stopped to notice that Edward had always wanted to fail this. It occurred to me that he hadn't even bothered trying to sleep without me and a tight sob built in my chest. I fisted the back of his shirt collar and ultimately comprehended that he hadn't been joking about the walkie talkies that day we'd made love in the meadow. He was just too damned stubborn to even consider asking me to shirk this challenge—to admit that it'd be just as hard for him. He'd refused the sleeping pills and shrugged off my worry and I'd believed him like a total fool.

I wept into his skin and pulled at him, angry for taking so long to realize it. His forearms were hard and dug satisfyingly into my ribs, mashing our bodies as if our souls were capable of merging and becoming one entity. His arms moved restlessly as they grasped me, as if trying to find a more efficient position to bring me closer, even grunting in frustration as they shifted once again. My legs shook with the strain of pushing into him, my nose diggin painfully into his shoulder.

He didn't even ask why I was crying as he tossed his things aside and lifted us from the bed. He guided my ankles to wrap around his waist and hooked his arms below me, carrying me to the door. I watched the room disappear behind us as he walked the twenty two steps to *our* bed, closing *our* door behind him with his foot.

He lowered me to the mattress and crawled in beside me, my hands never leaving his shirt as he slid under the covers and pulled me against him. His face was expressionless, the lines of his jaw sharpened against the dark shadows cast across his skin. He wiped away my regretful tears with the pads of his thumb, allowing it to linger on my cheek.

"Maybe next time," he whispered the green of his eyes nearly indiscernible through the darkness of the room. His hair feathered over his forehead and framed his gaze, cautious and searching.

I hooked my foot around his legs and yanked him closer, burying my face in his chest and shaking my head vehemently. "No next time," I demanded in a thick voice, sniffing my tears away and still clutching his shirt. "I'll do all the other crap, and I'll keep my mouth shut, even though it's all stupid and I hate it, but not this one. This one stays, no matter what. Promise

me," I begged, my body slowly losing its rigidity as his palm began gliding firmly, up and down my back.

He shifted his shoulder, tightening his arms around me as he pledged in a hard, decisive voice that pierced the darkness, "Fuck 'em. It's ours, I promise." He entwined his legs with mine and flattened his palm around my neck, holding me against him.

I nodded; exhaling a deep breath into the warmth of his chest as my hand instinctively went up his back to stroke his hair. It was silky soft between my fingers as I allowed my eyelids to finally fall, his shirt absorbing my tears. His breaths were steady and contented against me and I could feel his lips in my hair, pressing a kiss to my head. And I knew by those six words, spoken in a clear and concise voice, that he couldn't bear it any more than I could—that my weakness was a relief to him, as he shared the very same one.

We'd failed this one test—this one analysis that would prove how far our psyches had come. I'd dreamed, and Edward hadn't even tried. Tomorrow I'd have to go see Carmen, and I'd have to admit my weakness to her, and to my whole family. I'd have to confess how I'd caved and had gone to him. But our failure wouldn't be the point of that conversation.

I'd focus on how I'd gone to him to seek solace in his love, not his touch.

And I was reminded that there were always thin opportunities and fleeting chances for do-overs, but that sometimes, you couldn't fix what was never broken.

I began humming his song, and I remembered seeing my face that day one week ago, perfectly etched in graphite and paper on the page of a sketchbook that had been *intended* for beauty. It had helped me realize that we could *work* toward not needing each other so desperately. We'd always *try* to love one another in someone else's version of a "healthy" way. We could, and probably would, strive very hard to meet these goals, and it would never matter.

They'd always be exercises in futility.

However, when the sun rose in the morning, shining through our balcony doors, we'd open our eyes, and we'd be okay. Not perfect, not entirely healthy, not even rational where our love for one another was concerned. *Just* okay. Merely sufficient, at best. But there'd be only acceptance—never shame—in being two divine failures as we emerged from slumber, perfectly flawed, and wide awake.

Epilogue



“Wait. Turn a little bit—*yeah*, right there. *Shit*,” Edward grabbed my hip and leaned back on his heels, thrusting into me with an intense expression. Resting on my side, I clutched a handful of bed sheet and pulled my knees to my chest, gasping. “You like this one?” he asked, fingertips tugging my hips to him rhythmically.

I offered a fervent nod into my pillow.

Was there any position I wouldn’t like?

Doubted it.

He dropped to his palms and hovered above me as he tucked his chin into his chest, watching our skin meet while his thrusts grew erratic. He warned me in a strained voice, teeth clenched. “You have T-minus ten-seconds-and-counting to get yours.”

Er, yeah. That wasn’t gonna happen.

With a shudder, he grunted my name, his own palms curling into fists around the sheets as he stilled.

He flopped onto the bed with gasping breaths, panting, “Okay, that one’s out.”

I turned to him with a gaping jaw, wondering, “Why! I liked that one.”

“Eh,” He shrugged and kissed the tip of my nose, explaining plainly, “I can’t get you off like that. Too much fucking reach-around.”

I rolled my eyes, resting against his chest. “Just because I don’t get off doesn’t mean I don’t still enjoy it.”

He snorted into my hair as he nuzzled against it, reasoning, “Yeah, right. If we’d just spent all that time fucking and I didn’t get a nut, I’d feel fucking cheated.”

"You're a guy," I reminded. "You never have sex without getting off." And when I put it that way, maybe I *did* feel a little cheated.

"Man, it must suck to be a girl," he mused. "As if the whole having-a-uterus thing wasn't enough of a bitch, you aren't even guaranteed an orgasm. I mean, the guy pretty much dictates when sex ends."

I met his gaze and nodded.

Then his face went blank, right before he began laughing, bouncing me on his chest as his eyes crinkled. "I said 'dick-tate.'"

"Oh, Jesus," I groaned. "What are you, ten?" His boyish snorting followed me into the bathroom as I started the shower, stepping beneath the stream with another roll of my eyes.

He'd just come back from Jazz and Alice's, which explained everything. I swear, whenever he and Jasper got together, there was some kind of quantum shift in which they lost ten years of maturity. It'd take all night to get them back.

I waited for Edward to join me, as he usually did. Our new apartment was less crappy than I'd wanted. I'd specifically told Carlisle that I wanted to at least *feel* like I was "roughing it," like all my peers were. It was just a weird desire of mine, to get the full college experience, shitty housing and all.

We had our own damn laundry room, for Christ's sake.

I'd stopped pouting over it the second I saw the kitchen, though. It was love at first cookie-bake. The size of that oven was ridiculous. Sadly, school left me such little time to make use of it all. We'd just finished with finals, which was the primary reason for our "lets explore sexual positions number six through twenty" game. What better way to wind down after a long, stressful semester?

After a good thirty minutes of enjoying our over-extravagant shower, I realized that Edward wasn't going to join me, to which my brow creased in confusion. I exited the bathroom in a towel and began clearing the floor of our clothes, which had been scattered haphazardly after Edward had come home to find me wearing what he affectionately referred to as, "The Tittie Tank."

After a brief straightening up of the room, I began my search for Edward. We had a spare bedroom that I'd fixed up into a studio for him after he'd voiced an interest in painting, so I figured I'd find him there.

It was empty.

He wasn't in the living room, either, a quick sweep of the hall uncovered sounds emerging from the guest bathroom. The door was cracked, so I didn't give any thought to pushing it open.

He was hunched over the toilet, his bare back rippling with gurgled heaves that splashed into the bowl.

"Oh no!" I cried as I went to him, tentatively rubbing his back as he vomited. I lamely asked, "Are you getting sick or something?" Once I'd said it, I rolled my eyes. *Duh*. I couldn't see his face, but his entire body was trembling, skin ashen.

It wasn't until I heard a small, faraway voice that I realized Edward's cell phone was sitting opened on the floor beside him.

I picked it up, asking, "Hello?"

It was Carlisle. "What's happening?" he asked, frantic.

I answered, "Edward's sick. I think he might be coming down with something." Again, with noting of obvious facts.

Edward remained silent with the exception of his strangled coughs as I patted his back sympathetically.

"He's not coming down with anything," Carlisle sighed. "I wanted to wait and tell him in person when you came down next week for Carmen, but he... I didn't even have to say the words, Bella, and he knew why I'd called. I'm so sorry."

"Sorry for what?" I asked, blanching.

Carlisle's answer was grim and quiet, but was emphasized by another round of violent heaving from Edward, "His mother passed away last night."

January

With the New Year came a sense of grey numbness. He didn't go to the funeral, and though I couldn't understand why, I respected his decision. Carlisle had promised that he'd used his connections in Chicago to ensure her a respectful ceremony, but it didn't seem to phase Edward any.

"Still not hungry?" I asked as I cleared my own plate, Edward's left untouched.

He simply gazed down at it with a vacant expression, replying, “No, not really.” He pushed himself away from the table.

After offering me a quick kiss as thanks for dinner, he disappeared into his studio, where I knew he’d be for the remainder of the night.

I don’t know why I didn’t see it coming. I’d planned for so much over our last year together. I had to anticipate the big events for the purpose of my therapy, but for some reason, Elizabeth Masen’s death wasn’t ever included in that list of possibilities.

I wasn’t expecting her to live forever. Maybe I’d just hoped that Edward would never know her fate, or maybe I’d just been selfish and had spent so long focused on my demons that I’d forgotten he had some of his own.

He hadn’t eaten a full meal since before that call. Sometimes, he’d pick at his food and nibble at it, only to rush to the bathroom minutes later and expel it. That particular issue was my main priority at the moment. If I could just get him to eat and keep it down, then I could start working on the other stuff.

I silently scraped the food from his plate to the trash can.

February

“Maybe he’d reconsider taking some time off from school and coming to stay here for a while,” Carlisle hoped.

I shook my head. “He’d never do it, and you know it.”

Carlisle agreed with a grudging nod.

I continued, “It’s sleep now, too,” as I sat before him on the stiff, leather sofa. “When it was just food, I felt like I could... I don’t know. I didn’t think I could fix it, per say, but it wasn’t overwhelming. Now, he isn’t sleeping, even when I hum to him, and it’s just—” I harrumphed in frustration, concluding, “It’s too big for me, Carlisle. Food and sleep—it’s what I do for him, and I can’t. He needs help.”

Carlisle sat slumped in the chair before me, elbows resting on his knees. “I’ll try to talk to him, but I can’t make any promises,” he said, eyes a hopelessly lost shade of blue.

“That’s just the worst of it,” I persisted, because my session with Carmen hadn’t been long enough and I needed to get it off my chest. I pulled at a loose thread on my frayed hoodie and continued, “He’s totally quiet. He’ll speak when spoken to, sometimes, but... it’s like he’s not

even there anymore. He goes to class and goes through the motions, but it's like a tape playing on repeat."

I'd lost my mother before, so I should have felt as though I offered some insight to the situation. But Edward was different. I felt guilt at not being able to save my mother, sure, but he was a different story.

In his mind, he'd *abandoned* her.

I couldn't even bring myself to tell Carlisle about the other things that worried me. I felt ashamed for being selfish and wanting my boyfriend back, for wanting his kisses and affection and conversation. Some ridiculous portion of my mind had thought that I'd be different, that I'd be exempt from his distant behavior.

"We'll give him a week," Carlisle decided with a comforting, yet sad smile. "If he's still not eating or sleeping, then I'll just have to intervene. Sound good?"

I left the house with a feeling of helplessness.

March

There were two missing pieces of bread.

Call me crazy for counting, but I had, and I was left standing before the breadbox with a frantic expression. *What if I'd miscounted? What if he'd made a sandwich for a guest? What if he'd tried to make himself one, but had ended up vomiting it up?*

When he walked in the door that evening, he didn't look much different. He had circles around his eyes and his lips were dry when he kissed me on the cheek. His face was still just as sunken. His skin was still just as pale.

"Did you eat today?" I blurted before he could disappear into his studio.

He blinked at me, eyes flitting toward the kitchen. "I had like... half a sandwich for lunch."

I wanted to ask him whether or not he'd kept it down, but that felt overbearing of me, and I wasn't sure I even wanted to know the answer. I was too excited. "You think it's helping?" I asked.

He shrugged and scratched at his jaw, looking away. "I don't know," he answered awkwardly, adding in a hushed whisper, "Maybe." He stood there for a moment as I restrained my inner squealing.

"If you want something later, you'll tell me?" I beseeched, thrilled at the prospect of preparing him a dinner.

He nodded and peeked at me through his lashes before once again darting his eyes to his shoes. He looked bashful as he shuffled to where I stood, halting to press a soft kiss to my forehead, arms wrapping around my shoulders.

"Thanks for being so patient," he whispered, running his fingers through my hair. It was the most he'd touched me without solicitation in months. "I know it's a pain in the ass, but... I think this is really helping and maybe shit'll start looking up." His small grin as he pulled away was further proof that his words were true.

That night before coming to bed, I took my medication, and Edward took his.

April

"I need a bra," Jasper declared as he stood in our living room, a severe quirk of his brow conveying his seriousness.

Edward sighed from the sofa as he flipped through channels, "Too easy."

"What?" I asked.

Jasper shifted to one side and huffed, explaining "There's a very important water balloon sling-shotting war going on over at the dorms and Alice is bra-blocking me. You're my only chick friend, so naturally, there has to be some kind of bra-allowance in our relationship. I provide you with funny Edward-was-a-douche-back-when stories, you provide me with undergarments. This is some pretty simple shit, Bella."

"I'm not giving you a bra, Jasper."

Jasper gaped at me before turning to Edward, imploring with desperation, "Dude, why in hell's fuck are you just *sitting* there? Did you not just hear me use the words 'water balloon sling-shot' and 'bra' in the same sentence? This can't be missed. Talk some sense into your woman."

Edward was silent for so long that Jasper flicked his gaze to me, expression gradually darkening. I knew what he was doing, so I offered him a grateful but cheerless smile. The atmosphere of the room grew uncomfortable and thick, and Jasper's shoulders eventually fell in defeat.

Then Edward softly inquired, "Hey, don't you still have that white one with the fucked up clasp thing?" He turned to me with pursed lips.

"Uh," I stuttered and darted my gaze to Jasper, whose spirits I could practically see lift to the ceiling. "Fucked up clasp thing?" I asked dumbly.

He elaborated, shifting toward me with serious eyes, "Yeah, you know the one I can never get off because they get stuck and it annoys the shit out of me. Hold on." Without awaiting any answer, he arose from the sofa and disappeared into our bedroom.

Jasper and I beamed at one another.

May

"Did you put it on the right way?" Alice asked.

I cradled the phone between my ear and shoulder as I fiddled with the ribbons, nearly toppling over. "Well, Jesus, Alice. If I'd put it on right, I wouldn't be having this conversation," I hissed.

"I can't help you if I can't see it," she answered distractedly.

I swatted my hair from my face and cursed under my breath. "Can I just lose the fucking garter belt? Seriously, what does it even matter?" I was already throwing the piece of crap into the garbage can before she could reply.

I hung up the phone and fanned my face, which was heated and flushed. I couldn't believe I was about to do this. It seemed so shameless and... disrespectful. What if he wasn't ready? What if I pissed him off by even trying? How long was long enough? Had enough time passed?

We hadn't even so much as made out since he'd gotten that phone call from Carlisle. He offered me kisses on the lips or cheek or forehead, but it was never intimate. It was an enormous leap to even fathom that he'd be interested.

I was so lost and terrified as I emerged from the bathroom, throwing my hands up in the air with a roll of my eyes. "So, this seemed like a good idea this morning, but now I feel ridiculous," I explained bluntly. "Happy birthday."

Edward had always appreciated our "no bullshit" policy.

When I finally grew a pair and met his gaze, I found his wide eyes glued to my chest, the sheer material leaving nothing to the imagination.

"Damn," he breathed, slowly inclining to a sitting position. His hair had grown long enough that it was falling in his face again. He pushed it back, eyes unblinking. "It doesn't *look* ridiculous," he assured, finally meeting my eyes.

Relief flooded me as I crawled into the large bed, his dark eyes following my skin the entire way. He didn't appear offended or disinterested, which gave me the confidence necessary to not immediately dive beneath the blankets.

I was hesitant and uncertain as I kissed his lips, my reluctant pecks met with Edward's surprising enthusiasm. He dropped the sketch book he'd been occupied with to the floor and ran his hands along my barely-covered flesh. He broke away and brought his face to my breasts, gracing the space in between with a kiss as he fondled them in his hands.

I was already panting.

But then, slowly, his enthusiasm seemed to wane, and his caresses grew tentative. I looked to his face, which was entirely blank as he pulled away, running his fingers through his hair.

"Is it, uh..." He paused and looked down into his lap, the tips of his ear turning a startling red. "This is so unforgivably shitty of me, but can I take a rain check?"

My stomach plummeted as I hastily pulled the blankets over myself, willing my tears to remain unshed. "Yeah," I choked.

"It's not you," he promised, refusing to meet my gaze.

"It's okay," I assured half-heartedly. "I figure it'd be too soon. I should have known."

He argued, "It's not that I don't want to—"

But I disrupted, "Please, don't. It's fine. *Really.*" I offered him what I hoped was a convincing smile.

The next night, he stopped taking his medication.

August

"I'm not coming out, Alice, and you can't make me. Do it without me," I begged the last bit, banging my heated forehead against the wood of the door.

Her voice on the other side was muffled, yet still somehow came through the wood as a shriek. "Do it *without* you? We can't do it without you! Bella, please." And then I could almost hear her sigh as she pleaded, "Think of Esme."

Bitch. Pulling out the big guns.

"Esme will understand," I insisted, scratching one stocking-covered knee with the heel of my foot. "She... loves me...?" I smiled hopefully.

"You know what? Fine!" Alice muttered. Then I heard the sounds of her heels clicking against the floor outside, making my shoulders ease. I almost collapsed against the door in relief at her willing dismissal. She'd given in easier than I'd anticipated.

I took a moment to distract myself with the fancy etching in the doorknob, the intricate carvings of the wood surrounding every door and window, and then I felt guilty. Esme and Carlisle had spent so much money on this, and I was spoiling it. I knew I was being difficult, but my hands shook, my head felt fuzzy, and really, I couldn't be expected to do this, could I? Breathing came easier now that Alice had ceased her persistent coaxing, however the pervading shame of my petulance seemed to overcome my false sense of ease.

With a frown I pushed off the door and backed away, refusing to turn around and see myself in the mirror again.

I shook my head with vehemence.

No way was I doing that. *That* had sent me into a panic attack that had nearly made me pee myself. For some reason, I doubted that was why yellow dresses were chosen.

Unfortunately, before long I heard Alice's little clicking heels approaching the door again. I immediately tensed. More alarming was the dull thudding of shoes that seemed to follow and my ears perked toward the wood.

She wouldn't have...

"Bella?" I heard a low voice, concern palpable in his tone.

My jaw dropped as I gaped at the door and chose to momentarily disregard Edward. "Alice! How could you? Why can't you just leave it the hell alone?" My voice shook in fury and hurt and... more guilt. He couldn't be bothered with this, and I'd told her to just leave him be. Of course, if Alice ever listened to one fucking thing I said, I'd probably die of shock. I should have known better and just come out of the damn bathroom.

Wordlessly, Alice left, the clicks of her shoes fast and buoyant.

"Let me in?" he asked softly, jiggling the knob to the door.

Swallowing loudly, I grasped the handle and turned the lock, bowing my head as I stepped aside. He entered, and I couldn't meet his gaze when it opened, so ashamed for bothering him with my petty bullshit on this particular day.

"What's wrong?" he whispered, coming close enough that I could see his black shoes against the white floor. "You look so fucking beautiful, Bella. Please, don't be like this," he pleaded in this broken voice that automatically drew my eyes upward.

I wasn't surprised at what I saw there.

The skin under his eyes was an alarming purple, dark and drooping against his nearly chalky pallor. His dry lips were pale, set into a hard frown as his dark eyes searched mine. He was stunning in his tuxedo, and I'd never seen him so dressed up before. I wished that I could enjoy it and focus on the crisp lines hugging his body, but the effect was marred by his face, clean shaven for once but sallow and sunken. He'd lost weight over the summer, and it showed. I'd made him lasagna the night before, only to hear him vomiting it up before we'd gone to bed.

His tuxedo needed two additional fittings over the month to compensate.

My heart dropped as I felt my eyes heating, tears pushing at the back of my eyelids as I desperately fought them back. I didn't want him to see me cry. I shouldn't be the one crying. I was sick of being the comforted. I longed to be the comforter.

"It's just..." My voice cracked, and I had to look away from the dullness of his stare. "... very... revealing." I couldn't lie, and I couldn't get past my dress, all frills and lace and yellow that was meant to draw hundreds of eyes to the dip in my cleavage. I'd never been seen by so many in so little. Esme had even paid to have mine altered to make it less revealing, but it didn't help much. I felt like my nipples were about to pop out, the bra Alice had put me in designed to lift and lift and lift and squish.

An exasperated sigh escaped Edward's mouth, his hands coming up to grasp my shoulders as he spun me around. I squeezed my eyes closed, hugging my torso and going to my "special place." There, I was dressed in a large sweater of Edward's and a nice, comfy pair of jeans.

"Look," he ordered softly, sweeping my hair from my neck and resting his chin on my shoulder. The heat of him pressed against me and his delicate, electric hum drew my back to his chest, relaxing my muscles instinctively.

Feeling as though I couldn't possibly cause him further trouble, I obeyed his request and opened my eyes, meeting his green ones immediately. His coppery hair was hanging in his face, completely untamed. I was surprised that no one had made him slick it back or comb it down, but they probably hadn't wanted to bother him either—not since he'd completely reverted to how he had been, before the medication.

He simply gazed back at me, his long lashes grazing his brow as his hands slipped from my shoulders to my throat.

"Why is it," he asked in a whisper, holding my stare as his long fingers wandered to my collarbones, dipping his fingers around their caverns and causing me to shiver, "that I can tell you how fucking gorgeous you are every single day, and you never fucking believe a single word that comes out of my mouth...?" He halted his hand, cupping me and rubbing his thumb in an oddly affectionate fashion over my covered nipple.

It was really unfair. My breath stuttered and quickened, the red flesh of my chest heaving up and down as I gaped at him. It had been so long since he'd touched me like this. I was a bit stunned.

My eyes scanned the utter exhaustion of his expression, the hurt in his eyes, the weariness of his slouch, and I groaned in frustration. "This has nothing to do with insecurity," I promised, bringing my hand to his and holding it over my breast. His brows furrowed, eyes darting to my chest and back to my stare. "It's a very nice dress. If anything it... um... exaggerates my assets..." I trailed off, attempting to find a classy way of saying, "*My tits look good.*"

"So, what you're saying is..." His forehead creased further, and his eyes were once again on my chest. "You think it makes your tits look good?"

I sighed, rolling my eyes and wondering why I even bothered trying to be classy around Edward anymore. "Yes," I confirmed, blushing. "I think it makes my tits look good. Do you?" I asked, raising my eyebrows at my chest in the mirror.

His lips lifted into one of those impish smirks, and he gave me a squeeze. "Damn straight. Not that I don't like your tits anyway, but... you get to keep all that weird push-up shit, right?"

I laughed, pushing him away teasingly and savoring this rare moment of playfulness. It just wasn't like him nowadays. I'd missed seeing him smile and make crude tit jokes more than I'd even realized. It was worth the torture of the bra and humiliation of the frilly yellow dress to see it.

I knew this wouldn't last forever. I *hoped* this wouldn't last forever. Everyone kept telling me to give him time. That day by day, he'd begin eating more, sleeping more, smiling more, studying more—that time would heal his wounds, without the needs for chemicals.

Gripping my waist lightly, his smile fell, and he asked, "So what's with the lock-in?"

I inhaled a deep breath, hands wringing. "I'm just not used to so many people... *seeing* them..." Rationally, I realized that every pair of eyes attending the service wouldn't be fixed to my chest. That was far from being likely. However, I still felt undeniably uncomfortable with giving them the option.

Cocking his head to the side, Edward clarified, "That's it? You just don't want people staring at your tits?" I nodded, preparing myself for his inevitable eye roll and 'fuck what the world thinks'

speech, but was surprised to be given a relieved smile. "Oh, thank fucking God," he sighed, leaning to rest his back against the door. His eyes looked weary as he ducked his chin, muttering, "I'm not really a big fan of that shit either."

He stood in silence as my cleavage swelled and contracted with every breath, Edward fiddling with the hem of his jacket, staring intently at a loose thread.

Finally, his eyes snapped to mine, and he pushed off the wall, ordering, "Wait here, okay?" Before I could even respond, he had slipped out the door, closing it behind him and leaving me blinking in his wake.

I paced around the room, crossing my arms over my chest and praying that Esme wouldn't be upset with me. I'd tried so hard to suck it up and be normal, today of all days. Even at the fittings, I'd practiced self-affirmations and given the boutique owners a test-run by allowing them to see the cleavage. That had counted for something, and people had been proud of me.

What a waste...

The cleavage wasn't even my most difficult hurdle of the day. There was something much more important to me that was looming overhead, and possibly exacerbating my anxiety. Months prior, I'd been so fixated on seeing it through, but now... *well...*

There was no way I'd be able to hug Carlisle after the reception—not without Edward's help.

I figured he'd probably already forgotten about it anyway, and now, on top of setting a totally unreachable goal, I was now practically going backward in my recovery.

So lost was I in my silent, inner loathing, that I didn't hear Edward approaching the room. When the knob began turning, I panicked, lifting the hem of the top layer of my skirt up to my chin.

He gave me a curved eyebrow when he entered, holding a familiar lump of fabric beneath his arm.

My skirt fell with a stiff sway, every inch of my skin tingling in delight. "I can wear it!?" I exclaimed with glee while bouncing on my toes. My fingers itched to reach out and snatch it away from him, to feel the tattered fabric fragile and soft on my skin.

His smile was complacent as he came to me, my old black hoodie so inviting in his hands. I obligingly extended my arms as he carefully threaded my hands through, draping it securely over my back. To most people, I was certain it looked awful—all holes and frayed hems and loose threads and thinning edges—but to me, it just looked like comfort and second-skin.

I was only allotted a certain number of wears per month, and I'd shamefully already expended every single one, even though it was only the eighth day of the month. Edward was either

choosing to overlook it or hadn't even been keeping count. Either was a possibility. It didn't really matter to me, though.

"We'll just... zip it up..." he murmured, eyes focused as he battled with the difficult mechanism. He tugged and grunted in frustration when the zipper wouldn't slide, before coming to stand behind me for a better angle. With a swift yank, a resounding and glorious *zzzziiipppp* echoed through the room. I sighed in contentment.

There was a smile in his voice as he secured the old material below my chin, "That's right. Make them all fucking cozy and hidden." He pulled and manipulated the material until it was just so, finishing with an appreciative nod as he assessed me. "There. Esme won't give a shit."

"Thanks," I replied distractedly, occupied with hugging myself and finally being able to enjoy the way in which the lush fabric of the skirt swayed elegantly around my legs.

Who says dresses can't have hoods?

"Ready?" he ultimately prepared, voice once again somber and detached as he held the door for me. I tried not to regard his expression as I passed and raised my hood, but a quick glance from my periphery told me that our rare interaction hadn't changed anything.



We didn't stand with them. Alice stood beside Esme, Emmett stood beside Carlisle, and Edward and I sat in the first row, slouched and focused. We were meant to stand with them, truly, but I was anxious, and Edward was stoic, and we were ruining their happy day. I'd have none of it.

I watched their faces—their smiles—and I knew they would both be okay. Poor Carlisle had been so nervous all week that he looked positively drained, shoulders a little low, eyes a little swollen, cheeks a little sunken. Esme hadn't been much better. She'd kept asking us if we thought she'd be making a huge mistake by doing this. Of course, Alice and I had rolled our eyes and told her to "shut up and wax your legs."

Esme wasn't a perfect woman, and Carlisle wasn't a perfect man, but despite all the anxiety and bickering and paper-white expressions, they looked radiant and thrilled at that moment as they stood and exchanged vows.

Yeah, it was a little sickening.

Edward's arm was draped across the back of the pew behind me as he splayed his legs, lounging comfortably. His other hand was shoved into his pocket, and he was chewing on a piece of gum, sharp jaw flexing and stretching with each gnaw.

His eyes lurched to mine and lingered, jaw stilling. I wanted so badly for him to say something about it as his green eyes stared into mine intensely. I wanted him to acknowledge the moment and display even a modicum of longing for *this*. I wanted him to tell me that we made each other perfect, just like Carlisle and Esme, and that nothing could ever come between us. I wanted him to tell me it'd be us some day, that he'd stand before all our family and friends and make those vows.

For better or for bullshit...

His jaw began moving once again, and he severed our gaze with an abruptness that pierced me. My chest constricted and I struggled not to grasp my stomach and curl into myself. The moment was left with this uncomfortable, grey air of resignation. He had to have felt it, had to have seen it in my eyes and in the anticipative catch of my breath.

When his hand found my shoulder and softly grasped it, it felt much like consolation, a hint of apology, and guilt.

Always guilt.

I waited for the officiant's "I now pronounce you," and then the kiss, and then their turn, before I promptly fled Edward's side.

I was grateful for my duty to prepare the cake as I exited through church doors, slipping off my heels in frustration. I ran through the churchyard toward the neighboring banquet hall, though everyone else was surely driving. The grass was dewy and cold between my stocking-covered toes. The wind was biting and prickled my cheeks, my hair flopping lifelessly where it peeked from my hood. I realized belatedly that my cheeks were wet with tears, and I pushed my feet faster, the frilly skirt of my dress impeding my legs.

I wanted to keep running—running away from that moment during the ceremony—running away from Edward's eyes, green and exhausted and lost—running away from uneaten meals and the silence of our bedroom—running away from the last eight months.

I wanted to be the one to run first, this time.

Five minutes later, I arrived at the banquet hall, panting. The bottom of my dress was soaked, blades of grass and specks of soil sully the pristine, yellow fabric. I braced my hands on my knees and bent forward, willing the last of my sobs to dissipate so that I could salvage the day for Esme's sake. I purged the cries from my body, cramming months' worth of anguish into the expedited span of a minute. I lacked the catharsis of sobbing freely, of making them weighty and significant, of experiencing the numbness that would usually come after such an outburst.

With a steeling breath that pushed my bodice painfully into my skin, I wiped my tears and sniffled until I was certain my nose wouldn't run. Confident that I could pass off the puffy eyes

as the result of “happy tears,” I entered the hall and started toward the promising comfort of a cold, stainless steel kitchen.



I saw her running through the grass, that ridiculous fucking dress flapping and thrashing around her clumsy legs. I was afraid she might fall, so I didn't take the car like I'd planned. I followed at a languid pace, eyes always on her back, waiting for her to slip, and thanking fucking God when she didn't.

She hunched over when she reached the back door. At first I didn't see it, but the closer I got, the more obvious it became that she was crying. I mean, it wasn't that much of a shock to me. She had to have run out after the service and through wet grass barefoot for a reason. There was also the fact that she hadn't been happy in... *months*.

That was a pretty big flashing sign.

I shifted from foot to foot in the grass as I contemplated whether or not I should go to her. It didn't take a fucking rocket scientist to figure out who'd caused all that pain in the first place, though. She didn't need me or my coldness there, making it worse.

So I just waited.

It was a little fascinating to watch, as most people were when they believed they were alone. Bella cried like a falling tree—like it was plummeting so slow and silent through the air, and even though I could see it coming and knew the crash was just *right fucking there*, the sounds of destruction and the tremors beneath my feet still stole the breath from my lungs.

I tugged at my collar as I looked away and tried to inhale—as if that were even possible. I knelt down and swallowed the air, willed my lungs to expand and contract and stop suffocating me. I clutched my knees and mirrored her pose, because we were tit for fucking tat, and when she fell, so did I.

But I'd fallen first, and that was the reason she was falling now, because that shit went both ways.

I'd seen it, sure. I'd known what I was doing, the damage I was causing. I could see it in her eyes every day when I'd refuse to eat or sleep. I thought I'd seen the worse that night three months prior, when she'd come to bed in something that looked held together by two meager strips of

lace. I thought I couldn't possibly see her as devastated as I had that night when I'd rebuffed her blatant attempt at seduction.

Christ, she'd given me months before even trying, and I had to give her credit for that. I was grateful for her patience, but the truth of the matter was that time didn't heal shit. I was so fucking sick of hearing that.

"It'll never go away, but it'll get better," Carlisle had said.

Yeah fucking right.

I wanted to know *when* it'd get better. I was fed the fuck up with all of it. The only purpose waiting had served to accomplish was a sense of false hope. It'd never get better, I'd always be just a little dead inside, Bella would always fall because of it, and I'd never be able to catch her because I was too fucking busy trying to catch myself.

When she finally ducked inside, I straightened in relief, regarding the expanse between the church and banquet hall with empty eyes. I waited out there, in the in-between, long enough for every guest to have made the voyage to the reception. The sky was beginning to darken, and it was freezing balls, but I waited until the sun had set before I started toward the doors.

Everyone was so dressed up and disgustingly fucking happy that I had to stifle a sneer. My stomach was killing me. My joints were aching. My head was pounding. My entire brain felt like mush. My eyes stung. My insides felt like they were decaying, bit by bit, organ by organ. My blood felt thick and murky and I couldn't fucking wait to just... *go home*—home to Seattle, to me and my girl's apartment and all of our unspoken words and silent resentment.

At least when I was there, the surroundings felt appropriate.

"You missing something?" I looked to the voice from my side and found Jasper standing coolly against the arch to dining room. His hair was pulled back, longer now, and his hands were full.

"Nice purse, Jazzica." I quirked a brow, nodding to the little black clutch purse he had shoved beneath his arm. "It really compliments the ensemble."

He rolled his eyes, but covertly nestled it further into the cover of his jacket with a scowl. "Fucking riot, you are. My *fiancé* needed to go to the car for a second, so I'm being a gentleman or some shit," he retorted, eyes all fucking narrow and smug. Esme and Carlisle's wedding crap had been totally girl-infectious. Alice had gotten so swept up in the concept that Jazz had eventually gotten the hint and proposed.

Well... kind of sort of.

Actually, he'd had eight shots of tequila and had panicked after a particularly gruesome round of vomiting, "*I'm dying, guys. Fucking dying. I'm never going to get married, or learn Klingon, or break the world record for most spoons balanced on my face...*" Of course, this was followed by a slurred promise to fulfill all three lifelong goals.

He was up to three spoons, and even though he'd only bothered to learn obscenities in Klingon, he had followed through on his promise to propose to Alice.

Rosalie and Emmett, having been bitten by the wedding bug, too, had already gotten married a month prior. I think Rosalie just had to go first, impatient little wench she was. The fact that she was already knocked the fuck up may have expedited things a little, too.

Fucking idiots.

I sighed and rubbed at my forehead, the source of a pulsating ache, forcing my eyes closed. I wondered, "Is it time to eat yet?" I figured I should get something down, maybe a little sugar or caffeine, to at least make my headache go away.

Jasper shrugged in response. "Why don't you ask your girl?" he replied, and then in a lower voice that I chose to ignore, added, "*Or lack thereof...*"

I cautioned a glance into the room before us. "She's probably in the kitchen," I deduced. She'd been freakishly distracted by catering plans for the past two months.

The timing of this wasn't lost on me.

His hum was annoyingly suspicious as he shifted to one side, assessing me with those all-fucking-knowing eyes. "Actually, she's sitting over there in the corner." He nodded his head in the direction of the dining hall and my gaze followed. He added, "You can't miss her. She's the one in the black hoodie who looks like her boyfriend just spent the last year acting like a total piece of shit."

Of course, when I finally spotted her, I completely disagreed. I wasn't a piece of shit, I was a whole shit. Like... a big steaming pile of it, too. Maybe a few piles. Maybe I was even a collective lifetime of shit. Yeah, that sounded about right. To most motherfuckers, that would have been a really big insult, and would have likely resulted in physical violence. But, Jasper—prick that he was—was only stating the obvious.

So I just nodded. "Yeah." I shoved my hands into my pockets and inspected the toes of my shoes, all dirty and lacking the appropriate "wedding shoe" luster.

Jasper wasn't done. "You don't deserve her," he declared, lips pursed in contemplation before he nodded, looking away. The way he said it was so fucking factual and simple, like saying the sky was blue.

I shook my head. "Nope."

He continued, "You're not good enough."

"Not even a little bit."

He began laughing then, all toothy grin and purse clutched to his bouncing stomach. "You really get off on this, don't you, you sick fuck?"

I rolled my eyes, finally snapping, "Yeah, Jazz. It's a real hoot."

I left him there in the entryway with his clutch purse and his arrogance, because Jazz thought he knew me, and maybe he did, but he didn't *understand* me. Only one person truly understood me, and she was sitting alone in a corner, with her head resting on her folded arms, eyes fatigued, brow angry, lips a thin line that told a silent story of "*I hate my fucking life.*"

"Mind?" I asked, chancing a weak smile and gesturing to the chair at her side. I don't know what I was expecting. Maybe I was waiting for her to finally get fed up and tell me to pack my shit. It couldn't be much longer before she did. How much of my sorry bullshit would she take?

Instead, she simply nodded and sat up, fiddling with an extravagantly thick cocktail napkin.

An uncomfortable silence stretched between us as we stared over the dance floor. Carlisle's colleagues were all old dudes who were attempting to do... *something*. I wouldn't call it dancing, because it wasn't. It looked more like they were trying to jack off without using their hands.

"You hungry?" Bella asked without sparing me a glance. Her voice was even, but clearly detached. I supposed she was probably expecting me to say no, but...

"Yeah, actually." I puffed out a hard sigh, knee bouncing as I elaborated, "I'm fucking *starving*." And I really was, which was a little unexpected.

Her head swiveled to meet my gaze so sharply that her hood fell halfway from her head. Her lips were pursed into a stunned 'o', eyes wide. "Really?" she asked, and at my enthusiastic nod, straightened. She began picking at the ends of her sleeves, folding them around her fists as she offered, "There's beef. And chicken. And some seafood, but I know how you feel about shellfish." She sucked in a small breath and was visibly holding it, shoulders high, eyes cautious.

I was admittedly taken aback by her reaction. Had I really been that bad? So bad that even the thought of me wanting food without the aid of chemical intervention was a big fucking deal? *Yeah, probably.*

"Oh," I breathed in half realization, half acknowledgment. "Eh, beef?" I hedged, then thought better of it when my stomach churned. I narrowed my eyes at this, pondering, "Chicken?" When my body gave no immediately disgusted response, I sighed in relief, nodding. "I can handle some chicken."

She was literally gone before I could even finish my sentence. I watched her back as she plowed through the crowd, so fucking brave and unrelenting. I watched as Dr. Corbet did his totally-fucking-smooth jacking-off-without-hands dance routine and proceeded to bump into her as she passed. He muttered a swift apology, but she didn't even pause.

My girl was getting so good at that shit.

Her progress never ceased to amaze me. Our first year of college had been shockingly fruitful for her recovery. It seemed like she'd hit a new goal every month. Now, however, she was on what Dr. Carmen liked to refer to as "a plateau," which basically meant that progress was slower than two snails fucking—especially now that her issues weren't even at the forefront of our problems anymore.

Still, it was almost hard to believe she'd ever been so bad off that she couldn't even sit in a chair next to Emmett. I was surprised to find that it didn't bother me nearly as much as I'd expected. Sure, she could probably move on to some other motherfucker. She probably *should* move on to some other motherfucker. But you know what? If moving on was what made her happy, then I'd just had to deal with that shit, because as much as I *wanted* her to be mine, I *needed* her to be happy, which was something I failed to make her.

Two minutes later, I could see her plowing through the crowd toward me once again, chin high, eyes determined, all black and yellow like some adorable little bumble bee.

She set a plate of food in front of me, settled herself in her seat, and then she just... waited.

"Aren't you gonna eat?" I asked, a little anxious at being watched while I ate. I mean, I used to find that shit really cute, but it was kind of a big deal, and if I was just gonna hurl it all up in the next ten minutes, I'd rather be saved the inevitable humiliation I usually felt whenever she watched my sorry ass slumped over a toilet bowl.

"I ate," she insisted, hands all bundled up in her hoodie sleeves and clasped in her lap.

With a nervous breath, I regarded the plate with wary eyes. It looked good, which was promising. She'd given me too much, and I assessed it with trepidation, swallowing as I reached for my fork.

The first bite was the hardest. It felt awkward in my mouth, and the texture, though distantly familiar, felt alien to my tongue. Bella bit her lip anxiously as I chugged it down with a cup of cold water. The second bite was a little better, and the third bite was bordering on almost-

decent. With every one, her shoulders eased a little more and those crinkled, tight lines around her eyes began to smooth away. But this was how it usually was for me.

I never ate to sustain myself.

I ate to sustain her.

It usually came back up.

This time was a little different, though. I was sincerely fucking starving, and with each bite, she might have eased, but with each bite, I stopped taking note of her reactions and just... *wanted*. I wanted *more*. And it wasn't so awful. It hit my stomach uncomfortably, but maybe next time—*God, I hoped there was a next time*—it would be a little better.

Fuck me, maybe Carlisle was right.

I ate everything. I ate the chicken off the bone and the potatoes and the... weird... salad-y-looking shit that I didn't even know the name of, and by the time I'd finished, I was pretty sure it'd been *good*—not awesome or “fucking delicious” because I wasn't sure anything could ever taste fucking delicious again—but it was good. Good was something. Good was definite progress. And it was progress I'd made on my own.

Bella was fucking *glowing*. "Do you want another plate?" she asked, though it sounded more like hopeful begging. Her excitement was visible as she leaned toward me, wringing her hands, a smile hiding beneath the twitches of her cheeks.

Deciding to err on the side of caution, I declined a second a helping. I sat back in my seat, feeling full in the most insignificant of ways, and waited for the nausea to come. I didn't deserve to enjoy food like that. I didn't deserve to be invited to this fancy fucking party or meet all these fancy fucking people. I didn't deserve my girl, Jazz was right about that. I didn't deserve my family—at least, not the ones that would have me. I didn't deserve our apartment or that room Bella had converted into a studio for my art or my tuition or the Claddagh ring on my finger or her lips against mine or the shoes on my feet or that piece of goddamn chicken.

I could feel it coming up, and I mashed my lips shut, eyes scanning for the nearest exit as my knee continued bouncing, vibrating the contents of my stomach. Bella's eyes widened, and I so fucking desperately wanted to keep it down for her sake, more than anything, but I didn't think I could. Her lip trembled and her eyes began to water, and I could tell that she was like... *this fucking close* to just saying *fuck it all*.

But then she blurted the only thing on this entire earth that could have possibly distracted me.

"Those old dudes look like total spazzes, huh? Like... like they're trying to whack off without using their hands or something." Her laughter was strained and undeniably forced, but my knee stilled and my eyebrows rose, and I...

I laughed too. "No shit? I was just thinking the same thing."

Laughter felt foreign and a little fucking creepy, and she looked at me like I'd grown a second head, but for the first time in months, I'd eaten a whole meal unmedicated, and I wasn't hurling it all up. Maybe I was just getting over my own plateau, and just like my girl, progress was really slow—*slower than two snails's fucking*.

But there was some optimism in that sentiment.

After all, there were a *shitload* of snails in Forks.



I felt so much better as we made the drive home. My head wasn't hurting anymore, and even though I was still exhausted, I felt like my brain could finally function. It was amazing how much difference a simple meal could make. Unfortunately, this made me feel as though I'd forgotten something. It seemed important, but the more I failed to remember what it was, the more I figured it must not have been that important at all.

Still, it was really fucking nagging at me.

I went over a mental checklist as I sped toward Carlisle's house. All of us "kids" were staying there while he and Esme went on their honeymoon, partly for the purpose of keeping the house safe, but mostly because Emmett was gonna be a dad in five months, and that dumbass wanted to throw a party and go out with a bang, just like old times.

Bella was silent in the seat next to me, staring out into the blackness of the forest as it whizzed by. Her mood had improved a little after I'd eaten, but for some reason, as soon as we left the reception, she got all fucking quiet and sullen once again.

"What's up?" I asked, breaking the silence with a nervous sigh. Shit had been going so well, and though I'd usually let her sort her shit out without prodding like that, I wanted the lightness back that we'd left at that fucking dinner table among empty plates and shredded cocktail napkins. I'd done something right then, and I was fumbling to keep my grasp on it.

She shrugged. "Nothing." Then she met my gaze for a moment and pulled her lips up into a grin that was almost buyable. Before I could voice my objection, she began rambling, "Can you believe they're going to an island? Carlisle's one helluva smooth operator." She giggled weakly before turning back to window.

"Yeah, cheesy fucker probably had that shit planned out years ago." I snorted.

She offered a soft, "Mmhm," in response.

And, okay, I wasn't the smartest motherfucker ever born, but I could put two and two together: I'd forgotten something, and Bella was acting quiet and distant. She knew what it was. It'd probably pissed her off. Why she wouldn't just come out and tell me what it was, I didn't fucking know.

That was a little something I'd learned about females since Bella, Alice, and Esme had entered our lives. They didn't want to *remind* you to do shit. Somehow, they wanted you to miraculously keep tabs on dates and anniversaries and favorite colors and "special bras" that "weren't meant to be used for water balloon sling-shotting."

Yeah, well I wasn't a fucking mind reader.

"Can we not do this?" I implored, possibly a little more frustrated than necessary. "Just tell me what I fucked up back there so I can cut the shit and start making it better." I looked to her with a huff, my grip tightening around the steering wheel.

She met my gaze, and she likely realized that this was one of our trademark "no bullshit" moments, because her shoulders got all tense and her cheeks turned pink. "It's really stupid," she whispered, timid as she diverted her stare to her hands.

I argued, "If it was 'really stupid' you wouldn't be acting all.... however it is you're acting. No bullshit, remember?"

The silence that ensued only served to frustrate me further and I was tired and it'd been a long fucking day and I just wanted to lie down and—

"I didn't get to hug Carlisle."

The car lurched us forward as my foot stomped the brake, Bella's hands flying out to catch herself on the dashboard as I cursed, "Fuck! Fuck, fuck, fuck..." I continued chanting as I pulled over and whipped out my cell phone, hoping I had enough time to catch them, and seriously doubting I did.

"Don't bother them!" she cried as I began dialing, to which I merely scoffed. She fiddled in her seat and her face was all tight and worried and guilty and... *fuck, fuck, fuck.*

I should have *remembered*.

"Where are you at?" I asked as soon as Esme answered, ignoring Bella's hushed protests.

"About to cross the county line. Why?"

I tugged at my hair and ordered, "Uhh, just... pull over and stay there until we come, okay?"

Bella's embarrassment was evident as we sped to the county line, one fingertip between my lips as I gnawed a nail painfully fucking low. *This* was the shit that I used to have a hold on before everything went to shit. I'd kept such close track of her goals and progress, and I'd made *charts*. *That* was how devoted I'd once been, and now... I couldn't even remember the biggest goal of her entire year?

Christ, I had to pull my shit together.

Esme and Carlisle looked confused as we screeched to a halt beside their car, both emerging with matching, troubled expressions.

I hastily explained, "I forgot the fucking hug!" I must have looked irate as I rounded the car in a sprint and bounced on my heels, because all of them were staring at me with wide eyes. When Esme and Carlisle both started toward me, arms outstretched, I snapped, "Not me! Her!"

She looked so tiny and mortified as she stood awkwardly beside the Volvo, toeing her calf and wringing her hands. "It's no big deal," she repeated, blushing.

"Bullshit," I argued, ordering, "Lets do this."

So it was on the side of a dark and creepy road, just south of the Clallam county line, that the four of us stood, for forty-five minutes, while I inched Bella closer and closer to Carlisle Cullen—the man who had dedicated himself to a completely fucking selfless act of fathering four children that he didn't even experience the pleasure of conceiving, no matter the weird and terribly ridiculous shit that particular title entailed.

Seeing his arms around my girl became one of those moments that I'd look back on with equal parts joy and shame. Joy, because it was obviously a big achievement for Bella, and shame, because that opportunity had always been wide open for me, and I'd squandered it away.

And really, *that* was the kind of shit I should have felt guilty about. That was something that could be helped, something that I could fix if I'd just pull my head outta my ass for a second.

So when Bella had disentangled herself from his arms, lips pulled into a bashful yet accomplished grin, I hugged him too.

When I pulled away, the tips of my ears felt aflame, but I told him to be safe, and I called him "Dad," and it was cheesy as fuck all, and I automatically deducted a shitton of cool points for myself, because really, I didn't have to lay it on so thick, and if Jazzica could have seen me, I never would have heard the end of it.

But I'd no longer look back on that moment with joy and shame.

I'd just look back on it and see Carlisle beaming at us as we drove away, to the house he'd made our home.



I groaned as soon as we pulled into the driveway.

Oh, this is fucked.

Was it so much to ask? I just wanted to go up to my old room, collapse onto my bed, wrap myself around my girl and try to get some goddamn sleep. But, no. That'd be too fucking easy, of course. My day of epic assbattery wouldn't be complete without Emmett inviting every single person that attended the reception below the age of twenty six over to trash the place.

"I figured he'd wait a couple days," Bella remarked as we exited, the booming of a bass beat vibrating the windows.

I rolled my eyes before looking up to the dark windows of the third floor longingly. "So much for relaxing..." We shared an exhausted glance before Bella suddenly perked.

"We can go out back," she declared, grabbing my hand and dragging me around the house. It was actually a little cold, and though she had her hoodie and I had my full tux, I was still pissed off about it. "I've been really looking forward to spending some time out here, you know? Just like old—" Her halt was so sudden that I almost collided with her back. "What the *fuck* happened to the gazebo?" she gasped.

I looked forward, assessed the overgrown structure, and raked my fingers through my hair, shrugging. "They've probably been really busy."

Bella was not placated. She stomped up the small platform and stood before the table where we'd once sat, palms up, eyes wounded. "It looks *awful*!" she lamented, spinning in place. "Look at all this—" she paused and yanked a creeping vine, clutching and shaking it in her fist. "*—shit*." I couldn't discern whether she was just really pissed off or seriously about to cry.

I frowned but ultimately collapsed onto the bench, the table at my back as I rested against it. "It's practically fall," I reasoned. "I bet they spruce it up in the spring or some shit."

My efforts at consolation were flattened by the exhaustion of my voice and the slump of my shoulders.

Bella grimaced, taking her place at my side. "I'm being all girly and sentimental, huh?" She looked down at the dried vine, picking leaves from it.

I simply shook my head in response and tried to drown out the sounds of the music emanating from the house before us. I could faintly hear the river at our back, lulling and soothing like a lullaby and... *fuckin' great*. I scrubbed a palm over my face but dropped my chin to my chest, figuring that I could... just rest my eyes. For a little bit.

Bella's whisper awoke me from a barely-there slumber, "Can we do 'no bullshit' again?" When I raised my head, she was straddling the bench, her dress all bunched up between us.

I nodded.

She was gnawing on her bottom lip, eyes narrowed as they scrutinized me. "Do you regret it?" she asked, so softly that I had to strain my ears to hear it.

I blinked, wondering, "Regret what?" but instead of clarifying, she wrapped her arms around her torso and waited. It took close glances at her terrified expression to decipher the meaning, but when it finally dawned on me, it was like being hit in the stomach.

By a truck.

When I found my voice, I hissed, "Why the fuck would you even have to ask?" I knew I'd been a fuck-up lately, but I'd never regret having Bella. That she could even entertain the notion made me sick.

Her head shook slowly as she pondered, "What else am I supposed to think? Maybe if you'd stayed, you'd be happy. I mean... all I have is what you show me, and..." She trailed off, breaking our gaze. "You have no idea how much I worry about you."

"I ate today," I quickly noted, even though I knew I was grasping at straws.

She nodded, insisting, "I know, and I'm not saying it wasn't a big deal. I just..."

When she didn't continue, I softly reminded, "No bullshit, right?"

She raised her eyes to mine then, shame apparent in the slating of her brows. "I feel so selfish for bringing this up," she worried, fisting a thick palm-full of yellow tulle in her hands. "*You* may be getting better, fundamentally, but you and me, we're still so... up in the air." She emphasized this with a flustered toss of her hands.

My teeth clenched and I struggled to loosen my jaw enough to venture a stiff, "We're up in the air?"

She sheepishly expounded, "What you show me, remember?"

"I want to be better for you," I hastily promised, pivoting toward her.

Her smile was sad—piteous—and she grazed my taut knuckles with the back of her fingers. "I know."

I continued in a rush, "It's just really fucked up and... *Christ*, I'm sorry. I fucking promised myself and everyone else—even *her*—that I'd make the best of this." My hand went to my hair and I tugged a thick fist-full in frustration, concluding, "And I know I'm not, but I can't help it. This—this feeling, it never goes away. I know it's not rational to blame myself, but I *can't* be rational. I try, Bella. I swear to fucking God, I do, but then I remember how I just left her there to rot, and it—"

Her eyes flashed in annoyance as she raised her chin, asking sharply, "So is guilt stopping you from touching me, too?" Her nostrils flared, and to the common observer, she probably seemed really pissed. But I knew my girl better than that. Her forehead creased, and her breaths were shallow, and I knew her insecurity like the back of my fucking hand.

Just when I thought I couldn't get any more mortified... "That's not even fair," I defended, chest tight as I offered a clipped, "You know why we can't... do *that*..." *God*, I hoped she'd drop it. Of all the fucked up, totally emasculating arguments, she had to pick this one with me, today of all days.

I'd *eaten*. What the hell ever happened to baby steps?

"You're a liar!" She spat. I sat stunned while she fumed at me, "What happened to no bullshit? You stopped taking the anti-depressants last month." Little puffs of steam tumbled from her lips.

I could feel the heat radiating from my neck as my lips tightened. My skin buzzed with embarrassment, and I battled to hide my body's reaction—not because it gave away my dishonesty, but because I'd already lost enough dignity for one lifetime.

I hadn't given much thought to trying the anti-depressants at the time. I'd been unable to eat or sleep, and it seemed like an easy fix, and it really was. For a long while, shit had been close to normal. But there were... *side-effects*. It didn't really matter at first that the teenaged hormonal motherfucker was disturbingly M.I.A. The farthest thing from my mind at the time had been getting my dick hard.

That sentiment had faded the same night Bella had tried to seduce me to no avail. Seriously, there was nothing more utterly fucking humiliating than a limp dick in the face of scantily clad tits. I'd promptly said "*fuck that*" and stopped taking them, which had proven to be completely pointless, because even though I could now *physically* perform, my mind wasn't really in the game, so to speak.

"Can we talk about this later?" I pleaded, palming my forehead.

She moved to stand between my legs. "Is it weird or something?" she softly inquired, clutching at her sleeves. I met her gaze and shrugged, unable to explain when my mouth opened. Reluctantly, she added, "Is it something... *I'm* doing? Or *not* doing?" She batted the tears from her lashes, and even though she wasn't requesting anything, she sounded so much like she was begging me.

I shook my head vehemently as I gazed up at her. "No," I choked, barely a whisper.

"Then what?" she cried, but before I could organize my thoughts and form a coherent explanation, her mouth met mine. "Won't you try?" she whispered against my lips, kissing me tentatively.

I stiffened, mumbling, "Here?"

"Why not?" she asked, moving and shifting her dress as she straddled my lap. Her mouth was dominant against mine, forcing her tongue through the crease of my lips, and it was nice, but it *was* weird. As much as I wished there was some kind of definite time-frame for when it'd start being okay to want something like this again—her weight in my lap, her tongue soft and hot against mine—there wasn't. As a result, it just felt so fucking inappropriate.

"It's freezing," I deadpanned, pulling away. Little tendrils of steam billowed between us and she sucked her lips into her mouth, eyes a dejected brown. Before she could get that same defeated, devastated expression as I'd seen that night a month prior, I grasped her hand and cautioned a glance toward the house as I pressed her palm to my crotch, gulping.

I couldn't fucking believe I was doing this shit.

"Just... eh, rub it a little?" I guided her hand, and we each looked down into my lap as she moved against me, as if we were both waiting for some audible *boing* noise or some shit.

And then there was suddenly all this anxiety and pressure and *more* anxiety, and I literally *had* to do it, which made it *impossible* to do it, which kind of made me hate my dick a little, and I was pretty sure it was holding that against me, which made me wonder why I hadn't been a little nicer to my dick in the first place.

I closed my eyes and tried to envision every single arousing image I'd ever known, chanting in my head, "*Please, please, please get hard...*" Bella began sucking on my neck, her mouth hot and wet against my skin. She nibbled my earlobe and I nodded in approval, praising, "Yeah, I like that." Her tongue traced the shell of my ear, and I tried to imagine that lacey thing she'd come to bed in that night a month ago.

She'd looked so fucking good with her ass peeking out of that little nightgown thing, and the chest—*my God*, the chest. Her tits had been completely visible through the lace, all flushed and

soft and inviting and warm. I'd buried my face in between them in a weak attempt to humor her at the time, but looking back on it now, it'd been pretty hot.

Pretty motherfucking hot.

"Oh," she gasped into my neck, hand stilling and tightening around me. She pulled back to meet my gaze, but I pulled at her hoodie, peeking nervously toward the yard.

"Lemme' see your tits," I requested lowly.

She tugged the zipper down hastily, reaching for the back of the dress and shifting to one side. She yanked and pulled and eventually tried to slip the shoulders down, and I could feel myself losing it.

"Fuck this piece of shit," I cursed, forcing my hands into her cleavage and cupping her breasts. With a coaxing tug, I had them spilling out over the dress's top. I licked my lips as I felt their weight in my hand, eventually ducking my head to run my tongue across one, rosy, pert nipple.

Bella released a breathy moan in approval and released my crotch, instead opting to rock herself against my *very* proud erection. She captured my lips and spoke between our smacking kisses, "We don't really have to do this now, you know. I was just being impulsive and selfish."

I released her lips and huffed a misty breath while wrestling with the button to my pants. "It's hard *now*. Gotta do something with it," I replied, mildly irritated.

She winced, offering a soft and timid, "Sorry," as she lifted to accommodate my reach. I eventually worked myself free of something called a "cummerbund," whose name was hopefully about to become very fucking fitting.

I pulled myself from my pants and then began the task of diving into her dress's horrific amount of yellow tulle to find her panties. I was elbow deep in the shit, trying to sweep it all away as I cursed the frigidity of the air. She bit her lip and shifted her hips until my fingers touched soft lace, opting to simply shove it to the side.

Our eyes met as we began lining shit up, and then there was that moment right before, where we held an intense gaze and panted in anticipation, savoring, and then dropping, and then pushing, and then...

My palm met the table behind me with a sharp *thwack* as I released a hissed, "Shhhhhhit." Our faces contorted at the same moment, brows pinched, noses all fucking wrinkled, teeth marking lips with satisfied indentations.

Damn, eight months was a long time...

I pressed my fingertips into the wood and just dropped my head back. She opened her mouth against my throat to suck on the skin there as she began lifting and dropping to her content. I watched errant clouds of breath escape my gaping mouth from my hooded vision, one hand exploring blindly beneath her skirt.

Her rhythm was slow and entrancing, but after a moment, I lifted my head and groaned, "Faster." Her eyes met mine, and she held my gaze as she sped, one of her hands fisting the lapel of my tuxedo jacket. "Faster," I encouraged once more. She pulled me closer and panted against my lips as she drove herself into my lap over and over and over.

I sucked in shallow, trembling breaths, eventually begging, "*Faster*. Fuck me."

At this, her plummets grew relentless. She assaulted my thighs with flat claps as our mouths and tongues began tangling around one another. Her whimpers were moist and warm against my lips, her thighs and fists both quivering.

I ultimately grasped her face in my hands and angled mine enough to fully explore her mouth. My climax came in a series of erratic pushes and pathetically broken grunts.

Clouds of mist swirled around us as we caught our breath. Arms were wrapped around waists and necks. Sloppy, wet kisses were pressed to cheeks and throats and spilling cleavage, and *thank God*—the teenage hormonal motherfucker hadn't disappeared. He'd probably just been taking a vacation or something, because God knows, we'd certainly worn him out before shit had gone downhill.

Bella's laughter was airy and light, and made my lips curl up into a grin when she released me and stood, skin a pleasant pink despite the temperature. "Okay, that definitely made the dress worth it," she conceded, collapsing beside me once again.

I tucked her into my side once everything was put away, and we waited for Emmett's guests to begin filtering out of the house. Now, I wanted a shower and my bed, and maybe, given all the progress the day had brought, I could even catch a few hours of peaceful sleep.

"Did you start taking the anti-depressants again?" Bella ultimately broke the silence, nuzzling into my chest after I'd offered her my jacket.

"No."

She glanced up at me, remarking, "So this is all you? The eating and... everything else?" to which I nodded, a small flicker of pride warming my chest. She smiled. "I'm glad it's just you. Sometimes I wish I could do stuff without taking my meds, you know? It'd mean so much more."

I quickly argued, "The fact that you take shit to help you doesn't lessen what you've accomplished. I'm just... different," I supposed, contemplative. "My issues are self-imposed, I guess. It's just something I need to resolve in my own mind, at my own pace."

Shit, I was so goddamn insightful.

"So what did you resolve in your own mind today?" she asked, curious as she gazed up at me. "Something must have changed."

I frowned. "I watched a tree falling," I said, which confused the hell out of her.

When I didn't elaborate, she supplied a puzzled, "Okay," and then once again took stock of our surroundings.

"I'm kind of bummed about this place. I hope you're right and they fix it up again in the spring." Then, in a pensive tone, she added, "I've been wondering why they didn't get married out here. It could be so beautiful..." She trailed off into a whimsical voice, sighing.

"Oh, I asked Carlisle not to," I answered plainly, digging in my pocket for another stick of gum.

She tossed me a confused glance. "Why?"

I shrugged as I popped the gum into my mouth, explaining, "What if we wanted to get married out here later? Isn't that like... bad wedding etiquette to get married in the same place? Like seeing some other chick at a party wearing the same dress or some shit."

Her head suddenly lurched from my shoulder, and she gaped at me with these huge, saucer-wide eyes.

I quickly backtracked in an attempt to save my masculinity, "I mean, not that I'd care or anything, but I figured you might be sentimental like that, which is true, right? You said so yourself earlier." She was still gaping at me, so I defended, "And I don't really know about wedding etiquette, I just overheard Alice getting pissed off that someone else had already gotten married at the National Klingon Museum, which is kind of funny, because she didn't even want to follow through with that until she found out someone else had." I halted my rambling with a deep breath, concluding, "But, you know, it was precautionary or whatever."

She held up a palm, narrowing her eyes, "Wedding? Like... as in you and me getting married?"

My chewing came to an abrupt halt, and I suddenly realized why dudes bothered with all the stupid 'proposal' bullshit. "You wouldn't marry me?" I asked rigidly, utterly devastated, but readying myself for what I'd been expecting for months.

She quickly shook her head, correcting, "No! I just didn't realize that you'd even thought about it."

I scoffed. "Why wouldn't I think about it?" It wasn't like wedding shit hadn't been pounded into my head for the last year. The real question was: how could I think of anything else?

She hedged, "You've been distracted..."

"I mean, it's a given," I argued, though inwardly, I felt shitty for ever making her believe that I was so distracted by being miserable that I hadn't ever considered our future together. Then I whispered, "Right?" and risked meeting her gaze.

"I guess," she decided, finally resting back into her position at my side. As if sensing my troubled expression, she hastily amended, "I mean, yes. It's a given for me, definitely."

"Oh," I breathed, really fucking relived as I pulled her against me. "Cool."

June

"Take a right here," I directed from the passenger seat, my sweaty skin sticking uncomfortably to the leather upholstery.

Bella took a right and then a left and then another left, and then she turned around, because that last left had been a fuck-up, and then she took a right, and then we were pulling into the little hilltop cemetery where my dad had been buried.

I straightened in my seat as we neared his plot, idly noting how nothing had changed since I'd visited Chicago during that one fucked up summer three-and-a-half years prior. There was still that same funky looking tree on the south end that looked like any totally cliché cemetery tree.

There wasn't much shade offered when we arrived, and the Chicago heat was fucking sweltering this year. I wiped my brow as we traveled to the trunk of our car, lifting the hatch and extracting the exorbitant bundles of flowers we'd purchased.

My grave-site competitiveness hadn't lessened any.

I sort of stood by the car for a moment, watching the toes of my boots kick around the gravel while Bella put up one of those ugly fucking sun-visors in the windshield.

"But it's like... the only time we'll ever get to use one," she'd said upon buying it at the rest stop in Wyoming.

It had motherfucking puppies on it.

"You ready?" she asked, looking a little uncertain as she squinted against the sun. "I can stay here."

I rolled my eyes, figuring, "You were half the reason we came to begin with. Let's just... do it," I concluded, clearing my throat and weaving around gravestones as she followed.

His grave was unkempt, and it elicited a deep pang that made my chest ache. Bella looked on as I cleared away the weeds that had grown over the distressed etchings of a few cherished words.

My dad seemed like a dream to me now. Like I'd closed my eyes the first eight years of my life and conjured up this idyllic human being. I'm sure he wasn't really perfect. He'd probably been flawed in some way. Maybe he'd always left his towels on the floor or had never given to charity or had talked in movie theatres or something. I'd never fucking know. To me, the concept of him had turned abstract and distant, and in that distance, he existed as a model of perfection in my mind, which was okay. I could only hope to be remembered like that once my sorry ass was gone.

"Hello, Mr. Masen," Bella greeted, hands clasped respectfully at her front. Her face was so stoic and serious as she regarded him, that I had to hide a grin. I idly recalled my last visit and how talking to a chunk of stone had felt awkward and ridiculous.

Bella didn't have that issue—at all.

In fact, when we'd visited her mother's grave in Phoenix a few months ago, I'd been convinced we should have simply taken a tent. Renee's cemetery was nicer, but more crowded. Not that Bella cared one bit that groups of people were tossing her strange looks as she lounged against her mom's upright headstone. She talked and talked and talked and wondered aloud where the fuck my manners were when I didn't introduce myself.

God, we were so fucked up that it wasn't even tragic anymore.

"My name is Bella," she continued, appearing a little nervous as she wrung her fingers. "Me and your son have been seeing each other for a while now. You might like to know that he's a perfect gentleman—well, with the exception of his language, but I've done the best I can, and you know, like I keep telling Esme—that's my aunt—they're just words. No big deal." She tucked her hair behind her ear and darted her eyes to me, mouthing in blatant annoyance, "Say hello."

Jesus.

"Uh, hi," I said, preferring to simply stand and spend a few pensive moments paying my respects. Not all of us could be as unabashedly loony as my girl.

Shrugging, she grasped a lock of her hair and twirled it around her forefinger, rambling, "We live in Seattle right now. The weather there is a little cooler. Anyway, we have an apartment, but don't worry. Most sophomores live in campus housing, or one of those totally gross studio apartments, but Carlisle—he's Edward's adoptive father—he spoils us and makes us live in buildings with security, so..." She paused here and looked to me like I might take over, but *hell*. I waved her on.

She happily obliged, "School is going good, too. You should see some of Edward's grades. He's really smart. And talented. Like... freakishly talented. He can sketch anything by memory. It's borderline disturbing. He's going to make a great doctor, too, which almost seems unfair. I'm just majoring in business and hoping to run my own one day. That won't change lives or anything, but Edward will, I know it. He changed mine..." She gnawed thoughtfully at her lip before concluding in a breath, "I can't wait to meet your wife."

My body stiffened, and I fixed my eyes to the creepy tree over the hill, swallowing rapidly.

"Edward?" Bella worried, grasping my hand in hers.

"I'm fine," I responded, but I didn't want to see it. Seeing it made it real, and making it real made me physically ill, more often than not, even though a whole year had passed.

She entwined her arm through mine and did a semi-turn, beginning in a small voice, "Hello Mrs. Masen. I'm Bella Swan. It's a real pleasure to meet you. Edward's told me so much—mostly the good stuff. I've seen drawings of you and Mr. Masen, and Edward looks so much like you." A brief gust of wind swept through the area and cooled my face, easing me slightly. She continued in a softer voice, "He has some things he'd like to say."

I finally glimpsed at the large square beside my dad's headstone, and my breath caught as I stared down at it.

It was so fucking *plain*—almost generic.

My stomach lurched and I battled not to heave, rubbing the sweat from the back of my neck. Bella sighed in apology to me, rubbing her palm up and down my back, but I could handle this shit.

I cleared my throat and shifted awkwardly from foot to foot, briefly wishing I *had* asked Bella to stay behind. I began, "I'm really sorry for leaving you here to rot."

At this, Bella sucked in a sharp breath and dug her fingernails into my arm. "Edward," she warned.

"I know, I know," I grumbled, but refused to take it back. "Anyway, I just wanted to visit and... say I was sorry and ask for your forgiveness and shit, which you'd probably give me, even though I don't deserve it—"

"I'm seriously about to go back to the car," Bella disrupted, shaking her head. "I can't hear you talk about yourself like this." She met my gaze with a beseeching stare.

"Yeah, sorry. Old habits." I smiled ruefully, but I didn't take that back, either. I looked back to the gravestones, finishing, "And I also wanted you to meet my girl."

"And..." Bella coaxed.

I hedged, "And... leave some flowers and shit." Her glare was evident without me even needing to look at her. With a huff, I admitted aloud, "And I wanted to tell you that by not living my life to the fullest, I was disrespecting your memory, and I promise not to do that again." I looked to Bella with raised brows. "Okay?"

She reluctantly nodded, but pulled me to the ground, where we sat, picking at the grass.

A silence settled between the four of us that ended up being less uncomfortable than expected. The breeze was picking up and cooling us down, and my girl's hair looked so fucking beautiful and surreal blowing in the sunlight that it distracted me.

She leaned her head against my shoulder and crossed her ankles, stating, "Thanks for letting me meet them." Her expression was peaceful and relieved, and upon hearing it, I felt my own reprieve.

"Thanks for talking me into it," I offered, because seeing my mother's final resting place hadn't broken me, after all. Yeah, it was painful and fucked up, but that was something I would have felt regardless of circumstance.

We stayed until the sun finally began to set, cooling the air and pinkening the sky. My girl would utter random comments that would make me smile or laugh or nod at the headstones with a serious face.

And though, outwardly, I was holding these fucking absurd and casual conversations with two chunks of granite, inwardly, I was having a very different conversation with the two people they represented. I think Bella probably knew this, because when it grew quiet, she didn't disrupt me, instead opting to intertwine her fingers with mine.

I told them I was happy, and I was going to try my damndest to be happier, because I had beautiful girl and a family that loved me, and it took me a while to get it, but I finally understood that none of it was my fucking fault.

It was ironic how, after everything, my eventual conclusion could be summed up in a simple, shrugged murmuring of “Shit happens.”

When we left, the air between us held that last hint of resolution I needed. It’d all began with a falling tree, and ended in the little hilltop cemetery where my mother, my father, and my addiction to guilt were all now buried.

“You should save it,” I advised of the sun-visor as I ducked into the car. At Bella’s curved brow, eyes all shining and fucking beautiful, I elaborated, “We might come back again, some day.”

THE MOTHERFUCKING END

Outtake 1: Valentine Pineapple Pairs A

BPOV

I was an idiot. Agreeing to the hedonistic torture and actually believing it was no big deal. Just a 'quick' trip to the mall with Alice.

That one word should have been a big red flashing sign. If Edward were holding that big red flashing sign, it'd say *Bullshit*.

I cringed into my hoodie with my head down as I followed her through the mall and hugged the walls. I was following rather blindly as she led me around for the day, still trying to make the decision on whether or not I should just wait for her in the comfort of the Porsche.

Men were *everywhere*. I could almost feel Alice shooting me wary glances from over her shoulder as she tried her 'best' to speed along the excursion. We really should have taken the exact day into account.

The mall was decorated horrifically in deep scarlet reds that looked more fitting for a B-rated horror film than the quaint little rinky dink Port Angeles mall. And all of this, Alice shopping, me agreeing, the horrific decorations, and the swarms of men stumbling around nervously, were all due to one dismally gruesome annual event.

Valentines Day.

And we were in the mall doing last minute shopping like complete and total idiots. I wasn't actually buying anything. I wasn't sure what you got a guy for Valentines Day. I figured I'd just make Edward his favorite cookies or something.

Alice had very different plans for Jasper. She wouldn't tell me exactly what they were, but during the trip, she had bought some very interesting things. There was a wig. One that looked very similar to the double ear buns of Princess Laia. After I saw it, I stopped wondering. Too weird.

I was shuffling behind her with my head up just enough to see her heels when she led me into a store. I wasn't paying attention to where it was as I followed in silence. But one of the displays made me look up.

My eyes widened as I took in the scenery of the lingerie store I had walked into. There was an upside however. Every man in the mall looked like he wanted to come in, but never did. It was a breath of fresh air that made me grin as I followed behind her through the store.

She was silent as she fluttered her hands through all of the lacy slutty numbers with pursed lips, glancing at me sideways a couple of times as I waited patiently with my hands in my hoodie pockets. Usually this kind of shopping would make me cringe and leave, but there was no way I was re-entering 'Last Minute Gift Man Ville'.

I bit my lip as she strolled me over to the bra counter, looking down at all the sexy bras that were nothing like the ones I owned. Mine were all plain and comfortable. Function over fashion.

Alice knew this.

She held up a lacy bra and quirked an eyebrow at me with a smirk. "It's Saturday, darlin'." She snickered at me while holding it in the air.

I kept biting my lip as I stared at it skeptically. Edward and I hadn't gotten to the point where clothes were removed. He had only been able to grope me without the safe word for two nights. And it was always through my sweater. No skin.

But that was bound to change eventually. And I had already shown him my ugly plain white bra once. I seriously doubt he found it the least bit sexy. The blue bra she was holding was probably sexy. Delicate. Lacey. Appeared to have miraculous push up qualities that would make me look falsely bustier than I actually was. I figured that was the checklist for sexy bras. So I timidly reached a hand up and grabbed it from her hand.

Alice rolled her eyes at me as I stared at it in my hands like it was an ancient Chinese torture device. "I was just joking Bella, geez." She sighed, shaking her head.

I blushed. Furiously. Because she probably expected me to throw it back down on the counter when instead I dropped my arm and grasped it at my side. She eyed me in confusion for a moment before her eyes grew wide.

She gasped, putting her hand over her mouth. "You want it, don't you?" She asked incredulously through her palm.

I grimaced and turned away, pretending to be interested in something else. Which was a bad idea; because the bra in my hand was probably the most modest thing the store had to offer. I

suddenly empathized with all the men who needed to buy something from the store, but were too ashamed to be seen doing it.

I huffed and turned back to Alice, who was still gaping at me a little open jawed. "It's just a bra, Alice." I sighed, silently begging her with my gaze to let it go, and not make a big deal out of it.

Yeah. Because that always works.

Her slack lips slowly transformed into a smirk. "You're getting it because of Edward." She sang his name like we were suddenly ten again and boys had cooties. I almost expected her to do the kissing in a tree song.

I blushed more, because she was right, but didn't offer any information as I kept my head down and kicked the low budget carpet with the toe of my shoe.

She snickered. "You little slut." She said deviously, making my head snap up as I stared at her in utter shock.

"This coming from Princess Labia?" I blurted incredulously. I really didn't mean for it to come out at all as I was thinking it, but I didn't feel any remorse.

Her smirk disappeared in an instant. And it was the first time I had ever seen Alice blush as she shifted her gaze from me and back to the bra display. She sniffed as she fingered them. "I'm shopping online next year." She mumbled.

I scoffed. "Yeah, so am I." I nodded in agreement as I grasped the bra in my hand, hoping no one was looking.

After a moment, she turned to me again. The blush was gone from her face as she sighed and eyed me cautiously. "I'd be a total hypocrite if I lectured you." She whispered softly with a concerned expression. "But please tell me you're being safe?" She begged with her eyes.

I shook my head fervently, in feigned horror at her assumption. Then shook it in more genuine horror as her eyes grew wide when she misunderstood my actions.

I stopped shaking my head and huffed. "We're not having sex, Alice." I hissed under my breath as my face grew impossibly hotter and I darted my eyes around the store.

She eyed me skeptically for a moment before she bobbed her head and began looking through the bras again. "Well, when you do." She sighed quietly as she chose a bright red bra from the

display and turned to me, holding it up to my face with a snicker. I rolled my eyes and smacked her hand away.

She snickered softly for a moment before her expression turned serious. "I mean it, Bella. If you had any idea where that thing's been..." She trailed off with a delicate shudder and threw the bra down.

I grimaced, wishing she hadn't brought up my boyfriend's sexual history. "I'm quite aware, thank you." I narrowed my eyes at her as she turned to face me.

She held her hands up in the air defensively. "Hey, I'm just saying. I even look at Jessica Stanley and I feel the need for an aggressive course of antibiotics." She cringed as she dropped her hands. "That snatch has seen more visitors than Grand Central Station."

"Good God, Al!" I shoved my hand in front of her face with wide eyes. "Please stop." I begged desperately as I darted my eyes around the store once again. "The last thing I want to hear about is Jessica's..." I trailed off with a half shudder, half cringe as I clenched my eyes closed tightly and shook my head.

She giggled quietly and finally led me away from the bras to another part of the store. I followed behind her with my head down, slightly nauseated, and trying desperately to dispel the awful mental image that was Jessica Stanley's gaping and possibly infected chasm of a vagina.

I felt so relieved when she didn't lecture me. She was right about one thing. It would make her a total hypocrite. And instead of threatening Edward with castration like I had expected her to, she began piling items into my hands with a smile. Panties. Sexy lacey panties that made me gape at her as she began tossing them at me.

I wanted to be difficult and blush and throw them all back to her, offended. But, just like the bra, I snapped my mouth shut and kept my head down as she picked and chose what was suitable for my skin color.

The ride home was awkward. I shifted uncomfortably in my seat the entire way home as Alice began suggesting things like birth control and prophylactics while tapping her thumb nervously on the steering wheel. I wordlessly slumped further and further into my seat, wishing I could just disappear and erase the last two hours of my life.

When we got home, I was out of the car and in the house so fast it made my hood fly off my head. I sighed in relief when I finally entered the safety of the kitchen. It was weird. This whole time I had been with Edward, I had really wanted someone to talk to about these types of things. I was just so used to our extreme privacy that it felt wrong talking to anyone about it.

I went to dump the bag-o-humiliation off in my room and make plans for supper.

Outtake 2: Valentine Pineapple Pairs B

BPOV

It was particularly gruesome. The reds. Varying in shades from scarlet to pink, and probably matching the color of my face as I held up the lacy bra that Alice was forcing me to wear with this outfit.

I should have saved the veto .

She looked so triumphant, standing in the middle of my bedroom as she held up the red skirt with a wry smirk and a delicately arched eyebrow. It was Saturday, and I was pretty sure she had been planning this outfit for as long as she had been planning her night with Jasper.

I sank onto the bed, staring at her blankly. I had two options. I could run away and refuse to wear her choice. And in the process, completely ruin the truce between her and Edward. Or I could just admit defeat, suck it up, and hide in the house all day.

I sighed. And grimaced. And even cringed a little too, as I stood up from the bed and snatched the evil skirt from her hand with a glower. "It's too cold for crap like this." I held the skirt up in contempt with narrowed eyes as one last attempt to save myself.

She rolled her eyes. "Oh, please. You've seen what I'm wearing tonight." She put her hand on her hip and quirked an eyebrow.

Oh. The horror. The mental image of what Alice was wearing for Jasper was... traumatizing to say the least. The leather pants were modest compared to it.

It all began hours earlier with a trip to the mall. The reds were there too. Everywhere. And there were swarms of men stumbling about nervously as they fumbled and stuttered for last minute gifts.

I was careless for agreeing to go with her. Thinking that I had come such a long way with Edward that I could handle it without any issues and be normal with Alice for one afternoon. I really should have taken the exact day into consideration.

Valentines Day.

She led me hastily through the crowded mall, doing her best to speed the excursion along for my sake alone. And, sweet bitter irony, the one place in the whole building that I felt remotely comfortable was the lingerie store.

The men all wanted to go in, casting the window curious glances, but never having the courage to be seen doing it. It was full of women. And that I could handle. So I followed her around the little store happily as she began grabbing 'supplies' for her night with Jasper. I was so stupid, asking her for specifics as each new item piqued my curiosity.

There was a wig – double buns, fluffy hand cuffs, a can of whipped cream, some strange book that she wouldn't let me see, and a costume that Alice informed me was very specific to a fantasy of Jasper's. I believe the words 'Princess Leia' and 'slave' were thrown around somewhere in the packaging description. I blushed and looked away when she paid for it, which was really stupid for me to do. Because if I had been looking, I would have noticed that she was buying supplies for me too. The bra and panties that would match the wretched outfit perfectly.

I huffed and snatched the disgusting pink shirt from the bed and stomped to the bathroom without another glance in her direction. The only thing I could see on her all day was that perverted costume. I shut the door, a little harder than absolutely necessary and peeled my hoodie off with a dismal frown in its direction as I deposited it inside the hamper.

Admittedly, I was somewhat thankful for the bra deal. I didn't own anything even close to it. All my bras were plain and white and comfortable. Function over fashion. And normally, I wouldn't give it a second thought.

But Edward had been able to touch my breasts for almost a week without using the technique. It was absolutely divine. The way he touched me and grabbed me as if he really wanted to, and not just because it was helping me or making me feel better. Like he really wanted me. His hands were always gentle and sensual. And always over my sweaters and never touching my skin.

It seemed like perhaps it was ready to move things up a notch. And shirt removal only seemed like the next natural step.

Normally, I wouldn't have felt so at ease over the idea of exposing myself. But, in reality, he had already seen me without a shirt on.

I used that thought to abate my anxiety as I slipped the dark red bra on and adjusted myself in front of the mirror.

It fit all of Alice's requirements for a 'sexy' bra. She had given me the list on the ride home as I stared out the window with a façade of complete indifference. As if I wasn't hanging on to her every suggestion and committing it all to memory.

Lacey. *Check.*

Bold colors. *Check.*

Delicate and feminine. *Check and check.*

Has miraculous push up qualities that make me appear falsely bustier than I actually am. *Check and hallelujah.*

I turned from side to side in the mirror with pursed lips. It was pretty impressive. I personally would have gone for another color. Perhaps a nice blue. But I was told the occasion demanded it, so I couldn't complain. The red did make my skin seem less pale. And as I let my eyes wander down from the miracle cleavage to my ribs and stomach, I grimaced.

I looked like some morbid attempt to dress the freak show up for a decadent burlesque.

I hastily threw the pink shirt on, unwilling to see the scars next to the one piece of proof that I could be minutely normal.

The shirt was so low cut that I had to pull it up to hide the top of the bra. It was utterly insane for her to think I would be the least bit comfortable in this get up. I didn't even want Esme to see me in it. Let alone anyone else.

But the skirt had to be the worst. I had a list of specifications when it came to them. The length had to go to mid thigh at the very least. She pouted until I told her the reason why. Technically, I had scars all over my legs. Little ones that could be chalked up to clumsiness or something. But the ones on my upper thighs would surely draw far too much attention.

I was hoping it would scare her away from skirts all together. I was sorely mistaken. I slipped the skirt on in dismay, taking one last moment to glance at myself in the mirror. All pink shirt and scarlet skirt and miracle cleavage and all.

I slipped on my plain, usual black boots in a direct sign of rebellion and defiance. And right before I walked out of the door, I glanced at the hamper and paused with my hand on the knob.

Rules be damned.

I snatched it up and threw it on, breathing a sigh of semi-relief as I walked out of the bathroom and half searched, half hid from Alice. The hoodie would not please her. She never was very fond of compromise.

I made my way to her room after a few minutes, ready and willing to subject myself to the hair torture portion of my afternoon so I could finally relax on the couch and watch the usual unsavory non-educational programming unfit for the youth of America.

When I reached the room I stood in the doorway and pursed my lips. Empty. I shrugged and shuffled to the vanity, getting myself in position for whatever hair style was 'in' for this holiday. I tapped my fingers on the wood while I waited for her, shifting my bare legs uncomfortably and allowing my gaze to wander around the top of the surface.

There was a book on the corner that caught my eye. It wasn't the fact that it was a book I knew or liked. But it was the same book she had purchased in the store and wouldn't let me see. I bit my lip as I tapped my fingers on the desk and checked the doorway from the mirror to see if the coast was clear.

I picked it up and turned it over to read the cover title. Then I gasped and dropped it onto the wooden vanity top wide eyed. It was even worse than the costume or the hand cuffs.

The Contemporary Woman's Guide To Seduction.

I clenched my eyes closed and slid it back to the corner, shaking my head, and utterly horrified that Alice was buying... reference material.

I propped my elbow on the vanity and rested my chin in my palm with a sigh as I started at myself in the mirror. It was so...Alice. Always thorough.

I tapped my fingers on the wood once more, still waiting for her to come in her room and fix my hair already.

I darted my eyes to the book and back to the mirror while biting my lip. I wasn't looking in it. There was no way I'd be caught dead looking at that kind of literature. If it could even be called that.

I tapped my fingers on the wood for a few more moments. Then darted my eyes back to the book with pursed lips. *Seduction*.

I snorted and shook my head at my reflection with my chin still propped in my palm as I tapped the wood. I leaned into the mirror to pick at a blemish that had been annoying me for days before sighing and leaning back in the seat.

I darted my eyes back to the book once more and back to mirror to check the doorway before I slowly lifted my hand to slide the book back in front of me.

I opened it to a random page while my gaze was still on the doorway of the room, and then darted my eyes down to it.

I gasped. Then I slowly furrowed my brows, pursing my lips and tilting my head at the page before me.

Outtake 3: Ginger Snappy Birthdays Smuttake

EPOV

“Don’t go.” She panted as she released my neck, her hands coming to weave and fist into my hair at my crown, and suddenly she was controlling me. A defiant set in her jaw as I allowed her to pull my head back, casting my face up to the gray sky.

I hissed and clenched my eyes shut against the sting of it. The pain penetrated the numbness and made a bright jolt shoot through my head and travel to the tips of my ears. I moaned and shifted against her while she pulled harder. So strongly her hands trembled.

But she was still asking and being selfish by taking advantage of my complete obedience to her every whim. She didn’t want me to move out. She wanted me to stay and take all of this bullshit so that... I didn’t even know what she wanted. I couldn’t fathom how it would benefit her anymore.

But I agreed with a sharp nod and a hiss, making my scalp burn more with the resistance. Obedient to her every whim yet again.

She seemed relieved, releasing my hair and once again retreating to her meek position against the wall.

And now it was my turn.

I panted and returned my palms to the wall with a loud clap, fascinated at how she bit her lip and leaned her head back with a small writhe against me.

I had no right to ask – *order* – her not to do it. It was selfish and cruel to even think about it, and the last twenty minutes probably proved what everyone thought about me. But she got hers, and we were tit for tat, so why the fuck shouldn’t I?

“No fucking therapy.” I growled inches from her lips, seeing the same vision that made me furious at the thought of her loving someone else. Someone better.

Much to my surprise, she agreed without hesitation. Nodding compliantly in resignation and remaining entirely submissive to me as I trapped her against the wall.

I took her lips again with fervor, plunging my tongue into her mouth and grinding my erection into her hips without even thinking about. She whimpered and pressed back into me, her hands clinging to my sides and pulling me closer as our tongues pressed together.

All of the frustration seemed to swell as we panted and began rubbing our crotches against each other, the friction heightening our adrenaline as we kind of just... humped each other shamelessly against the brick wall.

Her hoodie was gone, abandoned on the damp grass somewhere so I took the opportunity to palm her breast between us, and she moaned into my mouth. The domination suddenly turned to lust and desperation and before I could even realize it was probably a bad idea, my hands were beneath her shirt – forcing them under her bra, and rubbing her breasts as she began whimpering once more.

I tore my lips away from hers as our hips continued creating the delicious friction, her head falling back to the wall. She looked up at the sky, panting and pulling my hips closer as I moved against her, and she looked almost as desperate as I felt.

I probably wasn't thinking straight given my exhaustion and reaction to the whole therapy deal. Not to mention the fact that now, I had to stay in Carlisle's fucking house, and live under his rules. And then I had to go and treat my girl like she was some goddamn possession, and not the person I loved more than anything in the world. It was turning out to be a shitty day. Week. Month. Whatever.

I wasn't happy.

But as our hips rubbed against each other and our moans filled the small space beside the loud air conditioners, I decided... I could make *her* happy. I could make her feel good. It was probably a shitty consolation for everything, but at the exact moment as she whimpered and wordlessly begged for more, I figured she would gladly accept it.

I backed away minutely, making her growl in frustration as her hands fought to pull me back. But my eyes began scanning the area over my shoulder while my dick twitched in anticipation. When I was confident enough that we could continue safely, I turned back to her hooded gaze

and unbuttoned her jeans.

My girl's eyes grew wide and began darting around the area, but she didn't stop me from sliding my hand inside, under her jeans and panties. Of course, there were no objections as my fingers found her folds, already slick and waiting for me. I groaned as I felt her arousal, and her grip on my shirt tightened.

She leaned her head back against the brick wall once again, lips slightly parted as she panted and writhed against my fingers with a strangled moan. I buried my face into her neck and began licking and kissing as I stroked her and worked to bring her pleasure.

Her gasps were loud in my ear, transforming into wordless whimpers as her fingers tangled in my hair, pushing my face farther into her neck. The way she was moving her hips against me in desperation was making me harder, and I began to wonder if she would touch me as I took her earlobe between my teeth and nibbled gently.

I was showing her mine, right? Sharing *is* caring.

But I couldn't ask, because it wasn't supposed to be about me. So I focused my attention on what my fingers were doing and searched for her entrance. Because my girl *really* liked that shit last time.

She liked it this time too, and she pushed me to go deeper and faster while panting into my ear. Involuntarily, I began moving my hips with hers, because I couldn't stop the need to find more friction. Unfortunately, it wasn't really satisfying, and I suddenly found my idle hand going to my crotch and palming my dick through my jeans.

I mean, surely, she couldn't object to me working one out for myself, right? I really fucking hoped not as I hastily unbuttoned them and shoved my hand inside.

I'm not even sure she noticed as I grabbed my erection and began stroking it in unison with my other hand, which was working frenziedly beneath her jeans. Her head was still thrown back, eyes screwed tightly closed as her ragged breathing made her chest heave.

I really wished I could have torn off that fucking shirt she was wearing. I wanted to be closer—skin to skin. But this was as good as it would get.

My hooded gaze traveled her body as both of my hands worked relentlessly and I focused on

the point where my wrist disappeared into her white panties. The sight of it made me groan and pump my hand as I fought to do the dual motions without faltering. Which really didn't work *at all*.

Goddamned non-ambidextrous bullshit. I thought in annoyance. After fighting to do both actions simultaneously, I eventually gave up and removed my hand from my jeans to focus entirely on her. Because it just wasn't worth a fuck to jack off half-assed. I decided to wait until after I made her cum, and as her moans grew louder and I tried to silence them by plunging my tongue into her mouth once again, I could tell she was close.

Her hands began clawing at my back to bring me closer, and her hips were rocking feverishly to get the added friction required. My fingers buried deep inside of her and I let my thumb work what it could within the constraints of her jeans.

Really, Bella. A skirt would have made this shit so much easier.

I could tell when she was on the edge because her eyes abruptly opened, focusing on nothing in particular as her hips bucked into my hand and her legs began trembling. With a soft cry, she bit her lip and tightened around my fingers.

There was nothing sexier on this entire fucking planet than watching my girl cum for me.

Her shoulders quivered against the wall and her eyes kind of rolled back behind her lids a bit. I could tell she was fighting to keep her cry silent, because all that emerged from her lips was a strangled whisper of ecstasy in the form of, "Edward." And I groaned as my name tumbled from her lips. *Just... fucking kill me why don't you?*

With winded breaths, she finally lifted her head to look me in the eyes, all fucking droopy and exhausted. I removed my hand from her jeans while leaning in to give her a soft kiss on the lips. I couldn't give her sleep, and I couldn't be enough for Esme or Carlisle to let us be together, but... I could make my girl cum, and no other motherfucker could do that—for now.

When my lips left hers, I hastily fixed her appearance. Buttoning her jeans and straightening her shirt before I even thought about taking care of myself must have shown my consideration. Right? I was wondering if she would kiss my neck, pull my hair, maybe... nibble my skin a little, or say something really fucking dirty as my hand returned to my pants and I grabbed my dick once again.

Is this really such a good idea? My conscience abruptly nagged in concern, and I inwardly sneered. *Bitch. Go away.*

I stilled my actions and searched her eyes for any signs of disgust, or revulsion, or... something as I stood right in front of her with my cock in my palm. It just wasn't worth it if it made her uncomfortable. I tried to think of how I would react if she suddenly started masturbating in front of me, but... *shit*. That was just making my hand move.

Thankfully, when our eyes locked, I didn't see any signs of disgust or any of that other shit. Surprisingly, she looked a little... aroused and curious, and maybe even apologetic, for some reason I couldn't fathom.

Seeing no objection, I began slowly stroking with my hand, allowing myself to relax as much as possible while doing this in her presence. The waist of my jeans and the lack of lubrication didn't make it nearly as enjoyable as it could have been, but I got to stare at Bella growing aroused by observing it, and that was enough to make my fist begin pumping faster.

I braced myself against the wall beside her head with my idle hand, and let my hand move with abandon as I stared into her glazed eyes and grew comfortable enough to just really fucking... jack the hell off. She moaned while she watched me, all fucking sexy, and I let my lips rest against hers. We didn't really kiss; I just panted and groaned against her mouth.

My ragged gasps quickly transformed into desperate grunts as I pumped my fist wildly around my dick. My eyes weren't pleading or anything; I was just trying to remember what it felt like to be inside of her as my gaze likely turned abruptly intense.

So when she suddenly dropped to her knees, sliding her back down the rough brick to the grass, and grabbed my wrist to halt my movements, I was a little fucking stunned. I wasn't asking, wanting, or even expecting her to do anything in return.

My girl looked up at me with lust filled eyes and darted her tongue out to lick her lips really fucking deliberately. I still had her trapped against the wall, her knees between my parted legs as she held my gaze and tugged on the waist of my jeans to release my stiff cock. I wanted to stop her and say no—

Okay. Even I wasn't buying *that* bullshit. I really *wanted* to say, "Bella, so help me... if you put my dick in your mouth right now, I will fucking worship you for the rest of my existence."

Luckily, I still had the inkling of rational conscience to make my face appear seriously disapproving. A little. Maybe. Probably. Whatever. I don't know how well I preformed, but she didn't look hesitant to wrap her hand around it, and give it one long stroke.

My breath hitched, and I kind of glanced around the space over my shoulder in a paranoid fear. If I got caught in this position, trapping Bella, a minor who I was *ordered* to stay away from, against a brick wall with my dick in her hand... I was *definitely* going to jail. And not the bullshit juvenile detention one either, but the real "scary motherfucker" jail.

I never considered myself a conceited individual or anything, but... I was fairly confident that my ass was too pretty for all that.

Bella did not share my fear on this, because while my eyes were still anxiously darting around the area, she swiftly placed her hot mouth around my dick. I hissed through my clenched teeth, and it mingled with a groan as my palms splayed across the brick in front of me for support.

She moved her lips slowly while gazing into my eyes and my chest was heaving with ragged breaths. My hands gripped at the brick wall as the push and pull of her mouth forced a whimper from my lips. The brick wall behind her head didn't really give her much room for movement, and I began absentmindedly pondering how impolite it would be to request a change of position. Then I figured... I'm getting my dick sucked, so bitching about logistics would be a really fucking idiotic thing to do.

Unfortunately, my dick was selfish enough to desire better motion, and against my will and better judgment, my hips gently thrust into her mouth, and out again. She moaned deeply around me, and her hands went to grab my ass. I froze. I figured that fucking my girl's mouth was a little too much depravity for me... even on *this* day, but her hands moved my hips back toward her in indication that... she wanted it. *Of course she wants it.*

"Fuck." I sighed shakily and slouched forward, allowing my forehead to rest against the cold and rough bricks. My nagging bitch of a conscience had conveniently vanished by the time Bella's hands guided my hips to repeat the motion again, and my hands began digging and scratching into the bricks as I replicated the action—this time without the need for her probable encouragement. Bella kept her head still against the bricks, and her lips wrapped tightly around my flesh.

I fixed my gaze on the top of her head as I moved my hips gently forward and backward, in and out of her mouth, and the sight of it provoked me further. She'd moan around my dick with

every thrust, and it'd make my teeth grind together when I groaned in pleasure. I knew fucking her mouth was wrong, and I'd feel shitty about doing it later, but for now, I decided that being an anti-teenage-hormonal-motherfucker wasn't enjoyable *at all*. So I kept pushing my dick into her mouth, bathing in her moans around me, and thanked all fuck that sleep deprivation and years of debatable civility had granted me the magnificent gift of temporary moral deficiency.

Yes. My dick was *definitely* one joyful motherfucker.

My lips parted as I panted and moved, all the while battling the instinct to grab her hair and push her in opposition to my thrusts. She kept moaning and pushing my ass further toward her, forcing my dick deeper into her throat, because I was being careful not to. I was trying to keep my groans and grunts and whimpers as quiet as possible given the threat of exposure, and my fingers kept clawing into the brick to inhibit themselves from grabbing onto her hair.

I could feel it intensifying rapidly, and I was debating whether to prolong the experience, or just surrender as I pressed my forehead into the wall and screwed my eyes tightly closed. Her moans and tongue were inciting the nearly frantic motion of my hips, and it was becoming ridiculously difficult to refrain from exploding in her mouth.

As if she knew that I was delaying my pleasure, I suddenly felt her teeth lightly scrape against my flesh, and my answering gasp was long and startled into the wall. *So fucking sly*. She knew the teeth would get me every goddamn time.

I whimpered, and my hands abruptly left the brick to grasp her face as I lifted my head to meet her gaze. Her big brown eyes shone up at me as I continued with gentler thrusts and caressed her cheeks with my thumbs.

"You're going to make me cum." I gasped, to give her an out, as my hips continued moving softly. I hated the idea of doing that into her mouth. Her hands grasped my ass tighter, as if to hold me close, and she moaned once again, letting her eyes fall closed as she sucked harder into my thrust—a clear indication that she was game.

My girl, I inwardly sighed. Always such a fucking trooper. With a trembling breath, I stilled my hips, locked my jaw tightly, and finally succumbed to the pleasure.

The tremor of my body, while I attempted to stroke her cheeks affectionately and cum at the same time, was... borderline humiliating in all honesty, but I made no effort to maintain my composure. I knew how much my girl enjoyed watching me lose my control. A breathless and

sharp grunt escaped my chest as I twitched and jerked between her lips, and her face was completely void of disgust as she swallowed it down hastily. She'd probably never realize it, but Bella was the only girl who had ever allowed me to cum in her mouth. It was a fucking splendid experience, and I was gasping and shuddering as she gave me one last sweep of her tongue, and finally released me from her flushed lips.

I quickly fixed my jeans and buttoned them up as she stood, and my legs felt like gelatin while I fought to catch my breath. When all body parts were once again hidden, I suddenly remembered what my girl considered appropriate post-oral gratitude. She had just retrieved her hoodie from the ground and was slipping it over her shoulders when my hands grabbed her arms and crushed her to my chest in a firm embrace.

Her stifled and satisfied chuckle warmed my chest as I plunged my nose into her hair and tightened my arms around her. She could barely return the hug since her hoodie was only partly covering her shoulders, but she pressed her face into me, and put her arms around me as far as the constriction of the fabric would allow.

We stood for many moments as I smelled her hair contentedly and embraced her lovingly; planting the occasional kiss on the top of her head in silent thanks as she sighed into my chest. She'd certainly had it right. A hug is very appropriate post-oral gratitude.

Eventually, and rather obnoxiously, the stupid fucking school bell interrupted our after-orgasm-euphoria, and we were forced apart with mirroring expressions of annoyance. I retrieved my jacket from the grass and slipped it on, and in a moment of recollection, spotted her school bag and snatched it up before she could.

I wanted to... I really wanted to love her affectionately and tenderly. I wanted to hold her hand and carry her books like some fucking Stepford Husband. I recalled my thoughts from earlier.

I slung her bag over my shoulder along with my own, and when she met my gaze, she rolled her eyes.

"Are you serious? I'm not handicapped." She scoffed, and the look of amusement in her eyes made my lips twitch as I shrugged and tossed her a little smirk. She grumbled something under her breath, but let me snake my arm around her waist as I led us away from the rumbling of the air conditioners. I could love my girl like *this* too, and even though it didn't make up for any of that other shit, it made me feel infinitesimally worthy of her satisfied smile when she glanced up at me and raised her hood.

I did my best to ignore the menacing sensation that began burgeoning in the depths of my chest; that tickle of premonition that alludes to foreboding. I wanted to push it away, but I wanted to soak in it all the same. I wanted to shove my girl behind my body and put myself between her and every little thing that threatened to ruin us. I wanted to protect her from them, and... maybe myself a little too. But she was *mine*, and I wasn't going to give in that easily.

When we emerged from the hidden path between the buildings, I could tell that neither of us really wanted to go back to that place where nothing went right, and nobody understood. We wanted to stay by the dirty brick wall and the loud metal air conditioners and let our need consume us for a little while longer.

But I still had a home to go. I still a part to play. I still had grades to keep up. And even though I fucking hated that feeling of helplessness that filled the pit of my stomach with the familiar heavy dread that festered and suffocated me, I still had obligations to all of these things.

But they weren't going to win, because I still had *my* girl.

Outtake 4: Ginger Snappy Birthdays in CPOV

CPOV

It was nearly five when I received the call from Esme regarding Bella's visit. I never would have shown it in the tone of my voice on the phone, but I was infinitesimally resentful for the way she so casually put the responsibility on my shoulders alone. It was the poor boy's birthday and she meant to dangle the forbidden fruit before his eyes and have me snatch it away at my discretion. She wouldn't be forced to survive the aftermath.

But it was his birthday, and even though it seemed a cruel method of granting what was likely one wish of his, I opened the door with a wide smile at Bella's soft and timid knock.

She stood meek and shyly, or one might assume her shy if they didn't fully understand her mental state. She cradled a large box in her arms. Birthday cake as Esme informed me. I felt compelled, as I stood aside, to tell this girl that Edward did not prefer birthday cakes. Every birthday we had attempted to celebrate with him, it was made quite clear that any fuss over the event would be swiftly attacked. I couldn't fathom seeing her spirits crushed when he did such a thing. She must have been rather excited for the escape from her punishment, just to have it dashed by Edward's harsh position on celebrations.

She didn't greet me, or really even acknowledge my presence aside from a small glance in my direction that seemed more anxiety driven than for politeness's sake as she entered the foyer.

Esme would be deeply disappointed at her lack of manners. I made it a point to omit this from my recap of events unless she expressly asked me for such information.

I led her to the dining room with only a few words, as not to make her more uncomfortable until Edward had arrived. When I knocked on his door, I had already prepared myself for his dismal silent treatment of me. It had been this way for fourteen days and though I rather detested the immaturity of the act, I was resigned to waiting for him to break the silence. I had pushed quite enough.

I was pleasantly surprised when he began to speak. It was progress in my mind, even though the words he spoke were meant to be sarcastic and scathing. Many people had a difficult time relating to Edward, but I had seen quite enough by now to know that the scathing insults were

his method of pushing people away. People he felt he could be close to. If I was still one of those people, I considered myself lucky.

"Bella," I began when I noticed him becoming exceptionally flustered with me. His eyes shifted focus to mine finally and I could sense his whole posture change. "Is in the dining room waiting for you." *With cake. Please don't be so hard on the poor girl. She couldn't have known.*

He pushed past me, and I suddenly noticed he was wearing the same clothing from yesterday. I frowned at the back of his head as he made his way down the flights of stairs. He was neglecting himself and was failing to take his health into consideration. His eyes were darker from lack of sleep and... don't think I didn't notice the way he nearly stumbled over the last step. I always noticed. It was absolute agony to watch him deteriorate in such a way, but I couldn't push him. *Not about this.*

I held my breath as I watched him enter the dining room, bracing for... whatever way he grew irritated with this odd girl. He captured her in a tight embrace before I could understand what was occurring, and for a brief second, I was irrationally concerned I would be forced to pull them apart. I did no such thing.

I watched in fascination as he swayed them from side to side affectionately for a long while. I eventually shifted uncomfortably and leaned against the door frame, feeling utterly disgusted that I had to be so intrusive on this particularly intimate moment. My resentment towards Esme swelled once again at this feeling. I watched as he turned his face to her ear and appeared to be whispering something. She shook her head. I was frustrated at the exchange I couldn't supervise. I didn't want to let Esme down.

Bella suddenly released his neck, peering at me over his shoulder. "As long as Dr. Cullen allows." She spoke just loud enough for me to hear, and I was grateful. They were discussing the length of the visit. I gazed back at her and attempted to make it clear in my friendly expression that I would do my best to make it as long as possible.

"Please, call me Carlisle." I corrected her. It was fairly unnecessary for her to use my last name. She had been sleeping under my roof for three months after all. I think we were past the formalities. I watched as she led him to the table and...

Edward's gaze finally landed on the cake.

I stiffened in anticipation of his impending ire.

He smiled at her and sat down in a chair.

I frowned down at my shoes with a sigh. Bella clearly fell under a separate standard than Emmett and me. I was briefly frustrated and envious that he could celebrate with this girl and yet his family was meant to ignore such occasions while he hid in his room. Would it have been so awful to enjoy it, if not for our sakes alone?

And then as I watched him begin eating her meal and speaking to her with a large smile that I hadn't seen in... years, I was once again reminded, Bella always fell under another set of rules for Edward. I was amazed at how my presence was suddenly entirely ignored. He took her hand beneath the table and held it. He made satisfied moans that seemed to make her smile wider. She spoke about their family and friends and when the time for cake arrived, I was baffled at her ability to make Edward submit to eating it without any resistance whatsoever.

The only time I had bought him a cake, it was an utter disaster. I had spent countless hours on the phone with a very exorbitantly priced gourmet decorator to perfect the decadently tiered cake. When he saw it, he seemed rather disgusted by the gesture all together and it sat dormant until I finally allowed Emmett to consume it on his own.

It was the last time I bought him a birthday cake.

And now he was consuming hers with a large grin and an abundance of sounds to attest to the fact he was enjoying it.

I watched him push the plate aside when he was finished eating. They moved close to one another, their heads lying casually on their arms atop the table while they spoke in hushed whispers. I felt completely ridiculous having to supervise such an innocent display.

But it was still necessary.

I oversaw their exchange with varied feelings of awe, embarrassment, and envy. I was awed at their intimacy without even being... intimate. A simple touch of their hands was enough to make them both quite visibly at ease. It was rather fascinating. This made me feel embarrassed. To be watching them so closely and scrutinizing their contact was ridiculous. But mostly I was envious.

I had seen this version of Edward only once before. Years ago in a hospital room when we first met. When I had first decided to bring him into my home and watch him grow and flourish under my tending. Long before this day, when our relationship had been reduced to scathing insults and unbridled rancor, it wasn't uncommon for me to see that smile.

I suppose he wasn't the only one to blame. I had put too much faith in my wisdom back then. I was devout in my belief that my insight and careful mentoring of the boy would lead him to the illustrious path he was destined for. I was a fool for not considering his refusal to allow me to do so.

I had tried every method possible of getting through to him. I spent years attempting to break the barrier between what he showed me, and what was truly bothering him. I spent my days with particular colleagues gaining information on various techniques to penetrate the defenses of deeply traumatized adolescents. And it didn't take a professional to understand that Edward was, in fact, deeply traumatized.

They all told me the same thing when I returned to them, unsuccessful in my attempts to gain his trust. It took patience.

For years I remained as patient as I could possibly allow given the circumstances. But then Bella Swan moved to Forks and suddenly, Edward let that barrier down. It took me a long while to realize they were even close, but once I saw him, holding her in the middle of the gym floor of the high school, I just knew.

All on his own and without any careful approaches, he had finally found someone to confide in. And as I watched them interact following the incident, I realized he had found something much greater than a mere confidant.

It was a positive sign, and even though I felt a sense of spite that I couldn't be that person, I encouraged the relationship for a long while. As long as I possibly could.

I watched as they moved closer on the dining room table. Bella was relaying a childhood memory that made me stifle a giggle. Alice always was the perfectionist. It was no surprise to see her upset over a destroyed sand castle.

But they began getting closer. Too close. And suddenly their foreheads were touching and I was uncomfortable with their intimate proximity in my presence.

"I think perhaps Bella should go home now." I spoke in the least intrusive voice I could manage, and yet still seemed to startle the poor girl who had completely failed to realize I was still in the room. Her lips fell to a frown as she glanced back and forth between Edward and me, and I felt angry with Esme once again. She was making me the bad guy today.

Edward was exceptionally perturbed as he sat up and met my gaze. "Why? We aren't doing anything wrong?" He asked, clearly agitated and sorrowful for her impending departure.

My stomach twisted in anxiety as I glanced down at my shoes and scratched the back of my neck. "Please, Edward. Don't make a scene." I pleaded. It would do no good to make such a hostile show in front of Bella. He could attack me once she was safely next door, and I'd take it, because I always had.

He appeared as though he was preparing to defy me when Bella finally stood up and disarmed him with a kiss on his temple and a bag of cookies.

She moved to leave, so I gave her an abundance of space to exit as she departed. "Goodbye Dr. Cullen." She shuffled out the doorway to the living room and I had opened my mouth to once again correct her before I realized it was fruitless. I'd omit this from my conversation with Esme as well.

Edward sat in his chair for many moments as I stood stoic, and utterly apologetic for ruining what was meant to be a happy day for him. There were many things I wanted to say as I stared at the back of his head. I wanted to say happy birthday, but it felt offensive and ironic given the circumstances. I wanted to say I was sorry and I'd do my best to encourage a repeat allowance from Esme, but I didn't want to see him disappointed when I failed. So I stood silent and prayed he'd still grant me the gift of his scathing insults, because it was the absolute best I could possibly hope for.

But the scathing insults never came, and I was eventually resigned to leaving him in the room alone, gazing at the birthday cake, devoid of the one lone sliver he had eaten.

Outtake 5: Tragic Dragons, EPOV Past-take

EPOV

There is no worse green than hospital green. Especially this particular - shitty - hospital. I pulled up the stiff sheet around my neck and wrinkled my nose at it while forcing back a gag. I fucking hated this place. My room was small, but luckily, it was private and I didn't have to share with one of the infectious, sick kids. In fact, this was the longest amount of time I had spent without any kids in years. The owners of the 'home' I currently lived at had somehow managed to convince the state they were perfectly capable of caring for ten children.

I snorted at the thought of the monstrous monthly check they received, but it turned into a coughing fit that forced me nearly upright as my lungs fought to expel the invading substance of the flu. When I was finally in control of myself once again, I flopped back down onto the crinkly pillow and reached for the remote control to the television. I began flipping through channels indifferently. It was seriously pathetic how I wished for the hustle and bustle of the public school yard as opposed to this room. I relaxed and tucked my familiar stuffed dragon underneath my free arm snugly. He was too fucking fluffy and cute for any respectable thirteen year old to cling to, but I couldn't bear to be parted with the little fucker.

He was given to me the day I first entered the foster system. My caseworker was struggling to make me smile as she brought me to my first home, but I was too broken and hollow to manage one. She tried everything. Fast food, video arcades, chocolate ice cream, even bloody movies.

When we reached the little house I was meant to live in, she reached in her back seat and pulled it out for me to hold while I toured the house for the first time.

It always brought back that distant and painful memory, but I kept it as reminder by my side wherever I attempted to sleep. *Never get attached.*

I had been ragged on so hard for it that I was now resigned to hiding him under blankets and in the bottom of duffel bags, but I never let him go. There was even a ridiculously embarrassing nickname that I'd never ever admit to. And as I sat in my crappy hospital bed, coughing up buckets of phlegm, I decided I might admit to it... if I could get out of this fucking hell hole.

On the upside, I was feeling better. The cough was still a motherfucker, but it was better than the fever and chills that only just recently abated that morning. I felt... better. Not good, just better.

I stopped the button on Oprah and watched her prattle on about suicidal housewives for twenty minutes as I tried my best to get comfortable in the electric bed that was, unsurprisingly, not functional. Apparently, the debt the little housewives had acquired over their flaccid marriages had them a little depressed. I frowned mockingly and rolled my eyes. *What an awful existence.*

I heard the familiar sounds of tiny footsteps patter past my doorway and quickly flipped the channel until I was sure they weren't entering my room. Because...fucking Christ... if Jordan could see this shit, I'd never live it down. He'd run around the house telling everybody I spent my day watching Oprah fucking Winfrey and I'd probably have to lock his ass in the closet again. I smirked at the thought. That little shit was the cutest six year old I had ever lived with.

He was also annoyingly up my ass and visited much too frequently.

I heard another pair of footsteps ten minutes later. But this was a pair I knew. Older. Refined. *Dr. Cullen.*

I sat up manually, because this shitty hospital lacked the funding to fix their goddamn beds, and waited for him as he stood outside the door and likely went over my charts with his keen eye. I smirked once again, a little proud that I was finally improving, even though I didn't deserve any of the credit.

He entered the room as he usually did; with a light knock and a three second delay before he opened the door and stepped inside with a smile. He was wearing that same white lab jacket that made him look clean and sterile with his khaki slacks and shiny black shoes. He always looked so neatly groomed and emitted an air of calm that made him perfect for his chosen profession.

"Well, well, well..." He cooed as he approached my bed with my chart in hand. "Felling better today are we?" He asked, a hint of smugness in his voice as he stared at the clipboard in his hand and scribbled something swiftly.

I shrugged against the pillow I had positioned against the wall and crossed my feet under the blankets. "Worse than normal, but better than shit?" I replied with a wry grin, earning a hearty chuckle as Dr. Cullen finally met my gaze.

"Hmmm..." He mused quietly with dramatically furrowed eyebrows. "Be sure to write that in my evaluation when you leave." He smiled as he removed the stethoscope from his neck and placed it in his ears. "My superiors would adore that." His eyebrows raised and he lifted his hand in the air as if to feign writing. "Dear superiors, your qualified medical staff has managed to make me feel... better than shit." He smirked, and I just had to laugh, because really, it wasn't common to hear anything like that come out of his mouth.

He put the cold metal stethoscope to my back and went through the normal routine of "Breathe in, breathe out" before he finally pulled away and returned the chart on the side of my bed. I watched in fascination as he scribbled his findings in black ink.

Dr. Cullen always fascinated me. I couldn't quite place why. Maybe it was how he went out of his way to keep me company at nights. He'd always come between shifts and play cards with me, like some fucking uptight version of Patch Adams or some shit. Normally, that kind of thing would exasperate me, but he was different.

He didn't treat me like some charity case kid when he kept me company. He always engaged me in intriguing conversations about everything. Literature, music, even politics. What kind of adult gives a shit what some kid thinks about politics? But he always appeared so genuinely interested; offering his own thoughts and opinions as he usually lost our card games. It seemed rather intentional to me, but I never mentioned it. Because nobody ever let me win before. The kids at 'home' all had the same mentality.

Survival of the fittest.

They were utterly devoid of compassion by the time they turned fifteen. That was why I liked Jordan so much. He hadn't spent enough time in the system to become jaded and cynical of everything. He still had that spark in his eyes that shone of genuine excitement and vulnerable innocence. He wasn't hardened. But he would be.

Dr. Cullen brought me from my musings as he wheeled his stool around to face me from the counter across the room. He had the strangest look on his face. I could tell there was a dash of caution as his bright blue eyes met mine, but there was also a very uncharacteristic twinge of anxiety as his hand combed through his hair in a gesture that clearly showed his nervousness.

I quirked an eyebrow at his abnormal behavior. He was always so collected. Except, I suddenly remembered, for that afternoon five days ago when he put the foster bitch in her place. Most of my fever had muddled my memories and hazed them over even worse than the sleep

deprivation I had become accustomed to over the past four years, but that memory stood out prominently.

His mood had shifted slightly since that afternoon, but I could tell he was trying to hide that it bothered him. I couldn't figure out why it would. I was used to shit like that. What I wasn't used to however were people sticking up for me. It would have pissed me off, but I felt too sickly and weak to object to his outrage on my behalf.

And now, I felt a little ashamed over the whole thing. It wasn't because I needed his protection or anything, though that didn't exactly help my pride any. I was ashamed because he had seen that part of my world. I was afraid he'd think less of me, see me for what I really was. Just a piece of shit foster kid that was kept around for the monthly government check.

But he came back that night and played cards with me like nothing had happened. And even though I could still see the flash of silent fury in his eyes every now and then, I refused to believe it was in any relation to that afternoon.

I cocked my head at him a bit, because he wasn't saying anything and he was just fucking staring at me with those penetrating and intense eyes and... it made me uncomfortable.

All at once his face collapsed into an agonizingly troubled expression that made my stomach lurch into my throat. It wasn't exactly the most comforting face to see on your personal physician turned... kind of friend. "You'll be discharged in three days." He informed me in an oddly strained voice. The heel of his loafer began tapping at the floor as his knee bobbed up and down. I nodded at him slowly. I was pretty fucking excited about that, but he didn't seem to share my enthusiasm for the freedom.

His cheeks suddenly puffed out momentarily as he held his breath and lowered his face a bit. A gusty sigh was mingled with words as he expelled the breath from his lips. "I was wondering if you might be interested in coming to stay with me." He spoke hastily while his heel tapped rapidly on the floor.

I sat staring at him blankly for a few moments before I could finally process his words. "Huh?" I asked bewildered as my jaw hung slightly agape.

He sighed again and finally lifted his face to meet my gaze. "You can't go back to those awful people, Edward." He shoved his hands in the pockets of his sterile jacket as I once again saw fury flash in his eyes at his coming tirade. "They will use you and squander every bit of potential you have until you're nothing but another statistic on the daily news, and I..." He halted

abruptly and inhaled deeply, appearing to calm himself. I was once again torn between awe and all encompassing shame over the situation. He did see the real me. He just saw it as a distant possibility of my future, and not the person I had already become.

I chuckled humorlessly and leaned back onto my pillow while I attempted to focus on Oprah once again. "You don't have to worry about me Dr. Cullen." I waved my hand in a dismissive gesture. "I can handle myself. I always have." My words were far more bitter than I had originally intended, and I knew when I glanced sideways at him that he could tell the process had already begun for me.

Then I was pissed off at myself, and maybe him a little too. I didn't want to be the charity case I never thought I was to him. And this felt too much like it for my comfort. In the matter of a minute, our whole dynamic had shifted from peer to adult and child. I kept my eyes on Oprah as his stool noisily wheeled to my bed side, and I fought back a grimace mingled with a gag.

"Edward?" He called to me softly while Oprah's next housewife finally broke down into tears. "I'm not asking for an answer right now." His hand came to cover mine on the blanket at my side and I flinched away.

Then I was torn between being deeply touched by a show of affection I rarely received and being seriously creeped out. I didn't really know this man. I spent time with him at nights when I refused to sleep or accept the sedatives, but... I didn't *really* know him. And now he was asking me to come to his home and... touching me outside the bounds of our doctor-patient relationship.

I had a difficult time determining if my paranoia was justly founded, or if it simply stemmed from years of living with children who had been lured into homes with nice people, who later turned out to be devious and menacing. Their nightly horror stories whispered in the dark quiet of various bedrooms had made me ever vigilant of affectionate contact like that.

He didn't seem to take any offense to my discomfort. "I have a son about your age, you know?" He asked in a voice that wasn't defensive, just merely informational, likely in an attempt to placate my suspicions.

I peeked at him curiously because I didn't know he had a family. "You're married?" I asked quietly, as more of a statement than an inquiry while searching the hand on my bed for a wedding band.

He shook his head and appeared apologetic as he withdrew his hand. "No. I adopted Emmett six years ago. He's fourteen now." He smiled as his eyes shone with something akin to pride and... something else. *Adoration*? I furrowed my brow at this expression on his face, and the way he beamed at his adopted son's mention.

It kindled this feeling deep inside of my chest and I had to look away before he could see the pain flashing in my eyes. It was a kind of love that I could spot anywhere. *Fatherly*.

"We have a condo on the east side of the city." He continued as I watched the television in a facade of disinterest. "It's just the two of us, so you'd have plenty of space and more quiet than you're used to now." I saw him smile and shake his head out of my periphery as he chuckled softly, as if to himself before he continued. "I'm not Ward Cleaver or anything, but you'll be well cared for both financially and medically." His words shifted to an oddly business-like tone, which I rather appreciated. The whole sappy father bit was starting to irritate me.

"You'll be expected to maintain good grades in school much like Emmett, but I doubt that's really a problem for you." I noted his smirk from the corner of my eye as Housewife Number Four admitted to a sultry affair with her husband's brother. He sighed and persisted, though I was attempting to seem very unconcerned with the conversation. "We've been planning to move out of the city for a long while, so keep that in consideration."

He stood then and examined my blank stare for a moment before he walked away from my bed with my chart in his hand. "Just think about it." He called softly over his shoulder as he exited the room.

I heard the door click as black tears began trailing down Housewife Number Five's rosy cheeks and I gripped the stuffed dragon under my arm fiercely.

She wiped them away with a shuddering breath that made her cleavage tremble as she stared at me intensely from the television screen. Her voice was hollow and devoid of all emotion as she spoke into the camera. "I never thought I'd end up here."

I spent my day pretending I wasn't considering Dr. Cullen's offer. The more I tried not to think about it, the more I did.

He could be lying, and planning to move me away to some fucking dank warehouse in B.F.E. I thought about the way his hand felt on mine. Tender, gentle, and affectionate. The thought made me shudder. Alternatively, he could be telling the truth, and he really was just this

completely normal guy who sometimes adopted kids because he was a bleeding heart. Compassionate and compelled to help wherever he was able.

I wasn't sure which the worst case scenario was. If he really was just being nice and caring then I'd be fucking up his life. Because all of those qualities probably meant that he thought he could fix me. I knew better.

The nurse came at noon with my lunch, and while I idly picked at the lumpy formation of shit with a side of shit, I did something that was inexcusable.

I allowed my thoughts to indulge themselves in a vision of what could be.

It was rather elaborate because I reasoned, if I was going to dream, I might as well dream big. I tried to imagine this condo of his, probably spotless and sterile just like his crisp white lab coat. I tried to imagine this Emmett kid, most likely proper and composed like the good little boy Dr. Cullen spoke so fondly of. Mostly though, I tried to imagine where I could fit in amongst all of his perfection and sterile, and if I'd even be happy. Or... as close to happy as I could ever be.

Dr. Cullen seemed like a nice enough guy after all. I suddenly felt guilty for seeing him as some creepy child molester when I knew differently. I couldn't explain how I knew, or what he had ever done to gain that amount of trust from me, but I just knew it. He had never been inappropriate with me, and had more than enough opportunities to try.

By dinner, I had decided that I was a shitty person for even thinking such things about Dr. Cullen. Which only left me with one assumption. He really was a bleeding heart. I tried even harder to push it aside and not think about it, but it kept resurfacing. It didn't help that I got no visitors for the day. I suddenly felt lonely and suffocated in the small room while I gazed blankly at the sunset from the slits in the vertical blinds.

How bad could it really be?

That same mental argument warred over and over again in my head that wondered... how much am I going to just... completely fucking disappoint this man. What were his expectations of me? How long would it be before he sent me back? It had happened to me before. The nice and honest families never wanted baggage with their adolescents and usually preferred the younger children, like Jordan. I tried to imagine the abundance of ways I could let him – and myself – down before he grew tired of my failures.

By ten, I was tired of envisioning it, and generally tired all together. I had slept plenty during my fever... unintentionally, and even though it was impossibly invigorating considering my condition, the lack of sleep was already beginning to catch up with me again.

Late night television was much better than that daytime crap, so it held my attention for a long while. I waited for midnight, curious if Dr. Cullen would enter my room as he usually did, or if he was already regretting his offer. I couldn't decide which outcome I preferred. Then as I heard his tell-tale footsteps approaching my door, I found myself feeling an odd phantom twinge inside of my chest.

He appeared cautious as he entered my room, keeping the door open a crack which wasn't something he usually did. I felt shitty and ashamed once again that he was doing it to ease my paranoid fears. His smile was genuine as he took his usual spot beside my bed and produced the deck of cards from his lab coat pocket with a quirked eyebrow.

I sat up in answer to his silent question, and took my place in the middle of the bed with my legs folded beneath me and the stuffed dragon abandoned on my pillow. He smirked at it fleetingly before applying his mock 'game face'. This had been our routine for almost three weeks, and the mere thought of even having a routine made me grin as he shuffled and dealt my hand atop the green blanket face down.

Being in the hospital was fucked up and I hated it to no end, but... I couldn't deny I craved this kind of stability. A place that was clean where people usually gave a shit about you. The kids running around in these halls were sick, but commonly sweet children. It was a stark contrast to the kids I usually had to share my space with. My mind began creating some kind of checklist of pros and cons against my will as I watched Dr. Cullen purse his lips thoughtfully at his hand of cards.

He was so goddamn *normal*.

It appalled me, but I began wondering if that was the thing that fascinated me with him all these weeks. That thing that, much like the phantom feeling in my chest, I couldn't quite put a name to.

He put one card face up. Three of clubs. I smirked and deposited my four of clubs to take the book. *Spades it is*. I thought smugly. I always beat him at this game, and I knew there was no way he could reverse-cheat into losing.

We played the hand in a very peculiar silence. Not entirely uncomfortable, but thick with deep contemplation. I took his Ace of Diamonds with my Big Joker and suddenly...

"Tell me more." I blurted in a voice that was still thick with flu and ill, yet held a twinge of defeat and caution. His gaze darted to mine and he pursed his lips again as he regarded me. I figured it wouldn't hurt to make an educated decision, even if I knew that I really just wanted more material for the elaborate fantasy playing in my head.

Inexcusable indeed.

His lips screwed up into a wry grin and he began speaking while I... simply listened.

After thirty minutes of hearing him talk, I began asking questions like, "If you have a son, then why the fuck are you up here spending time with me all night?"

He chuckled at that, and took my Queen of Hearts with his Two of Spades. "Emmett is fairly self-sustaining. I can always trust him to stay out of trouble or contact me in the event of an emergency. He knows how demanding my work is." He shrugged.

I wanted to feel offended that spending time with me was regarded as 'work', but reasoned that wasn't entirely fair, seeing as how he was making an effort to make me personal.

He kept talking, only pausing to answer my brief questions and I was so shamefully engrossed in his responses that I lost the game. He noticed, but didn't mock me for it. Instead he put the deck away and just spoke to me. And it wasn't condescending adult talk, and it wasn't even business-like. It was just Dr. Cullen asking to adopt me.

After two hours of discussing legal shit and housing arrangements, Carlisle – as I was now told to call him – left my room with a carefully blank expression.

And then I was confused and a little awestruck again. Because the way he spoke of me coming to live with him was just...

I couldn't fathom why. I'd never amount to much, and I'd probably always cause him shiteaps of trouble, but he didn't seem to mind the fact that I was fucked up. That was what got me as the sun rose.

I wasn't fascinated by Carlisle because he was filthy rich and normal and sterile. I was fascinated with him because he could be doing anything at midnight on a weekend. He could be out

having drinks with some hot nurse or at home with the prim and proper good boy. But he was here with me.

Because he *wanted* me.

It had been so long since someone really wanted me that I got that phantom feeling in my chest once again that made a lump form in my throat. There was a nagging voice in my subconscious whispering that he would back out, and he would realize I was more trouble than I was worth. And it really was me just fucking setting myself up to be hurt by this. It could be the best thing that had ever happened to me, or one of the worst to add to the list.

I rolled over onto my side and closed my eyes while I hugged the stuffed dragon tightly to my scarred chest. As the orange sun filtered perfectly proportional rays across my hospital bed, I buried my nose in all of the green fur and sighed into it, deep and defeated.

Because I just knew there was no turning away from the one person in the world who wanted me.

I was nervous as his shift approached, fiddling with my I.V. and huffing at the bed once again. I mean, seriously. How fucking expensive is it to fix a goddamn bed? I thought tax dollars paid for these. And why was it so goddamn hot in here? Fuck, my mouth was suddenly dry. Where the hell did my water go? Why am I freaking out so much?

I could hear his steps approaching as I swallowed loudly. Swallowed the dryness. Swallowed my pride. Swallowed that nagging voice that told me I was going to get so fucked over by doing this as I heard his perfunctory knock.

Three seconds later, like clockwork, he stepped into the room; eyes fixed on my chart as he idly bit the inside of his cheek and made his way to the counter.

"Fever's been down for two days. How's the cough?" He asked, glancing at me over his shoulder as he prepared a syringe.

I nearly grimaced at the needle before I remembered I had an I.V. "The cough is less." I replied offhandedly as I watched him approach my bed. He nodded and furrowed his brows in concentration as he injected my I.V. tube with the medication.

"Broad spectrum antibiotics." He explained with a grin as he began scribbling on the chart once more. "Just a boost." He concluded.

I chuckled, but it came out small and anxious. "Yeah. Wouldn't want to take some sick kid home with you, huh?" My chuckle became more anxious as my fingers began fiddling with the I.V. again and my heart was pounding and I couldn't fucking look at him and... shit. When did I turn into such a fucking pussy?

The room was bathed in a tense and heavy silence that settled deep into my stomach as I stared down at my blankets and fidgeted unconsciously. He wasn't talking and he was probably already realizing he fucked up by asking me. I wanted to die a little. Just pull the blankets up over my head and fucking... die of shame for allowing myself to believe it.

But I had to man up here, because it was my fault for believing in the first place.

I sighed and turned my head to meet his gaze. To tell him it was okay, and I didn't give a shit about his lush accommodations and affectionate hand pats and stupid fucking Emmett who could stay out of trouble. But my words stuck in my throat as my eyes met his.

He was grinning and maybe a little smug as his blue eyes gazed back at mine in satisfaction and he simply nodded. He didn't make me say the words, and he never forced me to swallow my pride whole. He just fucking nodded and clapped me on the shoulder briefly as he put the stethoscope to my back and asked me to take a deep breath.

I walked into my messy and completely fucking obliterated bedroom as I raked my hand through my hair and looked around in frustration. This place was such a fucking pig sty. Thank God Dr. Cull- Carlisle... could probably afford people to clean up his house. I pulled out the dark green duffel bag from beneath my bed and began filling it with everything of importance. The sketchbooks came first. I had five already filled up and they dropped into the duffel bag and hit the bottom with a thud on the floor. It smelled in here, but I had to share it with three other pre-pubescent boys, so it wasn't very surprising.

I could vaguely hear the girls in the house bickering over something as I opened the closet and began removing my clothes from hangers. This wasn't new for me. I had moved ten times in the last four years and made it a point to only keep what mattered. No posters, or CDs, or even photos of all the people I had met. These things get lost or stolen and there's no point in getting

attached because when the day comes and you can't find it, you feel like shit. It's easier to pack light.

I was just finishing with my clothes when Jordan came stomping into the bedroom. I had my back to him, but I could always tell when that little shit was behind me. He couldn't realize it yet, but his deviated septum was noisy as all hell. I smirked as I turned and look down at him. All of his flaming red, curly hairs glimmered in the morning light and made his angry pout look fierce as he stalked to my bed and flopped down on it angrily.

"This is bullshit." He said in his deceptively innocent and child-like voice.

I looked at him all disapprovingly, but I couldn't because he got that word from me. And a million others. I shrugged and zipped up the duffel bag, because I didn't know what to say to him. *That's what you get for growing so attached to someone?*

He'd understand when he got older and more hardened by the system. It was a necessary evil, and my departure wouldn't stand out in five years among the hundreds of others he would meet and bid farewell to.

His pout broke my heart a little as it softened and he picked at my bare mattress with his tiny fingers. "Can I go with you?" He whispered in a tiny voice and glanced up at me through his orange lashes and his lips trembled and... fucking shit. This kid was going to make me go all soft on him.

I puffed my cheeks out with a large breath, much like Carlisle had done a few days prior and I shook my head while I picked up the duffel bag and slung it over my shoulder.

His face fell even more and he kept picking with his tiny fingers and holding back tears. "Who's going to walk me to school in the mornings?" He asked with a barely-there snuffle that made me sigh.

"I never walked you to school, Jordan." I mumbled while kicking the toe of my shoe on the stained carpet. "You followed me every day for the last six months. There's a difference." I replied dryly as he wiped away an invisible tear.

"Cassie never lets me walk with her." He looked at me again, and he was so sad that I was desperately trying to force down the guilt and remorse for leaving the little fucker. And why? He irritated me to no end, and yet here I was feeling bad for him.

"Cassie's a fucking bitch." I replied apologetically, earning a distinct "Go to hell." from the adjoining room that made him smile and snicker. I merely shrugged, because really, she was. All blonde and hellfire and too good for a tag-a-long like Jordan that cramped her style. Thank God Dr. Cullen didn't have any daughters.

I was just about to leave the room and this house and this fucked up life when he suddenly sprang off the bed and lunged at my leg, capturing my thigh in a death grip as his wide green eyes stared up at me. I clicked my tongue, and rolled my eyes at the melodramatics as I kicked him off gently.

"For fuck's sake, Jordan. Let me go." I snapped angrily. I watched the dimples in his cheeks fade into a more defined pout as he stepped away and sunk to the floor with his knees to his chest. Then he buried his face and began sobbing like the six year old he was, and if it were anyone else in this house, they'd walk away and let him learn his lesson.

But I felt like shit. Because I couldn't take him with me and I couldn't save him from this shitty reality. I had to walk away and just hope he found his own Carlisle someday. I wouldn't keep contact and I'd never look back on it because there was no reason to.

With a deep and remorseful sigh, I dropped my duffel bag and unzipped it, reaching deep down to the bottom and grumbling as my hand emerged with the stuffed dragon. I kneeled in front of him and ran my fingers through my hair awkwardly while shoving it at him. It was the closest thing I had to a keepsake, and I couldn't find any reason to keep it any longer. He'd keep it with him all the time, and just like me, he'd be reminded that bonds are broken and made in the span of something as simple as an infectious cough and a chance referral to the cheap hospital.

"Here." I sighed, watching dreadfully as he sniffled and hesitantly took the dragon from my hand. He regarded it curiously as he held it before his face broke out into a tear stained smile that brought the dimples back.

His wide green eyes shone once again as he sniffled and glanced from me to the dragon. "I can have him?" He asked all fucking excited and still teary eyed as he hugged it to his chest like the proud new owner of a piece of shit lump of synthetic fur.

I nodded and grimaced as I stood up and chanced a cautious peek over my shoulder for any lurking bystanders. "His name is..." I trailed off, closing my eyes as the all encompassing embarrassment swallowed me whole for the millionth time in a week. "Mister Draggy Fantastico." I grumbled shamefully while slinging the bag back onto my shoulder.

Jordan's tiny, musical giggle followed me out the door of the pig sty as I exited the house and walked toward Carlisle's expensive Mercedes where he was waiting for me patiently. And I had no way of knowing if I was doing something really reckless and stupid as fuck by getting in the car and letting him take me to his home, but I pushed back the fear that welled inside of my chest as the phantom feeling returned with his every glance in my direction.

During the two days of arrangements made at my bed side with Carlisle, I had come to finally discover the name of that phantom feeling.

It was *hope*.

And as much I struggled to justify the shame of feeling it, I couldn't. I need it too fucking much to deny it. I needed him to keep me and prove that I was worth all of the bullshit and trouble I would put him through, because I had been so convinced I wasn't for the longest time.

"So," He started as he pulled off the street and began driving towards the east side of the city. "How are you feeling?" He asked, glancing at me warily from the corner of his eye.

I chuckled at his concern and leaned back against the lush headrest with a deep sigh as I watched the slums of Chicago disappear behind us.

"Better than shit."

Companion: The Light and the Dark, Elizabeth Masen POV

Elizabeth Masen

Sleep isn't an escape. My traitor thoughts whispered as I stared at the back of my eyelids. Darkness with sharp flashes of color protruding from the edges in wayward pyrotechnics danced in front of my irises.

That was probably a lie. Even if it weren't a lie, it didn't matter. It was an escape to me, and the rare hours I was graced by the empty bliss it created, I was still. Numb. It wasn't much to look forward to during the day, but it was something.

I needed more of it. Hours, or preferably days if possible.

The incessant chirping of an elated blue jay disrupted my fitful slumber at six thirty that morning. It was too early for me to muster up the energy necessary to shoo the inane creature from its perch behind the smudged pane, so I instead reached a weak hand blindly to my side and pulled the rumpled pillow over my ear with a raspy groan.

The pillow stunk of mold and stale booze. I pushed my nose deeper and breathed it in resentfully... reverently. The mold was unseemly, but the smell of the ambrosial liquor was more than enough to make it bearable.

That *was* an escape. Even I wasn't stupid enough to deny that. Though denial was not something I deserved nor sought. The truth of my Darkness infected me daily, creeping into the very depths of my being and dragging me under. I stopped fighting against its pull long ago; choosing to numb it with liquor and slumber. Waiting.

But now I had awoken once again. Alone in my unkempt bed with the familiar stench of my existence and the sounds of life outside of my apartment window. Mocking. I pushed the pillow deeper into my face, bracing myself as my hand created a feeble fist in the lumpy material. I knew the memories would assault me as they did every morning I awoke. Sobered.

They came in brief, sharp flashes as I clenched my eyes closed and pushed the pillow as tightly to my face as my minimal strength would allow.

Licorice and Mint. Corduroy and velvet. Dahlia flowers and wolf grins. Brown loafers and silken hair. The soft jingle of metal. Fresh linen and billowing curtains trimmed with lace. Sunlight and laughter. Soiled white cotton and excited whispers. Muddy hands. Bronze hair. Green eyes.

I was sick again in. Huddling over the stained porcelain toilet and heaving nothing into the dark bowl. Dry heaves. No stomach acid. No food. No liquid. Nothing.

I was empty.

I didn't look in the mirror as I rose. I never did. I never could. Instead I slipped on the large brown trench coat that would act as my barrier for the short amount of time I required it. There was no reason to get dressed. I was never undressed.

My head was aching, a pulsing whoosh resounding through my ears as I stumbled down the hall of the dark apartment carelessly. The stench was everywhere. Little crevices as I passed the kitchen, all dirty. The dank smell surrounded the air in something that could only be described as death. This whole place reeked of it. Sunk into the pores of the peeling walls and the gruff fabric of the carpet that led to the unused living room.

Of course it was unused. It was meant for the living, wasn't it?

When my pale hand turned the door knob and eased it open, I hissed, turning my face away from the bright light of the morning sky's oranges and pinks. I squinted, inching my face into the light to adjust.

It was warm outside and there was a distinctly familiar scent in the air as I wandered down the sidewalk with my face casted downwards. Those two facts were my only clues in my estimation of the current season. Summer in Chicago. I couldn't remember the date because I never kept track. Time was unfriendly and increasingly senseless to keep.

I made my bee line to the corner store on Seventy Fifth and Lexington, the familiar daily path greeting me flatly as I gazed down at it unseeingly. A scant few persons wandered about the streets as I passed; some on their porches waiting for taxis, and some passing me in disinterest.

A family of four scattered out of cab as I approached the familiar store, halting with my hand hovering over the metal handle. First a woman and a little girl emerged. They were similar with their red hair and blue eyes. Mother and daughter, holding hands and stepping aside as two more exited. There was man, the father I assumed, with a comically receding hairline and a repulsive yellow button up shirt that resembled the color of week old vomit.

The man looked infuriated as he grabbed his little boy's wrist and helped him from the vehicle. "What did I say about talking back?" The man asked the boy angrily. The boy simply stared up at him with a rather bored expression, which only seemed to fuel his father's annoyance. The young boy couldn't have been a day over eight years old. His hair was the color of his fathers. Murky blonde as it fell across his scalp limply. If his genes were any indication, he'd better enjoy that while it lasts.

It was meant to be a rhetorical question. Even the boy could see that as he shrugged lamely and turned to his mother. They didn't look happy. The mother looked frazzled and on edge as the man paid the cabbie and snatched the boy's wrist up, dragging him into the shop with low, angry hisses laced with threat. The boy didn't seem to care about what his father was saying.

He was nothing like...

Paper and paste. Teary eyed laughter and forceful tickles. Feathers and golden shimmers. Footsteps and chuckles. Humming and warm fingertips. Soft and sweet. Bronze hair. Green eyes.

I closed my palm painfully into a fist around the metal handle, jarring the door open with the jingling bell meant to alert the employees inside to my entrance clanging against the large door.

It wasn't necessary in my case. They knew when to expect me every day. I was as punctual as the elated blue jay outside my murky window pane was reliable. I chose my poison from the shelf, the usual bottle that would likely only last a mere five hours. I wondered briefly if I should buy an extra as I stared at the stocked shelf longingly. The scene of the family would surely make this day worse than yesterday.

I bought two. Paying silently as the aged and weathered woman behind the counter glanced at me sideways and made my change. We never spoke, and I pretended that I didn't see the pity in her eyes as I turned to exit the store with my treasures in tow. Her pity was something I neither deserved nor sought. Pity and denial were oddly similar in that way.

I walked home blindly, my memory of the habitual path sharp and clear despite my failing body's fatigue under the strain of my frail footsteps. The apartment door was unlocked, and opened with ease, but my hands shook as I pushed it open. Trembling as I was met once again with the stench of my reality.

I went to my bed, and there was serenity in the way it was waiting for me when I arrived. Dirty mattress and crumpled sheets, beckoning the daily routine as I removed the coat and sunk down onto the squeaky bulk in the middle of the room.

The blue jay had fled long ago. He always did by the time I returned.

My trembling hands produced my solace from the brown and rumpled paper bag. I licked my lips in anticipation, fumbling to remove the lid with the minimal amount of strength the need provided me.

It was warm as it slid down my throat. Bitter in the sweetest way as I threw my head back and took as much of it as I could without asphyxiating. It was disgusting and despicable, but so was I. We fit together as it lulled me into the slow numbness I craved.

It took more and longer to settle me into the comfort of its intoxication as I relaxed into the comfort of the hard mattress, but it was worth it. This was the time where I could remember it all with even a shred of peace. Without my bidding, the vision of the family on the street returned to me.

It was infuriating.

Because none of them looked happy, and none of them realized what they were taking for granted. I saw the same thing every day I made the trip to the corner store on Seventy Fifth and Lexington. Mothers and Fathers who didn't take the time to really appreciate their blessings. They bickered and fought and were unfaithful in dark alleyways and back seats without showing any signs of remorse when it tore their families apart.

I had the chance once. With a dashing man and a dashing smile that dashed my fears and elevated me past the petty differences that separated most. It wasn't every woman's ideal to get married at eighteen; with child at twenty three. But it was Ed and I because we knew from first sight at that party in Cleveland that we were meant to be by the other's side. Entwined and inseparable from the first second of the first day of the first week of the first year of our happily ever after.

Sometimes, if I get obliterated just enough to lose motor functions, I can still smell his scent lingering in the stale air of the dilapidated rental apartment. Licorice and mint and warm rain. It smelled like home.

It smelled like devastation. Like the end of my will to live because it was gone, and I'd never smell it again unless I was like this. Drunk and utterly useless.

We had plans and hopes and dreams. A cabin in the forest sitting to the west of the city where we could escape. A vacation to France and a walk on the pier of the river while the sun set behind the Parisian clouds. I would laugh and throw myself into his arms when he mentioned it.

Ed was a hopeless romantic. He romanced me hopelessly. Winding me around his finger with one flash of his dashing smile, and one touch of his soft lips.

He was everything. The gravity that planted my feet on the floor of our home when he worked all day. I would wait impatiently, sometimes losing my battle with my will and taking him lunch as a spontaneous gesture. He loved it of course, always welcoming me with open arms as I jumped into them excitedly. The separation was never easy for us, so even one hour of lunch on a park bench with him at my side was enough to make me wish for forever in that one moment.

He gave me life and shone Light into the Dark void I hadn't even known existed. I still recall with perfect clarity the day we found out I was pregnant. Our families and friends alike were shocked, insisting we were too young, or too promising to entertain such a notion. We laughed and spent the evening alone. His big warm hand resting on my bare, still flat belly and his head on my chest. *He* was absolutely ecstatic.

I ran my fingers through his dark hair as we lay in bed in that night. "What would you prefer?" I asked in reference to the sex of a child.

His body shook with silent laughter that reverberated down to my toes where our feet had become as intertwined as our hearts. "I don't care." He replied simply with a smile in his voice.

He didn't care. Boy or girl, the child was a product of our love and devotion. A perfect being from the mold our hearts had created long ago as it nestled and grew inside of my belly. It was the happiest nine months of misery one could ever hope to experience.

I was the one who chose his name. Edward Senior insisted it was old fashioned and he detested the thought of the ridicule our child might endure for having something so traditional, as he had when he was a child. But Edward it was. He looked like an Edward to me. Like half Ed and half me, and the complete incarnation of an unfathomable creation.

Edward was perfection.

He *was* the Light that Ed shone into my soul. He radiated life and innocence with his shining green eyes and rowdy bronze hair. All he had to do was smile and Ed and I were inclined to give him whatever he wanted. Not that he ever took advantage of that. Even as a small child he showed an amazing amount of care and integrity.

That was the thing about my Edward. He had a bigger heart than he knew what to do with. He was sharp and witty and could go anywhere in this world with his amazing gifts of intelligence and compassion. He was Ed and I multiplied infinitely.

Every mother must have such notions regarding her child, but it was different with Edward and me. We were closer than others, bound at night as I rocked him lovingly and hummed him that same old lullaby my mother hummed to me when I was but a child.

We gave him only the best. The best education, the best clothing, the best music lessons, the best... everything. Because he deserved no less. And giving him those things made us happy and content. A happy family.

So on that windy night in May when I got the call about the house fire, my world came crashing down around me.

I wanted to scream as I stood outside the burning ruins of our happy home. But no sounds escaped my mouth and I simply sank to my knees on the dark gravel of the road. There were flashing lights and sirens as people scurried about our lawn. But all I could do was watch while everything I loved burned and billowed up into the dark sky.

It was our anniversary.

I wanted to cry, but I was unaware if the tears ever managed to escape my wide, terror stricken eyes. The Darkness that the weight of the grief brought upon my soul threatened to drag me under and hold me down. And I welcomed the peace of its relief as I felt the thread that held me to this plane sever irrevocably. I crumbled on the hard ground and watched my happy family go up in flames.

That's when I saw him. A tall fireman in sooty yellow garb running from the yard with a child in his arms. Not *a* child. *My Light*. My Edward. He had survived the fire that was raging furiously before me.

It was in that moment that I saw his bare, black feet dangling against the background of the burning house that I knew I had to push it back. No matter how impossible it may have seemed, I had to hold the grief in for his sake alone. I had to stand up and take the steps to the gurney they were lowering his body onto.

He was barely conscious as he lay in his singed pajamas. They were burned from his chest and stomach, and the sight of the charred flesh that was melting and blistering his soft and innocent skin made me retch violently beside the parked ambulance.

The people were speaking to me as I fought to regain control of my bodily functions and walk closer, but I didn't hear them. The only thing visible to me was Edward's tear stained, sooty face and his singed bronze locks as they loaded him into the back of the ambulance.

I went in with him. And not because I was told to, or asked to, and not even because I needed to know he was okay, though that instinct was surely ever present in my mind. I went with him to hum him to sleep when they sedated him. I stroked his ashen hair and kept my eyes away from the ministrations of the paramedics as he was lulled into unconsciousness by the sedatives.

As they worked on him behind the closed doors of a triage room, the authorities relayed to me the story of the fire and the fate of my husband. They gave me the most gruesome details regarding the condition of his charred remains. Details that would stick with me and haunt my memories for years to come.

Edward was in the hospital for only two nights, and I truly wish I could say that the job of caring for him was enough to keep my mind occupied and away from the overwhelming grief of losing my husband and soul mate. But it was still there. I fought it back and swallowed it down with every ounce of control I had as I tended to my Light, but it still swelled inside of me and threatened to pull me under and into the Darkness of my hopelessness.

My Edward suffered greatly for it. I was meant to care for him and mend his wounds, however physical or emotional they may have been. But my own wounds injured us both, and I was unfit every time the Darkness crept into my mind and I gazed into his flat, green eyes.

It didn't take long for me to realize this grief was inevitable. It would eat away at my soul indefinitely; pulling me down and transforming me into a broken shell that could barely function under the weight of it. It would bleed out of me and infect those I was dear to as they made every attempt to pick me up. It would destroy them every moment that I remained under.

Edward would grow up while watching me suffer, and in turn he would too. He'd spend his childhood caring for his broken mother and seeing the remnants of what she had been slip away from him. It would break him and dim that spark that I held so dear.

And I absolutely refused to let that Darkness take my Light. He was too special and too pure to allow such a blasphemous thing to desecrate him.

It was at the funeral that I had made up my mind. I bowed my head over my husband's casket and I swore that I would do everything in my power to assure Edward had the best chance for a happy future. The only way to make such a vow was to sacrifice. To send him to someone better. Someone whole who couldn't poison him.

That night, we slept at Ed's parents' large country home. I hadn't hummed Edward to sleep like I usually did and he came downstairs, likely seeking me out as I sat at the kitchen table and drowned my grief in the stale vodka from the never-used liquor cabinet of the Masen home.

It was torture to deny my child this one last thing. To hold him in my arms and hum him my song and watch as he drifted to sleep peacefully. But I knew if I went up those stairs and held him I wouldn't be able to let go. So I remained where I sat as I told him, without looking him in the eye in fear that the grief would show and the Darkness would penetrate and desecrate my Light.

When the words left my mouth as I gazed down into my glass, I realized he would need consoling for this. He wouldn't understand the logic and the sacrifice I was making, and he would hurt for it. It angered me that I couldn't be the person to ease that pain in him. It would fade with time, hopefully. And I prayed to whatever God it was I worshiped that his new family would make it up to him and give him the happy home I could no longer provide.

I made the arrangements before the Masens could even figure it out. They would want to keep him for themselves, and that wasn't good enough. I would still know where he was, and the pull to see him every day would be far too strong to resist. And most importantly, they battled their own Darkness from the loss of their child. It wasn't *good enough* for him.

Once he was taken away by the case workers of the state, I left their home without another word to the aging and grieving couple. I couldn't bare the accusation in their eyes as I drove away from the country in my car, alone.

I let the bustle of the city hide me as I drifted from one shabby motel room to the next. Always with the one item that granted me the numbness to face the Darkness and take it into myself wholly. I was drinking with purpose and intention every day that I made a trip to a corner store or a busy market.

I had considered suicide many lonely nights as I lay in a comfortingly uncomfortable bed. The urge to do so was at times overwhelming. Just the thought alone of being able to see him again.

I didn't know if I could consider myself a deeply religious woman. But my family had brought me up with certain beliefs and morals that I abided by faithfully. I wasn't quite sure, if there was a heaven, if I would even be allowed admittance into such a place. But Ed and I were two parts of a whole, and I knew deep in my heart that I would go where he was. He was waiting for me somewhere out there, and I was ready to meet him.

Few things held me back. Mostly fear. Fear that I wouldn't do it right, and I'd just end up injured and waited on in some second rate hospital in the bad part of the city. There was also a fear that such a sin would banish me from that heaven. I wasn't deeply religious, but I wasn't taking any chances where Ed was concerned either.

So I drank myself into stupor after stupor on a daily basis, and if God was compelled to explore the semantics of my intentions and actions, he may have thought it to be suicide anyways. Of course, even though I knew better, I couldn't find the strength to disapprove when I downed a bottle greedily and welcomed the Darkness.

Those were the times of night, when the Darkness had consumed my every fiber, that I allowed my thoughts to drift to my Light. I wondered where Edward was and how he was doing. If his grades were good, and what the couple was like who was caring for him. I wondered if he ever grew to like sports when he was old enough, or if he still kept up with his piano lessons.

Most of all, I wondered if he was happy. I prayed for it, longed for it, begged the Darkness relentlessly for it. I allowed myself grand illusions of his normal daily routines and habits. I imagined that he was somewhere smiling at that exact moment, and it always made the sleep that the Darkness plunged me into that much more peaceful because of it.

Of course, I had no way of knowing really. I couldn't count the number of times I had to restrain myself from seeking out his exact location. I would reason that I needed just one look at his face, or one second to hear his voice. Just one glance to see how tall he had grown, or what parts of Ed had appeared with his maturing features. He would surely be just as dashing, if not more so.

I remained good on my vow throughout the years however, and I never strayed from the path the Darkness would inevitably force and shove me into daily. I could do no such thing and commit no such betrayal.

My Edward would be seventeen on this night. I never kept track of time or dates, but I always made sure to realize how he was growing into a man. And as I lay in my bed with the approaching Darkness daring to drag me under and tuck me into my glorious nothingness, I

imagined that he was laughing and bright like the silver moon that softly illuminated the peeling walls of my shuttered and dank oblivion.

My slumber greeted me with that same magnificent vision that transcended my Darkness just enough to allow me a small grin as the empty bottle dropped from my hand and bounced off the grimy carpet with a gentle thud.

Because somewhere out there in the world, my Light was shining brilliantly among the twinkling stars of the clear May midnight.