

Prompter: *PhoenixPrincesa/stolenxsanity*

Rating: MA/NC-17

Genre: AH - EXTREMELY OOC - Angst/Romance/Suspense

Prompt: *Isabella Swan, famed socialite and Edward Cullen, the guy from the wrong side of the tracks, end up stuck together in some cosmic twist of fate (author can be creative about that). What happens next? AH - Angst/Romance*

Withering the Ferns

A “*Twilight Gift Exchange*” FanFiction

By 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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Chapter 1:

Systematic Failure Blooms a Mystification of Unjustifiable Achievement.

~|-----o|W.T.F|o-----|~

(A.K.A. Paris Hilton is a Whore.)

I despise planes. They are small and stuffy, and they make me feel more confined than an elephant packed into a can of sardines. Walls on all sides, holding me prisoner for prolonged periods of time, making me sweat. There are people in front of me, people behind me, people beside me, and unfailingly, one of them has a wailing infant.

Wailing infants are whores.

Wailing infants are sniveling little creatures who get their way by means of auditory and emotional extortion. They whore out their mucus and their tears and their appallingly well-developed vocal cords. They use their parents' love against them to get what they want, when they wish for it. Somehow, some automatic and instinctual intuition tells them screaming at the top of their lungs will inevitably make their desires come to fruition. I'm not being harsh. I'm just keeping it real. Here. This statement will prove it.

I am a whore.

Not in the sexual sense, of course. I personally detest the usually narrow definition that people give the term when it is actually much broader. Some people call me a socialite. Others like to call me a debutante or priss or spoiled-little-rich-bitch. The *real* socialites, debutantes, prisses, and spoiled-little-rich-bitches like to call me *many* things--none of which are repeatable in polite company. It doesn't really matter what name is granted to them or I, because we're all the same: whores.

Our job is to look pretty, say all the right things, get really good press, and never, ever, *ever* go to any social function without underwear snugly covering our vajayjays. It's a simple concept. And really, the rewards are well worth the effort of wearing heels and dresses and push-up bras that are nearly good enough to convince people I'm not in dire need of an exorbitant boob job. *Nearly*. I didn't even have to go to college last year when I graduated from prep school. There was no need to when everything would clearly be given to me. It's a good life. A privileged life. A life without challenge, full of ease and luxuries without the expectation of intellect or character, just like Renee's.

In short, I loathe being a whore.

There are whores everywhere I look. Left, right, in front, behind, and then the whore who is front and center, basking in the attention and affections of her John like she hadn't sold her soul for a sixpence and a painful round of botched liposuction. The whore that makes whoring look reputable and decent. She's of the brand of whore that's made me one.

My mother, Renee is like the Queen Bee of all whores. I like to imagine San Diego like a big hive, with her at the center and all the little drones scurrying their wings in order to whore to her standard.

I still recall with perfect clarity the first moment I'd realized what that word truly meant. As I said before, it has nothing to do with sex, though, in all honesty, sex certainly does help. More talented whores can achieve what they want without ever performing a single sexual act. My mother calls it "climbing the social ladder." The first time I'd ever seen her consort with her minions, I could see it plain-as-day, plastered across her fake face that she'd given up her true self to gain the life she desired. *That* was a true whore: shoving the honesty of your ideals, values, and individuality deep into yourself for the sole sake of any level of reputation, monetary, or social achievement.

Her husband is Phil. This man-whore has no last name. Well, I suppose he technically has one, but no one uses it. It's kind of like Prince or Madonna, except without the musical talent or marketing genius. You can see him plastered on posters all around the country. He's on the bedroom walls of enthusiastic little boys, girls with endearing crushes, and sexually-confused teenage males who claim to have adoration for his team spirit and commendable morals but really end up masturbating to his male physique like jackrabbits on Viagra. He's known as an athletic phenomenon and ideal role model for aspiring athletes everywhere. He's got the highest batting average in the league and a clandestine steroid addiction the size of India—which coincidentally, is where he prefers to procure the "natural herbs" from. He's got the mentality of a twelve-year-old boy, the body of a twenty-eight-year-old man, the testicles of an adolescent rodent, a nine-figure contract with the league, at least twenty sponsorships, five houses, three yachts, ten cars, two snowmobiles, and a flaming case of herpes.

In other words, he's the American dream.

Phil had been putting us up ever since this loving relationship between him and Renee bloomed. And by "bloomed," I mean since my mother blew him in the bathroom of the Bellagio. Still, I had little to no room to complain. Renee gives me what I want, when I want it, without question or hesitation. And all I have to do is play the attractively proper little daughter-whore in the public eye. It had all been so easy for a good while. Using the ever-present media attention of her new husband, she had adored thrusting me into the limelight,

parading me around as her friends had done with their own daughters. She'd finally felt a sense of belonging as we climbed the cruel social ladder with ease. For a long time, I'd been good at holding it together.

And then, very recently, the downward spiral...

I've been caught tripping on camera more times than I can allow myself to count. At a formal function that I couldn't be seen drinking alcoholic beverages at, I dropped my cup of Dr. Pepper (with a dash of grenadine) and singlehandedly destroyed the governor's ten-thousand-dollar ivory sofa. Arnold had been far more understanding than his painfully present design consultant. Also, there's a photo of me circulating on the internet with my dress ignorantly tucked into the back of my underwear. And after an unfortunate misunderstanding in which I stumbled into Colin Appleby and landed in a very compromising position, I became particularly notorious for my crude sexual prowess.

My press only got worse when I was unknowingly recorded stating my uncensored opinion of the Queen of England on one of those annoyingly inconvenient picture phones. I won't repeat exactly what name I used to describe Her Majesty that was unfairly taken out of context, but here's a hint: it rhymes with "whore."

And last month—the final nail in the coffin known as my social reputation—I “accidentally” discarded Phil's luckiest charm and most revolting superstition—an antiquated jockstrap. As a result, the world attributed the loss to none other than Isabella Swan: the Jock Blocker.

I'd become the laughing stock of the city. I mean, I was no Paris Hilton or anything. The levels of whorage between us were *miles* apart. Unlike her, I can't get away with that much crap unscathed. It's a free-for-all in which insults and attacks are thrown at me faster than Renee and Phil's bank account could ever reasonably subdue. I'd failed at my only obligation to the lap of luxury, and now I'm running away with my tail tucked between my legs.

I'm going to Forks, Washington to visit my father, Charlie. He's a whore too, but a far more creditable variety of whore than Renee. When Charlie whored, he did it for a purpose greater than that of petty greed and corruption. I mean, yeah, he's a little corrupt. What public official isn't? He's considered fairly wealthy for the small town of Forks where he resides, but he does something with his position and makes a difference in the community. He *gives back*.

And now I'm hoping he'd give back to *me*, because I'm about to beg and grovel on my hands and knees for deliverance like the little whore I've been raised to be. I muse silently as I wait to reach Washington about small dreams of finally going to college. I imagine being able to apply

to somewhere decent, though not upper-class—not that I could get into any of those places anyways.

Truthfully, I feel as though I can be truly happy going to a laughable community college, majoring in literature and finally writing a book.

All I need is Charlie to give me Forks, and maybe I can be normal again.

~|-----o|W.T.F|o-----|~

The flight from San Diego to Seattle takes much longer than it really should. Regrettably, Renee was not feeling nearly generous enough to extend me the luxury of the private jet, not that I necessarily expected it. At first I found it rather refreshing to mingle with common folk in first-class, but that sentiment only lasted until my ass touched the fabric of the airplane seat.

I've become a rather spoiled whore, I decide.

As the plane begins its descent to Sea-Tac, I hold my breath. It's a nervous habit and commonly confirmed the legitimacy of the old saying, "There's no such thing as an atheist in a foxhole." I can't speak for the wailing whore-fant or the others surrounding me, but Jesus is always my homeboy when my body is falling at a nauseating and fatal velocity towards earth. I always hope he'll forgive the other three-hundred-and-sixty-four days of the year when masturbation and cathartic bathtub cries beat him out for top position. He must either forgive me, or it's true that Jesus loves the little children, because the plane lands safely, and I'm able to relax and expel a shaky sigh when we finally halt on the tarmac in one big, hollow, metal piece.

It takes time for the plane to be positioned at the gate, and even more time for the pilot to screw around with the stewardesses and play with the shiny mechanical buttons. I begin feeling claustrophobic, and the infant seems to be empathizing with me as well. It emits loud and shrill screams that make me cringe. I figure its mother can singlehandedly obliterate the birth-control industry by simply passing the little whore-fant around. God knows that the last thing I want after hearing *that* is sex in any way, shape, or form. *Celibate born-again-virgin?* Check. *See, Jesus?*

There's hope for me yet.

I am cosmically rewarded when they finally began allowing the passengers to exit. I stand and stretch as far as the limited space of my window seat will allow, which means that my neck and fingers are the only parts of my body to reap the benefits. I grab my carry-on bag from the overhead compartment and wait for a vacancy in the aisle to make my speedy departure. I am

ready to lurch out into the aisle and take every one down—infants included—when some kind-looking elderly lady stops at my seat and allows me to step in front of her.

“Thanks so much,” I smile sincerely, my faith in humanity marginally restored. The line moves slowly, and there is a long and tender indention in the flesh of my abdomen that stings painfully as a result of my jeans’ tight waist. I adjust them with a grimace, cursing Renee’s persistence in forcing me to wear “hip” clothes to a humdrum town like Forks. I anticipate zero media, but she has had my clothing packed, and I know better than to think her assistant was instructed to pack for my comfort.

I long for the relief of the luxuriously plush, velour sweatpants that I know are nestled safely in my carry-on. As I finally exit the plane and file out with the other passengers through the gate, I idly consider stopping in the restroom to change into them. Of course, I simply can’t imagine walking around the well-populated Sea-Tac airport with the word “Juicy” written across my ass in pink, even if they are by far the most obnoxious, ugliest piece of clothing that’s ever been purchased for me, but I’ll be damned if they didn’t feel heavenly. Thus, I do as I usually do with my favorite pair of lounge-wear and decide to wait until I’m blessed with the comfort of privacy.

“Hey!” A young female voice calls from behind me as I finally reach open space. I turn with a furrowed brow and zero in on a small girl, maybe fifteen, with short black hair, combat boots, and a conspicuously placed lip piercing. She smiles at me and turns her head a bit to the side. “You’re Isabella Swan, aren’t you?” she asks in a somewhat disbelieving tone. I force a tight smile and nod, briefly wondering what the polite time limit on these types of interactions could possibly entail. Her face lights up into a huge smile, and she whips her head around to another group of girls. “Hey! I told you guys it was her! The Jock Blocker!” They all begin laughing uproariously, and my tight smile transforms into a sneer as I spin on my heel, their amusement at my expense echoing in my ears as I flee the concourse in search of my driver.

This is something I’m used to by now. The cackling giggles serve as a constant reminder to my many failures. I weave through crowds and hold my head as high as I can, because while I am “Isabella” to them, I know deep down that I am—and always have been—someone else entirely, even though I have difficulty naming her. That person hates the name “Isabella,” the reputation attached, and what’s expected of her. That someone doesn’t give a shit as to what brand of clothing she’s seen in or what function can get her the most press. That someone is wearing a skin that is expertly exfoliated and thickened by harsh words and scathing criticism. That someone can be intelligent and has depth than no one would ever guess. Such a pity that I have to shove her deep into myself so that she can’t be hurt by the malice of herd mentality.

Once I reach the expanse of outdoors, I gulp the humid air into my lungs greedily before flopping down unceremoniously onto a nearby bench. “Whores,” I mutter under my breath as I fish my phone out of my bag. I didn’t bring any additional luggage because, truthfully, I haven’t the foggiest notion of how long I’ll be staying. I brought the essentials and packed light so as not to jinx the situation any. I’d already jinxed an entire major league baseball team. No need to tempt fate. Ideally, I’d be sending for my things within days and relocating to Forks with more permanence. *Ideally.*

While waiting for my driver, I begin absently flipping through my phone, checking my emails, reading my missed texts, because this is what’s expected of me.

102 missed text messages, the screen blinks at me. With a weary exhale, I open the first one, only to quickly delete it. I repeat this action twenty times before I surrendered and angrily throw the phone into a nearby trash can. I decide to get a new one. Really, how many “Jock Blocker” insults can one read before it just gets tedious? *I can tell you: twenty-one.*

“Swan?” a deep voice beckons from my side, and I jerk my head up in surprise. *A young one, intriguing...* The man has shoulder length blonde hair that is pulled back tidily and spills over his nape. His dark, beady eyes flash over my shoulders and chest and I recoil infinitesimally.

Ew.

“That’s me,” I answer carefully as his leering continues. *Despite my every effort.*

He grins at me, a small wicked grin that makes my skin crawl, and motions to my carry-on, which I allow him to lift from the ground at my side. I watch him travel to a small, dark sedan and open the trunk, putting the bag inside. He turns to me and tosses me a pair of keys, which just end up falling over my shoulder as I gape at him.

“The whores are making me drive myself,” I note with incredulity.

Puzzled, he nods and glances at the keys on the ground before fleeing.

Chapter 2:

An Unfortunate Discovery of Peripheral Ambiguity and its Consequential Corollary.

~|-----o|W.T.F|o-----|~
(A.K.A. *Why the hate, Jesus?*)

The drive takes me longer than usual because I don't drive stick shifts often.

Okay. I don't *drive* often at all.

Still, an automatic would have been easier and faster. Instead, I am forced to focus my attention on a million things at once, all the while deciding that Renee is going to get an earful when I phone her. I stall out at every stop, and when I accelerate, the way in which the car lurches is borderline comical. I can barely walk without falling most days and yet they expect me to operate a manual? *Un-fucking-believable.*

A sea of green growth covers everything, and the Olympic Peninsula atmosphere is not friendly to my hair. I'm already in a sour mood as I approach the Forks city limits, anxious to yank these jeans from my ass and burn them in a nearby trashcan.

These roads are the desolate kind. There are no houses or gas stations or small diners to greet me as I pass. There are the wide and outstretched limbs of trees, offering me the welcome of their long branches and thick moss but not much else. My GPS had become my new homeboy and knocked Jesus down a notch. If only it could magically transform the sedan into an automatic, everything would be fine.

The deep silence of the car and road makes me feel oddly lonely, in a way that reaches deep down and grips a dormant, yet ever present part of myself—the one being hidden by the whore I'm pretending to be. The silence is stifling, and I decide that music wouldn't be such a horrible idea. I want the distraction. I'm pursing my lips in deep consideration at the CD player as I round a bend, and I cannot suppress the loud gasp that emerges from my throat as the back of an unmoving, silver car comes too quickly into view.

The portion of my mind that is reserved for emergency situations and split-second decisions fails me, and instead of swerving, I attempt to shift down in a brief moment of idiocy. My fist grasps the stick, my foot mashes the clutch, and I quickly realize that I have no idea what I'm doing. All too soon, the opportunity to swerve has passed, and my muscles clench in preparation for the coming impact.

I always like to imagine that my life would flash before my eyes in a circumstance like this. Instead, the only passing thought that invades is: *those whores had better not put Jock Blocker in my obituary.*

Oddly enough, it is somehow freeing to see the back of this car collide with my own, and I keep my eyes open to witness the initial contact of silver against black.

The crushing sound of metal is deafening, and I'm being pushed and pulled forward and backward and inside-out. There is an explosion of white, a hard smack to my nose that makes bright sparkles dance across the back of my eyelids. Glass shatters, the horizon shifts, and metal groans as everything comes to a rest, still, silent, and calmly deceiving.

First I feel nothing, but then I feel everything.

I feel dizzy, ears ringing as I attempt to lift my head. It is too heavy, so I keep my cheek rested against the white fabric that has cushioned me. I blink and breathe and can see the trees beyond the window of the passenger door. Something sudden and uncontrollable bubbles deep within me, and it takes me a moment to apprehend that I want to laugh. It feels like such a bizarre reaction, but an unavoidable one. I open my mouth to free the chuckle, but all that escapes is a strained, choking sound. My vision darkens, black running through the edges of the world and enveloping green and grey until it swallows them whole and I succumb to something that I can barely comprehend.

~|-----o|W.T.F|o-----|~

I am awakened by the sound of rain pattering against broken glass. My eyelids flutter, and I strain to see—to make anything visible enough to grant me the comfort of finding my bearings. My face feels numb, and even though I register pain somewhere, I can't locate it in the brief moment I struggle with coherent thought.

Slowly, I see colors, forms and odd shapes, and then they come into focus, and I realize where I am and what has happened. My first instinct is to smile, but my second is to frown. Possibly cry. Instead, I do neither. I panic and begin moving my limbs to check for paralysis, because that portion of mind devoted to emergencies has kicked in, finally. I'm pleased to find movement easily in my fingers and toes and carefully lift myself from the red cushion my cheek had been resting on.

Red?

My neck, heavy and sore, protests as I straighten in my seat and stare at the blood-soaked airbag blankly. I shift my hands and reach for the door handle because I can't look at it, and staying inside the twisted and shattered chaos just doesn't seem right.

The crunch of the wet glass and gravel beneath my feet as I clumsily exit echoes oddly on the silence of the road. The entire front end of my car is actually inside of the silver car's back windshield, transforming the two into an ugly, smashed fusion. I finally groan, rubbing my stiff and throbbing neck before moving my palm to my nose. There is blood there, running down to my lips and chin. The red sight of it makes everything hurt impossibly more, nausea bubbling up from the pit of my stomach as I fight to stave it off.

I abruptly begin crying as I stand in the rain beside my mangled sedan. The pain and reality of the situation triggers a metamorphosis, and suddenly, I'm six-years-old again, longing for the comfort of what had once been the perfect image of a mother and father. The dull throbbing of my face amplifies this, and I allow the sobs that rack my body to escape freely. My tears mingle with the cold droplets of rain that fall and speckle my flesh, and those mingle with the blood that runs down my face and drips from my chin.

The pain, though present, is somewhat numbed by the sheer shock of the moment, and I quickly roll my eyes at my childish behavior and straighten myself to prepare for logic. I raise my face to the sky and breathe deeply, curling and uncurling my fingers and flexing my jaw.

A distant moaning sound alerts me and my head painfully snaps in the direction of the silver car. I gasp, covering my mouth with my palm as I slowly approach it. *I'm going to hell. Jesus hates me. I've killed someone, I just know it.* As I reach the window of the silver car, I can see a mop-headed form hunched over the steering wheel, unmoving. My heart sinks to my toes, pounding in alarm as he slowly begins to stir.

"Don't move!" I shout into the open-window while recalling some random piece of knowledge that reminds me how dangerous it is to move an accident victim. I half-sprint to my car, still wincing in pain as I struggle to remember the whereabouts of my cell phone.

Then I realize that I don't have a cell phone.

I'd thrown the piece of crap away like some spoiled whore-of-excess. I growl in anger at my stupidity and turn back to his direction. I am shocked to see the door opening, two dark boots stepping out onto the slick pavement.

"Wait!" I call as I approach, still wobbly from the dizziness of the accident and blood. "You're not supposed to move! You could have a spinal injur—" My voice catches in my throat as he exits and meets my gaze. The rain is coming harder now, making his loose jacket, which is covering another, light flannel jacket, gradually darker.

Droplets run down from his untidy, copperish hair and trail the smooth expanse of his rapidly-bruising forehead before landing on the thickness of his dark brow—one adorned with a shiny, silver eyebrow ring. His striking green eyes are blank and shaken as they gaze back at me, his pink lips set into a grim line. I sweep his body and face with my eyes, looking for any signs of serious injury and finding nothing but the curve-shaped mark on his forehead, likely from his steering wheel.

"Are you okay?" I ask loudly over the sound of the rain hitting the gravel. "I'm so sorry! I'm such a moron—and I wasn't paying enough attention—and it was a stick shift..." I trail off as he simply stares at me, his lips parting just slightly, but no words emerging. *Oh, good going Bella. Give the poor guy brain damage.* "Are you okay?" I ask again while stepping closer to him.

He begins blinking, his brows furrowing with a wince. "I'm not hurt," he answers in a voice that is nearly too soft to hear. He suddenly closes his eyes and drops his head, running his fingers through his dampened hair. "You're bleeding," he observes in a curiously angered voice while staring at the pavement. His jaw is hardened, taught. He begins mumbling so lowly that I can't discern the entirety of his words, "... be hurt... supposed to ... fine... fucked-up." His head shakes.

Confused and beginning to believe that I really *had* given him brain damage, I ask, "Do you have a cell phone?"

His head slowly raises, droplets of rain dripping from his nose as his eyes open. "Don't you?" he asks, clearly disoriented as his eyes scan the road behind me.

"No, I... I didn't bring it with me," I admit while wrapping my arms around my torso. The fridity of the sheet-rain penetrates my clothing and makes my teeth chatter, the tension of my shivering body making my stiffened muscles ache further. I long for the warmth of a hot shower and my old bed when I finally make it home.

"Well, that's a problem," he replies tonelessly, leaning back against his car. I shudder violently as I weigh the possibilities of either car working. His eyes follow me as I enter the dark sedan and try the ignition.

Click.

Nothing. I keep trying, as if my maniacal persistence will miraculously fix the crushed engine. I can feel more sobs building as I turn the key with desperation, but it is futile. I smack the dashboard with my palm, unleashing the full fury of my freakishly small hand. I actually manage to make a really nice sound. With a calming breath, I step back out onto the rainy road, fixing my eyes on the man that is now crouched low to the ground. His head is in his hands, shaking from side to side as he leans against the rear tire of his vehicle. He still seems to be mumbling to himself as he lifts his head and stares into the distance with a deep sigh. His eyes are conflicted, searching, yet unfocused as I warily approach him.

"Your car might work still," I offer with a defeated shrug.

Looking up to meet my gaze, he licks the rain off his lips and stands. "It won't," he says with certainty, his hands tightening into fists. I figure his car had already broken down, a glance at his raised hood confirming it. Something shifts in his gaze, turning his green eyes cold and determined as he adds, "We can walk."

I'm fairly certain that my jaw drops to my toes as I ask with incredulity, "Walk? In this rain? *No way!* We can just wait for someone to drive by and flag 'em down." The way in which I illustrate this by *actually* flailing my hands in the air probably makes me appear borderline insane. The inside of the car seems much more appealing than sloshing through puddles all evening.

Far from being amused by my animated flailing, his grim expression remains unchanged as his eyes bore into mine. "I know a shortcut through the forest," he explains, his voice loud over the rain as he holds my gaze. "We can get there in no time, but we have to hurry." His hand reaches out and grasps my elbow, softly tugging as he turns.

"Excuse me!" I yank my arm away and narrow my eyes. "I'm not going into the forest with a complete stranger. You'd be less creepy if you offered me candy to get in your car," I say dryly as he turns.

His grim expression turns impatient, annoyed as his weight shifts and his wet hair sticks to his forehead. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but who crashed into who?" he asks, gesturing to the wreckage. "If anyone here has the right to pull the 'fuck you' card, it's me. So, here are your options." He shifts his weight again, his eyes maintaining that similar cold hardness. "You can come and walk with me to get help, or you can stay here by yourself. I'm going, regardless," he finishes, folding his arms over his chest and flexing his jaw.

I remain still and shivering as the rain batters my head and shoulders. I get that nagging feeling in the pit of my stomach that sets off alarms inside of my mind, and I feel as though something isn't right. The man gazes back at me, and I search his eyes for any predatory gleam but find none. His features, though sharp and tight with impatience and an evident tension, are conflictingly soft and sincere. He can't be more than a year older than me, I realize, which shouldn't assuage me any, but for some reason, it does. His stare is still cold but not necessarily frightening. Nevertheless, I know that it isn't right to let him lead me into isolation.

I glance around while gnawing at my lip and briefly consider staying. I know it'll be dark soon, and even I can tell that this particular road sees little traffic. Staying here alone seems like an unsettling notion, but going with him doesn't seem much better.

I turn back to him and ask meekly, "You really know a shortcut?" The thought of getting to a phone in the very near future is just too good to abandon.

He sharply bobs his head, the rain running off his flattened hair and onto his nose. "But we have to go," he replies, meeting my gaze with an intense stare. "Now."

The conflict raging in my mind isn't being resolved quickly enough, and he stiffly spins on his heel to walk away. I watch his back for a couple seconds while hugging myself before I finally concede.

"Wait!" I call, dropping my arms and shoulders in surrender. He immediately halts and stalks back to me, head down, as if he were expecting this outcome the entire time. I travel to the sedan and retrieve my hideous Gucci purse, idly recalling that how I wore the purse—over my shoulder with the small strap, or the less-cool long, detachable one—being a source of constant tension between Renee and me. Now it all seemed ridiculous. This was the difference between us. We both have two, differing views of the bigger picture, hers usually involving pictures that are being taken, and mine holding a bit more substance.

He watches me as I open the trunk, unzip my suitcase and remove clothing from inside. "What are you doing?" he asks anxiously, shielding his face from the rain with his hand as I position myself so that the car is between us.

"One second!" I call while removing my shoes. I peel off my rain soaked jeans, sighing in relief once they hit the pavement with a 'splat.' I put a second pair of socks on before slipping into my thick sweatpants and stepping into my shoes. *No way in hell, am I walking with those wet jeans plastered to my ass.* I remove my jacket and put on another sweater before slipping back into the puffy sleeves.

Then I reach in my bag and search for the knife Charlie had sent to me for my nineteenth birthday, six months ago. He was concerned about my being in San Diego unprotected, given my new, humiliating status, and since I'd vehemently refused both a gun and taser, he'd realized that a knife and mace spray were the only things I'd accept with any measure of grace. I make certain both are present, because even though I'm a desperate scaredy-cat, I'm not stupid. I remove the mace, and sling my purse around my neck, crossing it over my torso snugly. It has all of my credit cards and identification. Locking the car is useless, so there's no other way to assure it won't get stolen. I have to do this right, I decide.

I've already screwed up so much.

With a steeling breath, I emerge from behind the car and travel to his side, a knife in the Gucci bag that hangs on my hip and the can of mace positioned in my palm. I nod. "Ready."

He wraps his long fingers around my elbow once again and begins leading me into the thick brush of wet ferns and moss-covered forest floor. I sneer at his hand around my arm and prepare to jerk it back when I trip, his firm grasp holding me up as he continues his step.

Annoyed that I need his assistance and still uncomfortable about relying on a complete stranger, I ask, "What's your name?"

His gaze remains fixed ahead as he blinks away rain droplets and hastily tugs me along. "Edward," he answers tersely, cutting me a sideways glance that is nothing if not complete annoyance. My brows furrow as I struggle to recall why that name seems so familiar to me. I search the recesses of my memory, somewhat damaged, given the state of mind I'm currently in.

Edward. It isn't a common name nowadays. It kind of reminds me of...

I gasp, grounding my feet in place ineffectively as he jerks me forward. *This can't be happening.* The likelihood of there being two Edwards this near to Forks is so miniscule that the gravity of the situation instills another, wholly new anxiety into the pit of my stomach. Everything matches up the more I think about it, right down to the silver car my dad had told me about, and I am utterly appalled at the complete shittiness of my luck. *Jesus really does hate me.*

I'm assaulted with memory after memory of mornings spent on the terrace of my home in San Diego, speaking to Charlie on the telephone and absorbing his every word as if it might bring me closer to his side. The name "*Edward Cullen*," had been spoken in varying tones of disbelief and anger, and over the months, transformed into rusty barbed inflections that wrapped

around the syllables of his name spitefully. I slow my steps, a cold dread sweeping through me as my internal alarms start shrieking, “*Run away, you stupid whore.*”

He groans at my sudden trepidation and shouts over the rain, “Come on, you have to be quicker than this!” His voice, though hard and demanding is betrayed by the desperation in his gaze as he turns to me. The coldness of his eyes suddenly turns pained, amber in green against white and rain as he stops and gazes back. “Everything will be fine, okay?” he coaxes in a strained voice while loosening the grip on my elbow and shifting toward me. The lines of his face are etched deeply with a subtle agony that reflects through his eyes. I cannot comprehend it as he stares at me.

He is looking at me in a way that no one looks at me, and the profound sensation it summons in the hollow of my chest causes my eyes to widen. Because he is looking at me as if he’s meeting me for the first time, as if I’m a perfect stranger that evokes absolutely no predetermined judgment of his own, as if seeing my face is nothing of consequence to whatever else is causing him this intense pain, and as if I am *nothing*.

No one.

He must not know who I am, I realize. My name, my failures, or what my ass looks like when my dress is tucked into the back of my underwear, is a complete blank to him.

I haven’t felt so free in nearly a decade.

I want to follow Edward Cullen wherever he and his warm, ignorant, agonized gaze will take me.

And even though I know *what* he is and can clearly hear the voice of my father ringing in my ears, begging me not to follow the town’s most disreputable criminal into the dark, wet forest—I do.

With a willing smile.

Chapter 3:

The Fatigue of Pious Denizens, Dwelling in Shadow and Grasping for Light.

~|-----o|W.T.F|o-----|~

(A.K.A. Insert any clichéd Robert Frost poem, here.)

As we walk and stumble through the density of the wet forest, the rain eventually lets down enough for us to hear each other without screaming—not that anyone is speaking, of course. My allegedly, morally-defunct companion holds firmly onto my arm, helping me over logs and keeping me vertical when I display my less-than-graceful tendencies. My clothing becomes heavy from the rain and makes walking more difficult than usual. The fabric sticks to my skin and glues itself to my motion.

He doesn't seem to have much of an issue with the trek and keeps his eyes straight forward as his feet meet the soft ground below with barely any sound or slipping. As the scarce sunlight begins slipping away, I fix my eyes to his boots and how they sink into the ground. I attempt to match his strides with my own and the challenge is enough to distract myself from the throbbing pain that ails me from the neck up.

His demeanor is ever changing. One minute, he'll look determined, and his footsteps will quicken. Then he'll begin to slow, seeming wary and pained as he avoids my eyes. And then he'll return to his determined speed, desperation and uncertainty lying just beneath the surface when he slows once again.

I begin growing nervous as the hours pass and the sky grows darker. He appears to be fixed on some path that I can't understand, and instead of questioning him, I look to his eyes to find assurance in their warmth. I'm usually met with the troubled coldness of before—but I know the warmth exists. The forest at night seems deeper, more frightening as my anxiety mounts, and I eventually realize what an awful predicament my silliness has gotten me into.

For what feels like the millionth time, his steps falter and slow, until eventually, he is stopped and looks down at his shoes, panting in exertion from the long walk. I lift my head and look to him quizzically, but find only his expression twisted into something ugly and tormented. He shakes his head and breathes deeply, flexing his fingers around the wet padding of my arm and locking his jaw.

"What?" I breathe, the thick trees and vegetation swallowing my scared whisper, as I clutch the can of mace and prepare for attack. I've kept my Gucci bag unzipped, and the knife is sitting on top, should I need it.

His eyes jump to mine and remain there for many moments as he stands rigidly. Without any warning, his lips part, and he begins, "Your father has a rare kind of aggressive and terminal cancer. A renowned scientist has discovered a cure but wants more money for it than you have. The only way of getting the money is to steal it from your wealthy neighbor, an elderly woman. Do you do it?" he asks, the penetration of his eyes meaningful and heavy.

I swallow anxiously and try to process his question while inwardly panicking. I'm making mental diagrams of the most efficient methods of incapacitating attackers when I answer absently, "I steal it, but I pay it back once my dad's better." I brace my legs for assault and wrap my fingers tightly around the can that is held in my palm. I'm conscious of his every breath and minute shift as he stares at me, squinting his eyes in concentration and scrutinizing my expression with an unfathomable care.

He sighs, rubbing his forehead with his idle hand. "You ask," he mutters, squeezing his eyes shut in frustration. "You ask the neighbor. She's elderly, which means that she's probably lived next to your dad for most of his life. She'd give you the money," he says and opens his eyes. They are neither warm nor cold as they gaze back at me. They are simply saddened, ashamed, and he drops his head while I remain uncertain if answering the question wrong had sealed his decision to make a move.

"I—I'm sorry," I say, attempting to move back, but his grip on my arm remains firm and unrelenting.

He looks up at me and shakes his head, wet locks of hair grazing his eyebrows. "It was a trick," he whispers. Something in his expression shifts, his forehead smoothing as a rueful smile tugs at his lips. He appears calmed in the eeriest fashion.

My eyes grow wide at the truth of his words, and I can feel my face pale. *It was a trick.* I begin moving my hand to the opening of my bag, positioning myself for a more likely upper-hand.

He sighs then and turns away from my fearful face. "The question was a trick. Anyone who chooses not to steal it is lying, and anyone who chooses to steal it has shitty character. There's no right answer in the way it's worded." He tilts his head to the side as his eyes dart left and right, searching the darkness of brush with doubt. "This way," he suddenly utters with certainty while pointing right and begins once again leading my steps, though this time with more haste.

There is urgency in the way he holds my arm close to him and speeds his footfalls to a near jog, and I'm left struggling to keep up while my clumsy footing impedes me. The expression on his

face is pressing and desperate, his eyes darting into dark alcoves as he ducks and dodges low-hanging branches with ease.

I grow flustered and confused, and my fear is being slowly trumped by my frustration over his evasiveness and indecision as he drags me over logs and the obstacles of the forest floor. It hasn't escaped my notice that someone definitely would have passed by on that road by now. This only amplifies my anger. I'm disappointed in myself for trusting him, and now I'm stuck depending on his unpredictable motives.

The dark silence of the forest is suffocating and I puff laboriously as I strain my legs to move at his side. The speed in which he tugs me along doesn't relent for what seems like hours. I can just barely make out the soft glow of the moon from behind the trees and thick cloud cover as my will gives out. The cold air hits my face and numbs my nose, but that is not an altogether unpleasant result of the travel. The way in which the cold makes my neck stiffen further, however, is unpleasant, and as I trudge further with him into the unknown, I berate myself repeatedly.

"Are you sure you know where you're going?" I ask in annoyance, panting as he quickens his steps once again. My feet have a hard enough time making this walk at a *slow* pace, and I can't comprehend how my constant stumbling hasn't tipped him off to this fact.

Without meeting my gaze, he replies with a clipped, "Yes," and pushes ahead even faster, nearly dragging me now as his long strides make it impossible to keep up. It's a lot like being attached to a leash, and it pisses me off.

I plant my feet in the muddy ground and yank back, forcing him to stop. "What's the hurry?" I snap as he turns to me, huffing. "I'm so close to kneeing you in the balls and running the other direction right now." He simply stares at me as I catch my wheezing breath and pull the wet hair away from my face, the throbbing of my nose and muscles amplifying.

His chest heaves as his eyes watch me carefully. "We can... rest for a second," he eventually says and leans against the mossy trunk of a nearby tree. Closing his eyes, he puffs, "I'm sorry for freaking you out," and brings two pale and slender fingers up to pinch the bridge of his nose.

"Whatever," I grumble and find a tree to crouch below. The rain has completely ceased by now, but the dark oblivion of the brush and thick vegetation unsettles me. I shiver and wrap my arms around myself as I rest my cheek on my knees. "Where is the place we're going?" I ask absently, trying to distract myself from the aching pain of my neck and face.

There is a long pause where I'm uncertain if he'll respond before he answers, "A cabin," in a quiet, venomous voice. I'm taken aback by this information, because he'd said "shortcut" and for some reason, I'd mentally envisioned a path to some run-down convenience store. It's difficult to make out his expression, my eyes following the moon's reflection off his eyebrow piercing.

Sighing, I close my eyes. "Well, if you're planning to rape me or something, you should probably know that I've been taught thirty-four different methods of castration via improvised cutlery," I lie while clutching my mace.

There is a distant shuffling and then his long sigh. "You're really kind of stupid for following me."

I raise my head and find him sitting on the wet ground, his arms folded atop his bent knees. "And you're really kind of stupid for assuming that I'm really kind of stupid." I hold up the mace with an obvious expression.

He rolls his eyes. "Oooh, pepper spray. Clearly, I don't stand a chance," he replies flippantly, sarcasm dripping from his lips as his eyelids slide closed.

The hollows of his cheeks deepen, and I watch the rise and fall of his chest behind his knees before I rest my head once again and mutter, "Clearly."

He has no intentions of harming me, and I know it. He'd had plenty of chances between the accident and where we find ourselves now. Before his odd moral test, I wouldn't have been convinced, but something in that uncomfortable moment seemed to have settled whatever conflict had been raging in his eyes before. I find relief in this realization but resolve to remain wary about his intentions anyway.

There is silence as we sit feet apart in the grouping of towering trees, the canopy blocking the silver glow of light from the sky. I close my eyes and allow the exhaustion of the day to capture my thoughts. My cheek against the soft knee of my dampened sweatpants is oddly comfortable, and I feel myself surrendering, sinking deeper into my crouch and melting into the moss at my back.

"Hey," he eventually says, the sound startling my eyelids open. "You shouldn't go to sleep. You could have a concussion or something." His lips are set into a thin line as I shift my gaze to him and straighten my spine.

"How would you know?" I snap, the anxiety that's dissipated over his intentions quickly giving way to anger towards his decisions. My fists curl into small balls that dig into my stomach.

Nonplussed, he answers, "My dad's a doctor. I know this kind of shit."

I scoff. "I happen to know for a fact, that that's not true," I say and rest my cheek once again.

After a moment of stillness, he asks in an acerbic whisper, "What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

Normally, I wouldn't provoke a larger man who is already shady and has me isolated in a dense, dark forest, but my ease from my earlier revelation has given me the courage to make my annoyance known. My exhaustion is also a fierce catalyst.

"Well, Edward Cullen," I spit his name and lift my head, starring daggers into his shocked eyes. "That's what happens when the state revokes your medical license. You become not-a-doctor. It's not rocket science or anything," I reply, feeling a hesitance build as I gaze at his wide eyes. He hasn't expected me to know his name, let alone his family history.

All too swiftly, his shock turns to anger, thick and heavy on the hard lines of his face as the muscles beneath his skin flex and twitch. "How do you know about that?" he asks in a low voice, fists pressing into the fabric at his forearms.

"My father tells me plenty," I answer carefully, avoiding exact names that may tip him off to my identity. "We have a little routine of speaking every morning in which he likes to update me on the current state of Forks' crime rate. You and your father have managed to make repeat appearances in his conversations," I inform and watch knowingly as his eyes darken. He hadn't expected me to know so much about someone I know so little. It is strangely refreshing for me to be on the other side of recognition, like being on the other side of the deceiving, two-way mirror. It's so often that I'm standing on that other side.

His lips purse as he stares at me and tongues the inside of his cheek, his long fingers fidgeting with the damp fabric of his jeans. He stills his movements as a hollow grin spreads across his lips. "I don't expect someone with the word 'Juicy' displayed across their ass to understand the intricacies of my situation. So why don't you do me a favor, and just shut the fuck up?" he asks, resting his head against the back of the tree trunk. He hides the coldness of his stare with his dark eyelids and I flinch, grimacing as I look away.

I obey his request and allow him to rest without disruption, but not because he'd asked in quite possibly the rudest manner ever. Sullenly, I return my cheek to its resting position and squeeze

my eyes tightly closed, furious at myself. I can't even fathom the amount of hypocrisy necessary for me to have judged him in the same fashion in which people judge me. It's what I hate most about strangers, deducing my character based off of tacky articles and unreliable sources. I begin to wonder if everyone wasn't right about me all along.

But how can I know, when I don't even know who that is?

It had been important to me for some reason, to know that one person on the earth didn't think those awful things about me, and to know that I could tap that deeper, hidden part of myself to achieve it.

I'd been such a fool in that moment.

Owls and the distant shuffles of animals penetrate the silence and lull me into a comfortable stillness that makes my body ache for slumber. After many moments, I can hear Edward's breathing change, shifting to a quiet and subdued snore which alerts me to his unconsciousness. I consider waking him, worried about him having a concussion as well, but eventually decide against it, as my own alertness wavers.

The heaviness of my eyelids overcome me, and I melt into the wood at my back once again, slipping into black as I envision the safe warmth of gold in green, dancing around a fire of black and wrapping me in its tranquil heat. I imagine being scattered once again, spread wide and curling around the threads of the lies that soothe me.

~|-----o|W.T.F|o-----|~

I'm dreaming of being enveloped in soft, emerald-colored linens when I'm jarred awake by the sounds of crunching sticks. I start, my eyes flying open while my neck strains in protest. I cry out and wrap my fingers around the tender portion of my shoulders as my eyes adjust to the grey light of early morning. I can tell that the sun is just barely peeking out from the horizon as it scarcely penetrates the cloud and forest canopy.

Edward is standing under a different tree, much further away with his back to me, and until I see a steady stream of liquid falling from between his legs, I'm confused at his spread posture. I grimace and quickly look away while he finishes and returns to his previous spot, running his fingers through his now-dried hair.

"Are you done resting, Juicy?" he asks dully as he shifts to one side and stares down at me. It is only just now occurring to me how very asinine he looks.

Who the fuck pierces their eyebrow anymore?

And wears *flannel*?

What the fuck is this, *I love the ninties*?

The bruise on his forehead is a deep shade of blue and stands out strikingly against the paleness of his flesh. I'm reminded of who is ultimately responsible for the situation, and I inwardly frown. I sigh and lift myself, imagining the creak of my muscles like injured machinery that has rusted from disuse over the years. I wince with every movement and try to stretch while rolling my head on my shoulders. I answer with a sharp, "Yes," and pull my hair back from my face.

"Good," he replies and begins walking on the previous path he'd chosen.

Before I can think to follow, he turns his head, eyeing me from his periphery as he calls over his shoulder, "Because we're lost, and it's going to take a shit-load of walking to find anything even resembling civilization."

Chapter 4:

The Certitude of Heated Quarrels and Intrusively Abrasive Behaviors.

~|-----o|W.T.F|o-----|~

(A.K.A. The Whore and her boot up your ass.)

His arms occasionally swing with nonchalance as he walks, and it infuriates me. The way in which he ducks low branches with fluid ease infuriates me. His evasive mood and the silence between us infuriate me. His constantly shifting demeanor and facial expressions infuriate me. Mostly the fact that he's gotten me lost in the dense Pacific Northwestern rain forest infuriates me. But also, the grin that always subtly tugs at his lips when I stumble and refuse his hand, most definitely infuriates me.

We walk for hours until the sun is high in the sky, and I curse my lack of attention on the finer details of the survival training I'd been forced by Charlie to take during my childhood summer visits. I can't tell east from west, north from south, and some moments, up from down.

"I cannot *believe* I let you drag me out here," I eventually break the heavy silence, my frustration mounting with every bug that I'm forced to swat away from my face. I mock his velvety voice, "Oh, why stay in the car and wait for someone when we can walk into the woods and really screw ourselves nice and proper?" I cease my mocking tone because it is comical in a far different way than originally intended. I continue, "Yes, Edward, lets go out into the forest and get lost and eaten by bears. It just sounds so damned perfect." I am rebuking myself as well and trying to remember with every failed foot fall why I'd agreed to follow this ass in the first place.

"I'm good at this," he insists with tight eyes. "We'll find our way out of here. You just have to stop bitching," he says.

I indignantly gape at him. I'd been quiet all morning, and the first time I mention the extreme inconvenience of the situation that *he'd* caused, I'm bitching?

I don't *think* so.

I growl under my breath. "Has anyone ever told you that your sense of direction is shit?" I hiss, and just barely avoid falling flat on my face as I trip over a mangled root.

"Nope," he responds flippantly, arms swinging as the cuffs of his flannel shirt peek out from his jacket. "Has anyone ever told you not to follow strangers into the forest?" he asks.

"Has anyone ever told you that you should pull over when your car breaks down," I counter as I hastily sidle up to him.

Something about my inquiry makes the edges of his eyes crinkle in a hard way as he replies, "I don't know. Has anyone ever told you to pay attention while you're driving?"

I swat my hair out of my face and ask, "Has anyone ever told you that you shouldn't leave the scene of an accident?!" My voice is rising to an embarrassing shriek, hysteria seeping in and inflecting toward the sharp contours of his face.

He quirks one side of his cheek upward and glances at me sardonically. "Says the person who followed me," he retorts, and after a brief pause, adds in a low voice, "Has anyone ever told you that you have the most annoying voice ever?"

I grind my teeth and dodge a branch. "Well, has anyone ever told you that... your face is stupid?" I halt my steps and sigh, shaking my head. Obviously, my injuries and lost bearings are affecting my usually quick wit. *Damn.*

He turns to me, a rare, honest smile flirting at his lips as he stops. "My face is stupid?" he asks with a dumbfounded expression. I narrow my eyes. "I guess I win *that* verbal sparring match," he barks a dry chuckle and turns, resuming his step. "Try again, Juicy."

My anger climbs as I feel a sense of heat creep up my neck. The fact that he's looked at my ass actually registers, and I'm embarrassed for reasons unrelated to the broadcasted term displayed there. I begin feeling flustered and self-conscious in the most absurd ways. I've never been one for caring what the opposite sex thought of me, so the sensation is foreign, intriguing, mortifying, and maddening. I do *not* want Edward Cullen looking at my ass, but only because I'm fairly certain the pink velour of my sweatpants isn't painting it in the most flattering light. *What the fuck is wrong with me?*

Instead of attempting to insult him further, or informing him of my *real* name so that I wouldn't be reminded where his eyes have been, I save my last shred of dignity and follow at his side. I spare him the occasional withering stare, which he somehow either fails to notice or fails to give a shit about. I stomp my feet with more force as we trudge onward, hoping that the dull smacking sound of my soles against wet dirt will make my indignation glaringly clear.

He remains silent, unfazed.

Good God, I might hate him a little.

"I need to rest," I eventually say as my stomach growls and grumbles its empty fury. I stoop below a towering spruce and rest with my hands on my knees as he finally stops. The sun is peeking through the canopy of leaves and a lone ray beams into the redness of his hair, making it shimmer and sparkle.

I curse myself for not saying that his *hair* was stupid, as it *so clearly is*.

He rolls his eyes in annoyance but silently agrees and drops to a crouch where he stands. His fingers find a nearby stick, and he pushes it upright, stabbing it into the soft dirt. He inspects the shadow it casts with his troubled eyes and mumbles, "Afternoon," removing the stick and throwing it behind him.

Perhaps normally, his knowledge of how to even do that might captivate me. Instead, I am pushing my knees together and fighting my bladder futilely. I begin rocking without even realizing it, squeezing my eyes shut and trying to concentrate on anything that doesn't involve a stream of steady flowing water.

He sighs. "What is it now?"

I open my eyes and scowl at his face, my infuriation growing exponentially. "I have to pee," I grate through clenched teeth, squeezing my teeth together firmly.

His lips curl up into that asinine smirk from before, and he replies, "Well, Princess, the earth is your toilet," while spreading his arms out toward the forest around him.

My glare intensifies as I grind my teeth with more urgency. "Look here, Special-Ed," I growl, making his smile falter. "You may be able to whip your thing out and spread your manly essence wherever, but I am a fucking *girl*," and yes, I emphasize this fact by grabbing my tit in the crudest possible fashion. His eyes widen comically as I continue, holding myself in my palm through the thick padding of my layers. "So don't you dare imply that I'm being a 'princess' simply because popping a squat in the cold, wet forest doesn't seem appealing to me. Got it?" I have one eye narrowed and one wide, twitching as I dare him to disagree.

He clucks his tongue and tilts his head to one side. "You know, if I listen really hard, it's almost like I can hear the violins playing," he muses softly. I push off the tree with a glower and prepare to lower my womanly expectations when he adds, "Don't forget when you wipe, leaves of three, baby," and winks, a deep chuckle escaping his lips. He is enjoying my discomfort a little too much.

I whirl on him and plunge my hand into my Gucci bag, just barely restraining the urge to emerge with the knife as I pull out a pocket-sized package of Kleenex. I smile prettily as I wave it at him and begin scouting locations. The asshole actually looks disappointed as he rolls his eyes and drops to the ground.

“Don’t look!” I yell as I position myself behind a large tree, far enough away so that he can’t hear me when I do it.

From a distance, I can hear him say, “Don’t flatter yourself, Anna Nicole!”

I roll my eyes and drop my pants, grimacing and grumbling as I squat. There is no right way for a girl to pee in the woods, I discover. If I keep my legs too close to me, I piss on them. If I squat too far, I piss on my pants. If I lean one direction or the other, it will run down my legs. Naturally, I’m convinced that the term “Penis Envy” was created by a woman while squatting in the forest.

I take what must be five minutes to empty my bladder and utilize my Kleenex tissues greedily. I raise my sweatpants and am relieved that at least one pressing issue is taken care of. I’m marginally more comfortable as I walk back to where he is sitting, propped against a tree and playing with some wayward fern leaf. He stares at it fixedly, lost in thought as I approach, and I can discern the definite, sudden change of his mood that’s made apparent by the conflict that laces the green in his eyes. I sit a few feet away and reach into my bag, producing a pack of gum and extracting a stick from its wrapper. I’d purchased it in San Diego, hoping that chewing it on the plane would stop my ears from popping. Now, it was the closest thing I had to sustenance.

My stomach is unhappy as I pop it into my mouth and begin chewing. I wonder, as I hesitantly meet Edward’s gaze, how much of a stupid whore it would make me if I’m pleased with the forced starvation.

It has to be the most effective diet ever.

He is eying me strangely as I shove the discarded wrapper into my purse and smack my minty gum as subtly as possible. “What all do you have in there?” he asks curiously, inclining toward me and peeking at the black bag that rests on my hip.

“Stuff,” I say evasively, and protectively cover it with my hand. “What’s it to you?”

He glances up and stares at me blankly. “Give me your mirror,” he orders.

I narrow my eyes and sharply inform, “I don’t have a mirror.”

“Bullshit,” he replies, inching toward me. “As you so charmingly pointed out earlier, you’re ‘a fucking *girl*.’ All girls have mirrors. Especially princesses. Hand it over,” he says and extends one hand, palm up.

It takes every ounce of my patience to not think about that knife as I insist, “I. Do. Not. Have. A. Mirror.”

Dubiously, he gazes back at me and keeps his palm upright. “What is it, like embarrassing? You got one of those Little Mermaid compacts or something?”

“Little Mermaid?” I ask while smacking my gum between my teeth. “Could you *be* anymore random?” *Seriously, where is he even getting this shit?*

He scoffs and raises his chin, dropping his palm to the dirt below. “Could you *be* anymore annoying?” he asks, his eyes scrunching up.

My hands clench around the purse strap and I feel my eyes lighting up in that furious way. “Could you *be* anymore of an asshole?” I shriek.

The wrinkles in his nose deepen as he stares scornfully at me. “Could you *be* anymore of a bitch?” he shoots back haughtily.

“Yes!” I shout into his face. “I really could, so don’t fucking test me!”

His eyes flash as he returns his palm to its upright position, gazing at me with a steady fury. “Give me your motherfucking purse,” he orders in a menacingly calm voice.

I snort. “Well, since you asked so nicely... No.” I pull the bag at my hip into my stomach, clutching it tightly against me.

His nostrils flare, the wrinkles in his nose vanishing as his upturned palm curls into a shaking fist that he drops to his side. “You... are so... goddamn intolerable!” he growls and lurches back against the tree, finally shifting his gaze from mine. I watch as he pinches the bridge of his nose again, his chest jerking with sharp breaths. It seems as though he’s nearly calmed himself when he meets my gaze again, and begins abruptly howling, “In case you haven’t noticed, we’re lost in the fucking forest!” His hands lift into the air, frustration and anger spilling from every pore of his pale flesh as some hidden dam bursts and spews it forth. “We have *no* food, *no* water, *no* phone, and I am completely *fucked* right now!” The little vein in his forehead that protrudes behind the bruise turns red as he continues his tirade, “And I don’t even mean the ‘lost-in-the-forest-with-a-Kardashian’ kind of fucked either. I mean, royally, ‘if-I-make-it-out-of-here-I’m-

deader-than-shit' kind of fucked!" His chest is heaving, in, out, up, and down as I swallow nervously.

The green of his eyes is now hot, not warm. Not even simply hot, but boiling, scorching, blazing. I watch the speckles of amber glow and smolder around the black of his pupils. I don't understand the source of what triggers his obvious mood swings, but this is definitely the most profound display I've seen yet. It makes me uncomfortable.

He pleads in a low whisper, "So just give me the purse. Please," and slowly lifts his hand once again. The blaze of his eyes flickers and fizzles down into a dull gleam of exhaustion. Something about it and the hollows of his cheeks sinking deeper as his lids droop grip that same something deep inside. I spend a moment staring into his eyes, attempting to decode the riddle of his troubles. I wonder if the accident with his car will get him terribly punished or something similar. I ponder if it's related to these mentions of his seedy reputation or maybe even something female-related, but I can't know.

What I *do* know is that he has far greater worries than me, maybe even greater than being stuck in the forest. Something hidden and surreptitious gnawed at him. If I look at him closely enough, I can see it taking him bit by bit. I realize I am hardly a blip on his radar screen, and I'm right in front of his face. It's what I like about him most, but for some reason, I feel a light pang of disappointment at the thought.

I remove the strap from around my shoulder and place it carefully into his palm, watching as he gratefully slides it toward him and sets it in his lap. He opens it fully and flips it upside-down, dumping the contents onto the dirt before him.

I watch as he tosses the bag aside and meets my gaze. "I'm sorry for yelling," he says in his soft voice.

I bring my knees to my chest and hug them. "No, you're not," I reply, doing my best to ignore the fact that he'd just thrown a two-thousand-dollar Gucci bag onto wet dirt.

His lips twitch as he admits, "No, not really." I watch his hands rifle through my belongings, and I don't really care that he's getting an uncensored glimpse into what I am. If anything, I'm a little curious about what the contents of my bag reveal.

It's entirely vain.

He begins muttering under his breath as he pilfers the pile of junk, an expression of complete focus on his face. "Tissues, pen, chap stick, gum... sunglasses, a copy of *Pride and Prejudice*..."

He pauses and looks at me, quirking an eyebrow while holding the paperback in his hand. Continuing, he says, “Keys, wallet, receipts, knife...” he trails off as he holds up the knife and stares at me. “You have a knife,” he says tonelessly.

I roll my eyes and think, *No shit, Sherlock*. Instead, I smile and respond in a sickly sweet voice, “I planned to stab you.”

He purses his lips, setting the knife at his side. “Fixed blade’ll come in handy,” he mutters. I’m not necessarily worried about him having it, so I let him set it aside, inwardly encouraging his Boy Scout mannerisms. I imagine him sitting in front of the contents of my Gucci bag with that little tan outfit on, a scarf hanging around his neck and his badges on proud display. I suppress a giggle, hiding my smirk with my hair.

He continues listing off the contents of my bag and making passing comments on the items under his breath. “Useless mace, smelly perfume, hair ties—which you could really use right now—Advil—which, *God-fucking-knows* knows I could really use right now—change, hand sanitizer, phone charger that won’t do any fucking good without a *cell phone*.” He emphasizes this by shooting me a glare, which I totally disregard. “Coupon? That’s weird. Doubt you need any of those. Batteries, tam—” His voice cuts off as he hastily drops one of my tampons, wiping his hand on his shirt with a look of disgust on his face.

I click my tongue. “It isn’t used, Edward, Jesus,” I mutter and do my impression of non-embarrassment.

He meets my gaze and wrinkles his nose. “Used or not,” and then opens the bottle of hand sanitizer, applying a liberal amount to his hands. “So, you really don’t have a mirror?” he muses, as if to himself as his eyes rake over the contents one more time. “Why?”

I huff and lean over the space between us to swipe a hair tie. “I told you I didn’t. I’m not fond of staring at myself,” I say as I sweep my hair away from my face and neck, tying it up into a knot at the top of my head.

He purses his lips and gazes at me through the thickness of his dark lashes. “Don’t tell me I’ve managed to get stranded with the world’s only self-conscious Princess,” he asks wryly while continuing to rifle through my bag’s inventory. I clench my jaw and look away, using my fingers to shred a leaf and swallowing the lump that has formed in my throat.

Persisting, he mutters, "Used tissue, *gross*, medication..." He pauses and scoops up a brown pill bottle that is peeking out from the bottom of the pile. His eyes are alight with curiosity and anticipation. This was more of a glimpse than I'd planned to give him.

My eyes widen, and I lunge for it in a moment of panic. He is startled as my hand surrounds his and attempts to pry it out of his grasp. My fingers pull and my chest constricts as my mind screams, "*Too fucking personal, asshole!*" His fingers are slender, but strong, hands cold as they imprison my secret in their bony grasp. He furrows his brows at my futile effort before reading the label aloud, "Isabella Swan, Zoloft." His eyes scan the bottle once more, and he suddenly relents, uncurling his fingers from around it and sending my hand holding the bottle flying into my stomach. I scurry back to my position and blink back the tears that threaten to weaken my veneer.

His lips curve down into a sharp frown and he looks away. "Sorry," he mutters, running his fingers through his hair. I make no move to assuage his guilt, instead clutching the bottle closely to my body, wishing that I could make it disappear into myself. I wonder if his seeing my name has struck any recollection, and pray for the ground to swallow me. Sighing, he meets my gaze, but it remains unchanged. "You can't take that out here, you know? Your stomach's been empty for too long," he whispers in this annoying, clinical voice.

I grind my teeth and hiss, "No shit, Dr. Intrusive."

I feel the layers of my mask peeling away and melting at the bottom of my muddy shoes. What lies above it is so ugly that my stomach tosses in disgust. I want to sink my fingernails into the itching flesh of my face and pull it away, leaving muscle and bone, scarlet and ivory, the legitimacy of soul and the fragility of the soft marrow that lies beneath.

He is silent as he returns my items to their rightful location, still blissfully ignorant that the name Isabella Swan means scandal, obligation, humiliation, flaw, and failure. Instead of knowing these things with any certainty, he simply knows that I am a nineteen-year-old girl who loves sanitation, reads classic literature, doesn't like to litter, is frugal though it isn't necessary, likes to be prepared, hates looking at herself, and relies on medication to keep that false smile unwaveringly dependable.

Already, Edward Cullen knows more about me than any blood relative, and it is utterly terrifying.

Chapter 5:

Gradually Unearthing the Intricacies of Mendacious Information.

~|-----o|W.T.F|o-----|~

(A.K.A. Show me your arms...)

“How did you talk me into this again?” he grumbles, shoving his hands deep into the pockets of his dark jeans.

I watch them dance from the outside, the denim shifting in the shape of his knuckles as I reply, “You tactlessly went through my things and let me guilt trip you into it.”

His eyes shift upwards to the setting sun in the sky, a sharp sigh escaping his lips. His jaw is darkening with stubble, and it ascends gruffly up the sharp incline, resting at his sideburns in a furious stipple.

We began walking after the purse incident, but my silence and uncharacteristically passive behavior over the hours has, for some reason, bothered him impossibly more than he already was. He apologized once again, but eventually asked how he could make it up to me. Surprised that he even cared, I told him that turnabout is fair play, and if he could invade my privacy, I should be extended a similar opportunity.

His eyebrows quirk up, the little piece of metal embedded in his eyebrow sparkling as he stares at the thick clouds and pulls his hands out. He dumps the contents onto the dirt before me, and then reaches into his back pockets. One pale hand emerges with a wallet, which creates a flat smacking sound as it meets the dirt. Another pale hand emerges with a cluster of small bags that appear to be filled with some sort of powder.

My eyes widen as I gape at the clear bag holding the smaller ones. “Please tell me that isn’t what I think it is,” I sigh as my eyes rise to meet his gaze.

He stares back vacantly as he says, “Okay. It *isn’t* five ounces of heroin.” His voice, sarcastic and mocking, is oddly empty.

I lift the bag and inspect it, sighing in recognition. I know drugs well enough since, for four years, I’d been forced to attend prep school on a daily basis. I’ve tried drugs before, of course. What prep school experience would be complete without a little narcotic use? I’d tried so hard to fit my square personality into the round pegs expected of me. I remember the sensations of burning as powder was pulled up my nose, disappearing bitterly into the back of my throat.

That's what *my kind* preferred: cocaine and crushed prescription drugs, trendy and glamorous. Up the rabbit hole they go, never to return.

But at night, in the dark and scandalous upscale night-clubs of the city, things occur that are far beyond my casual restroom-snorting experiences. Girls always go with the intention of dancing, drinking, and humping the nearest trust-fund-case, but sometimes, they get pulled into those back rooms—the ones reserved for “V.I.P.s” and the sexually rabid whores. Everyone knows the likelihood of them being lost in a silent, intravenous oblivion is fairly high. Some girls won't return until sometimes, days later, unkempt and barely conscious, reeking of stale smoke, booze, and sex. After that, they're hooked.

I'm abruptly reminded of socialite queen, Rosalie Hale. We had been close, briefly. My mother had once said to me, “You watch how she moves, Isabella. She's what you should aspire to.”

Rosalie always got fabulous press. Men and women would flock to her perfection, and she'd glow with their attentions. She might be this way now if she hadn't become proof that even perfection can fall. Two weeks before I'd decided to come to Forks, Rosalie Hale had been drugged and raped by famed club owner, Royce King.

It was never publicized, of course.

Seeing her lifeless eyes as she'd lain in the hospital bed had sobered me to the lifestyle I'd just barely grazed. I wanted no part of that, the price of the risk being too high, even for me. She was the beautiful swan that had crashed to earth, beak-first, injured and planted firmly in the soil she once gazed down so whimsically upon. What kind of mother would want her daughter to aspire to *that*?

I frown as I drop the bag of heroin and look tentatively to Edward. *I shouldn't really be surprised*, I decide. My father has told me enough over the last year about this person that I should have expected something like this. Up until now, it had been difficult to reconcile the troubled Boy Scout that walked at my side with the criminal that my father had seethed about over the telephone. Now, he was beginning to look like something far more monstrous than my father had explained. I didn't come all this way to find another, cheaper version of that sadist, Royce King.

“Well,” I begin as I unceremoniously toss the bag aside. “I think if you decide to do that crap anywhere near me, I'm confiscating my knife,” I snap, and then feel my eyes widen once more as I add, “Wait. You haven't been doing it, have you?” It hadn't seemed like it, but I really don't know him, so it is difficult to judge.

His lips curl up into a revolted pose. "What makes you think I'd ever poison my body with something like that?" he asks, staring daggers at the bag and taking a curiously appalled step away from it.

Quirking an eyebrow, I answer, "Umm, because you have a full bag of it on your person." I want him to know that I'm not judging him based on my father. I'm just judging him based off the large amount of heroin he's been carrying around snugly in his back pocket.

Two and two make four, any way you spin it.

He stiffens and leans against the mossy trunk of a large spruce, crossing his ankles. "I *sell* drugs. I don't *do* drugs. There's a big difference," he says, raising his chin in the air and glaring down his nose at me.

I pucker my lips as I scrutinize him dubiously and decide that he's being truthful. He just doesn't *look* like a drug addict. I've seen the signs, and he'd be going through withdrawals right now if he hadn't been using. His skin would be more sallow, and his mannerisms more fidgety. Suddenly curious, I ask, "So if you don't use it, then why would you sell it?" It doesn't make sense to me why one wouldn't go with the other. Even scum like Royce enjoyed the euphoria the drug offered.

He snorts and crouches to my level, his hair falling to his forehead and momentarily hiding the purple bruise. "Any dealer with half a brain knows better than to use," he replies, looking away shamefully to the ground. "They end up going through their supplies and fucking themselves, because the addiction becomes their only expense. Meanwhile, people like me get all their clients, because the addicts aren't stupid either. No one likes being fucked around." He shrugs and sighs, shifting his gaze to the bag. "It's a means to an end, but you probably wouldn't get that," he whispers and rests his chin on his knees.

I'm ready to argue his unfounded assumption before I decide against it. Instead, I ask, "Because your dad lost his job?" His eyes flash in anger as they meet mine. I'm wondering if I should begin counting the plethora of emotions he goes through in a mere five-minute period for my own amusement.

"He didn't *lose* his job," he spits venomously. "He was unfairly targeted and made an example of by self-righteous motherfuckers who couldn't see what was staring them in the face," he seethes, and his eyes darken, smoldering in that similar way. After a moment of heaving sharp breaths, he adds, "It's called character assassination. The people of this town excel in it." His fists relax out of their taught curl and his eyelids slide closed. The ginger way in which he

pushes his hair away from his forehead makes him seem more innocent than I know he is. Royce King, or not.

I recall the morning my father had told me the story. Charlie had arrested Dr. Cullen himself. The town's most venerable physician had been caught stealing narcotics from the hospital, and not just a little, either. There had been hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of supplies allegedly signed for and intercepted, unaccounted for.

The town's citizens had gone into a hysteric frenzy once word spread, feeling that they'd been misled by Dr. Cullen's charisma and influence. They'd felt deceived and frightened that the new drug trend would infect their children, and he became a very obvious target for an already-present paranoia. This, coupled with the upcoming political elections and his vehement refusal to accept a plea deal made a particularly unseemly spectacle of the entire scandal in court. They'd had difficulty making the charges stick but had managed to convict him. He'd been sentenced to six months incarceration and fined a few thousand dollars, but had also been banned from practicing medicine.

Overnight, the admirable, compassionate, and wealthy Dr. Cullen had become unemployable public enemy number one.

I have no clue if these accusations against Edward's father were well-founded, but as I glance at the bag of drugs between us, I wonder if Edward isn't much, much worse than Royce—possibly throwing his own father under the bus. "You do realize that you're just granting validity to everything against him, right?" I ask disbelievingly. "Were you the one responsible? Or is this a family activity?" I ask. I am expecting more of his ire, so I'm surprised to be met with his despondent sigh.

"I didn't start dealing until a few months ago," he whispers in a pained voice, hiding his face in his knees. "But it doesn't matter now. None of it does." I watch as his hands come up to his hair, resting on top of his scattered locks gently. I can't understand his words, and it leaves me impossibly more agitated that I'm responding in *this* curious way, as opposed to the revulsion that his behavior should summon.

Yet I want to know the "why" and "when" of these events to assemble them into a prettier puzzle. I *want* to understand him. I want him to justify his behavior and indulge the idealist in me that believes there is good in the rare warmth of his green eyes. I want to know that what I had seen there before wasn't false, just hidden.

Damn it all to shit.

With an unpleasant shift, I turn my thoughts to the things he had extracted from his pockets. I figure I can uncover more by going through his things, so I begin doing just that. He has far less than me. Only a meager amount of change, a wallet, his car keys, a folded piece of notebook paper, and a random screw lay on the soft ground before me.

And, of course, the heroin.

I go for the most intriguing item first, rubbing my hands together in preparation for something particularly—dare I say, juicy—as I lift the folded paper. I’m guessing it’s a note of some sort as I unfold it, and I idly wonder if it’s from his girlfriend. I think I’m correct as I’m met with an elegant and feminine script, but the contents prove otherwise.

Edward,

I’m picking up an extra shift tonight, so I’ll be home near dawn. If you go into town, pick up some milk, please? I think Emmett drank a whole gallon yesterday. We need to start locking the doors. That boy is a bottomless pit.

-Mom

P.S. Don’t worry about last night. He didn’t mean it.

Stop leaving your shoes in the hallway.

I fold the paper back to its small square and curse the insurgence of added questions the note has invited. He is still hiding his face in his knees when I glance up, and I consider asking him what the note means, about the subtle message within, who this “he” is, and what “he” didn’t mean.

Instead, I begin feeling worry for his mother, who clearly cares about him and is likely worried sick over his absence. I imagine her walking in the hallway of their home and seeing the vacant spot where his shoes would lay. I imagine her being briefly satisfied that he had obeyed her wishes. And then I imagine her looking for the gallon of milk and realizing that Edward has gone missing. Before I begin imagining the same about my own parents—an act that I know with certainty will cause me momentary sorrow—I set the note aside and begin busying myself with the task of further investigation.

“What’s this?” I ask, my curious voice invading the silence as I hold up the screw to inspect it.

He turns his face to look at me, narrowing his eyes at the item between my fingertips. “A screw,” he answers flatly. “I was trying to fix my car,” he adds after a pause, hiding his face once again.

Deciding that this item is boring, I cast it aside and search his key ring. There are nine keys, which seems a bit excessive to me, but there is also a long keychain, colorful, beaded, with the words, “#1 Brother” spelled in white, square beads.

“You have siblings?” I ask in surprise.

Without looking up, he mutters, “Sister. Her name’s Alice. Sixteen.”

Alice. Such an antiquated name, I muse, but then again, so is Edward. I surmise that his parents had been on drugs when they chose them.

I unfold the wallet carefully, and suddenly, he is watching me. He props his forearms on his knees and leans his head back against the mossy trunk behind him. I look first at his Washington State driver’s license. I learn that he is nineteen as well, older than me by three months, and that he is one-hundred-and-seventy pounds, six-foot-one, and an organ donor. I spend an inappropriate amount of time staring at the photo on his license, tracing the edges of his clean-shaven face with my gaze, and committing his eyes to memory, because they appear happy in *this* moment. I imagine him being excited on the day he passed the driving test, like any teenager would be, and it takes every ounce of my control to keep my lips set into their thin line.

I recognize the address of his home and my stomach does a lone flip that aches, the acid churning angrily against the vacancy that’s being forced upon it. The Cullens live on the particularly impoverished side of town. Forks isn’t a big enough town for defined “sides” or anything, but it is common knowledge that one, long street on the East side has been reserved for the charity cases, the welfare mothers, the unemployable disabled, and the discarded elderly.

Looking up, I find his eyes are faraway, his brows pulled downward at the edges with an expression of remorse etched across his features. Noticing my gaze on him, he darts his eyes to mine, and I’m taken aback to hear him suddenly mutter, “Do you consider yourself a forgiving person, Isabella?”

I blink in shock at the unexpected question as he holds my stare. It's the most genuine sentence to escape his lips since we met, which both intrigues and unnerves me. I haven't really made a habit of speaking of myself, but it's easy to assume that he's attempting to put me in the role of someone else. Someone he's close to, and maybe hurt in his corrupt dealings. Creasing my forehead, I reply honestly, but in a generalized fashion, "I suppose it depends on the situation and whether or not the person can convince me they're actually sorry."

"What if they were?" he asks quickly, angling toward me slightly. The glimmer of hope in his eyes is oddly disconcerting. "If they were really sorry, you'd forgive them?" he asks with an uncomfortable focus on my expression.

I raise my eyebrows and can't help feeling as though I'm being pushed into a commitment by agreeing. "Ah, I guess?" I reply warily, but also decide to add, "I'd be more inclined if I knew they had good intentions." This is going nowhere, and I can't even come up with an accurate formula for his theoretical inquiry. I'm rarely ever apologized to in sincerity, so it's difficult to say. I have the feeling the person he's worried about isn't anything like me, however.

Luckily, my careful adjustment makes him appear marginally relieved as his shoulders loosen. His eyes shift away from mine, discomfort apparent in the reassurance that laces the lines of his face. "I have good intentions," he mutters, as if comforting himself with his words.

I wait for him to continue, but he doesn't, instead staring off into the distance with a thoughtful expression. I refocus my attention to the contents of his leather wallet, finding no credit cards or photographs inside. There are no phone numbers from girls, or the large bills that I'd expect to see from a drug dealer. It is essentially empty. There is an expired identification card from Forks High School Library that has nothing outwardly unique to his name, and something thin, crammed into the back. I furrow my brows as I dip my finger inside and emerge with the foil package of a condom.

I drop it with a gasp and begin wiping my hands on my jeans frantically. "Eww, gross." I grimace and shudder dramatically, flicking it with my finger.

He chuckles and smirks languidly as he drawls, "It isn't used, Isabella." His echoing of my earlier words is taunting, but I'm momentarily stunned at his first use of my real name. The swell of his cheek as he smiles crookedly makes his eyes seem brighter, so close to being the warmth of his earlier stare.

I smile charmingly as I replace the unused condom to his wallet and reply, "It never will be, Edward."

Chapter 6:

The Endless Loops of Those Gone Astray, Vigilant Within Their Diminishing Husks.

~|-----o|W.T.F|o-----|~

(A.K.A. Kumbaya, my whore... Kumbaya.)

I've gotten somewhat conditioned to the discomfort of my toes as they dig into my shoes. Renee says that I wear a size six, when I actually defy the norm of perfection and wear a seven. I know that she realizes this and vaguely remember the day in which she had discovered my inferior shoe size.

We had been inside an upscale boutique with some random friend of hers and her daughter. Renee had been anxious to parade me around, dress me in clothing that made me blush, and prove to the other women that she too owned a doll of her younger, mirror image.

"She wears a six," Renee had said with indignation as the salesman inspected my bare feet. He had looked at her with a quirked eyebrow, and then to me, shrugging and taking her word for it. The shoes wouldn't fit comfortably, and my toes had been squished unpleasantly, painfully. "Perfect!" She'd clapped her hands and remarked on how the blue of the toe glittered under the lights.

Six was perfect, so I strained a smile and agreed, which had pleased her. But I wasn't a six. I was a seven. I was just one-off from being ideal, in every measure. My boobs are one cup size too low, my waist is one inch too big, my ass is one inch too small, and I'm one inch too short. I only ever cared because I was told to.

The afternoon quickly moves as we continue walking, and eventually, the sun is once again beginning its decent over the horizon. I begin watching Edward curiously as he stops every now and again, wordlessly plucking some sort of berry from the vegetation as we pass, and placing them in his grey coat pocket. He's slid the knife into his waistband, and occasionally squints up at the sky as we trudge through low-hanging branches and step over roots and logs.

"I don't get it," he mutters, holding a large vine away so I can pass it. "We should've hit a trail by now." He shakes his head as he releases the vine and it snaps backward. His hands fall to his stubble-speckled jaw as he rubs it thoughtfully, distracted.

Cold, I wrap my arms around myself as he glances around the trees and foliage, hoping that he can manage to find his bearings, because I'm subconsciously putting it all on his shoulders. I

remove another stick of gum from my Gucci bag, and discard the wrapper on the ground in annoyance with his uncertainty.

Huffing, he continues his path and I follow, as always, grumbling.

It gets progressively darker as the hours pass, and I begin to wonder if we shouldn't double back to find the road, though I realize that it is probably more than a day's walk behind us. The extreme failure of Edward's sense of direction gives me the compulsion to take the reins, even though I likely wouldn't fair much better. I can see the travel and anxiety wearing him down as his eyes dart into dark crevices and scan vigilantly.

My toenails push back into my flesh with every step, and it gets difficult to continue as the moon rises. I'm just about to voice my exhaustion when he holds a vine back for me to pass, a sense of déjà-vu slamming into me. I look to the ground, bend, and retrieve the discarded gum-wrapper with weary eyes. I hold it up and sigh agonizingly.

"We're going in circles," he groans, snatching the wrapper from my grasp and crushing it into his fist. He lolls his head back and slumps against yet another nearby tree. His fingers pull at his hair, and his eyes, deeply troubled, become unfocused as he slides down and growls in frustration.

I suddenly feel awkward observing his obvious aggravation, for reasons I can't really comprehend. I'd seen him frustrated continuously over the last two days, but this seems different—as if he's truly defeated. I suppose since I am relying on him, it's making me more empathetic than I should be. With a sigh, I collapse onto the ground and begin removing my shoes. The added padding of the double socks has made my shoes impossibly tighter, and I wince as I remove them.

I stretch my toes and wiggle them within the confines of my socks, please at the relief. "Who is 'he?'" I inquire, breaking the silence and hoping to distract him from his defeat as I rub my toes soothingly.

"What?" he asks.

"The 'he' from that note in your pocket. Your mom said that 'he' didn't mean it," I clarified absently while massaging my feet.

"Oh," he breathes, blinking at me for a moment before mimicking my actions and unlacing his own shoes. "My dad," he answers grimly while pulling off his dark boots, setting them aside

with a sigh. "Things at my house are..." he pauses, lowering his head when a brief flash of agony sweeps his features. "tense."

Pursing my lips, I ask, "Please explain," if only to distract us both from the fact that the moon has become hidden behind the clouds. The darkness is more peculiar than the previous night, the canopy of needles and leaves above us blowing loudly in the howling winds.

It's difficult to make out his expression as he rests his head against the tree. "This isn't some fucking camping trip where we all sit around a fire and bond. It's none of your business," he responds in a cold voice.

I roll my eyes and curl my feet up under my calves to warm them. "Wanna' know what I think?" I ask.

"Nope."

I hum and begin, "I think your dad is bitter because his son is validating everyone's accusations against him. I think he probably makes this known, on a regular basis, and I also think that your mom's stuck in the middle." I'm enjoying— too much—being the spectator into someone's life for once. In San Diego, everything is so cut and dry, and everyone knows everyone else's business. Edward is a fun conundrum, complex, yet carefully predictable.

"That's great," he chuckles, and I register the soft thump of his head hitting the bark. "This is such a fucking nightmare," he mutters under his breath.

I grin despite myself. "Drama queen much?" I ask, both amused and dismayed by his suggestion.

He snorts, motionless. "That's your job, Britney Sears."

"It's 'Spears,'" I correct, inwardly kicking myself for rectifying his slights.

"I know how it's said," he grinds. "It was a double reference to... oh, *never-fucking-mind*." He sighs and grumbles lowly about me, "lacking the intellectual capacity to comprehend the intricacies of his insults."

This makes me laugh, of course. The sounds of my snorting laughter echo off of the trees around us, louder than I had intended. I immediately suppress my guffaw and am met with a growl that is neither his, nor mine.

My stomach is bitchier than Renee the night before Botox day.

I slap my hand over my mouth, pulling my knees into my stomach in hopes that it can muffle the sounds that emerge.

Edward straightens, the sound of shuffling alerting me to his approach. "You should eat," he whispers, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a handful of those pink berries.

I gape at him in the shadows. "I'm not eating some random forest berry, thank you."

"It's not random," he grumbles, moving closer to my side. "They're salmon berries, and I've been eating them all day. Here." He holds out his palm, full of the berries and thrusts them at me.

I narrow my eyes. "You've been eating *all day*, and haven't offered me any until *now*?" I question in a furious whisper, my stomach rumbling once again.

He scoffs. "You haven't offered me any of your gum. It's not like you don't have a full pack."

"You could have asked," I snap, secretly feeling a smidgen guilty that I hadn't offered him any myself.

In a steady voice, he orders, "Just eat the goddamn berries," and suddenly grips my hand, dumping them into my palm.

I hold them close to my face and attempt to inspect them in the darkness. I'm not knowledgeable on the edibility of forest vegetation, and this feels like a rather large liability to entrust him with. One more loud growl and churn of my stomach trumps my trepidation, and I pop one into my mouth, chewing it experimentally. They don't necessarily taste appealing, but they aren't awful, either. There's a twinge of sweetness, but mostly they are bitter, with a rougher texture than I'd expect. I suppose, being just barely spring, that they haven't fully ripened. Satisfied that it isn't the most appalling thing ever to digest, I begin eating more, first consuming them in pairs, and then trios, and then just shoving them into my mouth.

"Not so bad, huh?" he whispers from my side, and I can see him drawing lines in the dirt with the stem of a large leaf.

I stop chewing and swallow thickly, moving my hand to my bag and removing my pack of gum. I scoot close to him, placing it gingerly on his knee. "I'm sorry about the gum. I wasn't thinking," I admit remorsefully, running my tongue over my teeth to dislodge the berry residue.

His hand drops the stem and tentatively reaches for the gum. "That's okay," he says while extracting a stick from the wrapper and shoving it in his mouth. "I was too proud to ask," he adds in a quieter voice, chewing softly.

His speedy acceptance of my paltry offering juxtaposed with his soft admission of being proud leaves me momentarily shaken, and I feel my face warming. His vulnerability leaves me feeling impossibly more ashamed for withholding it from him. I wait for his witty retort in compensation for the weakness he'd shown, expecting something terribly predictable like a reference to Juicy Fruit. I'd be thankful for the opportunity to counter his insult and put us back in that comfortable, familiar place we've been fond of since we met. But instead of easing the awkward tension of the atmosphere by calling one another silly names, we sit in silence, chewing our midnight feast.

I'm nearing the end of my handful of berries when he speaks, "So, what's with the Zoloft?"

I stiffen and swallow the last of my meager meal. "I thought this wasn't a bonding experience?" I say in a harsher voice than intended.

I can feel him shrug, the edge of his shoulder just barely grazing mine as he says, "Just making small talk."

I pucker my lips and respond in a wry voice without thinking, "Small talk is, 'Hey, Ted. How 'bout them Dodgers.' It isn't, 'Hey, why don't you explain why you take massive doses of anti-depressants to make getting up in the morning seem worth your effort.'"

And just like that, I have a bigger mouth than Divine Brown.

"Have trouble getting up in the morning, eh?" he asks in this annoyingly casual voice while smacking his gum. "Seems like a pretty normal case of the doldrums to be wasting prescriptions on."

I chuckle humorlessly as I slide my eyes close. "Whatever, Special-Ed. You don't know anything about it," I reply, finding solace in the truth of my statement and the return of name-calling.

He is silent for many moments, and the sounds of the rustling overhead branches sweep between us eerily. He eventually sighs. "You weren't too far off earlier," he says before clarifying, "About my dad and all."

I open my eyes, having adjusted to the darkness well enough to make out the sharp contours of his face. I eye him skeptically, wondering what he's playing at with the sudden Kumbaya moment. "Oh?" I ask, quirking an eyebrow.

He nods, a succinct crease forming between his brows. "But you weren't completely right, either. No one ever is," he murmurs, leaning his head to the side. "People don't realize what something like that can do to a family," he says despondently, and I can easily assume that the "something like that" must be the legal troubles of Dr. Cullen.

There is a silence in which I kick my legs out before me and grant him my full attention, eager to encourage his offering of piecing my puzzle together. When he doesn't immediately continue, I warily speak, "What was it like before?" I really don't want to wade through the boring shit, but figure that seeing the bigger picture requires the little details of the background.

A rueful smile tugs at his lips as he pulls one knee up to his chest. "Things were good, I guess. Our biggest concern back then was where we were going to take our next vacation." He chuckles with a far away expression while softly chewing, the muscles of his jaw expanding with every chomp. "Alice always won those battles. She's impossible to say 'no' to," he adds, but then his smile falls and his eyes slide to mine. I catch a glimpse of despair in his gaze as he says, "We took a lot of shit for granted."

My lips pull down into a frown as I quickly look away, fearing he will see the truth that lies beneath, and how much I likely take for granted on a daily basis. Picking at my nails, I ask, "How'd it get so bad?" It seems like such an extreme leap, from worrying over vacation destinations to having to sell heroin to make ends meet.

He is silent for a moment before sighing sharply. "Well, it's pretty fucking obvious isn't it?" he asks through clenched teeth. I can hear his breath picking up and inwardly grimace at the signal of his quick mood swing as he continues in a grating tone, "The head of household gets sent to jail, lawyer's fees begin adding up, there's no more income, no support from... anybody, and the next thing you know, the house with the white picket fence is being foreclosed on." He pinches the bridge of his nose and heaves slow breaths, finally calming as he finishes, "Money can't buy happiness, but it sure as fuck helps a whole helluva lot."

I'm personally inclined to disagree with his sentiment, but I'm more inclined to find out more. "Why?" I ask. The pragmatist in me hungers for the added information his insight provides, while the idealist in me is telling him to stop his whining and be grateful that he has two parents who give a shit about him.

“Why does money help?” he asks disbelievingly, meeting my gaze with hostile eyes. *Here we go again*, I sigh as he seethes, “How would you feel seeing your mother reduced to a low-end waitress job at the Lodge to feed you? What would it be like to see your parents’ guilt over having to deny their daughter her first car, or ballet lessons, or that really fucking nice Gucci purse she’s been talking about for months, which coincidentally, you just happen to have attached to your goddamn hip!?” I flinch away from his callous voice, blanching in shock and determined to remain stone-faced until he’s purged his enmity at my curiosity. He snaps his mouth shut, dread sweeping his features as he drops his gaze and rakes his fingers through his hair. “Sorry,” he mutters, glancing at me remorsefully. “Sore subject.”

The look of regret for snapping at me, I realize, probably won’t last long, given his inhuman penchant for changing his demeanor at the drop of a hat. This fact, mingled with the contrast of reaction versus explanation makes a deep chuckle build within me. It might also have something to do with my habit of laughing at the most inappropriate moments. I do my best to stave it off, unwilling to trigger his ire again tonight, but much like after the car accident, I find that it’s inevitable. Laughter erupts from the pit of my abdomen in a deep chortle, and I double over, covering my face with my hands.

I laugh into my palms, sneaking a cautious glance at him through the spaces of my fingers, and am pleasantly surprised to see his lips twitching. Buoyant from his own amusement, I say through chuckles, “You’re moodier than a bloated, P.M.S.’ing, drug-addled prep-school-girl on restriction.” *And, God knows, I’ve met enough of those to be an expert.*

I feel a familiar surge of relief that I’ve graduated, and am past all that nonsense.

He’s still fighting a smile as he rolls his eyes and grumbles, “Yeah, yeah. Whatever.” The darkness exaggerates the shadows of his face, making it appear sunken and aged as I hug myself tighter, recoiling from the frigidity of the sudden, cutting breeze. “Can you walk more?” he finally asks, flattening his palms against the dirt and bracing to lift himself.

The mere thought of cramming my feet back into those shoes makes me wince. My limbs are sore—especially my neck and shoulders, still recovering from the accident. My eyes, heavy and weary, desire the relief of slumber. I know that I don’t want to walk any further, but I also no longer feel pleasure in the thought of upsetting him—which kind of annoys me. I sit silently as I contemplate whether or not I should admit to him how very exhausted I’m feeling.

As if sensing the warring conflict in my mind, his arms ease, and he sinks back into the ground. “We can rest,” he says, tightening his jacket. “I’m not exactly in any hurry to get home, anyways.”

I frown, dubious that a “tense” home could be any worse than freezing our asses off in the forest all night long but decide to take the proverbial bull by the horns and curl up against the tree I lean against. I try to pull my jacket over my knees as they press into my chest, but find that it’s too snug to manage. I settle with simply embracing my legs and resting my cheek on my knees, feeling the occasional shiver reverberate through my huddled form. My teeth chatter despite my every effort to relax my stiffened body and breathe them out. I squeeze my eyes close and struggle to envision warmth, imagining it spreading up my toes to my knees, climbing my body and making its rest against my shoulders.

There is a gentle disturbance of shuffling at my side, and I open my eyes to find Edward removing his black jacket. My eyes widen as I see his chest for the first time, his flannel shirt unbuttoned and exposing a light thermal shirt beneath. It’s stretched tightly over the planes of his chest and leaves little to the imagination as the shadows exaggerate the curves there.

Edward Cullen is a rather attractive asshole, I decide.

He holds the jacket up uncertainly, and I furrow my brows in confusion. Glancing at me sidelong, I can discern his uncomfortable expression as he suddenly moves his coat over me, covering me from the biting wind with its heavy material.

“Edward,” I murmur, more than a little stunned at this abrupt act of chivalry as I shiver under the jacket. “You’ll f-freeze to death,” I chatter. My face unconsciously nuzzles closer to the warm fabric, detecting a scent that sends a comforting wave of warmth crawling down my spine. It smells very homey and clean, with a hint of the trees surrounding us.

He shifts his gaze away, shrugging. “I’m not that cold,” he lies, a slight tremor in his voice betraying his shiver. His fingers tug down the sleeve cuffs of his light flannel shirt and I know that it’s nowhere near enough to cover him for the night out here.

I grimace and prepare to extract the large jacket’s warm comfort when the idea swiftly strikes. It isn’t exactly ideal, barely knowing each other—but given the circumstances, I figure we can skip the childish behavior and bear a few hours of one another’s close proximity. I exhale and move my body close to his against the large tree we’ve been sitting against. I can feel his body stiffen as I smash my side into his.

“What are you doing?” he mumbles as I lift the jacket, spreading half over him since it is nearly large enough to accommodate us both.

I roll my eyes. "I'm sharing the jacket," I inform in a sharp voice, slightly annoyed that I'm being made to note the obvious, which makes it somehow *more* awkward. "And my body heat," I grumble in a lower voice.

He remains rigid as I curl deeper into his side, basking in the warmth that emanates from his arm and thigh against my own. Residual shivers slink up my body, our resulting closeness making it possible to feel the light shudders that resonate through his. I coil closer and decide that this is no time for awkwardness. He'll just have to deal with that shit later.

My head rests against the rough bark as we remain huddled beneath the weight of his jacket. Finally, my body ceases its trembling and I'm able to close my eyes with a sigh. The heat of us accumulates under the fabric, enveloping us in its soft cocoon and penetrating my many layers. I wait for him to slacken against me, to accept my offering and move closer, but he doesn't.

Sleep hazes my mind, and my body, nuzzling itself unconsciously closer to his heat, hums in satisfaction. I allow my cheek to fall to his shoulder, ignoring the manner in which his body goes impossibly stiffer as I ease myself into the sweet release of slumber. As I slip away, I'm almost certain I can hear a velvet whisper carried in the static, deep in the distance, nestled in vegetation and darkness, "I really am sorry."

~|-----o|W.T.F|o-----|~

It isn't a peaceful sleep. It's more like a pattern of dozes, awakening in intervals and shifting closer to Edward's rigid body. I saturate myself in him. His palpable tension remains as I'm repeatedly roused by the unfamiliar sounds of the forest, but I'm somehow capable of going back to sleep, feeling oddly safe despite the unpredictability of local wildlife that should frighten me. After my eighth or ninth awakening, I begin to notice him easing, bit by bit, until eventually, I can hear his tell-tale snore and feel him slackened against me. Stealthily, I bend my upturned knees to rest in his lap, sighing softly as the added warmth comforts my poorly padded legs. It's difficult to maintain a polite distance under the circumstance. I definitely don't want to wake up straddling him or anything, but I end up smashing my chest into his arm and inching my nose closer to the crook of his warm neck.

I inhale him groggily, and in a very secret, so-classified-that-I'd-never-admit-it-even-on-my-deathbed sort of way, I think he smells really quite good. Much like the jacket, he smells like soap and forest, except with a hint of something else, maybe the remnant scent of his shaving cream. My nose creeps closer to the exposed flesh of his neck, seeking heat to warm its tip, and rests just past his shirt on the flesh above his collarbone. I breathe him in. My eyelids fall as my

nose tingles, breathing softly into his skin and surrendering to a deeper sleep than I've known all night.

The next thing I know, I'm awakening to the dim light of dawn, crushed so closely to Edward that a casual observer might assume we were intimate. I've somehow managed to shove my socked feet between his legs and have twisted myself completely into him. My arm entwines with his I lean against it, still resting my head near the crook of his neck.

I swiftly discover that Edward has overcome his aversion to physical contact a little too well.

More startling than my own pose is where I find—or rather, *feel*—his hands. They are palm-to-palm, wedged high between my thighs, and twitch intermittently as he dreams, still entirely unconscious.

I curl my lips into a sneer as I feel his fingers shift infinitesimally, dangerously close to my special 'Holy-Fucking-Christian-Bale' place. His cheek is resting on my head, his deep breaths moving his jacket up and down. He is motionless—with the very inconvenient exception of his fingers.

Twitch... Twitch-twitch... Twitch... Twitchy-twitchy-jerk-twitch...

I mash my teeth together and wonder what on Christian Bale's pink earth he's dreaming about. I use this question as a futile attempt to reject the sensation, because *no way in hell* am I getting aroused by Edward Cullen.

Five minutes later, I decide that he's typing, knitting, strumming a harp, or playing a piano. Whatever it is, it's becoming very difficult to find revolting as my breathing grows softly erratic. I clear my throat loudly in hopes of rousing him... before he rouses me.

Further.

He stirs, but at an unfortunate minimum. Instead of waking, his hands simply shift so that one is palm-up and one palm-down, each gently grasping a thigh. The friction of the movement and the resulting tingles are warming, giving me the impulse to push down into his hand fully. Suddenly, his pinky twitches. I gasp as I feel it lightly graze the sensitive flesh of my tender, throbbing, longing...

"BEAR!"

His head snaps up, his hands removing themselves from my thighs as his cloudy eyes dart around the area. “Where?” he asks and rubs his face furiously, still slightly disoriented as he searches the fogginess of the grey morning, rigid with tension. His eyes remain wildly vigilant for a fraction of a second before darting to mine, finally absorbing our pose.

I quickly untangle my feet from his legs and scramble away, momentarily mourning the loss of his heat and smell and—*god-fucking-dammit*—his inappropriately pleasant fingers. “I thought I heard a bear,” I mumble scorch-faced, my probable flushing betraying my off-handed attitude.

The green of his eyes pierces me as his brows furrow. “You heard a bear?” he asks dully. I’m wondering when the hell eyebrow piercings became attractive to me, because for some reason... it definitely now is.

I nod, pursing my lips and shifting my gaze to my Gucci bag. I scramble for a stick of gum while he stands, stretching his sinewy arms high in the air and exposing a sliver of pale, furry flesh below his bellybutton. My eyes widen as I gulp, just barely managing not to swallow my gum whole. Shaking my head, I berate my hormones and his twitching-fucking-fingers. I follow him with my eyes as he moves a few feet away, the sound of a swift ‘*zzziiipp*’ emerging.

His steady stream of urine hits the ground between his feet with a flat splash, followed by his sigh. Tilting his head to the side with nary a care that I’m right behind him watching, he sighs, “I wouldn’t worry about bears, LeLo. They’d take one look at that rat-nest hair you’re sporting and run for the hills.”

And just like that, any trace of “sexy” is appropriately annihilated with his casual pissing and petty affronts.

I narrow my eyes and smack my gum. “You’re living in a glass house there, Special-Ed,” I retort while unhappily cramming my feet back into their designer-athletic prisons. When he turns to look at me over his shoulder, I glance pointedly at his *stupid* hair, which is going every which way. He shrugs and jiggles before zipping and turning.

It’s quite clear that the friendly and open atmosphere we shared last night is now completely gone, replaced with the same silly and immature behavior we are fond of.

The very distinct feeling of “wrong” from my earlier reaction to him sparks an abrupt and appalling urge. I bite my lip thoughtfully as he lowers himself to the ground and pulls on his boots. I watch as his lithe fingers work his laces, curling around the cords and tying them expertly, nimbly... fucking dexterously.

I figure, *what the hell*. I'm stranded in the wilderness with an insufferable heroin dealer, injured, cold, hungry, thirsty, and still recovering from a brief, yet completely egregious lapse of hormonal judgment. Misery loves company, right?

Right.

Biting my lip thoughtfully, I realize that it's not terribly smart to provoke a larger man whom I don't really know in this particular fashion—isolated from civilization, to boot. Of course, because I'm a foolish whore, the thrill of it just makes it all the more appealing. And nothing would make me happier than to see him flustered.

I angle myself slightly to the side, stretch my arms high above my head, and yawn languidly. I pull at the sleeves of my many layers with my fingers in the air, forcing them all upward and feeling a significant portion of my belly completely exposed to the cool dew of dawn. I inwardly smirk, hoping that he's observing as I twist from side to side deliberately, tugging my sleeves impossibly higher. I allow myself a swift, sideways glance, and spot him in my periphery, just enough to know he's facing my direction.

When I drop my arms, I immediately turn and bend down to my bag, retrieving my hair tie from within. Shamelessly, I jut my ass outward and part my legs just slightly, bowing my back wantonly. I imagine being a peacock and spreading my colorful feathers around my back in a brazen flaunt, poking out my chest and prancing around proudly...

Or is it only the males that do that?

I find some measure of ease in the fact that I'm not wearing some obnoxiously exposed thong or anything. I suppose it's really quite innocent—for *my kind*. Oddly, I'm a little nervous as I prepare to gauge his reaction, still hovering over my purse and knotting my hair atop my head. It occurs to me that this kind of bold behavior is a first for me. It's never been in my nature to seek out this form of interest intentionally. I'm unexpectedly insecure.

I swallow hard as I hold my stance and zip it up, my confidence waning. I trail my eyes to the ground below and through my legs, struggling to absorb his features upside-down.

He's still sitting on the ground a few feet away from me, his laced boots flat against the dirt, legs bent as he chews on the fingernail of his middle finger. His head is inclined downward as he gnaws his fingertip, and his sharp jaw, which moves minutely with his hard nibbles, is darker with stubble than yesterday morning. None of this matters, however. What matters is that he is

staring—quite fixedly—at my ass through his dark lashes, his feral hair spilling over his forehead and framing his gaze.

I snap my head up and allow a wide, victorious smirk to spread across my face. I straighten and shake off my smugness before turning to him. His darkened eyes lurch to mine before widening. He drops his hand from his mouth and scrambles to his feet, ruffling his hair while he looks away with an awkward expression. My wicked grin widens despite my every effort at subduing it.

“Ready to walk?” he asks gruffly, his throat bobbing with an obvious swallow as he once again dons his thick, black jacket, and covers the chest that I'm anything but tired of looking at.

“Yep,” I reply giddily and snatch my bag from the ground, tapping every ounce of restraint I possess to not skip in front of him as he leads the way.

Chapter 7:

The Discomfort of Orbiting Proximity and Courageously Audacious Displays .

~|-----o|W.T.F|o-----|~

(A.K.A. What kind of whore do you take me for?)

I'd think that he'd be more prone to speaking as we move through the forest, but his pattern proves otherwise. He is unusually silent as we walk, and more talkative in the evenings when we rest. I figure that he loses himself in his careful focus of surrounding areas, plucking berries when we pass the proper vegetation and keeping careful eye on the location of the sun in the sky.

I find an effective motivator for walking. Admittedly, I'm sick of the task, and my feet still throb in protest with every step I take, so it's a welcomed diversion. I begin to feel the urge to grow more brazen as the sun raises high in the sky. I want to elicit a stronger reaction and grant confirmation to my earlier findings. My interest is new and exciting, and it's so *like me* to start having these inclinations while I'm in the forest, parted with my belongings and hygienically-challenged.

Edward holds a low branch aside for me, allowing me to pass ahead of him, and my hips *sway*.

I've never been a hip-swayer. In fact, I'm commonly known to roll my eyes at the girls that are. I find myself suddenly understanding their conduct as I pop my hips from side to side and indulge my new fixation. It's like a moment where it all just snaps into place, and I'm finally the nineteen-year-old girl that Renee has been trying to awaken. I'd always figured myself deficient, apathetic with the opposite sex, or perhaps simply frigid.

But thanks to Edward, it makes perfect sense to me now why girls act this way.

I'm no nineteen year old virgin or anything. I've flirted before, sure. But only because it seemed like the right thing to do when a particularly attractive man bought me a drink. I never got this kind of thrill from it.

I walk ahead of him a few paces until he sidles up to me, and then I peek up at him covertly through my lashes. His jaw is tight as he searches the invisible path ahead, but he is plainly distracted. He rubs his forehead with his palm, squinting his eyes and darting them from the ground to the distance ahead. He steps over dips and grooves in the geography, but he's walking much slower than usual. Gradually pecking at his fortress of focus with my persistently deliberate movements, I *soar* from the high it gives me. *God, if Renee could see me now...*

I'm tactlessly entertained by this new fascination as we walk. I can always tell when he's watching because his footfalls grow softer behind me, and he is all-too-convincingly aloof when I meet his gaze. Even though the hip-sway begins feeling ridiculous, I persist because it is gloriously effective and confirms my initial notion.

There's an overturned log not too far ahead, and we approach it steadily, finding it to be waist-high. He lifts himself onto it smoothly and turns, reaching out his hand in offering. I swing my bag around and grasp his palm firmly, allowing him to pull me up and awestruck by the ease with which he accomplishes it. His agility is impressive as he jumps down with a small "thump," his long jacket billowing around him. He turns and holds his arms out while his eyes narrow minutely.

It's just too damn tempting to resist.

I lick my lips and crouch just enough for him to grip my waist. His thumbs press into me a little painfully as he eases me off the log and is forced to press himself closer to my body. Placing my hands on his shoulders, I watch his expression with care as I intentionally slide down his lean chest. His jaw locks, eyes crinkling at the edges. He sets me down gingerly but doesn't remove his hands from my waist as quickly as he should.

I brush past him, enjoying the way in which he stands rigid and disoriented for a fraction of a second. And then I continue my hip-sway, because I'm ahead of him and it's become a violent addiction.

He bends close to my ear from behind me as he approaches and lowly mutters, "I know what you're doing." The heat of his abrupt breath against my ear startles me, and my footfall falters. Recovering, I eye him suspiciously as he walks at my side, a little disappointed that my inexperience may have made me transparent. Maybe the whole body-slide was a bit much...

I widen my eyes and drop my jaw in a false show of cherubic innocence, because I plan to milk my fortunate advantage of plausible deniability for all it's worth. "I'm quite certain that I don't know what you mean," I say.

His eyes are still tight around the edges, jaw clenched as he glances at me sideways. "Don't play stupid with me," he replies before shifting his gaze ahead. "You know what you're doing."

I snort. "Seriously?" I ask, rolling my eyes. "What *exactly* is it that I'm doing?" I call his bluff. As transparent as I'd been before, he's clear as glass right this second, his throat bobbing with a nervous swallow as his eyes shift uncertainly.

I can read him like a book.

Pursing his lips, he lowers his head and watches his boots as they move against the soft dirt. "You don't want me to say it," he says, challenging me with an askew glance. A smile tugs at my lips as I realize that *he* doesn't want to say it. Whether because he isn't certain of his accusation, or simply because it makes him feel uncomfortable, I can't decide.

I grin, lifting my chin as I swat a skinny, flexible limb obstructing my path. "Say it," I dare him.

His hands are no longer swinging nonchalantly with his steps as he slows minimally. "I don't need to say it," he replies stiffly.

"Uh," I raise my eyebrows. "Yes, you do—out loud." The significant portion of me that is nervous about being discovered is blushing. Another, far more spiteful portion of me is enjoying his tension to a sadistic degree.

I watch his intimidating façade falter, just barely as he blurts, "You've been taunting me all morning." He carefully composes his hardened expression once again as his cold gaze avoids mine.

"Taunting how?" I ask, deceptively affronted as my jaw slackens.

He is impossibly more flustered at being made to admit his accusation, his hands curling into tight fists at his sides. "You've been—"he pauses, the muscles behind the stubbled flesh of his jaw constricting as he grinds, "wagging your ass in—"

"Ha!" I bark loudly, cutting him off. Shaking my head, I jeer, "In your sick and twisted dreams, Special-Ed." Inwardly, I'm slapping my palm to my face and shriveling in mortification. Thankfully, though I'm inexperienced at the art of attraction, I happen to be a seasoned veteran at the art of performing.

"Don't—" he growls while his feet begin stomping with more fervor. "Don't you fucking dare imply that it's all in my head," he insists, scowling at me through the periphery of his vision. The bright pink of his neck betrays his embarrassment and is almost endearing.

I cluck my tongue. "Geez. A Little presumptuous, aren't we? Especially seeing as how *I'm* the one who woke up with *your* hands between *my* legs," I retort in a harsh voice.

He comes to an abrupt halt, grasping my wrist and forcing me to stop. "I did not!" he insists defensively, his eyes wide and seemingly appalled.

“Did too,” I sigh.

He grows troubled further, his brows furrowing deeply. “I don’t believe you,” he replies, and I simply shrug, uncaring. The scales are now balanced in my favor, and instead of being the shamefully obvious flaunter, I am merely the inconvenient companion of a pervert. I’m good with that.

Locking his jaw tightly, he steps closer, his eyes flashing in anger. “You wanna’ play that game? Fine,” he hisses. “But one of these days you’re going to pull that shit around the wrong motherfucker, and he’s going to confuse it as an invitation.” His nostrils flare outward as he glares down at me and I have the urge to stand on my tiptoes and glare right back.

And lick his eyebrow ring.

His insinuation is clearly meant to be a warning, but what Edward doesn’t realize is that he’s the only “motherfucker” I’ve ever pulled that shit in front of. This makes me wonder if he’s attempting to threaten me, which for some reason is just completely amusing. His entire charade of being the big-bad-wolf is entirely destroyed by his eyes, facial expressions, and careful posture.

I can smell a fake from miles away—*skill compliments of one Rosalie Hale*—and right now, he is reeking of bullshit.

A lazy smirk spreads across my face as I gaze into his cold, green eyes. “Are you threatening me?” I ask, in a very *unthreatened* tone as my cocky grin remains.

His lips part slightly in surprise before tightening into a thin line. The slight, defeated slump of his shoulders confirms that my instincts are spot-on. He’s all talk. “You have absolutely no sense of self-preservation, do you?” he inquires with incredulity.

I shrug, popping my lips. “Sure, I do. I’m just a good judge of character, and you don’t have the balls,” I answer indifferently, satisfied that I’ve proven myself right. I prepare to turn and continue the walk while basking in my victory, but his hand suddenly tugs my wrist once again, spinning me to him.

“I don’t have the balls?” he asks, his expression infuriated once again as his nostrils flare. I’m uncertain if it’s the challenge of the exchange or some underlying animosity toward the popular phrase that flames his fury, but he is clearly offended. I simply watch as his face turns an angry red, his eyes abruptly darting over my shoulder and sweeping the forest behind me.

He releases my wrist, but steps closer, thumbing one corner of his lips as he ducks his chin. His tense and suspicious gaze continuously searches as his palm suddenly flattens against my velour-covered thigh. My eyes widen as they observe his shifty stare, and I'm paralyzed under the feeling of his hand against me. It remains still as his oddly attentive gaze explores the surrounding forest.

He slides it forward, curling his fingers around the back of my thigh and ascending as my muscles clench.

My jaw drops as I realize his intention, his smoldering eyes darting about anxiously. Before I can decide whether or not I want to spur him on or knee him in his nut sack, his hand softly glides up to my ass cheek, palming it gently. I'm utterly speechless as he cups me, rubbing his thumb over my flesh before applying a firmer pressure.

My traitorous hormones flare, tingles and twitches climbing my thighs and settling warmly between my legs as his gentle massaging continues. His eyelids grow heavy as he finally meets my gaze, the green of his eyes darkened as our breathing becomes shallow.

"What the *fuck* do you think you're doing?" I intend for this to emerge as sharp, affronted, and angered. Instead, it emerges in a shaky whisper, betraying both my hormones and tension, and my muscles actually loosen with his tender palming.

"I'm proving a point, Juicy," he answers with a blatant gulp, his eyes falling and scanning my face. Slowly, his hand retreats, sliding softly from my ass to my thigh before falling at his side.

He turns and walks away from me stiffly as I gape at his back, struggling for coherency and battling to find his actions as infuriating, insulting, and revolting as they should be. Instead, I'm just standing here with my lips parted in shock, my ass cheek cooling from the absence of his soft palm, confused, bewildered, and horny.

Goddammit.

~|-----o|W.T.F|o-----|~

"No," Edward says sharply, shaking his head. "End of discussion. We walk." His voice rings of finality, eyes firm as he holds my gaze and crosses his arm over his chest.

I lift my lips into a deliberate sneer as my fists clench. "No, we stay. *End of discussion*," I mock stubbornly, jutting out my chin.

“No.”

“Yes.”

His eyes close briefly as he breathes deeply, chest heaving. “We can’t stay,” he says once again.

“Why not?” I shriek, battling the urge to stamp my feet like a petulant child. “It makes perfect sense! My dad is probably searching for me already!” I mimic his pose and fold my arms across my chest.

I’m no survivalist or anything, but it’s only common sense to remain in one fixed location in this circumstance. I’ve let Edward lead me for almost two days when I shouldn’t have. I can expect with utter certainty that Charlie has the entire police-force of Forks out searching.

It’s time to wait this thing out, and we’re in the ideal location to finally do it.

At the mention of my father, his face goes curiously blank, emotionless. “We’re probably close to a trail by now. Just give it another night,” he reasons in a pleading voice.

“No!” I whine, gripping my hair in my fist. “We’re in the perfect place to wait *now*.” The gurgling of the narrow river beside us is a soothing contrast to our heated exchange. The setting sun casts brilliant shades of orange and purple against the landscape, reflecting resiliently off the water.

To say I was ecstatic to hear the sounds of a nearby stream after the thick tension of the ass grabbing incident would be an understatement. Even Edward, tense and silent, had shown a brief moment of delight as we approached. He’d forced me to empty my Advil bottle and said something about doing a “contamination test.” He’d filled the bottle with water, dropped a few grains of sand into it, and had waited to see if it’d sink or float. I assume that sinking sand implied non-contamination, because he’d given the go ahead when it did. We’d spent five minutes drinking from the clear rivulet, enjoying the view of the river and relaxing before he’d ruined the moment by suggesting we walk some more.

“We can follow the fucking the fucking river for all I care, but we *have to keep moving!*” he insists, his eyes wild with an immeasurable desperation. For someone who’s in no hurry to get home, he is certainly urgent about walking so goddamn much.

I want to stay by the river where there’s a fresh supply of water and vegetation, and I definitely don’t want to venture farther away than I already have. I can imagine Charlie’s purple face when he discovers that I’ve wandered so far away from the scene of the accident. I know

better—because he'd taught me so himself. I've given Edward two full days to rectify the extreme situation he'd gotten us into, and now I am ready to call the shots.

Turning away from him, I mosey a few feet and lower myself to the pebbles. I begin removing my shoes. "Well, I'm staying," I say, sighing in relief as I release my feet from their confines. I rub between my toes and mutter, "I don't really give a shit what *you* do."

This is a lie, but I can't stop him from walking and I refuse to follow. Truthfully, the mere thought of being out here alone is distressing and frightens me. However, I've done all I can to argue my case and decide to simply let him go if that's his wish.

He's silent as I continue massaging my feet, hissing and wincing every now and then from the pain. Finally, he replies in a quiet voice, "I can't just leave you here."

I glance up at him from the ground and find him standing with his head down, nudging the rocks with the toe of his boot. "You have no obligation to me, okay?" *Even though this is your fault.* "You can leave, and I'll be fine," I assure, inwardly protesting my own words as I carefully compose my expression into one of surety.

He cocks his head to the side and rubs the back of his neck, peeking at me through his lashes. "I can't," he says simply, dropping his hand and sighing in defeat. I'm secretly overwhelmed with relief as he stalks to my side and drops to the ground.

"Two days," I say. "If no one comes by then, we'll walk, okay?" I ask softly, beseeching with my gaze. It only seems fair, giving me two days as I'd given him.

He chuckles humorlessly and mumbles, "That's what I'm worried about." I furrow my brows in confusion, searching his face. His eyes, agonized and troubled are fixed on the rocks before him. He runs his fingers through his hair, seemingly lost in thought. I've just opened my mouth to ask what he'd meant when he meets my gaze. "Well, the upside is that we can make a temporary shelter," he mumbles in a sad tone, lifting himself from the ground before sweeping his ass with his hands. "Maybe even a fire..." he muses quietly as he removes the knife from his waistband and saunters toward the edging of trees.

The Boy Scout returning full-force, Edward sets about collecting branches, limbs, and ferns from the surrounding area. He's silent as he works, his eyes concentrating as the knife cuts through thin wood. I am fascinated as he lays a thick blanket of leaves and dead needles just at the edge of the tree line, disappearing and returning with handfuls of the leafy green and brown foliage. His construction is amazingly well thought-out and I watch, semi-awestruck as he plants thick

limbs into the soft ground, pushing his weight on the top of them and straining to make them as deep as possible.

When four have been planted deep in the ground, he disappears behind the trees for a good while before returning with an enormous armful of vibrant, green fern leaves. He drops them and strolls to where I sit, pulling off his jacket and dropping it at my side.

He mutters something in flippancy, wiping at his forehead with the back of his hand. Of course, since his jacket has been removed, I'm so distracted with the task of ogling his chest that I'm forced to rip my eyes away and breathe, "Huh?"

He huffs and shoves his hand palm-up, downward at me. "Your cell phone charger? Please?"

Handing it to him, I ask, "Can I help?" and wring my hands together anxiously, because I'm uncertain how much help I'd actually be.

He barks a laugh while turning away, calling over his shoulder, "If I need someone to direct me by way of complaining, I'll give ya' a shout."

I watch as he cuts the cords with the knife, removing the inner wiring and McGuyvering it to fashion thinner branches along the posts he's made. Once a rough, skeletal roof and wall has been made, he drapes the fern leaves over it, leaving the side facing the river completely open.

It's certainly no Waldorf Astoria, and I don't have much confidence that a strong wind wouldn't completely demolish it, but it's definitely an upgrade from how we'd slept the two previous nights.

"Not too shabby," I appraise favorably as we stand before the makeshift shelter. The sun has already disappeared over the horizon, but the cold darkness is oddly neutralized by the sloshing sounds of the nearby water. Secretly hoping that he can manage to start a fire with nearly no supplies at all, I praise him, "Survivorman would be proud."

He snorts at my side. "Les Stroud doesn't have shit on me, Juicy," he says absently, furrowing his brows in concentration as the knife shaves away wood from a small stick. He glances up to meet my gaze, smiling sardonically as he says, "He's never spent his seven days in isolation with you."

Chapter 8:

The Fulsome Resonance of Waning Incongruities at the Water's Pebbly Edge.

~|-----o|W.T.F|o-----|~

(A.K.A. McGuyver, Survivorman, and Associates.)

"What's th-the E.T-t.A. on that f-fire, Special-Ed?" I chatter as I lay curled atop the padding of leaves, shivering under my jacket. It must be midnight by now, at least, and Edward sits just beyond the shelter, using a bow made of sticks and elastic hair ties to attempt a fire by way of friction.

It is the most useless thing I've ever witnessed, and I find myself wishing that he *were* addicted to drugs. A lighter would come in really handy.

Though I can't see him in the dark, his frustration with the futile task is made evident by the sounds he makes. Low growls and curses emanate from him as the furious hiss of wood being rubbed together floats around us. With a defeated, "Fuck!" I hear him drop the sticks, the hiss ceasing. "This isn't working," he mumbles, and I can almost feel the sensation of his slumping shoulders.

"Th-at's ok-kay," I shiver, wrapping my arms around myself as I lie on my side and cower deeper into the leaf-covered haven. I wonder if sleeping by the water hadn't been a terrible mistake. There aren't as many trees to block the chilling winds, and it sweeps without obstacle right into the open face of our fragile refuge.

He stays outside for a moment and I can make out the outline of his dark silhouette against the semi-illuminated reflection of the water. He lowers his head and rests it in his hands, his chest heaving deeply with calming breaths. And then he relents and crawls his way to my side, ducking his head as he slowly lowers himself into a crouch.

"I'll try again tomorrow," he whispers, sounding apologetic.

Nodding, I roll over on my side and coil my legs against my chest, breathing into the lush fabric of my knees and calming slightly with the warming sensation it provides. The velour dampens, but I continue, feeling the heat crawl minutely farther with each puff I make. I surround my mouth with my hands and warm my digits in the process. I repeat the huffing into my knees until I begin feeling lightheaded. I attempt to relax enough to find the relief of slumber, but am unable to, the tension caused by my sporadic shivering making it impossible.

I sigh and roll over on my back, staring up at the dots of scant moonlight that penetrate the fern leaves overhead. "I can't sleep," I whisper, glancing at Edward warily. He's sitting on the opposing side of the shelter with his hand clasped lightly around his knees. Sitting up to face him, I ask, "Talk to me."

His eyes slide to mine fluidly. "Talk to you?" he repeats. After I nod, he asks, "About what?" eying me dubiously.

"About anything," I shrug, ducking my chin into the collar of my jacket. "Do you go to school?"

"No," he answers, a slight edge of bitterness to his voice. "Didn't have the money and my G.P.A. turned to shit."

"Oh," I respond in a sad voice, feeling a little crappy that I *had* the money, and I'd spent the last year doing next to nothing while Renee planned my future around functions, events, and potential suitors. Raising my chin, I say firmly, "I'm going to school in the fall. Literature, I think," and nod.

"Literature, huh?" he asks.

Nodding, I expound, "I've always dreamed of writing a book. I have the time and know enough, but..." I trail off, embarrassed to admit that my personal experiences are lacking in the way of creative inspiration. Instead, I quickly inquire, "What are your friends like?"

Puffing out his cheeks, he ruffles his hair. "I don't really have any," he whispers and his lips shift into a hard frown as he stares into the distance.

I scoff. "Everyone has friends."

His head shakes. "I mean, not *real* friends. I have... associates." His eyes narrow as he says this, darting about from left to right. "Well," he abruptly adds, furrowing his brows. "And Emmett, who's... really neither."

"Associates?" I choose his prior term with a curious tone.

Nodding, he explains, "You know, people you associate with out of necessity, as opposed to preference."

I heave a heavy sigh and follow his gaze, watching the lapping reflections of dark clouds. "I suppose by that logic, I have a whole lot of associates too," I say sullenly, wondering briefly

what it would be like to have a *real* friend. Someone to be close to out of preference and not necessity. The entire concept seems so foreign to me.

He snorts condescendingly. "I find it a little hard to believe that you don't have any friends at all," he drawls.

"To me," I muse thoughtfully, still feeling somewhat nostalgic over a person who doesn't exist. "a friend is someone you're comfortable getting completely shit-faced in front of, and no matter what you say or do in the process, you know they'll still be there in the morning with coffee and Flaming Hot Cheetos to nurse your hangover, ghetto style." I finish with a decisive nod, suddenly craving a skinny hazelnut latte with a double shot and a bag of cheap corn snacks as my stomach churns. I try to put all the people from back home into that position, and decide that I'd never chance it. "I don't know anyone like that," I finish with a weary sigh. Rosalie had been as close to a friend I'd ever really had, but I always knew who she looked out for first, and it certainly wasn't ever me.

He hums in consideration from my side before softly murmuring, "Me either."

After a long moment of stalled silence, I rest my chin on my knees, mirroring his pose, and ask, "What are your associates like, then?"

I hear the sounds of fingers running through soft hair as his silent pause builds. "They're a lot like vampires," he says quietly, a strange edge to his voice. "They suck the life out of everyone they touch. They care about themselves first and their obligations to their crew second." The edginess to his voice still lingers in thickly in the air as I purse my lips and ponder the similarities between his associates and my own. I decide that I quite like his metaphor, and plan to use it in the future, as it is so clearly fitting of the San Diego elite.

I cannot stop my lips from moving, forming around the soft syllables of my flat inquiry, "Then why even bother?" It's quite possible that this question is intended to be internal, a tender echoing that's meant to reach my soul and grant insight into how I'd managed to become the laughable equivalent of a little whore-pire myself.

It's purely rhetorical.

So, I'm quite surprised that, after many moments of sloshing silence, he actually answers. "I knew what I was getting into when I decided to take responsibility. Those people are just my only way of—" he stalls and I turn my cheek to squint at him curiously. His hopeless eyes are

boring into mine, hesitancy lacing the soft hairs of his brows as he chokes a whisper, "Never mind." His gaze shifts away from mine, his body now humming with unease.

"What is it?" I prod, lifting my head in interest.

He barks a humorless chuckle, shaking his head. "I always say too much around you. I always forget..." he trails off as his jaw locks, his eyes flashing in remorse.

I roll my eyes. As if it weren't the most obvious thing in the world to see. "Let me guess," I begin wryly. "They're your way of getting the heroin, which gets you the money, which pays the bills and makes your world go round. It's not brain surgery," I say, somewhat offended that he doesn't realize how glaringly obvious he's made his entire situation out to be. I'm also somewhat annoyed that the puzzle is becoming too predictable, mediocre, a black and white picture of just another whore.

"No," he responds in annoyance, shifting and curling his legs beneath him. He searches my eyes carefully while remaining motionless, the darkness of our refuge making his eyes appear pitch black against white. The intensity of his scrutiny makes me uneasy and I look away, hugging my legs tighter to my chest. Eventually, he whispers. "It's not about the money."

I huff in frustration. "But you said—"

"I know what I said," he disrupts in a quiet voice. "It's true, but it's not the reason I do it." I look to him and he's still staring at me, so I raise my eyebrows in a silent request for him to continue, even though I'm growing bored with his inconsistency. He cocks his head to the side while his expression turns uncertain, sucking his bottom lip into his mouth and gnawing it anxiously. Before I can lose my shit and make a second attempt at sleep, he asks the most unexpected question, given the nature of our conversation. "What would you say if I told you my dad was framed?"

Curving a skeptical eyebrow, I repeat flatly, "framed?" It seems even more far-fetched than Charlie's belief that Forks could sustain something like a drug ring. Of course, I may have been wrong about that too, so I tentatively straighten.

He nods, and his expression shifts to one of paranoid urgency as he leans closer. "It was a set up from the beginning," he whispers, his eyes only moving from mine to quickly dart about the area. When he meets my dubious gaze once again, he explains in a hushed voice, wild-eyed, "He never signed for that shipment, I'm certain," he pauses and licks his lips, flattening his palms into the soft bedding and inching himself closer. I unconsciously incline my head to hear

him as he continues, his gaze turning impossibly more paranoid as it scours the riverside. "Someone else is responsible. I know it in my bones. My dad didn't need the money, and he doesn't do drugs. He'd never risk his career for it. He—" He stalls once again, his jaw locking while his eyes flash in a blinding fury. "Medicine is his whole life."

I take a moment of thoughtful silence to absorb this information, a little doubtful. Of course he'd think his own father was innocent, just as I knew Charlie would never arrest someone unless he truly believed them guilty. "What... what about the evidence, though?" I ask cautiously, too uninformed to possess exact knowledge on what the evidence even was.

Edward shrugs, his eyes falling to the padded floor. "They never had much on him. The signature was a lot like his, but not exact. The list they found in his office matching street values to prescriptions was *obviously* planted," he says, glancing up at me with a cynical expression.

I had to give him that. A compiled list of narcotic values makes Dr. Cullen look like a bumbling idiot, not a criminal mastermind of a well-organized drug ring. Still dubious, I argue, "The hospital can't be that gullible."

"No," he agrees, shaking his head with a rueful grin. "They aren't gullible at all, Isabella. They're a greedy institution who was in danger of losing funding from some of the town's wealthiest donors if they didn't clean up the mess." He sighs, cocking his head to the side, and mumbles, "Money talks, and bullshit walks..."

As I watch the corners of his lips pull down into a hard scowl, I can't help but ponder the extreme crapiness of Dr. Cullen's luck. The local political elections and the hospital's need for funding had made an admittedly aggressive cocktail. I find myself uncertain that—had he actually been innocent—he would have ever had the opportunity for complete exoneration anyways. This thought transforms into an utter confidence, and I find that my faith is slowly fracturing. I recall how Charlie had spoken of Dr. Cullen before this had occurred, and his mentions could only be described as admirable, glowing, and respectful. I know how much my dad cares deeply for Forks and am slightly ashamed to admit that I could see him jumping on a bandwagon if he were truly convinced by the citizens.

With a heavy heart, I look up and am forced to confront my inner pragmatist, feeling the weight of despair fall on my shoulders as Edward's numbed gaze meets mine. "I'm so sorry," I breathe.

There's a suspended silence as I he gazes at me. "You believe me?" he asks, voice tinged with hope and trepidation.

"Sure," I whisper, smiling sadly. "I think maybe being an outsider and having no investment in the town gives me a certain unbiased perspective or something. I've seen firsthand what mob mentality can do to someone. I guess... well, I suppose I can sympathize sort of, but also—" I realize that I've been reduced to stammering and must sound like a complete moron, so I breathe and meet his gaze, face aflame. "I believe you," I finish.

His lips pull up into a relived grin, seeping of an unimaginable reprieve as he sighs, "Thank you."

"Okay," I begin, eager now that the intrigue has been restored to my puzzle. "So it isn't about the money?" I ask, only barely being capable of recalling how this entire conversation had begun.

"Right," he says, as if breaking himself from a train of thought. His odd paranoia returns tenfold and I can sense an air of consternation about him as he fidgets with his fingers. "Well, there aren't many people in Forks who'd be interested in obtaining that kind of narcotic supply. All I've gotta' do is find the person responsible," he says, restless and tense as his eyes explore my face.

"How?"

Impossibly more rigid, his lips press into a thin line. His eyes dart from mine to the open area surrounding the sloshing stream and he leans closer. Thumbing the corner of his lips, he meets my gaze, eyes narrow and dark, and intones in a soft whisper, "Infiltration."

I ask blankly, "Infiltration of what?" He holds my gaze for an immeasurable pause, quirking an eyebrow as a piece of the puzzle clicks into place, fitting perfectly with its surrounding picture. My eyes widen, "You mean..." I trail off as one corner of his lips pulls up into a wicked grin.

"I'm an excellent actor, Isabella."

I purse my lips dubiously, eyeing him in disbelief. "So, you're telling me this whole 'criminal' thing is some kind of undercover mission to clear your father's name?" I ask in semi-amusement.

Holy shit, I've walked into a Lifetime movie...

Dropping his grin, he nods slowly, his fists tightening as they rest on his knees. "It wasn't easy and I had to make sacrifices to prove myself, but—" He stalls, shrugging tensely as he diverts his stare to the river. "It isn't about the money."

I'm uncertain if I want to laugh or feel horrified that he's actually telling the truth—that is, until I realize that *he's actually telling the truth*. "Does your dad know?" I ask in awe.

Shaking his head, his eyes, full of despair, lower to the ground. "Had to make it as realistic as possible. That means getting arrested and grounded and... screamed at. That's the sacrifice of it. Petty vandal, breaking and entering, theft—you name it—I did it to draw attention to myself because the plan necessitated it. I refused to poison my body with drugs, so I did other things," he pauses, pointing to his pierced eyebrow while rolling his eyes. "Eventually, the thought of me walking up to those people didn't seem so odd anymore, so I did it. I just made 'friends' with the scariest motherfucker I saw in the circle—Jasper Whitlock. Then I had to make myself look valuable, like helping him with jobs and offering to take the fall when things went south." As he says this, his eyes harden into a deep glower. Locking his jaw, he continues, "After so long, it only made sense to the crew to give me the incentive, so James—the head-guy in charge—began offering me solo jobs. One by one, I did what they wanted and pretended to need it, which wasn't really far off anyways. And now... I've worked my way to the top, and... one last job... I was so close to—" Pausing, his expression turns pained, the posture of his shoulders sagging. Instead of continuing where he left off, he simply finishes in a despondent whisper, "If my family didn't hate me, it'd look suspicious."

"God, Edward. That sounds awful," I choke, imagining what it must be like to spend every second of your day devoted to the same cause that scorns your efforts. Then I realize that, though different, my own familial situation has its similarities, and my sympathy swells. Without really considering it, I place my hand over his, atop the scratchy bed of needles. I almost expect him to stiffen and snatch it away, so I'm surprised when he simply shifts his gaze to my hand and softly furrows his brows. His hand beneath mine is still, but I feel an odd sensation from our merged flesh, a gentle hum just beyond my palm that transfers between us in a steady rhythm.

His eyes are fixed on my hand above his and he slowly pulls it away, abandoning my palm on the rough surface of the floor. "It's nothing," he mumbles while avoiding my gaze. I can see him rubbing the spot over his knuckles with his hand, his eyes crinkled at the edges as they gaze out over the waterfront.

Having successfully made the atmosphere between us uncomfortable, I clear my throat and angle my reddened face away from him. Still somewhat affected by the experience, the awkwardness makes me do silly, ridiculous things. I sweep my hair back, grazing my cheek with the portion of my palm that had made contact with his hand. In my mind there exists an imaginary dimension in which I jump and squeal and clap my hands together jovially as if I were a twelve-year-old girl who just got touched by her long-time crush. I think I do a cartwheel, too.

And maybe... call him on the phone, hear him answer, and then hang up, squealing and clapping my hands together jovially. Wash, rinse, repeat.

I press my lips into a tight line to avoid smiling, laughing, and blurting insecurely, "Do you consider me an associate or a friend?"

It takes me a moment to realize I've actually said this aloud. In that same imaginary dimension, my giggling is cut short by an inner groan, a slap to the face, and an unceremonious fall from school-girl cloud-nine.

He doesn't audibly shift as I sit rigid, staring at my hand as if it were the most intriguing thing in a ten-mile radius. "Would you feel comfortable getting shit-faced with me?" he asks, and the subtle hint of amusement that I can hear inflected through his grin spurs my inner joviality once again.

I shrug nonchalantly. "Well, I know you'd still be here in the morning because you don't have a choice, but also, you've already gone through my private belongings—and held one of my tampons—and heard me pee—and grabbed my ass—" I ramble, only belatedly realizing that all of these things were painfully mortifying to repeat.

There is an intake of breath, but he is silent until, "I'm sorry about earlier," he breathes shakily. I tentatively glance up and find him shifting awkwardly, running his fingers through his hair. "The... when I... grabbed you... I just... I mean, I'm not usually like that. I don't know what the fuck I was thinking," he stammers, finishing with a sharp sigh and narrowing his eyes at the ground.

"I forgive you," I murmur honestly while looking away. In one breath, I speedily apologize, "And I'm sorry too. I don't usually... act like that... either."

"There!" he abruptly shouts and my head lurches to him in alarm. He is pointing to me with wide eyes. "You *were* taunting me! I fucking *knew* it!" he slaps his hand to his knee, a victorious smile threatening to spread across his face

I roll my eyes, shielding my blush by angling my face away and muttering, "I was just having a little fun at your expense." I lower myself down onto my side and rest my cheek on my palm, facing away from him and staring out into the darkness. My eyelids are now heavy, but my mind is filled with Edward's confessions and playful banter—and the feel of his knuckles against my flesh.

After I've curled up and decided to attempt sleep once again, I hear him shifting, the sound of fabric rustling nearby. He drapes his jacket over me and I don't protest. Instead, I coil myself, pressing my nose into the fabric and inhaling his soapy forest scent.

With none of the hesitance I should possess, I lift the portion of the jacket at my back in a silent invitation.

My arm begins to strain after holding the jacket up for so long. I'm just considering resignation when I feel him move close. Releasing the jacket from my grasp, he positions himself beneath it, his chest barely grazing my shoulder blades as he settles so near to me that I can feel his breath against my hair, and I know... we *both* know...

Neither of us had even been cold, though neither of us admits it.

Instead, the first real friend I've ever known slowly drapes his arm over my torso. Content with the feeling, we close our eyes, incapable of ignoring the steady rhythm of current that flows between us once again, and sleep.

Chapter 9:

The Flames That Consume Our Miseries, Lapping us Freely in Their Radiant Glows.

~|-----o|W.T.F|o-----|~

(A.K.A. Motherfuckers, Maniacs, and Chapter Titles.)

Lowering my book, I watch in exasperation as Edward's hands work the makeshift bow against the thin slab of carved wood. "You know the definition of insanity?" I ask, licking my finger and turning a page. "Repeating the same action over and over and expecting a different result."

Without halting, he mumbles. "Oh no. I don't need any help. Thanks for asking though." The hiss of the wood, followed by the familiar, minute puff of smoke captures my attention for the fourth time that morning. His eyebrows are furrowed deeply in concentration as he attempts to get his kindling of needles to ignite, but it is once again futile. "Too wet," he sighs in acquiescence, dropping the stick.

He talks some more about the kindling holding too much moisture and needing something to fuel the flames long enough to dry out the wood and blah blah blah... whatever. I lick my finger. Turn a page.

It's early morning, the sun having just barely risen behind the clouds. It looks an awful lot like it might rain, but then again, it always does. The smell of the water mingling with trees and dirt hangs thickly in the foggy air. Still cold, the atmosphere is stifling and heavy. Then again... this could be directly indicative of how we'd woken up.

Edward's large hand, slender fingers splayed across my stomach, clutching me to his chest as he snored softly into the hair at my nape.

We spooned in Forks.

It should be a fucking postcard slogan.

Naturally, when we'd both realized our extremely intimate position, we'd scrambled away from one another, avoiding gazes, running fingers through hair, and clearing throats drowsily. We offered timid grins and only spent a record ten-minutes calling each other names before we were officially out of the "Awkward Zone."

He pissed, I squatted, we ate some berries, drank some water from the stream, and then I settle down to read my book while he gives the fire another shot. I wonder why after only three days of being with Edward in the wilderness, this feels like a routine. I wonder why it's growing more comfortable and normal, even though it's clearly not.

Mostly I wonder whether it's being in the wilderness that makes me feel this way—comfortable and eased—or if it's being with Edward in particular.

"I need your chap stick and a tampon. " He breaks me from my silent musings and lifts a palm, smacking his stick of gum with a blank expression.

Raising my eyebrows, I can't be expected *not* to ask, "Ah... come again?"

Shifting to a revolted expression, he huffs and closes one eye. "It'll help start a fire."

So I surrender the items to him, discarding my book, because the look on his face when he swallows and removes the cardboard applicator from my tampon is a Kodak moment. He uses the knife to cut off the end of the cotton, applying a liberal amount of chap stick to it afterwards.

He then meets my gaze, an impish smile flirting at his lips. "I'm going to need that book."

My eyes widen in outrage as I realize his intention. Snatching up the book from the ground, I clutch it my chest. "You are *not* burning Jane Austen, got it, Special-Ed?" My withering stare is firm and steady as he smacks his gum, palm lingering in the air. I hug it closer in refusal and snarl venomously, "Over my. Dead. Body."

An hour later, there is the crackle of flames licking moist wood. My lips are set into a small, circular scowl as I watch Edward's obnoxious triumph. He is standing with his fists up in the air, exultant as he chortles to the sky, "WHO'S THE MOTHERFUCKER?"

My paperback—travel copy—of *Pride and Prejudice* has been mauled. Raped. Violated. Eighteen pages. He wouldn't even let me pick and choose which ones to sacrifice, simply yanking them out in clusters, disrespectfully.

Inaudibly, I'd whimpered.

Edward then continues with satisfied, accomplished eyes to retell the manner in which he'd started a fire with nothing but tampons, chap stick, and paper—as if I wasn't sitting *right fucking here* when it happened. It was definite testosterone overdrive, gloating and all.

"C'mon, Juicy. Who's the motherfucker?" he croons condescendingly, curling his hand around his ear and turning his head ever so slightly. *Shit-eating grin...*

I imagine him being a caveman, stomping around in his prized loincloth while beating his chest and grunting, "I am man. Me make fire."

The worst part of it is... I can't complain. The fire is large and so soothing that I think I might just melt into the dirt below me in comfort and pleasure. I hold out my palms and warm them, sending a silent thanks to Jane for her sacrifice, and telling her how it hadn't been in vain as I whisper, "You're certainly *a* motherfucker..."

"I'm sorry?" he asks, his grin impossibly larger.

With a huff, I jut out my chin and narrow my eyes. "You're the motherfucker, okay?" *Jesus*. Arrogant bastard's lucky he's pretty and skilled in wilderness survival.

Clearly pleased, he drops to my side and begins warming his own hands, eyes still alight in the rarest way. Having been witness to his ever-changing demeanor over the past few days, this is new and refreshing. He isn't scowling or anguished or annoyed or paranoid for once. I try to look away as he stares at the licking flames, looking so damned accomplished and self-satisfied that I actually want to smile as well. I muster up the pain of watching burning pages to squelch that urge nice and proper.

This is a serious situation. This isn't the time for things like ass flaunting, and hip swaying, and late night confessions under the makeshift shelter that unveil the beauty of his soul. No helicopters can be heard coming and I have no way of knowing whether or not we'll make it out of this forest alive. So what if Edward is the closest thing I've ever had to a friend? So what if his twitching fingers make my special 'Holy-Fucking-Christian-Bale' place tingle in delight? So what if he's simultaneously the fakest and most real person I've ever met?

This is about survival, plain and simple.

This is dire.

~|-----o|W.T.F|o-----|~-"

"Plucky Duck would kick Daffy's ass any day!" I retort indignantly, lifting my toes higher to the source of heat.

Edward scoffs. "First of all, Plucky is like a fucking... infant duck or something. Hence the name *Tiny Toons*." His brows rise as he fixes his gaze on the flames, leaning back on his elbows. "Daffy is a seasoned veteran. Back in the days of Looney Toons, anything went. Can't fuck with that level of experience," he shrugs.

I forgot how the conversation had started. Sometime between a failed attempt at catching fish and a couple handfuls of salmon berries, we had begun discussing the first thing we'd do when we got home. A shower was an obvious first, followed by something greasy and fattening. After

that, we both decided we'd be in for a nice marathon of really awful television. He'd made the mistake of putting Tiny Toons into this category, which has roused my inevitable ire.

"Oh, come on!" I screech, Edward's lips quirking up as he gazes at the flames. High on the exuberance the fire has provided, I begin ranting, "Have you even *seen* the Animaniacs? They were *hard-freaking-core*. I mean, God, Edward... '*maniac*' is right there in the name. Pinky and the Brain aim for world domination. Has any Looney Toon ever had that kind of ambition? And... even if Buster Bunny was a poor model for Bugs, they gave him an equal female counterpart instead of just dressing him in drag. Babs Bunny was—"

Before I could finish, Edward was doubled over in laughter, his back bouncing as he buried his face into his knees, shaking his head. "Fucking hell, Juicy. I give, I give." He puts his palms in the air, a sign of surrender and smiles impishly.

Satisfied, I nod and reply, "Good."

The sun has just set and the flames of Edward's victorious fire climb and lap at the dampened wood he's collected to fuel it. The cracking of flames meeting moisture forces sparks into the air, disappearing into a dimming flight.

"Oh!" I exclaim and straighten, narrowing my eyes in earnestness. "Hamburger. Definitely would kill something cute and fluffy for a hamburger."

Nodding appreciatively, he agrees, "Good one. One of those Angus son-of-a-bitches, too. Nice and juicy." He sighs longingly, one corner of his lips drooping into an adorable pout.

I'm blushing because he's said the word "Juicy." *God, I am such a whore.* "Fair enough. I hereby pronounce thee redeemed."

"Beverage?" he asks absently while adding another small pile of sticks to the fire.

"Hmm," I muse, refusing to watch his hands dust themselves off against his ass—*his really nice ass*. "Dr. Pepper with a dash of grenadine," I decide.

"Ha!" He barks a chuckle and reclines once again, kicking his toes out toward the heat. "Pretentious simplicity. Only you..." His head shakes, a small smile tugging at my lips, and I somewhat gape at him. This had always been my inner-thought every time I ordered that drink. I was comfortable with the simplicity of the beverage, while also enjoying the luxury of fancy cherry—because it was simply... there. Call me analytical, but it's a metaphor for my entire life. Seeming to notice the fall of my expression he offers, "Chocolate milk for me," ducking his chin.

My smile broadens and I nudge his foot with mine. "You're shitting me, Special-Ed. I shoulda' known you'd be the Yoohoo type," I mock.

Embarrassment flashes over his features for split second until he swiftly recovers. "Yoohoo is shit. It's Hershey's Syrup and Vitamin-D, or nothing." He shrugs as if he weren't admitting to liking a totally four-year-old drink, and I realize that he's actually comfortable with me.

When the fuck did that happen?

I'm attentive as I search his face in excitement, ready to take full advantage of it. Nights are always so revealing with him—pieces of my puzzle clicking into place. I'm not so stupid as to think that our conversation last night had solved the conundrum that plagued me. There was something else hidden beneath, and given the gravity of what I already knew, it had to be something just... really huge. I felt like Renee as she dug for gossip from all of her arrogant and narcissistic whores.

I begin shooting questions off, beginning with condiments and finding that he prefers mayo on his hamburgers, but only mustard on his hot dogs. This, of course, is only mildly interesting and reveals little—if anything—about him. Unfortunately, it's still rather easy to be interested in his replies, observing how his head cocks to the side when he's particularly thoughtful.

Feeling uncharacteristically brave, I ask, "First kiss?" This likely has less to do with my curiosity regarding his clandestine affairs and more to do with the odd attraction I feel toward him.

Sweeping his eyes to mine, he grimaces and admits, "Jessica Stanley, ninth grade, under the bleachers."

I begin giggling as I question, "Bleachers, eh, Casanova?"

He rolls his eyes and lolls his head back. "It was completely one-sided," he mutters to the sky.

"Oh," I breathe, nodding sympathetically. "Mouth rapist, huh?"

Laughing, he nods, and then looks at me with a wary expression. "You?" he asks.

I groan and narrow my eyes at the fire. "Andrew Hudson, eighth grade. Ninety-five-percent tongue, and... I think I gagged." I tilt my head to the side thoughtfully in an attempt to remember the Paulson's pool party.

"Hmm," he hums, his forehead creased. "Kissing is an art. Can't expect little eighth-grader Andrew Hudson to know," he replies with a hint of indignation, the corners of his eyes tightening.

"Do I smell a hint of sour grapes, there?" I ask with a smile.

"Pssh," he scoffs, turning to me with a smirk. "No sour grapes here. I excel in all things, kissing included." He wiggles his eyebrows, the silver through his flesh accentuating it as it reflects the flickering flames.

I gape at him for a split second longer than entirely appropriate before responding, "Sure, sure." The sounds of the fire are as warm as the heat it emits, a comfortable crackling that evokes a sense of ease and safety. This, coupled with the easy going manner in which are able to discuss these things makes it easier to inquire, "Virginity?" though, I do whisper it an octave higher than normal.

His eyes jerk to mine, widening minutely before they shift to his toes. "That was Tanya Denali, two years ago," he answers with a deep sigh. Not a longing sigh. More of a remorseful sigh. This has me far more curious than entirely necessary. He is silent another moment before turning to me with a lopsided grin. "Best three seconds of her life," he winks.

I laugh loudly, my back rising off the ground with each chuckle. "Ha. Ha. Very funny." I roll my eyes and kick his toe with mine once again.

He quirks an adorned eyebrow and asks, "Who said I was joking?"

It's difficult to tell just how much he's exaggerating, but there is a twinge embarrassment in the pinkening of his cheeks that confirms some truth in his admission. "Oh, well, in that case, it's just really sad," I reply, my lips twitching as his gaze transforms into a sardonic scowl.

"You fared better, then?" he asks, sucking his bottom lip between his teeth and chewing it idly.

I sigh heavily. "I don't know his name," I confess in a mumble, chancing a peek at Edward's expression.

His forehead is deeply creased as he inquires, "How can you *not* know his name?"

Rolling my eyes, I avoid his gaze and explain, "It was a set-up of sorts. There was this... function, and all of my friends went. It was really hoity-toity, lots of formal wear and bad dancing." I recall this with a rueful grin, sparing a glance and catching his answering smile. I continue, "Anyways, they didn't really have anything better to do than meddle. They found out I was a virgin and decided to kind of "adopt my cause," so they... asked somebody. He never told me his name or anything," I shrug, frowning slightly at the fact I'd never even asked him. "He just... took me into the coat room and... well, you know." I send him a pointed look, my cheeks heating as I shift uncomfortably.

He stares at me intensely and there are, as always, a million different emotions in his gaze. Frustration, sorrow, something indiscernible—anger? Jealousy? No, not jealousy. That made no sense. Most of all, there was definite pity. “That sounds really shitty,” he whispers sadly.

“It wasn’t so bad,” I defend hastily. My first sexual experience may not have been ideal, but it was mine nonetheless, and that made it special—in its own way. “He went slow and was gentle with me.” I sniff crossly, recalling how the man had been careful not to cause me too much pain. “He liked the way my hair smelled. And... he told me I was really pretty,” I remembered nostalgically, and then ducked my head, swallowing as I remember how terribly easy I’d been.

Of course he would have said I was pretty if he knew he’d be getting laid. Back then, hearing something so innocent was a thrill for me. I was accustomed to hearing much crasser things from boys my age: “Nice ass,” or “Show us your tits.” I’d even hoped the man would give me his phone number, but he hadn’t.

Looking to Edward I could see his lips set into one of his customary frown-slash-scowls. In an effort to relive the tension that I had unknowingly accumulated between us, I shake my head and sigh, “But he didn’t have a condom and didn’t know if I was on birth control, so he ended up pulling out and jizzing all over my stomach.”

His eyes lurch to mine, twice as if doing a double-take, before he erupts into howling laughter that echoes off the trees. “Please, say you’re lying,” he begs, eyes squinting as he releases his sharp chuckles into the wind.

“He seriously did. Scarred for life.” I point to my chest and nod sadly.

Recovering from his laughs, he sighs and tilts his head, staring into the bright flames attentively. “Well, I think it’s insulting,” he mutters.

“You think?” I ask sarcastically.

Chuckling, he shakes his head and turns to me, propping himself up on one elbow. “Well *that* obviously, but I meant...” he pauses and seems to reconsider before finishing with an abruptly tender expression, “...him calling you ‘pretty.’” His gaze alters to one of a staggering intensity as his hand lifts, lingering in the air for only a brief moment before he brings it to my face. He sweeps a wayward lock of my hair away from my cheek and tucks it behind my ear as he whispers, “I think you’re *perfect*.”

The trail left by his fingertip blazes against my cheek, a path of gently dissipating electricity that momentarily stuns me into speechlessness. His eyes shine with warmth and stir that similar sensation I’d felt at the forest’s edge days prior. In this fragile moment, I finally understand that

I'm not drawn to Edward because he's totally ignorant about who I am. I'm drawn to Edward because he sees something in me that no one ever has: perfection.

My breath feels caught in my throat as I stare at his lips, as if the word he'd said could be seen emerging as some kind of visual manifestation of magnificence. His lips part and I can barely see the tip of his tongue sweep against the insides of them. I glance back to his eyes and search for any signs of falsity, but find only his jade warmth, a hint of sheepishness in the minute duck of his chin.

He looks like a boy, but he isn't one. He is a man. I've spent four sunsets fascinated with his background, enthralled with his movements, and captivated by his face and words. It is simply absurd that it's taken me this long to acknowledge my attraction to *him*. I'd known it was present, but had hidden it behind snide remarks and inane flirting. But I'd never dreamed that he could see something so plain and flawed as me as anything more than a forced nuisance. And now he was telling me the words that I'd never expected to hear from anyone, least of all someone as beautiful and enthralling as *him*.

I'm not perfect, though. Surely, the wilderness and lack of food has made him bat shit.

It is in this mindset that I lean my face closer to his, shifting slightly to my side to seek a closer proximity, because... if he'll let me, I'll take full advantage of his momentary insanity. His eyes smolder as he realizes my intentions, reflecting the nearby flames with resilient and abstract flickers. But he remains rigidly glued to his position as my lips descend to his.

"You don't know me," he breathes as my nose makes contact with his, the intricate details of his eyes making themselves clear in my vision. The flutter of his eyelids and the way in which he raises his face betray his anticipation, and I want to say that I've had sex with men I've known less. I want to say that I probably know him better than anyone he's ever met. I want to say that I know what it feels like to wake up in his arms and feel as though I'm not actually stranded in the forest, and I *want* to say that this is more than enough—that it feels more right than anything I've ever experienced.

Instead, I close my eyes and whisper in all sincerity, "I really want to." I press my lips to his, and my body quivers, the cool dampness of his lips pliant and satisfying. Though his lips are unresponsive to mine, his hand rises to my cheek and cups it gently. My mouth moves over his with growing trepidation. His thumb caresses the thin skin at the edge of my jaw while I pull softly at his lips with mine, seeking their response and fisting my hand into the fabric of his shirt.

I open my eyes to watch his, slowing my kiss to a mere sweep of my lips as I search his eyes in nervousness. I try to imagine what it'd be like to be rejected by him, and then left to sleep at his

side for an indeterminable amount of time, now that I've made my attraction to him known. There is an unfathomable anguish hidden beneath his gaze as his fingers weave softly through my hair, cradling my head in his palm and holding me to him.

"I can't," he murmurs distressingly against my lips. However, the fact that he makes no move to distance himself from me makes his conflict glaringly clear. Beyond the grief in his gaze, there is excitement and explicit desire.

Uncertain as to why he'd be so conflicted I plead, "Why not?" and seek his lips with mine once again, kissing them softly as I gauge his expression.

His intake of air is cool against my mouth as he replies, "It's complicated..."

Furrowing my brows in annoyance, I pull my lips away and offer him a firm stare. "It's only complicated because you're making it complicated. Just kiss me and shut the fuck up." I tighten my fist in his shirt and warn him with my eyes, a final attempt.

His lips part slightly as he gawks at me, his fingers in my hair eerily still before suddenly tightening. His eyes, being so incredibly expressive, make the moment in which he settles his warring conflict amazingly clear. His hand crushes my face to his and I whimper at the force with which his lips begin devouring mine. His nose creates uneven hisses of air that make his enthusiasm apparent. My nose is still sore from the accident, tender and sensitive, but I press my face closer, incapable of really giving a shit. It's like he's lowered a wall and is choosing to display some kind of long-festering desire for me—even though I know that's likely my narcissism talking.

My hand slides up his chest and tangles itself in his chaotic hair, pressing his face closer as I match his kisses in speed and intensity. We open our mouths at the same time, both choosing to completely disregard our lack of dental hygiene as our tongues meet.

He moans so softly that I can hardly be certain it had occurred. Entering my mouth with fervor, his hand abandons my hair and finds my hip, pulling my body closer to his. We scoot, settle, and hover. I eagerly mimic his kiss as our tongues continuously draw back from one another's lips, only to plunge forward with enthusiasm. I lift my leg over his hip in an attempt to get closer. His hand slides from my hip and cups my ass. He massages gently at first, before palming it firmly and crushing my pelvis to him. His rough groan reverberates from my mouth and down my body, settling at the aching point between my legs.

I roll onto my back, pulling my fistful of fabric and his body with me. He acquiesces without much objection, only minutely hesitant as he rests between my open legs and continues his greedy kisses. Breathing erratically, I lift my hips and seek the friction of his probable erection.

I'm rewarded with his sharp grunt into my mouth as I make contact, gasping at the sensations that propel my hips further into him. His weight falls onto me, a satisfying pressure against my chest that leaves me impossibly more breathless as I writhe underneath him.

He rests his forearms on either side of my head and lifts his face away, looking out into the forest with darkened eyes and a heaving chest. He ducks his head, but doesn't meet my gaze. Instead, he squints into the darkness and locks his jaw, softly muttering, "Fuck, I'm going to hell."

I crease my forehead in absent confusion, for I'm pretty positive, given his history, he was going to hell long before dry humping a random whore in the forest.

Finally dropping his gaze to mine, his eyes tighten and his hips shift into me with a deliberate thrust, and I lose the capacity to dissect the context of his statement. We both exhale shuddering sighs, my head digging into the ground below as my body arches into him.

He drops his lips to my neck and kisses my throat absently, focused on the motion of his erection grinding against me. I slip my hands underneath his shirt and grasp his belt loops, crushing his pelvis to mine tighter as I writhe against it wantonly. I vaguely see his arm shift out of my periphery, his palm digging itself into the dirt as our movements grow harder and faster.

"Oh, shit," he hisses into my neck as I swirl my hips into him, a growing pressure, familiar and urgent, making my wriggles more and more desperate. His mumbles into the flesh of my neck in broken, muffled murmurs, "Waited... long... better than I ever... fuck..."

"Just—" I whimper, sliding my hand down and inside of his back pocket, clutching him to me tighter. "...don't stop."

I can tell that this will be one of those almost-sexual experiences that I'd never tell my girlfriends about. Instead, I'd embellish it and conveniently forget to mention the way in which his dick slides to the left, just out of "Go Zone," and the scurrying motion my hips make to right the positioning. They'd never know the sound of his husky chuckle against my neck as I huff in annoyance and force it into proper dry-humping arrangement. I'd definitely leave out the near-knocking of my forehead against his as I search for his lips and feverishly shift myself against him. I'd probably just say we had naked, hot, forest sex and leave it at that. In reality, this feels much more intimate and vulnerable.

The best part of the experience is seeing his expression as his forehead rests against mine, pressing distracted kisses to my lips. His eyes are screwed tightly closed, jaw taught as his brows softly furrow in concentration. He slides himself against me with eventual fluidity, finding a rhythm that suits us both. Occasionally, his features will ease and he'll sigh, long and slow.

Another fevered swirl of my hips, and his forehead creases again, teeth clenching as he pushes into me with more urgency.

I can eventually feel myself at that delicate precipice and am so close to exploding that my hands shake with tension, my legs quaking and burning with the exertion of my frantic squirms under his weight. My mind chants a mantra of *"Don't stop. Don't stop. Don't stop."*

A fucking helicopter could land on the river, and I'd ignore that bitch.

Just as my pelvic bone begins throbbing in protest of the friction, a violent warmth blooms through my body. I whimper and thrust my hips higher into his, grinding against him as the sudden longing to have him slip lower, finding my opening and entering me, erupts into a fierce detonation of stinging gratification.

I say his name, all guttural and embarrassing, and who really cares that it emerges as, "E-wur--fuhhhck?"

The sweet, almost aching sensations of my orgasm wax and slowly wane. I press my hips into him for one last indulgence of the piercing, residual pleasure, and shift my fatigued gaze to him.

He's still sliding against me, his face buried into my neck as his quick breaths dampen my skin. The arm that is partially holding him up begins shaking as his muscles constrict. Raising his head, he grunts with a forceful thrust, his eyes suddenly flying open.

He lurches off of me, angling himself away as he hastily undoes his pants and takes himself in his hand. I watch in awe as he pumps his fist wildly, throwing his head back in rapture. His palm constricts around himself, and... okay, I'm unabashedly inspecting the... quite impressive size of his cock.

Holy mother of...

With a strangled groan, he stills his hand and erupts, spilling onto the ground in long spurts. Massaging and squeezing out the remnants of his orgasm, the bright flames dance across his pale skin, accentuating the tight chords of his throat that vibrate with his final, inner rumbling. His shoulders fall, head dropping as he collapses to the ground, breathing heavily.

Reaching into my Gucci bag, I offer him a tissue to clean the small amount of semen that is beaded on the tip of his softening penis. He accepts without meeting my gaze, swiftly cleaning and righting himself before redoing his pants and sighing. He closes his eyes and buries his fingers into his hair, an agonizingly remorseful furrow of his brow, a frown, and a shake of his head.

I want to laugh—rather gravely—at his blatant expression of shame. I lift myself and tuck my knees to my chest, hugging them against me as I swallow back the bile that has risen in my throat. “That didn’t take long,” I choke, shifting my gaze away from his regretful face.

He is silent for a moment before replying in an injured whisper, “Well, you got off first. At least I didn’t jizz on your stomach or anything...”

Realizing that he’d misunderstood, I turn to him and narrow my eyes, “I mean your whole ‘Repentant Orgasm’ face. It usually takes guys a few minutes to realize they made a mistake...” Trailing off, I turn away and sink my teeth into my lip.

He scoffs and suddenly throws his arm over my shoulders. I attempt to shrug it off, but he simply pulls me to him, crushing me to his chest. “That’s not it. Geez,” he mutters in annoyance, shaking his head. Against my rigidity, he manages to lay me down at his side, turning me to him as he sighs. His thumb dips beneath the hem of my shirt and rubs my skin. “I already told you, it’s complicated,” he breathes, gazing into my eyes with the now-familiar warmth. He tilts his head into the bed of ferns that pads us, scrutinizing my face. “If I could explain it... and know that you’d still give me the light of day, I would. But—” he huffs and his eyes turn sickened, loathing. He closes them. “I’m too fucking selfish.”

I’m taken aback by his reaction, but also, exponentially annoyed. I lift my hand to grab his face and scowl at him. “Can’t you just drop it for one night?” I ask, remembering similar troubled expressions gracing his face nearly ever second I’d known him. I’d only finally just begun to see a different side. It made me wish we’d met under different circumstances, in a reality where we could enjoy our time together, like we’d been doing for most of the night. “Whatever it is, just forget it. Pretend that... I don’t know, we came out hiking together and nothing else matters or something.”

Throw a girl a bone for... wanting a bone.

Truthfully, his entire virtuous guilt thing is killing my buzz and making me feel as though I’d done something wrong by wanting him—by having him—by being a little blissful about it all.

He blinks at me blankly for a moment before creasing his forehead in confusion. “Pretend?” he asks doubtfully. Something flickers in his gaze, the corners of his eyes easing as a sad smile tucks to corners of his lips inward. “Yeah, I’m pretty good at pretending,” he declares, shifting his hand so that it rests lightly on my hip.

He bends his elbow and I rest my cheek on his arm, while he rests his on his palm. Satisfied that he’s acquiesced to my suggestion, I move closer, nuzzling into him so closely that our noses touch. We have one of those weird, long moments where we do nothing but stare at each

other. It isn't as awkward as it should be. Instead, he releases one raspy chuckle, for no apparent reason than that of just being able to do it. His lips fight a grin, but lose the battle, and relent.

I return his grin and suppress a giggle because I feel like a fucking moron—buoyant and awestruck by the perfection of his face and the feel of his thumb rubbing the flesh that stretches over my hip. There's that similar sensation of a tingly hum, a current, a pull. It makes me giddy and ridiculous. I wrap my lips around the tip of his nose and suck it in a sloppy kiss, quickly returning to my position. He curves an eyebrow, but remains wordless, smiling in a very unfamiliar, undeniably infectious way.

Being lost in the forest with Edward is likely the best fuck-up I've ever made. I've lived a pretty good life, filled with luxuries and people paid well to make me comfortable. I should have been content in *that* reality, but none of it compares to this experience—and I don't just mean the orgasm, though... yeah, it was kind of awesome.

If I died eighty years from now, I'd look back at my youth and only see him, sitting in front of that fire, triumphant and beautiful and kissing me. If I ever found enough inspiration to write a book—anything autobiographical—I'd leave every chapter blank but one. It'd be pages upon pages of this accidental excursion, his eyes in the rain, his hair in the sun, his hand on my ass, his chest against my back as we sleep, the midnight whispers that reveal the purity of his intentions, and the way in which he's looking at me right now.

This particular moment alone could be summed up in no less than a hundred pages. I'd write about the droop of his eyes and our exhaustion as we pretend to *not* be completely screwed in the desolation of wilderness. I'd describe the feeling of his hand sliding over my hip and palming my ass, his smile growing into a smirk as I realize that he's *definitely* an Ass Man. I wouldn't even skim over the moments where we try to keep our eyes open, but eventually surrender to our fatigue.

I wonder, as we breath against each other, how I could ever describe the way the radiant flickers of Edward's fire dance over us in a grand and vibrant ballet—with insignificant *words*. I fear that it's not possible without sight, smell, sound, taste, and feel. It'd never do it justice. So I commit it to memory. I mentally document the sweep of his hair, the hums of his contentment, the way in which our feet entwine and tangle, and the crack of his eyelid as we snicker like drowsy fools, and I'm confident I'll never forget the night I felt perfect.

Our knotted bodies sink deeper into our bed of drying leaves, slowly falling into a satisfied slumber. The fire and the heat between us have dehydrated them, and already, I know what I'd call that singularly filled chapter of the story of my life.

Withering the Ferns with Edward Cullen.

Chapter 10:

The Frailty of Understanding Feet, Fleeing the Midst of Delicate Unions .

~|-----o|W.T.F|o-----|~

(A.K.A. Pretty Little Stab Wounds From Yours Truly.)

I'm dreaming of... yellow. That's really the only way I can describe it. It's bright and warm, and reminds me of those two years Renee and I lived in Phoenix. It pulses around my skin and penetrates me, warming me from the outside in. I can't recall ever feeling anything so vibrant, even though I know things aren't meant to *feel* vibrant. This yellow definitely does. It tickles the tips of my toes and slithers up my form, tickling my flesh with its prickly heat. It makes me want to smile and laugh and dance—even though I know I'm awful at it.

I'm searching for something with my eager eyes, and although I know I'm looking for something in particular, I *don't* know what I'm looking for. I twirl around, scanning the absent, golden space for this *something* that I... *can't* be here without.

It doesn't take long for me to find him. He is behind me, eyes closed with his face tilted back, as if soaking up the yellow reverently. The first thing I notice is his hair as it shimmers brilliantly, reflecting the golden light that's consumed us in speckles of red, white, and for some reason, green. I simply watch his steady breaths as the warmth shines upon his face, illuminating his eyelids and accentuating the little crevices of their folds. Suddenly, his lip twitches, the corners pulling up into an impish grin.

He cracks one eyelid, smile widening. "Stop being so fucking girly," he chastises, finally opening both eyes and meeting my gaze with amusement.

Feeling as though he has some odd capability to read my thoughts, I ask, "Who says I'm being girly?" Though on the inside, I certainly *feel* girly... which is definitely not like me one bit. I want to wrap my arms around his neck and squeal, because he'd been here, waiting for me. Recovering, I add, "Plus, I think the whole 'having a vag' thing makes it kind of unavoidable..."

He throws his head back and chuckles, a raspy, yet musical sound. Looking me in the eye, he smirks and replies, "You'll have to show me that sometime," then winks.

I can't be certain if I'm blushing, because my body already feels so *warm*. "Someday," I agree unabashedly, and we are *flirting*. I stifle a giggle.

His smile slowly falls, eyes easing into a blank stare. The yellow around us feels as though it's dimming in some way, but I'm convinced that my eyes are playing tricks on me. It just feels too endless to ever cease.

"You don't know me, Bella."

I blink rapidly in astonishment at the name he's addressed me with. Only Charlie has ever called me Bella. It feels so intimate and... inside. Like he's inside my life and is contradicting his very words by using it. I might have enjoyed it exponentially if his stare weren't shifting to one of cold desolation.

"I want to," I promise, but am momentarily distracted by the ever-dimming aura that has cocooned us.

His gaze turns hardened, and I can almost discern the exact moment he's driven out the possibility. "It's not important," he says tonelessly, and begins turning away.

My chest feels heavy with his words as the yellow flickers and diffuses to a dull green. "Edward..." Stubbornly, I reach for his arm and yank hard, the odd lack of gravity in our empty space seeming to make him fly toward me with the motion.

His head snaps to mine, his lips set into a grim line. "I'm an excellent actor, Isabella..." His voice fades though his lips remain moving. His voice flickers in and out, like a television with bad reception, and I stretch the antenna, bunny ears flopping from left to right. "...something... heard of... why would... fucking stupid... last time... promise... get hurt... wake... fuck... wake... Isabella..." I narrow my eyes as I watch his lips flutter in slow motion, the noises coming in clearer, until he abruptly grasps my chin, yanking my gaze to his eyes. I gasp at the fury and hatred beneath the green, the atmosphere we've been wading in now a barren, charcoal grey. His fingertips dig into my skin, pulling me closer as his nostrils flare, voice growling, "Goddammit, Isabella. Wake the *fuck* up!"

My body lurches forward, chest heaving with sharp, stifled breaths. I gulp in the cold night air, resting my hand over my heart as it thrashes violently against my ribcage. I'm sweating, I realize, the soft sheen of it making me shiver against the cold wind.

I wipe at my eyes and am not startled at first by the darkness surrounding us. It doesn't take long for me to wonder what had happened to the fire that had once warmed us. I search around me for Edward, a faint sense of déjà vu, and find him disassembling the shelter behind me with quiet haste.

Furrowing my brows, I begin to ask, "What—" but his eyes dart to mine, cold, hard, and subtly panicked. He raises his finger to his lips and flares his nostrils. He mouths silently, something that looks like, *'Shut. Up.'* but the darkness makes it difficult to determine with any certainty. He continues his task with rigid, silent movements, grinding his teeth when twigs snap almost inaudibly.

The pit he'd made for the fire is covered in sand, smoke still faintly rising from the ashes. My chin drops as I realize that Edward had intentionally extinguished the fire he'd worked so hard to create, the proof of his triumph now nothing but a pile of soot mingling with damp soil. His jacket is draped over me and I pull it away as I prepare to stand and ask him what the hell is going on.

Before I can even fully stand, his long fingers are suddenly wrapping around my elbow, pulling me up. I meet his gaze with questioning eyes, but am met with an expression that clearly implies I'm to keep my mouth shut. I'm vaguely registering how pissed off that's making me when I begin hearing the distant trampling of footsteps.

Multiple footsteps.

My eyes widen in joy as I turn away from Edward and distinguish at least two remote beacons of light, filtering through the trees. I raise my arms and inhale a deep breath, preparing myself for a deep scream to signal the searchers before a cold hand is clamped over my mouth.

And then we are running. Or rather, Edward is running and yanking me beside him. My feet drag as his hand presses against my lips, his strong legs pushing us forward and back into the cover of trees. I growl under his palm and attempt to pry it away fruitlessly. My mind is enraged that our salvation is so close, and yet he is dragging me *away* from it.

When he's pulled me a good distance, he stops and forces us both into a crouch. His eyes are shifting from side to side, terror seeping from his every movement, the grip of his hand around my arm, his quiet pants and stiff posture.

"You have to run with me," he orders in a nearly silent voice, looking over his shoulder once before meeting my gaze.

"What?" I hiss incredulously, trying to jerk away from him.

His jaw locks further as his eyes bore into mine. "That's not who you think. I'll explain later, but we have to move. Now." His voice rings of finality as he lifts us and looks to me carefully, gauging my acquiescence.

I'd seen Edward wear so many different expressions over the days. I'd gotten familiar with all of his bad moods, and very recently, his good. I'd seen him annoyed, pissed off, agitated, restless, grim, and despondent. I'd even seen him comfortable, pleased, trusting, victorious, and even aroused.

I'd *never* seen him frightened.

Fright is really such a weak term to describe him in this moment. His emotions are never weak or subtle. Edward himself is far from being weak. This fact only amplifies my worry and inclination to submit to his requests, because—I figure—it must take a whole hell of a lot to make someone strong like Edward look so fucking petrified.

So, for the second time in my life, I follow Edward Cullen into the forest, leaving civilization behind me.

I still want answers as we run. He catches me when I fall and his eyes are tight with an odd mixture of focus and fear. We never look back, but bizarrely, I can feel those strangers behind us as we move through the night. Our breaths are hard and erratic. We just keep moving. He stays behind me and slows to my clumsy pace, never as annoyed with it as he should be.

He is patient.

He is impatient.

He is a perfect fucking paradox.

This is all fairly fucked up, and I know it. I don't care if it's a few stray campers following our path. They can help us. It doesn't make sense to leave the area when people are so near. It doesn't make sense for *Edward* not to realize this. This either means he's a complete lunatic, or he knows something I don't. And why *wouldn't* he know something I didn't? Isn't that what I had been for the few days we'd known each other?

In the dark?

"This is probably a really great time to do that whole 'explaining' thing, don't you think?" I ask hostilely as he pushes me further, his hands at my back.

"Keep your voice down," he hisses. I grind my teeth angrily as I nearly stumble over another root or log or stump or mound or... *goddamit, I fucking hate the forest.*

Without slowing, he steadies me and begins in a quiet voice, "That's not a search party, okay?" His sharp breaths are against my hair, his hands holding my waist and pushing... always pushing me forward.

It's difficult to see anything through the thick cover of darkness, but I know his eyes are focused on the path ahead, steering me away from obstacles. The moon is either hidden or entirely non-existent. We're going at a brisk jog, and eventually have to climb a small embankment. He climbs first, digging his boots into the ground and propelling his body up with ease. He extends his hand and pulls me up, only straining minimally as I fight to mimic his grace.

After I'm at his side, I expect him to push me further, so am surprised as he leans down, resting his hands on his knees. "You know that crew I was rolling with? James?" he asks. He pauses and actually stands still for a moment, searching my face as he fights to catch his breath. At my wheezing nod, he smiles hollowly, shifting his stare to the soft ground. "Well, that's them."

~|-----o|W.T.F|o-----|~

"You—" My voice catches, simply because I am so infuriated. I want to pace the small space behind the trees, but his hard stare makes it clear that I'm to remain silent and still. Incapable of venting my frustration, I settle for, "Why are they after you?"

Of course they are after him. It makes perfect sense. Edward has royally pissed someone off.

Walking toward me and brushing my shoulder, he asks, "Can we walk and talk at the same time?" His fingers once again wrap around my elbow and tug, though this time a little more gently. The fear and panic haven't dissipated, but he's making a better effort to hide it from me. I'm not certain if that makes me relieved or annoyed.

Either way, I follow at his side and do my best to match his pace.

"I should have known," he sighs, curling his fingers into tight fists. "This whole wilderness thing is James' element. He's good at tracking." Shaking his head, he begins, "It was the last job I was supposed to do," he stalls, hiding his face from my view. His voice is low, but clearly distressed. Perhaps even remorseful. "I fucked it up pretty bad. I think—"

I jerk him to a stop and gawk, incredulous, and reconsidering a vicious stabbing with much more seriousness. "This is about that heroin!"

His hand clamps over my mouth once again, much colder as his nostrils flare. "A little fucking louder, why don't you?" Slowly, he removes his hand, convinced that my withering stare will be

the extent of my fury. Continuing his step, he looks away and swallows. "Yeah, they're... after the heroin," he confirms, offering me a sidelong glance that is curiously calculated.

As I walk at his side, I begin doubting him for some reason I can't entirely justify. There's no reason for him to be honest with me, but there's no reason for him to be *dishonest* with me either. His eyes are carefully fixed on the ground, and we are still going at a speed difficult for my feet and legs. I have utmost confidence that he can go much faster, and that I'm burdening him.

If Edward were truly concerned about protecting his heroin, he probably would have ditched me. That's what heroin dealers *do*. They don't care about anyone but themselves. But Edward's already made it clear that dealing heroin is a front for his infiltration. So why would he care? Why wouldn't he just hand it over, and be done with it?

Nothing made any sense.

"Why don't you give it to him?" I eventually ask, and am further puzzled by his alarming stare.

Without slowing, he answers in the oddest, possessive and determined tone, "It isn't theirs." His steps grow louder, and I vaguely register that *that* sounds a lot like something a *real* heroin dealer would say.

I'm at a loss, and irritated that I've allowed myself to be dragged in the middle of some small town drug feud. This isn't exactly what I'd had in mind when visiting Forks. Getting lost in the forest, I can handle, but this is out of my league. I'm a motherfucking spoiled little rich chick from SoCal, for fuck's sake. Unfortunately, there is no turning back. I have no idea what those men back there are capable of. I don't know if they're bumbling idiots or criminal masterminds with guns. All I know is that *Edward* knows, and I'm forced to trust his judgment.

Not too long after we made the speedy departure from the riverbank, sprinkles begin falling from the sky, speckling us as we huff and puff and push onward through the dense brush. We're mostly silent, the sounds of our ragged breathing filling the black spaces around us. The rain clicks as fat drops hit leaves and branches. One plops unceremoniously onto my forehead and tickles as it bleeds down my nose. The rain makes the ground beneath us soft, masking our steps as we travel soundlessly through the night.

Being the insufferable nuisance it is, my body yearns for rest long before any such action could be deemed acceptable by present, tense and focused company. James' approach had disrupted my sleep, and now the fatigue was starting to catch up with me. It's funny how living like this—

sans food—made me so easily fatigued. The bed of scratchy forest debris, which looked repulsive and uncomfortable only days ago, now seems like it would be heavenly to lie upon, I mused wistfully. I doubt even the rain would bother me as much as it would've that first evening.

I begin falling with more frequency as the hours pass, the sluggishness of my limbs making it incapable to exude any amount of grace, especially at the speed in which he pushes me. Edward begins growing more frustrated with my stumblings, his eyes getting tighter, jaw tenser, grip tighter as he helps me up and tugs me forcedly along. I can see his patience faltering and his annoyance and desperation finally shining through.

Sadly, my attempts to remain coherent enough to mimic his ease are futile, and I trip once again, stumbling as my foot catches on a snarled root. It's too dark to see the ground as my face rapidly approaches it, but I can feel it coming, and brace myself with my hands.

I'm expecting Edward to catch me.

He doesn't.

I land with a lung-draining, "Oomph!" My palm has broken my fall on a wet and jagged upturned branch. The pain of it penetrating the soft flesh below my thumb makes me cry out into the dirt. My body quakes as I lift myself, Edward's hands finally coming to lift me. His eyes are bright with vehemence when I meet his gaze but transform into concern as he sees my injury.

"Shit," he hisses, wincing as my hand lifts between us—limb still attached. I smell, more than see, the blood running down my flesh and mingling with the raindrops. Swallowing thickly, he grimaces and gingerly cradles my hand in his, only taking a moment of deliberation to scan the space over our shoulders. He inhales a steeling breath and prepares to remove the stick with careful eyes.

Intriguing.

His concern for me surpasses his need to flee, and this puzzles me further as his soft fingertips press into my hand. I stifle a whimper as he coaxes the wood from my flesh, darting his apologetic eyes to mine to gauge my responses to his ministrations.

Eventually, the limb is free, and Edward tosses it aside with a curt snap of his arm. Lifting me fully, he begins to speak, frowning, "I'm sorry. I was—"

But he freezes as we hear the sounds of footsteps behind us—the snap of a twig, the brush of a leaf against fabric, the heaving of breaths. He stares intensely into my eyes, rigid as he drops my hand. My eyes widen in return, because they had sneaked up on us, the softness of the damp ground masking their footfalls as well.

There is only a split second as we stand in the rain and share a knowing stare, but the moment seems to go in some kind of skewed slow-motion. His is panicked and conflicted, his lips parting as sharp, rapid breaths emerge from his mouth in little puffs of grey steam.

I'm uncertain what my gaze holds but am convinced that it's somewhat defeated, frightened, and surely pleading. Pleading for him to do something and get me out of this mess he's shoved us into. Mostly though, I'm worried for him and what they'll do when they catch him.

There is no time to run or hide, the beacons of light washing over us too quickly to make a getaway. Edward's shoulder drop, his breathing labored as he pushes out more air than he seems to take in. His eyes are agonized, tortured, resigned as his face inclines to the sky, drops of rain spattering over his squeezed eyelids.

This is more than just terror.

This is apology, wrapped in desperation, with a blatant edge of *"I'm so fucked right now..."*

I open my mouth to apologize for my failings, to tell him that this is the story of my life, to beg his forgiveness for ruining what could have been an easy escape from his demons but am cut off by the sudden crashing of Edward's lips against mine.

I gasp in surprise as his hands surround my head, his fingertips pressing roughly into my scalp. The kiss only lasts a second, but its message is startling. His tongue forces itself between my lips, a brief thrust that is quickly drawn away as he presses a final smashing of his lips to mine. The wetness of rain dampens the kiss, our lips fusing and sliding and slipping and cold.

It's stolen and urgent and breathless and reeks of *goodbye*.

When he pulls his face away, he jerks his body with it. The footsteps are close enough that I can hear the mumbling and see the way their flashlights illuminate the leaves at my feet in a bright circle. But I can't focus on their voices or anything else when Edward is looks at me like *that*.

He's cold and stony, all expression wiped clean from the pale edges of his face. It reminds me of the dream I'd had hours before and makes my heart plummet in a way I'm not expecting.

Then he grabs my shoulder, and I'm too startled by the roughness of his grip to see the motion as he spins me, crushing my back into his chest. He twirls us around to face *them*, and once again, his palm is over my mouth. His breath at my ear is slow and controlled, a nudge of his nose against my hair, a sweep of his thumb against my cheek.

"I'm sorry," he whispers in a low, strained voice, before inhaling deep. I can feel his chest expanding against my back as I grasp at his hand in confusion. Edward's shout booms into my ear, making it ring and pulse in protest as he calls, "I've got her! Over here!"

I'm still pulling at his hand when two distinct figures emerge. I stiffen, stilling my hand as my breath come in sharp gasps through my nose. My heart begins thrashing wildly as they step closer, their faces veiled by darkness and shadow.

"What took you guys so long?" Edward asks in an even voice, tickling my scalp with his warm breath. I attempt to look at him, but find that he's just out of my periphery. "I've been stuck in this fucking forest for four days now," he adds in a growl, angry and almost menacing as his grip around my mouth tightens.

The pair stands before us and lifts their lights, forcing me to squint and recoil away from the bright intrusion. There is a brief moment of suspended silence as the rain pelts the leaves and ground, and I have no idea what Edward is *doing*.

An eerily calm voice responds, "And I've spent four days tracking you in this fucking forest. Mind explaining that?" There is a definite accusation in the way his voice lowers to a threatening rumble.

I idly pondered the extreme lack of violence, not to mention Edward's hand across my mouth, or the way in which he had basically called them to us.

What the fuck is going on?

Edward doesn't skip a beat as he replies in annoyance. "The directions you gave me were shit. How the hell do you expect me to navigate out here? Not everyone—"

He's cut off by the same rumble as before. "You honestly think I'm going to buy that—"

"Stop!" a new voice commands. His silhouette seems to reach out and grasp the other's arm, ostensibly uncertain. "I told ya' he just got lost, man," he soothes. I can discern a slight touch of southern accent to this voice, but can't make out his face in the darkness. He seems to be calming the atmosphere with his cool voice.

It sure as hell isn't working on me. My hand's still grasping at Edward's, trying to dislodge it from my mouth.

The man he's holding back sneers, "If you've fucked this up for me, Edward, so help me God..."

Edward responds brusquely, snorting, "I didn't fuck anything up." His other hand comes around my waist and grasps my hip. He tilts my head and crushes it against his shoulder with the palm over my mouth. My angry growl builds as I move my heel to crush his toes. Before I can, his voice resounds around the area, casual and yet, somehow, automatic.

"I brought her to you like you asked. Now where's my fucking payment?"

Chapter 11:

Battle Cries Are the Liquid Excess of Unfortunate Lessons .

~|-----o|W.T.F|o-----|~

(A.K.A. You hump someone, and you think you know them...)

For what seems like an eternity, I'm convinced that I'm still sleeping. My hand aches as it limply slips from Edward's over my mouth. I'm sure I stain him with my blood because I can smell it, bitter and abrasive under my nose. I don't faint from the scent of it, though I really wish I would. My limbs are heavy and the adrenaline I'd felt moments before is being replaced by something darker and desolate. My feet throb as it encases me.

It was a trick...

They are speaking, but their voices wash over me like a fuzzy film, garbled and murky. Sound is like looking through thin, dirty, dented plastic. Their voices stretch and accelerate, little wisps of hisses and long drawls of grumbles, distorted and abstract. The rain comes down harder, battering my head as they speak of things I can't comprehend. Or maybe I just don't *want* to comprehend. Even though—painfully—I *completely* comprehend. My eyes close as I remember.

You're really kind of stupid for following me...

I collapse into Edward and wish for the ground to open. I wish for the roots to animate themselves and wind around my feet, pulling me into the wet soil so that I can rest among the veiny webbing in the dirt. I long to feel mud squishing between my fingers and toes as they curl and cool, drowning me. I want to disappear. I want to wake up. My chest aches every time he speaks.

I'm an excellent actor, Isabella...

Despite being crushed to Edward, every part of my body is frigid, like ice—well, every part but my eyes and hand. Those both burn and pound. Warmth tingles down my face, contrasting strikingly against the cold that streaks with it. I lack the strength to shiver, let alone fight him off me. What good would it do, I wonder? There is no hope of me taking on four grown men, and even if I did, what's the point? My legs buckle as I struggle to breathe.

I think you're perfect...

When a shiver finally runs down my spine, I begin feeling the grip of Edward's hand slacken — only minimally. One of the fingers touching my hip ducks beneath the hem of my... *oh God*. I'd kissed him. I'd let him do things to me. I'd felt him on top of me, had wanted him *inside* me. My tears transform into a silent sob, and the garble of their voices grows clear enough to understand. My head pulsates as his finger caresses my skin.

It was the last job I was supposed to do...

"We had an agreement. The files for the girl," the big man says in that same calm, yet threatening tone. He steps forward, and I can barely make out the blonde of his tied-back hair, the tallness of his form, the grubbiness of his jacket. "You broke it. She was supposed to be at the cabin four days ago. What do you think this does to my plans? There're things to consider. A whole goddamn timeline, you fucking pr—" His eyes flicker to mine as a sob escapes me, muffled by Edward's palm.

I brought her to you like you asked...

I sob because the man standing before me is dreadfully familiar. I recall the leer and my initial thoughts of disgust at the airport when he'd handed me the keys to the little black, stick-shift sedan. His lips pull up into a fleetingly appreciative, disturbing smile before he focuses once again on Edward—Edward, who is convincing him that the plans have merely been delayed—Edward, whose thumb is gingerly stroking the flesh of my hip—Edward, who had been hired to lead me to a cabin in the woods.

And this is the first moment that I finally comprehend... he'd always known who I was. This is likely an impossibly worse blow than knowing he'd been sent to trick me into following him. All that time... every second he looked at me, he'd always known. It was so staggering that I felt lightheaded and my knees went briefly weak. I'd built so much faith on my anonymity in his presence, so much joy and comfort, and it had all been a lie constructed to get *money*.

Now where's my payment?

"Everything can still go as planned," Edward sighs, shrugging. "I don't understand why you have to be a dick when I was clearly the one inconvenienced," he reasons indifferently. He's nothing like the person I thought I'd known only hours prior. His voice is cold and toneless, mechanical. His grip is tight, but... somehow loose in all the right places.

He *was* an excellent actor. I'd give him that. Maybe the best I'd ever known, for I'd truly believed...

The large man, who I can only assume must be James, spends an indeterminable amount of time scrutinizing us. Though I cringe under his stare, Edward remains aloofly collected. Almost bored. A gust of wind blows the sheets of rain to and fro as they stand, in a moment of suspension. Finally, James looks over his shoulder to the other man and nods.

“The trail is five minutes away. I’ll call Laurent and have him get the Jeep over here.” As James speaks, he is opening a cell phone, the little light from the screen glowing a mystical blue-green. He turns to speak into the receiver, a low whisper to the person on the other end.

I feel Edward’s nose pressing into my hair and am sickened.

~|-----o|W.T.F|o-----|~

The trail *really is* only five minutes away. Edward keeps his hand over my mouth as he holds me to his chest and drags me along like a ragdoll, his arms like cold, steel bars. The two men flank us from each side, both silent as they direct Edward with their steps. He is rough, yet somehow gentle as my toes barely graze the puddles pooling the ground. Occasionally, I can feel the tip of his nose pressing against me, exhaling and inhaling into my hair. The rain makes visibility almost nonexistent, and I wonder idly how they can even find their way through it.

Really though, it’s difficult to care anymore. There’s so little that matters. For one, I’m the biggest moron in the world and had basically handed myself to... my captor. And why? Because I thought he didn’t know me? Because I’d felt free? It’s so surreal to think that I’d once been proud of my own logic and care, bringing my purse and knife—the knife I’d willingly *given* him. And now... now I had allowed myself to be used, had let him take things from me, had become more of a whore than I’d ever expected myself to be.

I don’t know what they’re going to do to me. I have no idea if these “plans” consist of rape or murder or servitude. The sky’s the limit. My life doesn’t flash before my eyes as we walk. I try to think back to my time by the fire but find that the aching in my chest worsens exponentially every second I *know* that it was all an act to placate me. I try to find something in the depths of my mind, against the fatigue that weighs me down and makes me slump further into Edward at my back. But there is nothing. I see Charlie, and I see abandonment. I see Renee, and I see triviality. I see Phil, and I see glorification.

I’d had it all, yet I’d had nothing.

I don’t cry as we approach the trail. I don’t fight. I’m a lifeless form, hanging from his arms in submission, because there’s simply no reason to have will. Edward’s body seems to stiffen as

we step onto the even surface, and though I refuse to look at him, I can tell by his sharp breaths and his tightened grip that he's angry. Maybe angry that we'd been so close to the trail, but I'd stupidly wanted to stay at the river's edge. It wouldn't have changed anything, though. It wouldn't have meant that I'd have been freed from their plans. It would have simply made it quicker.

It's now that I understand why I feel so cold and numb. The worst part of this whole revelation isn't that I might die soon. Somehow, I'm capable of coming to terms with my mortality. I'm young, but I've been places and seen things—had as full of a life as anyone my age could wish for. Death would... suck, I can't possibly lie to myself about that. But that seems like nothing to fret over, given my inability to stop the inevitable.

No, the worst part—by far—is knowing how close I'd been to something truly special for once, and feeling it ripped away from me in a violent second. I feel like the butt end of a joke. I imagine them sitting around a table later and laughing about the little whore that had actually fallen for this ridiculous guise.

I should have kept walking, I finally decide. I shouldn't have stayed at the river. If we'd kept traveling, I never would have experienced the fire or those tender moments before. I could have died believing that it was impossible for me to feel that way about anyone.

Ignorance is bliss.

We wait for the Jeep in the rain, the mud on the ground rising with the torrents and sheets that batter us. Eventually, Edward's hand loosens from my mouth, gradually, until it merely lingers over my lips, brushing them softly with my breathing. I don't scream. No one who cared would hear me.

"Keep a hold of her," James orders in a steely voice, disrupting the silence and causing me to flinch.

Edward scoffs and drops his hand all together, defiant. "She's not going anywhere," he insists, though his grip around my waist stiffens further.

James seems put-off by Edward's tone, his shoulder rising with tension as his eyes narrow into dangerous slits. Outwardly, he's trying to appear calm, and only minorly failing. Jerking his head to the side, he spits, "Shouldn't you have her tied up or something? Fucking Christ, it's like working with invalids." He walks over to me and attempts to take my hands, but Edward yanks me to his side.

“I already told you. She’s not going anywhere,” he warns, his fingertips digging into my side.

James’ lips are thin as they quirk. “Suit yourself,” he replies, backing away with a hard stare. “If she runs, you’re running after her ass yourself.” He turns to look back down the trail, only darting his eyes to us on occasion, suspicious and prepared to handle me it would seem.

The second man stands off to the side, staring down at his shoes and scratching his head, as if thoughtful. I take a moment to inspect him. Well, I take several moments. I figure I should know every detail about them. James I can describe with ease because—despite his menace—he is fairly plain. The other man may be blonde as well, but he has a hood pulled up over his head, protecting his hair from the rain. He leans back against a tree and studies his toes but doesn’t interact with anyone.

And Edward... Well, I figured I could probably describe him better than I could describe myself. Physically, at least.

After what seems like an eternity, we can hear the loud grating of an engine, see the distant headlights bouncing through the trees. Everyone is stoically silent as it approaches, the large hunk of muddy metal coming to a stop before us.

The bright lights illuminate everyone, making their faces clear to me as they travel to the loud vehicle. I get a glimpse of the second man and stifle a gasp. He has scars on his face, littering the expanse of the bridge of his nose, his cheeks, eyebrows and chin with small and jagged marks. His eyes meet mine for only a second before lurching away. He enters the backseat, expressionless.

James takes shotgun, but doesn’t enter until Edward has guided me into the backseat, shoving me inside between him and the scarred guy. When all doors slam, they are still, the driver revving the engine and maneuvering the large vehicle with a three-point-turn.

The interior of the Jeep is old and scratchy, but the closest thing I’ve seen to civilization in days. The heater billows hot air, enveloping me and offering a false sense of comfort that doesn’t last. The space smells of musk and smoke and I rest my head against the seat, staring blankly out the windshield. James offers me one glance, appraising my compliance with his beady eyes. Instead of cowering, I meet his gaze steadily and stare into his eyes for many moments. I’m uncertain what I’m attempting to convey. Maybe I’m waiting for guilt to grip him or for karma to come and impale him with a nice bolt of lightening.

Instead, his lip curls up into a disgusting half-smile.

Edward clears his throat, disrupting our connection, and James turns as we depart. The road is bumpy and thrashes me from side to side, knocking my shoulder to Edward's, then to the man's next to me. I don't stiffen to lessen the jostle, because I figure it doesn't really matter. I've somehow managed to make myself numb, empty, uncaring and darkly vacant. They could glue me to the dash and watch my head bobble with every bump, and it'd all be the same.

The ride only takes an hour or so. I ponder sleeping but eventually decide against it, too untrusting of my company to allow it. Edward is silent at my side and doesn't offer me a glance, instead propping his elbow on the door handle and resting his cheek on his fist. He appears to be watching passing scenery, but I know it's far too dark to see anything out of the tinted windows.

Some small part of my mind is on alert—for some reason—and tries to map the trails they take, the direction they go, and the final break of brush they pull into. There are only two turns, both left, and neither makes any sort of sense to me. I have no idea where they're taking me.

This notion grabs hold of me as we arrive at their destination. The Jeep comes to a halt, and though I can see the illuminated front of an apparently logged cabin, I feel as though I'm more lost than I've ever been. At least in the forest I'd had hope. This place is intimidating because I don't know what waits inside for me.

My heart thrums wildly, churning my stomach as they all open their doors. I'm glued to my seat, my fingers clutching the sides of my jacket, and burying into the plush fabric. My eyes dash about frantically. The scarred man exits first, and I *think* that I can likely slide out and make a run for it before the others can round the vehicle.

Before I can conjure up anything more concrete, a hand captures my arm and yanks me with a rough grunt, sliding me across the seat. I whimper, bracing myself and half-expecting something to strike me. But I'm simply hauled out of the car, the hand seizing me hurling me out of the seat. The car door slams, and I'm face to face with Edward.

My brow creases in confusion and desperation as he stares down at me, his nostrils wide and eyes livid. His hand clenches around my arm as his intense gaze burns into me. He raises his eyebrows meaningfully, as if trying to communicate in some, silent way, which just confuses me further.

Suddenly, the scarred man touches his shoulder, shaking him. "Edward," the man breathes, surprised and aghast as he looks down at Edward's fingers, digging into my arm. "What the hell...?"

Realizing the strength of his grip, Edward's fingers immediately loosen, his face blanching as his eyes widen. I look away and try to force back the feelings that emerge when I look into his eyes. Familiar feelings. Feelings that had burgeoned over our days and nights together. Feelings that were based on false compassion and trickery.

Instead of numbness, sadness, or self-pity, I begin feeling wrath as the four of them lead me into the cabin. Edward still holds my arm, though much more carefully. Still, I'm mad. Angry. Pissed-the-fuck-off-something-fierce. I want to break something. I want to scream and yell and kick and spit in his goddamn face. I know where that knife is. In one second flat, I could spin, yank it from his waist band, and slit his perfect-fucking-throat.

Impulsive, my mind screams, trying to reason with my furious fantasies. Unable to reconcile my logic with my emotions, I'm too late by the time we enter the building. I absorb the floor with my eyes, frightened of what this building looks like from the inside.

The floor is a plush tan, boot prints embedded into the fibers and matting them together with grey mud. The air smells stale and old. Someone behind me closes the large, wooden door, and there is a distinct clicking sound, a latching, a clank.

I'm locked in.

"First order of business," James begins, brushing past Edward and me and traveling to a nearby, floral, granny sofa. He plops down and looks Edward in the eye as the other two scatter around the room. His blue eyes are cutting and abrasive, thin and sly. "She is fucking filthy." He points to me without meeting my gaze, regarding me as if I were some... possession that needed cleaning. "Won't do for a picture, now will it?" he asks Edward, propping his foot on his knee casually.

Edward is silent for a moment, but I don't dare glance at him to gauge his expression. "First, the files," he eventually requests in an even voice.

James eyes roll upward, his cheek quirking up wryly. "You'll get you fucking files, jackass. But not until we get the ransom. Can't get the ransom until we make the request, and we can't make the request until you clean her filthy ass up. Got it?" His words are firm and his eyes suggest that there is no argument to be had.

But my head is spinning as I process his words. *Ransom*. Of course there'd be ransom. The revelation is so relieving that my shoulders drop. I'm uncertain who they want ransom from—Charlie, Renee, Phil... hell, maybe all three. It doesn't mean I'm out of the woods. Just because

they don't intend on killing me certainly doesn't suggest that they don't have other options, but it is a speck of light among my particularly shitty early-morning.

"I'll take her," the scarred man abruptly intones, pushing off the wall and finally meeting my gaze. He seems wary and tense, shoving his hands into his pockets and awaiting confirmation from his leader. His hood is finally removed, and I can see his hair, wavy and blonde, flopping about his head as he saunters forward. It's only now that I can tell how very much older all these men seem to me. I suppose I'd assumed that Edward had met them while at school a year ago, his own age group. But James looks to be in his mid-twenties, as does Laurent. Jasper himself can't be much younger than twenty-one.

Edward suddenly reaches out and grips my arm again—which is *really* starting to get old. His voice is tight and subtly panicked. "I'll do it. Which bathroom?" he asks, already leading me toward the narrow hallway.

James waves a hand dismissively, muttering, "Second door on the left," and picks up a nearby remote to turn on a television. But the scarred man, little flecks of pink skin spattering his face and throat, watches us with fretful eyes, wary and restless as we retreat.

I'm abruptly filled with my own overwhelming brand of tension at being alone with Edward once again. My throat constricts and my stomach churns as he leads me to a door, opening it and flicking on the light. The small bathroom is nearly bare, only a pedestal sink, an old toilet, and a proprietary bathtub filling the space. There are no rugs on the floor, but curiously, there are three powder-blue hand towels.

Edward closes the door behind us, and I catch his face in the mirror.

I retch.

I fly to the toilet and dry heave over the bowl, my stomach having been empty for far too long to produce anything. I clutch my sides and wait for them settle, my back lurching with involuntary movements. I gasp for breath that is stifled by another heave, and repeat this for what seems like forever, until it finally subsides.

When it does, there are tears streaming down my face, snot clogging my nose so that I must sniffle to clear an airway. Panting, I turn and bump into Edward's hand, hovering over my head. He quickly snaps it back and jerks his face away, reaching for the knobs on the tub and turning them on.

Water bubbles at first, but eventually streams forth in what appears to be a hot flow, steam rising from the tub in ballooning waves. When he plugs the drain, I realize that this tub has no shower and my heart sinks.

Without looking at me, Edward turns and walks to the far corner of the bathroom, raking his hands through his hair. His nose is buried in the wall as he softly orders, "Get in the tub."

My unsteady fingers fumble with the zipper of my jacket as I attempt to smother the urge to cry. I slowly pull my arms out of the sleeves and plead in a strained stammer, "Do you h-have to b-be here?"

Watching his back, I can see the pause in his breath, the tightening of his shoulder blades, and the drop of his forehead against the wall as he asks, "Would you rather it be one of them?" His voice isn't controlled as it had been before. Instead, it is fraught and rueful. His hands shove themselves into his pockets, forehead bumping against the wall.

I do realize that it's better to have him here instead of the others. It's reasonable. Edward seems the least threatening of the group, even though I know how much of a lie that is. I try to still my trembling fingers as I lift my shirt over my head and toss it onto the cold, tile floor. I make an honest attempt to quell my tears as I remove my bra and slide down my sweatpants. I stall when I hook my thumbs under my panties, cold and shaking as I stare at Edward's heaving back. When I finally pull them down, I sprint to the tub.

It's the first time I think I've ever known what it felt like to be completely naked. It's not about clothing—in the same way that being a whore isn't about intercourse. Naked is *everything*: moles on hips, secrets of childhoods, and furtive expressions.

Why had I given that to him, I wonder as I step into the water? The heat is pleasantly stinging as I lower myself, cradling my injured hand to my bare breasts. I feel as though he could turn at any point and see me, which is more metaphorical than I'd like to admit. I hold my breath as I sit, making contact with the heat of the water, and bring my knees to my chest. I try to cover myself with my limbs, shoving away the comfort that the heat grants, because this is by far the *least* comfortable I should ever be.

I turn the tap when it runs cold, but immediately return to my prior position, curling into myself and anxiously checking Edward's back. The room is filled with a thin silence, the sounds of an intermittent dripping from the tap reverberating heavily off the tiled walls.

Blurp-dreep... Blurp-dreep... Blurp-dreep...

The steam rises and encases my nostrils, weaving around me in delicate plumes as I inspect my surroundings and watch Edward from my periphery. There is soap and shampoo—no conditioner—sitting on the tub’s ledge, a folded washcloth at their side.

Though the heat of the water is undeniably satisfying, I can’t seem to care about getting clean.

Just as the thought passes through my head, Edward sighs and shifts. His jackets' fabric sounds unbearably loud as he begins removing them, both his heavy one and his flannel one dropping to the floor. My muscles tense as I hug myself tighter, expecting him to turn once it’s removed. Instead, he drops it at his side, hesitates for a moment, and then grasps his shirt collar at the nape, tugging upward and pulling it over his head.

He wouldn’t... would he?

Shockingly, without turning, he rolls the fabric of his shirt into a long strip, bringing it over his eyes and tying it at the back of his head. He turns and I swallow so loudly that it echoes off the tiled walls. Bringing a finger to his mouth, he presses it against his lips and slowly wanders to the tub’s side. My arms constrict around my legs and I scoot farther away from him, cowering at the far end of the bathtub. I can see the handle of my knife pressed against his well-toned stomach, and though I know this could be my chance to overpower him, I simply can’t imagine *doing* it.

The hem of his shirt flaps around his nose as he toes the tub, feeling for its location and lowering himself. Unconscious tears roll down my cheeks, soaking my chin, falling onto my knees and tickling me as they bleed down my thighs. His lips are set into a thin line, the pink of them unusually pale as he turns and settles so that his back is to me, leaning against the porcelain.

Angling his head to the side, he sighs, bending his knees. I can see the intricacy of his veins climbing his throat, the tendons taut and luminescent under the dim lighting, opalescent. So softly that I’m not even certain I hear him, he whispers, “I’ll get you out of this, Isabella.” But then he rests his head back, facing the old ceiling of the cabin. The wet tendrils of his hair drip into my bathwater, sending circular ribbons of waves with their every drop. And then he leans his head back further, looking at me without seeing me. And I know that I’d heard him correctly because I can almost feel the way his gaze warms under his shirt as he promises, “I swear, I will.”

Chapter 12:

The Liability of Faith, Silver Linings, and Tentative Alliances .

~|-----o|W.T.F|o-----|~

(A.K.A. Dear Edward, Fuck you. Love, Bella. P.S. I like your chest. P.S.S. I hate you.)

"Why?" I ask, mimicking his hushed whisper. "Why should I believe anything you say?" My toes curl under the water and drag against the bottom, making a ragged and deep sound.

Stiffly, he answers, "You shouldn't." There is another long silence, and the drips from the tap are lessening, their intervals stretching more and more with every descent. He rests his forearms on his knees, folding them over one another. "But it's true," he adds, the conviction in his tone marred by the pit in my stomach—a result of his constant deception. "I'd kill every single one of them before they could touch you." As he says this, I watch his knuckles turn white, stretching over bone, sharp and cavernous.

"You've done nothing but *lie* to me," I hiss, trying to make sense of why this act would even be necessary now that I'm here and he can get his... *payment*.

He exhales a long breath, but can't seem to argue, closing his mouth with slimmed lips. "Do you remember what you said that day?" he asks, and I glare at the back of his head. "You said that you'd forgive someone if they meant it, and had good intentions..." he trails off, as if awaiting some eureka moment to come to me.

Instead, I smash my chin into my knees and respond coldly, "Yeah, well, excuse me for having a really hard time believing you have good intentions. Maybe it's the whole... being tricked out into the forest—"

"You *followed* me, and if you'll just let me expl—"

"Plus," I cut him off, ignoring his comment with a growl. "I don't extend common courtesy to kidnappers, so you're shit-out-of-luck there."

Our hissing whispers cease, and the silence is deafening. I can see a crease in his forehead, his eyebrow ring peeking out from under his shirt, still blindfolded. He fingers the tattered and muddy hem of his jeans, wordlessly facing the bathroom door.

"I lied to you once, in all that time," he breathes. "I know it doesn't make a difference, but... it was only one time." He tilts his head up again, as if he can see me, pleading. "They weren't after the heroin, but I meant what I said about them being after something that wasn't theirs."

I simply stare at him as I contemplate his words, feeling as though I can't possibly ever know truth in him. "Lying comes in many forms. One of which is the complete withholding of—"

"I didn't want to scare you or— "

"—vital information, and I *think* that *you* being hired to kidnap *me* is pretty goddamn vital," I finish in a huff, annoyed at his constant interruption.

There is another stalled silence, the sounds of a booming laugh coming from the living room down the hall.

"Please," he whispers, bumping the back of his head against the tub. "Just let me *explain*, and I promise, I won't leave anything out and I won't lie—which, I know probably is worth exactly shit to you, but—" he pauses and seems to allow me a moment to object, but I don't. Why should I?

"James was always smarter than I'd given him credit for," he begins with a deep sigh, resting his arms at his side, palms flat on the tile. I'm fairly certain we both know that I can take the knife at any time. But *he* doesn't know that I can't imagine taking a life—most of all the life of a man that I'd felt... *not only eight hours ago*. His position is one of passivity—an offering. "The first time I met him with Jasper, he was suspicious, I think. As time went on and I didn't... act like the others, they probably grew," he muses softly, shaking his head. "Anyways, he recently came to me and... cut-the-shit, so to speak. He knew what I'd wanted all along." Edward's lips curl up into an embittered grin, a silent chuckle shaking his chest. "He told me he'd give me the proof himself—that it wasn't him, but that he could tell me who and provide the evidence... but—conditionally." Chuckling again, he murmurs, "I was so fucking stupid."

I quietly scoff. "I know that feeling."

Ignoring me, he continues in a soft breath. "He said that all I had to do was one last job for him. Just be at the road when the time came and lure you to the cabin." Straightening, he turns to me, pivoting his body and pressing his pale chest against the porcelain. I push my back against the tub, gripping my calves as I swallow. "I said 'no' when he first told me, I swear to fucking God, Isabella," he hisses in a frenzied tone, inclining toward me as if his proximity can make his words sincere. "But he kept... flaunting the files at me and the time to make the decision was

running out. It was so tempting, can't you understand? Not only could I prove my dad's innocence, but I could get *out*." He stops and is rigid for a moment, before gradually slinking back to his position.

How could I ever agree with that? I'd be a liar not to realize my understanding his desperation to clear his dad's name, but at the expense of what? There are lines.

He whispers too softly to hear, "I... my mind... minute..."

"What?"

Turning his face as if surprised to hear my inquiry, he repeats, "I changed my mind at the last minute. I just... well, I couldn't. The ends didn't—"

"—justify the means" I finish bitterly.

Slowly, he nods and drops his head. "But that fucking prick, Laurent was with me, and he..." He continues in a growl, his hands balling, "He did something to my car and I couldn't move it, or do *anything*. And then, when you hit me... you were bleeding, and... they *promised* me no one was going to get hurt. I was so pissed off, but..." He huffs, ruffling his hair and sending sprinkles of rainwater into the tub. "But I thought that I could do it, because I was just so tired of dealing with them." Sighing, he shrugs, "I got to the point in the forest where I was supposed to lead you here, and... I couldn't." He shakes his head resolutely. "I'm not going to turn into one of those soulless bastards. My dad would say it isn't worth it, and he'd be right."

Unbidden, the memory of Edward's mumbles that day, the look of conflict on his face, and the odd moral dilemma he'd had me answer come to me. His actions and words correlate with his explanation, I suppose. He *had* been upset to see me injured, he *had* been uncertain when we'd reached that point, and he *had* asked my forgiveness long before I'd known there was anything to forgive.

He snorts then, the sides of his lip quirking upward. "Of course, then, I was so focused on getting you away from them that I got us lost." Chuckling breathily, he adds, "I figured I could get you out of there and back to your dad before they could ever find us, because again—" He faces me, wrinkling his forehead upward. "I'm a fucking idiot."

I draw my lip between my teeth and trail a finger in the water. It's still just barely steaming, making the frilly, frayed ends of my hair curl. "What will they do to me?" I whisper, unintentionally child-like and vulnerable.

The sharp edges of his jaw tighten. "I won't let them do anything to you," he promises again in a fervent voice. "They'll take your picture, put you in a comfy room, call the Dwyers and request ransom. Once they get it—" He stalls here, slumping his shoulders. "Jasper is supposed to drop you. I don't know the location. I'm not privy to everything." He finishes with a deep sigh, pinching the bridge of his nose through his shirt. "I don't know if I can trust Jasper," he admits.

"The one with the... scars?" I ask tentatively.

Nodding, he clarifies flatly, "Occupational hazard."

I wrinkle my brow in confusing, wondering how he could possibly get so injured from... drug dealing. It seems like an explosion had gone off in his face. *Meth lab?* I idly wonder, but there are far more important things to ponder on, foremost being whether or not I should even trust Edward. I figure, I don't have anything to lose if I do. Already, I'm in a shitty situation I have zero hope of getting out of.

But that seems moronic.

He'd caused me nothing but strife and confusion since the day my car had rammed his, yet I'm willing to even *consider* trusting him again? How many times have I cursed myself for following him the first time? There are so many questions and decisions waiting to be made as he tugs at his shoelaces anxiously, his shoulders high and stiff.

Yet—one thing I'm *certain* of, is that Edward wouldn't ever cause me harm.

Physically, my mind echoes.

He'd kissed me with reverence not even nine hours ago. He'd stroked my cheek and shared his secrets with me. He'd wanted me to "give him the light of day." His smiles and chuckles and caresses were sincere, I'd been *so positive*. The contrast of his dual personalities makes every portion of my mind war with conflict. Something deep inside of me is, as always, entirely willing to follow him and trust that he knows what he's doing.

My heart?

Well, that's some unforgivably cheesy bullshit.

No matter how much it *feels* accurate.

Maybe it's just the idea of him as a friend, as a confidant, as someone who could kiss me and see some skewed version of perfection I'd always longed to be. In return, I'd wanted access to every part of *his* life. I'd wanted to see every inch of his body and claim it, know the depths of all he's hidden. I'd wanted to sleep next to him and be engulfed in that yellow again, and I'd *definitely* wanted him to want *me*.

But my mind begins disagreeing... vehemently as I try to decide if I still want these things. I'd wanted them with a version of Edward I can't even be sure exists. We're strangers, really. I've never been particularly stupid. I'm a pragmatist and don't buy that 'follow your heart' crap. Especially for someone I'd only known for roughly four days, who'd tricked me, kidnapped me, and is now trying to explain away his sins with... well, with really fucking sympathetic testimony, but still...

It's dangerous and unpredictable to put myself in his untrustworthy hands again. I *should* just act the quiet little captive and wait for Phil and Renee to shovel out their wealth to these monsters. I wonder what he'd do then. Would he still try to release me? What were his plans?

I sit in the tub, lost and confused and warm while trying to reconcile my emotions with my logic.

But emotions aren't logical, and neither is what I felt when I saw him in that mirror, minutes prior. The same vision that had made me nauseous—had left me retching over the toilet. He'd been staring at me with those *eyes*—green and warm and worried and compassionate and... he'd looked at me as if I were the only person in the world that truly knew him. Like him and I were in this together.

"Show me your eyes," I order in a breathless voice, hugging myself closer.

He angles his head and asks, "Huh?" in a confused and incredulous exhale.

"Your eyes," I repeat, inhaling deeply. "I can't tell when you're lying unless I see your eyes."

The shirt blindfolding him shifts as his brows furrow. "But... if I... I don't think I should... you're naked," he finishes lamely.

I shrug delicately and rest my cheek on my knees. "It's only skin. We're both adults. It's more important for me to—"

“—trust me,” he finishes in a very non-eager voice. I softly agree, though I’d wanted to say ‘it’s more important for me to know you’re not being a deceitful son-of-a-motherfucker.’ Then again, he always seemed better with words.

Puffing out his cheeks, he clanks his head on the side of the tub once more before reaching for the back of his head and grasping the fabric. “You’re sure?” he asks, stilling his hands.

“Just do it. Look me in the eye,” I challenge, turning myself so that all he can see is my shins and—if I work my ankles just the right way, none of Christian Bale’s Holy Land.

After another brief pause, he gently works the knot out of his shirt and slides it away, still with his back to me as he stares at the door. He appears to rub at his eyes, dropping the fabric and smoothing out his hair with a deep breath. He turns slowly and my muscles constrict involuntarily. So quickly that I know he can’t see anything else, he fixes his eyes to mine and braces his hand against the side of the tub, furling his lips awkwardly and attempting a semi-smile.

“I really am sorry,” he whispers, abandoning his half-hearted grin and sighing. The tender flesh around his eyes is dark and sunken as he stares at me, all gruff and wild-haired and even filthier than me. His eyes swirl and focus and the gold flecks remind me of hours before, laughter by a fire and a heated kiss.

And I just know.

I remember him saying those exact words to me the second night we’d spent together, half coherent as I was at the time. His voice had floated through my ears like a melody that had made no sense—until now.

And for all of his failings and omissions, I find that... I just don’t care, and it’s so ridiculous that I want to laugh... or maybe attempt vomiting again. I’ve fallen for him like a complete idiot—and not just in the ‘cute crush’ or ‘fleeting dry hump’ kind of way, either. This is so deep that the thought of turning back, away from him and the utter sincerity of his gaze, actually *aches*.

Even if I *had* wanted to, he is my only chance.

I figure that there’s one way, and one way alone, that Edward could ever redeem himself and his actions, and that’s getting me out of here, alive, untouched, in one piece. Resigned and sort of hating myself a little, I grumble, “What’s your plan?”

He releases a gusty breath, his shoulders easing as he settles himself, once again against the tub, away from me. Feeling marginally more willful, I pick up the bar of soap and begin lathering my hands, the sounds of my soft splashing making him ease further.

“Well, I was thinking about the drop point and Jasper, and wondering if I could maybe get him on my side,” he muses aloud, slouching forward and jutting his chin out in deliberation. “I figure I can appeal to his more... humanitarian nature, though... to be honest, I just don’t him well enough to be sure he’d... *turn* on James.” He finishes with an agitated exhale, bringing his fingers to his bare neck and massaging the flesh there. “Ideally, everything can go as planned—he’d get the money, I’d get the files—and once you’re out of here, we can turn him in, but...” He pauses and tilts his head as I rub my lathered hands together. “Something’s off about everything, and I can’t quite put my finger on it.” He seems thoughtful for a moment, gently tapping his toes, before finishing with a sigh, “I’ll definitely need to get Jasper though, and you... well,” He angles his head, enough for me to see half of his face, but not enough for him to stare directly at me. “You’ll have to kind of... play the part.”

“Play the part,” I whisper flatly. “What exactly does that entail?” There is a light edge of resentment to my voice, knowing that there is really no ‘part’ to play. I’m *really* in this situation. I can’t possible *be* anymore realistic than I already am.

Ducking his chin, he responds in a breathily, “You’ll have to act like... you hate me. Like you’re afraid of me.”

I laugh at this, a little too loud, and am forced to stifle my bitterness with my wet palm. “That’s no so far off, anyways,” I assure.

Dropping his shoulders, he looks away and swallows. “Yeah, I get that.”

I begin cleaning my arms and the portions of my legs that I can reach without unfolding myself. There is long stubble that makes me grimace, and suddenly, I have the urge to shave. This is a rather puzzling thought, I muse, because only minutes ago, I hadn’t even cared about getting clean.

But that was when I hadn’t had any trace of hope.

I exhale a near growl and plunge the washcloth into the water, deciding that James had been right about one thing. I really *was* filthy. I tentatively unfold my legs as Edward simply stares at the floor, the back of his head touching the porcelain that lies beside the shampoo. Finally longing to indulge in the comfort of the hot water, I position myself and lower my back, sighing

as I rest my head against the tub. From this vantage, I can see the side of his face, and with a mere dart of his eyes, he's looking at me.

He hastily jerks his gaze away, mumbling, "Sorry," for having looked when he shouldn't have.

Rolling my eyes and certain that he hadn't seen anything but my face, I attempt to re-direct us to our planning. "So, I pretend to be all bitchy and weak, you talk to Jasper, make sure no one wants to rape, maim, or kill me, and then..." I trail off expectantly, lifting a knee to my chest and scrubbing my calloused feet.

He continues in an airy tone, "James will take a picture of you, contact the Dwyers, give them forty-eight hours, and then organize the drop points—which are separate. I don't know anything beyond that. I'm not so stupid as to think he doesn't have contingency plans and... I have no idea how he plans to get around law enforcement. I *assume* he'll just use the clichéd 'if the cops get involved, I'll kill your daughter.'" He sputters a sigh and shakes his head gently. "But then again, there's no telling."

Particularly unsettled, I continue bathing myself in a contemplative silence. The fibers of the cloth are rough against my skin, but in a very good way. I scrub my flesh with languid, yet careful attention, focusing on the lulling sounds of splashing water—which remind me of the river a bit—and Edward's soft breathing. The comfort of the heat is so relaxing that I'm afraid I'm might fall asleep. I'm still running on no fuel, emotionally, mentally, and definitely physically exhausted.

Edward seems to notice something by the sink and crawls to it, standing with his back to me and opening a little medicine cabinet. My muscles coil infinitesimally, scared that he might turn around and look at me, even though he's already had plenty of chances to ogle me in my vulnerability. He doesn't, of course. After shuffling through its contents for a moment, he steps back to my side, walking backwards and easing himself into his previous position.

Pivoting his head to the side and looking into my eyes, he asks softly, "Give me your hand," and holds up a pack of gauze and peroxide.

Having completely forgotten about my injury, I lift my palm to inspect it. I'd never gotten it wet, so there's blood caked with dirt on my wrist, gruesome and stomach-churning. I quickly lift it and shove it under his nose, squeezing my eyes close and shuddering at the gash.

He is gentle as he cleans it, utilizing the hand towels and occasionally requesting that I wet them in my bathwater. I absently recognize that Edward would make an excellent doctor, like

his father, for if there is one thing no one in this town could deny, it is that Dr. Cullen was good at what he did. I also thought in amusement—and admittedly, a little bitterness—that Edward’s talent at keeping unseemly things unmentioned would only make him more proficient in the medical field.

When he is finished, my hand is all wrapped up and I bring it to my face to appraise his work. “Thank you,” I murmur, propping it on the side of the tub and sighing. Sadly, the water is getting cold at this point and I shiver. My hair is still disgusting and I doubt my ability to wash it with one hand, though I decide to give it an honest shot as I duck my head underwater, quickly emerging and straightening.

I gently thrust the bottle of shampoo before him, dripping water down his shoulder and chest as I sheepishly request, “Can you squeeze this into my hand?”

Perceptively, he takes the shampoo and opens it, squeezing a liberal quantity into my palm and returning the bottle to the tub-side. To my credit, I do get a good half of my hair lathered quite well, scratching my scalp with my fingertips and occasionally surfacing with stray forest debris. Unfortunately, I’m doing it with my left hand and just can’t imagine spending two days fifty-percent nappy and matted.

I sigh heavily, rinsing my lathered hand in the water and dismayed that I have to settle. But Edward—ever astute—must have understood my plight. He retrieves his shirt and wraps it around his eyes once again, turning to me once it’s firmly in place.

“I can...” he trails off and feels for the bottle, awaiting permission as he suspends it between us, resting on his heels.

I clear my throat awkwardly and turn, reminding myself that it will be worth my discomfort later. I’m also not particularly opposed to seeing him in a subservient position—though I’d prefer some form of feet kissing to something as intimate as hair washing.

I do narrow my eyes as he dampens his hand in the water and accidentally brushes my thigh.

“Sorry,” he apologizes quickly and buries his fingers in my hair.

I can hear his nervous swallow as I close my eyes, ultimately relenting to the satisfying massaging of his fingertips against my scalp. Thoroughly, he works his fingers through my hair, draping its entirety over the edge of the tub. I’m assuming this is for the sake of avoiding the flesh of my back. He ignores the spilling of suds and water over his chest and the tiles.

I vaguely register how very comfortable this bath is, and rest my head against the tub, propping my feet on the opposing ledge and confident that he won't remove his blindfold as he carefully rids my long locks of stray leaves and needles and dirt. I caress the top of the water with my hand and close my eyes. The sounds of his breaths and fingers against me cause an involuntary tranquility, the muscles in my neck loosening. I'm so *tired*, and I release a contented sigh as I feel the fuzziness of my fatigue devour my thoughts.

The next thing I know, I'm being awakened by a sharp knock. I lurch upward and wrap my arms around myself, glancing over my shoulder at Edward, fingers lingering in the air. He is frozen, neck strained as he jerks his head to the door. He has suds dripping from his hands, the whole waistline of his jeans darkened with my bathwater.

Lifting himself stilly, he hisses, "Keep your back to the door," and turns, removing his shirt from his head. His hands paw for his jacket, extracting the flannel shirt from inside and thrusting it at me hastily. Edward's whisper in my ear is quick and hushed. "Cover up," he orders, and I promptly do, clutching the shirt around me and stretching it across my breasts. I'm soaking the ends in the water as I turn my head to meet his frenzied stare. My heart beats wildly as he cracks the door, pausing as he regards whoever is on the other side.

Finally, I hear what I think to be Jasper's voice, "What the hell is going on in here. It's been almost two hours—" There is a heavy silence, and I can see neither face. Eventually, Jasper asks in an odd growl, "Where the *fuck* is your shirt?" There is a thump and Edward appears to keep the door fixed as he attempts to answer.

But Jasper quickly overpowers him and forces the door open with his foot, scanning the space. He meets my eyes and I gasp, folding myself and thankful that he's only get an eyeful of Edward's flannel and my lathered hair. I squeeze my eyes shut as I hear their shuffling behind me.

"Why are you wet?" Jasper asks, a hint of suspicion lacing his tone.

Edward answers coldly, but honestly, "Her hand is hurt. I was washing her hair." After a moment of stalled silence he adds discordantly, "Got a problem with that?"

I can almost feel Jasper's eyes on my head as he curtly replies, "No problem here. Just bringin' some towels and her suitcase." There is a thump, a shuffling of plush fabric, and then quick footsteps. I'm being suddenly wrapped in the dark blue luxuriousness of a rather large towel.

I use it to cover what the shirt cannot and turn slightly, watching Jasper's rigid posture.

Jasper shifts his gaze back and forth between Edward and me, before settling on my stare and asking meaningfully, "You okay?" He raises his eyebrows and locks his jaw, glancing at Edward sidelong for a brief millisecond, and I realize that this asshole is actually *worried* about *me*.

Irrationally, I feel the instinct to defend Edward and Jasper's misunderstood impression of him. This is utterly absurd, of course, so I instead nod. Edward definitely hasn't earned my defense of him. If Jasper wants to think him some perverted, evil monster, what do I care? In fact, as Edward had said, that was kind of the point anyways.

Jasper slinks out the door, placated by my assurance, and closes it behind him. Edward keeps his back to me as I rinse my hair and ponder my suitcase. It is without a doubt the same luggage that had been in the trunk of my car. I realize that they likely *had* my car somewhere, had taken it off the road to avoid suspicious passers-by.

I step out of the tub and dry off, Edward remaining vigilantly facing the wall as I bend to open my suitcase. I remove comfortable clothing, evading the tight jeans and revealing shirts, skirts, and dresses that had been packed for me. I choose something I'd usually wear to bed, but can pass as modest: some old pajama pants and a big shirt with long socks.

I figure with a frown that wearing Edward's flannel shirt for the remainder would look to suspicious and glumly place it, rumpled and damp, atop his jacket which still lies in a heap on the tiled floor.

I feel like a new person after being cleaned. So much so, that I turn and actually look at myself in the mirror for the first time in days.

I gasp at what I see.

"What?" Edward asks in alarm, turning just enough to be certain I'm clothed before coming to my side.

"My nose!" I all but screech. I finger the black, purple, and blue contusion that covers the bridge of my nose, stretching out toward my eyes. I hadn't realized my injury from the crash was so... *bad*. "I didn't know..." I trail off, frowning and dropping my bandaged hand. I drop my chin and turn away from the mirror, ignoring Edward's puzzled stare.

"It's not broken," he informs, pulling his shirt over his head and removing the stop from the bathtub. I watch as the water swirls down the drain in a petite tornado, devouring all of the forest dirt and debris. He faces me and runs his fingers through his hair, emerging with a small piece of leaf and tossing it into the bathtub.

“What about you...” I ask hesitantly, wringing my hands and gathering my things—the only things in this cabin that I am positive I *know* and have known for quite some time. The suitcase and clothing are familiar and soothe me in the most ridiculous way. Catching his puzzled expression, I clarify, “Are you going to... clean up?”

Truthfully, though I’m still wary of him in many ways, I don’t want him to leave me alone. He’s second to the suitcase in familiarity, and I’m not above being clingy, considering the fact that I’m a kidnapped captive in the isolated wilderness of the Pacific Northwest.

I think I’m allowed to be a little pathetic.

“Oh,” he breathes and glances in the mirror, smoothing out his hair. Grimacing, he takes the last clean hand towel and wets it under the sink faucet, using the soap to wash his face. I turn away from him as he begins working down his arms, scrubbing under his pits and granting him the same offer of privacy he’d extended to me.

He splashes around for a long time, and I idly wonder if he’s washing his hair under the sink tap, but remain turned away, just in case he’s disrobed or something. Yes. I’ve seen his penis. Yes. I liked it very much. No, I do *not* want to visit that train of thought at this particular moment in time.

After his splashing has ceased, he whispers, “I’m good,” and I turn, finding him ruffling the towel through his hair, chest... glistening.

I gulp.

Kidnapper, kidnapper, kidnapper! My brain keeps screaming.

I agree, but we have an alliance, and it shows in the light of his smile as he shakes his head, speckling me with water and chuckling when I swat and scowl at him playfully. It’s a lighter moment, stolen and maybe a bit farcical given our history, but he is warm again—a glimpse of him by the fire—and I’m hoping that the swelling in my chest is simply my realizing that his warmth is him just... being himself.

We both face the door and take steeling breaths, getting our respective game faces on. I channel my inner-whiney-frightened-girly-girl and nod, hoping that he can see the plea in my stare. He responds with a soft smile, lifting his hand to my arm and fingering my flesh.

“Can I?” he asks considerately as his fingers encircle my arm. Acknowledging his attempt to make things between us a little more level and tactful, I agree with a nod. “The things I say, and how I act... it’s not—”

“—you’re just playing the part,” I finish with a sad smile. “I get it.”

Sighing, he turns to face the door and grabs the knob, but pauses, rubbing his thumb over my arm in a small circle. Before I can question him, he pushes his lips to my temple in one swift motion, pulling away and avoiding my dumbstruck stare. My pulse races as I stare at him, confused and... goddamnit.

Smitten.

Chapter 13:

Sedulous Studies and Lengthy Culminations..

~|-----o|W.T.F|o-----|~

(A.K.A. The Stubborn Little Shit Who Outsmarts the Annoying Martyr.)

Edward was right. There is a bedroom reserved to hold me for the duration of my stay here. He leads me into the room shortly after my bath, James and the others seemingly disinterested in the logistics of dealing with me. Jasper's eyes are speculative as he regards Edward, sending me the occasional, concerned glance. His looks make my forehead crease as I keep my head down, wondering how someone so evidently empathetic has ended up in his position. Surely, if he cares as much as he acts, he wouldn't have agreed to something like this.

Edward is quiet as he opens the door to my room, his palm pressing gingerly into the small of my back as I enter. Once the light is turned on, it is all I can do to stifle a grin. I shouldn't feel so elated at the sight of a bed, but I certainly am. I almost want to jump up and down on it. If I possessed the energy to do so, it might have been a concern.

There's a round table in the middle of the room, three chairs, a rocking chair in the corner by the single bed, and a large rug covering the floor. The only window present is covered in plywood. It is obviously meant to keep me inside, fixed to the wall with large nails and screws. There is a large quilt covering the bed, one of those old, patchy pieces that looks soft, plushy, and unbearably comfy.

I move to the bed and lower myself to the edge, running my palm over the colorful fabric and sighing, a mixture of contentment, dread, and fatigue.

It is now that James stalks into the room, a large camcorder in his hand and a dark smirk spreading over his face. Jasper and Laurent appear next, quiet and reserved as they fall behind. Edward remains close to me, thankfully.

"Ready to strike a pose, Princess?" James asks tauntingly, and I bristle at the name Edward had once used to regard me with. I fucking *hated* being referred to as a princess. It always made my pulse rise, my fists tighten, and my chin jut out in defiance.

Edward, sensing this and knowing me well enough, steps in front of me and turns, pulling me up by my arm and leading me in front of the large slab of plyboard covering the window. He gives me a stern look as he turns his back on the others, a clear warning, and I suppress a heated scowl.

James takes a moment to ready the camera—clearly a video camera and not a photo camera, which seems bizarre to me.

He tilts his head as his eyes rake over me, holding the camera in his palm and pursing his lips. “Something isn’t right,” he muses, curling his fist under his chin. I dart my eyes to Edward nervously, wondering if we’d been caught, but Edward is a better actor than me and is simply scraping the dirt out from under his nails. “Ah!” James suddenly exclaims, smiling darkly. “She needs... less. Less clothes. Edward, rip her shirt.”

The three heads in the room suddenly snap up, all asking a synchronized “What?”

James rolls his eyes, passing his gaze over them in annoyance. “They’ll think she’s in more danger, you morons. Don’t any of you have brains? No one wants to think of the little Princess getting violated.”

“No,” three distinct voices ring out, surprising me as I even see Laurent eying him in disgust.

“I already told you, no sick shit. And that’s some sick shit,” Laurent adds, crossing his hands over his chest.

Jasper wordlessly agrees with Laurent, pale faced and aghast as he regards his leader with incredulous eyes. Edward’s reaction is subtle, and I wonder if they can even discern the raise of his shoulders, the set of his jaw, and the twitch of his fingers as they inch to his waistband.

“I’m sorry?” James asks in a confused grind of his teeth, the muscles of his neck rippling. I swallow thickly as I watch the evidence of his temper flare in the flash of his eyes and the grip of his hand. Looking back and forth between the three, he takes a deliberate step forward. “I wasn’t aware this was a fucking democracy.” And then his hand is gripping the collar of my shirt.

I flinch in surprise, my wide eyes flitting to Edward’s as I recoil. With one strong, sharp yank of his hand, the tug both jerks my neck down painfully and splits a wide rip down the front of my shirt. I cry out, from the shocking speed and the pain of the shirt collar digging into the back of my neck. I stumble forward and am forced to reach my hands out to James’ chest to steady myself.

When he removes his hand, my entire left breast is exposed to the room, the flesh above the white of my bra red and flushed. The other three men look on in horror, Edward standing aside with his hand now ducked completely inside of his shirt, likely gripping the handle of the knife.

I send him a look that is filled with fear, but also caution.

Suddenly, James lips pull up into a smirk and he leans closer, my hands dropping from his chest as I wince. “Your parents really seem to love you,” he murmurs, lifting a finger to my bare shoulder and trailing it over my collarbone. Edward takes a step forward. James leans in further and sniffs, tilting his head, a small frown playing at his lips as he searches my face. Finally, he concludes, “I don’t get it,” and steps away.

A collective breath is released as he returns to his position without antagonizing me further. The other men divert their eyes and I figure that covering my chest with my arms will only piss him off more. I try reasoning that it’s just like a bikini, that people had seen me in less.

So why does this feel so humiliating?

I’m blinking back hot tears as James orders in a hard voice, “Jasper, Newspaper.”

Jasper picks up a large newsprint from the table and rolls it up, tossing it to me, and seemingly afraid to get in frame. It falls to the floor, and James laughs as I bend to pick it up, grinding my teeth and wishing the other two would leave the room so Edward could stab him already.

When I’m in place with the paper—three days old—he makes me say things to the camera. Stupid, ridiculous things like, “Please help me, mommy.” *Like I’d ever call Renee “Mommy,”* I inwardly scoff. He instructs me to say more things, play up my fear and weakness for the camera. “I’m so scared, and the people here will kill me if you don’t give them what they ask for. I’m cold and hungry, and blah blah blah.” James is dissatisfied with my tone, which is mostly dull and devoid of any honest emotion. Edward tries to convince him that they’ll believe it—that this is truly my personality. Instead, James abruptly removes a large pistol from the back of his waistband, all eyes following it intently as he sets it upon the table with a loud “clank” and eyes me pointedly, tapping it with his fingernail.

“The gun’s a best case scenario, bitch,” he spits, tightening his grip around the device in his hand. My eyes widen with the plethora of meanings that comment is loaded with.

On the final try, I really am scared, and my voice wavers, blinking back tears each time he gestures to his firearm, a dark and threatening edge to his stare and orders. Eventually pleased with my performance, he finally closes the camera and stalks out of the room, ordering someone to remain with me at all times.

Of course, Edward takes this duty with a false huff, declaring, “Why not? It’s not like I haven’t been babysitter for four days now,” and seats himself in the rocking chair beside my bed, sending Jasper a sidelong glare as he nearly protests.

His whole empathetic-kidnapper-dude bullshit is plainly beginning to frustrate Edward as he stalls at the door, glancing at me with kind eyes. "Hungry?" he asks, rubbing the back of his neck and shuffling his feet.

Lifting the ripped portion of my shirt, I'm fairly certain the promise of food is the only thing that can lift my spirits after what had just occurred. I fervently nod with an involuntary smile, walking to the suitcase on the bed and opening it to find a new shirt.

Curiously, Edward's eyes snap up, and he stands, "I should get you something," he states, with a rather odd emphasis on the "I."

"I don't mind," Jasper sniffs, his hand lingering on the knob to the door. Edward almost appears disappointed as he realizes that he'd be forced to leave me alone with Jasper, and relents with a surreptitious frown, lowering himself back into the chair and staring at his shoes.

"You should do it," he surrenders in a mumble before asking, "Are you allergic to anything?"

I answer, "No," somewhat taken aback by his consideration, never having been asked anything like that before. People make me food all the time, yet no one ever asks if I have allergies. It seems odd, but so... *Edward*. I reason that it must be the physician's son in him, but still, I feel slightly... touched by it.

Jasper nods and exits the room, finally leaving us alone, the silence comforting and welcome. That is—until I hear the locks on the door being latched and a sense of unease makes my stomach churn. I put my hand to my belly, a long growl filling the emptiness around us.

I keep my back to Edward as I lift my shirt over my head, replacing it with a new one that I don't even bother to look at.

When I turn, Edward sighs, shoulders slumping. "I should have thought of that," he whispers.

"Thought of what?" I ask, finally relaxing on the bed. I'll be able to hear James coming with the locks, and this notion calms me infinitesimally.

Looking up at me from under his lashes, he frowns. "Getting you food. I was so distracted by everything else that I wasn't even thinking..." he trails off and shifts his gaze to the floor, remorseful and disappointed.

I fight a smile, realizing that he had wanted to be the one to get me food instead of Jasper. Edward had this whole knight-in-shining-armor thing going on. Even in the forest, he had

enjoyed seeing me as some damsel in distress, relying on him for essentials like food and fire and safety.

“We haven’t even been here that long,” I reason, folding my legs underneath me while I wonder whether or not Jasper will get Edward anything to eat. I’m hoping that he will.

Shrugging, he leans his head back against the chair and lets it go, staring at the door with vigilance, plainly tired as his eyelids droop, his feet gently rocking the chair to-and-fro. “I’m sorry that... that I let James do that to you,” he apologizes with tight fists.

I roll my eyes and bring my knees to my chest. “You didn’t *let* him do anything, Edward,” I assure. “You couldn’t take on all three of them. They might have killed us both. Plus, it really wasn’t that bad,” I lie.

Shaking his head, he mutters, “That’s as far as he’ll get. I don’t care about the others. I—” His voice cracks and he bumps his head against the wood of his chair, closing his eyes. “I promised he wouldn’t touch you,” he whispers in a rasp.

“It’s okay. I’m okay,” I console, but can tell that it’s no use as he remains still and mute.

We are silent until we hear Jasper at the door again, undoing the locks and entering with a large plate and a bottle of water cradled under his arm. Edward straightens, his eyes tightening as Jasper enters and closes the door with his foot. I all but clap jovially as he travels to me, my mouth watering at the enormous sub sandwich lying on the plate, small bag of chips at its side.

Jasper extends the plate and gazes at me in apology. “We don’t have much stocked in—”

But he doesn’t finish, because I’ve already taken the sub from the plate and taken a mortifyingly colossal bite. I chew as I feel my cheeks puff out, bread protruding my lips that I’m incapable of fitting into my small mouth. I hum as I taste the ham and turkey and cheese, and when I open my eyes, Jasper is staring at me in a kind of awe-struck amusement. I blush furiously, even though I don’t really care how much of a pig I’m being.

I put my hand over my mouth, appearing to be polite, when I’m actually cramming the surplus of bread into my mouth. “I haf’nt eat’n inf fays,” I reply defensively while trying to chew and swallow.

Edward’s lip twitch as he rocks a bit and turns his face, and the shift in his mood is totally worth the embarrassment I feel over acting this way.

Jasper clears his throat, nodding in understanding while visibly stifling a smile and offers, "Well, if you need anything else..."

"Mhm," is my distracted reply as I take another bite from the sandwich, watching him exit and anticipating the sounds of latching this time.

Edward finally releases a snorting chuckle. "You should have seen your face when he walked in with that thing. I think you had some drool," he fingers his chin with a smirk, and I roll my eyes, dismissing him with a wave.

Though... I do take a covert swipe at my chin when he looks away.

When my mouth is finally void of sub, I swallow and sheepishly push the plate out. "You should eat half," I insist, licking my lips. "It's really too big for one person."

He snorts again and shakes his head. "I'm fine. Eat."

I narrow my eyes, knowing that he has to be as starving as I am. I simply can't comprehend eating in front of him while he sits there, rocking and pretending not to be darting his eyes to it, or inhaling the scent, or really wanting something to eat.

Stubbornly, I reply while raising my chin. "I'm not eating if you don't eat."

He sputters a sigh and rocks with a little more force. "Don't be fucking stupid. Eat your food. I'll get something later," he persists.

"No."

"Yes."

"No."

He growls lowly, but the tightening of his cheeks suggests that he's battling a grin. "Has anyone ever told you that you're a stubborn little shit?"

I smile and flick my damp hair over my shoulder. "Frequently. Has anyone ever told you that you have a really annoying martyr complex?"

He quirks an eyebrow and leans toward me, staring pointedly at my shirt. "Sometimes. Has anyone ever told you that that the San Diego Padres suck dick?"

Looking down at my shirt, I realize that I'm wearing one of Phil's team shirts. "Not in so many words. Your avoidance is annoying, stop diverting," I accuse.

"I'm not avoiding."

Quirking an eyebrow, I challenge, "Bullshit. Eat half of the goddamned sub, or I'm screaming 'rape' at the top of my lungs. Jasper just might stare at you to death."

He laughs at this, the chuckle from his chest free and light, and he relents with a sigh, his face falling as he swipes half of the sandwich from my plate and lifts it to his mouth. "Thank you," he grumbles before taking an even more enormous bite than I had.

Pleased with his acquiescence, I find myself asking, "What was with the terminal cancer question?" I recall how he'd asked me the riddle at what I now could assume the point meant to lead me here. I'd assumed my answer was wrong, so why did it have the adverse effect, I wonder?

He meets my gaze and knowingly grins around his chews. "I wanted to know what you were. A liar or someone who only cared about those close to her." His eyes are thoughtful as he mumbles, "Seeing you as a real person made it easier for me to defy James."

Furrowing my brows, I repeat what he'd said, "Anyone who chooses not to steal it is lying, and anyone who chooses to steal it has shitty character."

Nodding, he explains, "You'd steal it, but you'd plan to give it back, even though there's a better option you can't see. You're not a saint, but you try to do the best thing, given the information you're handed." Shrugging, he dusts the bread crumbs off his hand and meets my gaze. "It's the exact same answer I gave," he explains, his lips pulling up into a sad smile.

I grin and continue eating my sandwich, opening the bag of chips and splaying them across the plate, making him take some of those too. While we eat like two complete pigs, stuffing our mouths and trying to talk through bread, I figure that the worst is ahead of us, and try to enjoy the good moments while they last.

~|-----o|W.T.F|o-----|~

I'm clean, have a full stomach, have managed to fish my hairbrush from my suitcase and spent nearly an hour working out the knots while cursing all men's lack of conditioner purchasing, and now I'm in the bed. The comfy, warm, soft, quilt-covered bed. I want to sleep. My eyes droop,

and I'm pretty confident that the sun has risen, even though the plywood over my window makes it impossible to tell.

But I don't think it's a good idea, given the circumstances, so I try to keep myself awake, rubbing my hands over my face and trying to strike up conversations with Edward.

He's not really faring so well himself by this point, his words—like mine—begin to slur.

"You can sleep, you know," Edward finally says, the rocking of his chair against the wood rhythmic and lulling. I roll over and stare the ceiling, a little annoyed that I'm being so transparent.

Heaving a sigh, I admit, "I don't think it's a good idea."

There is a deep silence, few to no sounds coming from the other side of the door as Edward's eyes watch it fixedly.

"I'll watch over you," he promises, angling his head to catch my askew gaze, eyes warm and soft.

I don't answer, instead pulling the blankets to my chin and counting to one hundred in my head. I try to use it as a method to keep awake. My body, resistant, turns on its side and coils itself beneath the quilt, toes curling inward and sweeping against the soft coolness of the sheets.

I close my eyes—just to rest them, for a little bit—and focus on the sounds around me. It is raining outside, and I can just barely discern the pattering on the roof and outside my boarded windows. Despite knowing what and who waits for me outside the door, the room feels secure and safe. Our own little cocoon.

Even when I surrender to the idea of sleep, I find that I can't, and I'm groggily restless underneath the blankets, thinking of Renee's face when she receives that video of me. I wonder about Charlie and think about how he's probably blaming himself for this entire thing. But then I wonder if Renee's told Charlie, given that James likely made a threat against involving law enforcement, and Charlie is Forks' *main* law enforcement. So what does he think, I wonder?

These thought plague me for quite some time, even when my thoughts grow fuzzy and I struggle to remember what Charlie looks like. It's been so long since I've visited, and now, under the weight of my exhaustion and emotions, I can't picture his face, and it bothers me.

I imagine what I'll do when I'm finally released, wonder how and if Renee and Phil will get their money back. I ponder turning in Laurent and James, though truthfully, James is the only one I can muster up any amount of hatred for. Even Laurent didn't seem so bad, not wanting to subject me to his leader's sick and twisted torment of nudity on camera. Jasper doesn't seem so bad either. And Edward... well, as much as I'd love to hate him, he's proven himself, right now by watching over me, promising to protect me, and I *know* that he'll get of here.

With the grim exception of James, none of them really seem evil to me.

And as I think of these in my clouded mind, weaving their names and faces around me in some future version of a police statement that will surely be filed, something strikes me.

I lurch up so fast that it makes me dizzy and I put my palm to my forehead, snapping my gaze to Edward's.

He looks to me drowsily, but his eyes are wide and alert once he catches my expression. "What is it?" he asks, bracing his palms against the arm rests of the rocking chair as if prepared to attack something.

"Before," I begin in a rapid voice, sweeping my hair away from my face. "In the bathroom when you said something was off, but you couldn't put your finger on it?" At his confused nod, I continue, "I know what doesn't make sense about this Edward. It's all so clear." I want to laugh as I throw the blankets off of me and begin pacing the room.

His eyes follow me, but he doesn't ease back into the seat. Instead he stands, his fingers close to the knife at his waist as his eyes scan the space with vigilance. "Tell me."

I stop and turn to him, raising my eyebrows. "Why do I know your name?" I ask.

"Because I told you," he answers, brow creasing in confusion.

I nod slowly. "Yes, but... James called you by your real name in the forest. He calls everyone by their real name." Something seems to flash in Edward's eyes and I nod in confirmation. "I know what all of you look like. What's to stop me from—"

"—turning all of us in anyways," he finishes and slaps his palm to his head, closing his eyes. "God, I am so fucking stupid. Why didn't I think of... God, he should have us wearing masks or something..." He trails off and sinks back into the chair, his face a mask of concentration and focus.

"Is he that stupid?" I ask.

Shaking his head, he scratches idly at the scruff covering his jaw. "No, there's no way he'd overlook something like that. I mean... if you only knew the extent of organization that went into this." He meets my gaze and is frighteningly serious. "We're talking months of arrangements. Maps and diversions, tow trucks, chauffer interceptions, a letter sent to you father—in handwriting that is almost exact to yours to throw him off of your disappearance, not to even mention this cabin, which has roughly thirty-seven locks throughout. It's too big of an investment for him, Isabella. I was the weakest link..." He trails off and runs his fingers through his hair agitated. "If we aren't wearing masks or using different names, it's not a mistake—"

"—he planned it that way," I breathe, just knowing that every detail of this was organized down to every point. Even sending Edward into the woods without a cell phone seemed too careless.

Or... maybe not.

"Oh, Edward," I sigh, slumping as I travel back to the bed. "Don't you get it? All this time you've believed that you were pulling the wool over his eyes by helping me, when actually—"

"—he's pulling the wool over mine," he finishes in a growl, burying his fingers into his hair, resting his forehead in his palms. "And not just me, but all of us. It's a fucking setup. It has to be, that son-of-a-fucking—"

Before he can complete his sentence, the sounds of the door unlocking disrupt him, causing us both to stiffen.

"Get under the covers," he hisses, slipping his hand beneath his shirt and presumably gripping the knife. As I comply and crawl beneath the quilt, he adds, "Act like you're sleeping."

I throw the blankets over my shoulder and turn toward the wall, stilling my body just as the door opens. I try to calm my breathing into a likely rhythm for sleep, my heart thrashing furiously as I hear the door close once again. Under my lids, my eyes cannot stay still, and I'm suddenly very happy that they can't see my face.

Chapter 14:

Tenebrous Alliances Against Demagogues and Villains, the Sanctity of Halcyon..

~|-----o|W.T.F|o-----|~

(A.K.A. Laps and Lips and Little Lectures.)

“How long has she been sleeping?” Jasper asks, and I’m so thankful to hear his voice instead of James’s that I have to suppress a gusty sigh.

“Little while,” is Edward’s murmured reply, and he’s rocking again, back and forth against the wood.

“Hmm,” Jasper hums, and the loud clunking of his boots seem to carry him to the table in the center of the room. A chair scratches across the floor as he sits. “Wanna’ take a break?” he offers.

“I’m fine. Thanks anyways,” Edward declines, his fingers tapping on the wood of the chair.

There is a long silence before Jasper sighs. “I can’t stay out there with him anymore,” he admits in a soft voice. “Two more days...” he adds in a breathy, whimsical voice. “Two more days and I’m done with his shit forever.”

Edward lets a pause build, and I can almost see his forehead creasing as he responds, “This your last job too?” Another silence, in which I can assume Jasper nods when Edward asks, “Going back to Texas?”

“Mhm, you know my mom’s down there. She’s losing the house. Bad economy and all...” he trails off and I roll my eyes behind my lids. Like behind every criminal, there’s a loved one in need. I know that’s bullshit.

Edward sighs, “I know that feeling,” and I can hear the hard frown on his lips.

“Plus, it’ll be easier there, away from Maria and all. Hell, maybe I’ll—” Jasper’s voice cracks and there’s a short gap in his words, the silence thick with some odd, palpable emotion. “Maybe I can even get clean, being with my mama,” he finishes in a wistful voice, full of longing and pain.

“Maybe,” Edward ultimately echoes, the sounds of his chair’s rocking growing further as he slows. “It’s easier to do right when you have someone to do it for,” he whispers quietly, then adds as a direct afterthought, “Hey, Jasper? Does James know about this? You going to Texas to be with your mom and get clean...”

A few seconds of breathing and Jasper answers, "Of course. Why the hell you think I'm here, doing this?" he asks with a hint of indignation. "He knew I needed a lump sum for the house, offered to let me in, kindhearted person he is." He says this with so much sarcasm that my lips twitch, and I'm deciding—drug addictions and criminal tendencies aside—I kind of like Jasper.

"I like you, Jasper," Edward says, copying my sentiments with such accuracy that it momentarily startles me. There is one last, long rock of his chair before it ceases, and I can perfectly envision him leaning forward, elbows resting on his knees. "So, I'm going to give you a bit of advice. Get the fuck out of here while you can."

I can hear the rain picking up outside, a gentle howling of wind in the distance that seeps through some far window or door in the house. Bits of breeze force themselves under crevices and leak through, peeking and dissipating through the hall. It sounds like there's quite a storm brewing.

"Oh, yeah? Is that a threat?" Jasper asks in a sharp voice, suspicious and defensive.

Edward sighs, chair clanking against the floor as he eases back. "Why do you always do that shit?" he asks. "Not everyone is out to fuck with you, Jasper. Maybe I'm just looking out for you. Ever think of that?"

Jasper scoffs. "And why would I need you lookin' out for me? I'm the one with seniority. You're the one that no one trusts. Always goin' arou—hey!" he suddenly growls. "Don't fucking look at me like that. This has nothing to do with..." He wavers, a shockingly heartbreaking crack of his voice making my brows furrow and my heart clench. He clears his throat and barks a bitter chuckle, "And anyways, these are pretty big words coming from another kidnapper. You're no better than him or me. There's no honor among thieves, Eddy-boy."

I frown as I discover how very jaded Jasper is. I wonder what he was like as child, before coming into this life and getting involved with the wrong people. I wonder what had brought him into it and imagine it must have something to do with this Maria girl he speaks of. Mostly I wonder what destroyed his spark and disillusioned him so significantly that even the thought of getting clean and having another life was like a faraway dream to him—intangible and unlikely, despite all of his longing for it.

Edward's chair is still, his breathing relaxed and shallow. "Isabella," he says lightly, and I wait for him to continue, curious as to what he'll say about me. Instead he sighs, "You can stop pretending now."

I turn cautiously, alarmed that he's revealing my act to this person, for even though I don't think him to be an evil person, I fear that his disenchanted attitude will get him into further trouble. I'd rather we not be dragged into it, but Edward's voice makes it clear that Jasper needs to understand, Edward and I aren't captor and captive. I slowly roll onto my back, peeking warily at Jasper's blank expression and then to Edward's encouraging one.

"It's okay. Jasper's cool," Edward reassures me with a calculating expression.

I snort and reply, despite myself. "Really? Because that whole conversation provided some pretty convincing evidence to the contrary." Jasper was likely right about there being no honor among thieves. Edward was a rare exception, and even he had issues with honesty.

Jasper's eyebrows are deeply furled as he gazes back and forth between us, sliding to the edge of his seat with an apprehensive expression. "You knew she was faking? Shit, Edward, why don't we just tell her everything? Maybe our driver's license numbers and directions to our houses. Fuck," he chastises Edward, clearly missing the connection between us.

I roll my eyes, hoping that Jasper doesn't possess a gun like James, even though I'm seriously doubting that he'd ever cause me harm. I know that he's going to need more than words. Jasper doesn't seem like an easy person to convince of anything, being so set in his ways and so accustomed to his lifestyle. Edward needs him on his side for any of this to work out, anyways. And I honestly don't want to see Jasper go down with James if he doesn't deserve it. I'd rather see him in that house with Texas, getting clean while he cares for his mother than rotting away in some remote penitentiary.

I throw the quilt off of me as I sit but change my mind and draw it around my shoulders as I swing my legs over the bed and stand. Their eyes follow me—Jasper's with caution and Edward's with eventual realization as I near his chair beside my bed. I eye Jasper pointedly as I turn and plop myself into Edward's lap. Jasper's lips part slightly as I lift my feet, wrapping the blanket around myself comfortably and burrowing into Edward's chest. His arms come around me, hugging me, and it's sweet and cute, and I think I want to hurl all over the fucking floorboards.

"Isabella, meet Jasper. Jasper, Isabella."

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance," I say with a polite smile, then correct, "Well, okay—not particularly."

He's still gawking at us, his head thrust back on his neck and his forehead creased rather comically.

"So, Juicy," Edward sighs into my hair and begins rocking, my feet wedging themselves between his thighs, just like that second night. "Tell me, how well can you describe Jasper here?" he asks, sweeping my hair back.

Grinning, I reply, "Pretty good. He's sort of unforgettable." I'm referring to things unrelated to his scars, but quickly realize how it could be insulting, so I hastily add, "You know, blonde curly hair, tall, white dude named Jasper. Not many of those 'round here."

Edward nods against my head, Jasper narrowing his eyes as we both rock, looking quite intimate. "And Laurent?" he murmurs, smirking against my ear.

God, he is really playing this shit up, isn't he?

I suppress a shiver as his breath washes over my ear, tickling me. "He's got that whole retro thing going on. The red stripe down the jacket? I'm pretty sure that's not all that common. And... well, I don't want to be rude," I add in a whisper. "but his nose... well, I mean come on. That humongous thing has to be a sketch artist's dream." I relax back into Edward, secretly enjoying the embrace and the rocking, exhaustion overcoming me once more as I feel that similar hum to the one in the forest.

"What are you doing with her, Edward? What is this?" Jasper asks in a high pitched voice, bracing to stand as his eyes dart to the door and back to us, suspicious and tense.

Edward's chest expands with a sigh and I yawn as he answers, "We're—" he pauses and seem to tilt his head to side, looking at me questioningly.

"Friends?" I hedge, holding my shrug.

He nods and agrees, "Sure. We're friends."

Jasper scoffs and finally lifts himself, hissing frenziedly, "Looks like a whole helluva lot more than friends. Are you insane? Do you have any idea what James will do to you? You're lucky you're still alive after that stunt you pulled out there, getting lost—"

Edward cuts him off, "I was screwed long before now, Jasper. He knew I was iffy about this whole thing and yet he sent *me* to get her? Does that make any sense to you?" he asks in a frustrated tone. His arms constrict around me, and I rest my head on his shoulder, watching the

muscles of his throat as he speaks. "We aren't wearing masks. Doesn't that seem strange to you? Or the fact the he calls us all by name. Do you think this is all coincidence? How about the fact that he's the only motherfucker going to get the money at the drop point. Christ, man. Use your fucking head," he snaps.

Jasper is expressionless as he stands before us, staring intently into Edward's eyes and gauging the honesty that lies there. The moment seems to stretch on for an eternity as I yawn once more, and Edward squeezes me, settling down a little further in his seat.

"Try to go to sleep," he requests in a hushed voice into my ear and begins rocking again. I feel like some version of a baby or toddler being rocked to sleep, and it annoys me. I'm nineteen. I have tits, three cars, access to a yacht, and a trust fund the size of Montana. I'm *not* going to be rocked to sleep like a fucking *child*.

Involuntarily, my hand curls under my chin, my glare at the skin of his neck transforming into a hooded, drooping stare. I'd never been rocked before—well, not that I can ever remember. Being on Edward is somehow more comfortable than the bed, his warm thighs and hard chest beneath me, the rise and fall of his breaths in perfect time with the rocks of the chair.

I frown and finger the edges of my quilt as my eyes close.

Jasper finally speaks then, his cool voice impossibly more lulling. "You think he's setting us up?" he asks, a twinge of anger lacing his disappointment. I reason that he must have had heart set on that money with the way his voice drops.

Edward hums in agreement, the rumble of his chest vibrating softly beneath me, and I want to ask him to never stop. That humming. It's relaxing...

"Maybe he just wanted to plant it all on you. Ever think of that?" Jasper spits defensively.

Edward scoffs, "Whatever makes you feel better." After a drawn silence in which I'm almost asleep, Edward continues, "You're not a stupid person, Jasper. Look at the big picture. He's going to run, and they'll have three people to take the fall in his place, which... lets face it, we know this town. That's what matters. After a year, they'll forget anyone named James exists while we rot in jail."

And with that I drift to sleep, Jasper and Edward's hushed dialog shaping my dreams as he rocks me in the chair, his arms not holding me prisoner, but just... holding me. It is beyond pleasant to be held in this way.

~|-----o|W.T.F|o-----|~

I awaken later with a start, disoriented and confused as I rock back and forth. I'm staring at Edward's neck again, my palm resting on his chest, and I swallow heavily as my eyes rise.

He's staring at me worriedly, brows softly furrowed as one of his hands sweeps my hair back. "Go back to sleep," Edward whispers.

Shaking my head and feeling a blush creep up my cheeks that I'm here with him, in his lap, I let my eyes adjust to the light and absorb the room. I'm startled to find Jasper in the same chair as before I'd fallen asleep. Looking to Edward, I ask in a rough voice, "How long did I sleep?" and rub at my eyes, fumbling for coherency.

"About five hours," he replies, still a hint of concern lacing his tone as he frowns, flattening his palm against my quilt-covered hip.

"Oh," I breathe in surprise, working to extract myself from his lap and feeling more than a little awkward at being watched while I slept there. I was somewhat used to Edward watching me sleep, but Jasper's eyes were highly speculative of Edward's hand on my hip, my cheek on his shoulder, my palm splayed across his chiseled chest. Truthfully, it felt much shorter than a mere five hours of sleep, and my body still yearns for more.

But I'm vehemently unwilling to drop my guard for any longer.

Jasper eyes me oddly as I lift myself from the chair, trying not to stumble over the quilt at my feet and wander back to the bed. I lower myself to the edge and push my hair out of my face, widening my eyes as I resolve to stay awake. Edward clears his throat and shifts himself, likely stiff from having me sleeping on him for so long.

"So," Edward begins while gazing at Jasper and rubbing his neck awkwardly. "The timeline..." he trails off, as if trying to get back on some track that I hadn't been present to hear.

"Right," Jasper shifts and leans forward, elbows resting on his knees, hands clasped. "We've gotta work fast, but that goes without saying. There's only thirty hours left, and I really can't think of any advantage James *doesn't* have." He says this with a hard scowl.

"He doesn't know *we* know," Edward reminds with optimistic, yet careful eyes. "I figure we can either overpower him with brute force, or just... let him think everything's going perfectly. Utilize the element of surprise," he shrugs.

I *really* like the way this conversation is going, and I lean forward enthusiastically, trying to soak up the details and use context clues to figure out what I'd missed while sleeping. Later, I promise, I'll make Edward explain the specifics of Jasper's epiphany, his blatant alliance, and anything else I'd missed.

Jasper sighs, "Not to suggest I'm against anything brute force, but..."

"Work smarter, not harder," Edward agrees with a decisive nod, pursing his lips thoughtfully. "Well, you know, there's always that camcorder," he remembers, a wicked smile playing at his lips.

Jasper seems to perk up, or at least, seems to be as close to perky as someone like Jasper can get. "You think we could get him to incriminate himself on camera?" he asks, amused but doubtful.

Shrugging, Edward replies, "If we planted it just right and acted cool, why not?"

Cutting in, I mumble, "Edward's an excellent actor," and his eyes dart to mine for a brief moment, immediately looking away, shame-faced.

"Yeah, it should probably be me," he agrees in a despondent voice. "I can get him to admit to having the files too, probably. Hell," he barks a chuckle. "You know how that asshole gloats. I wouldn't be surprised if he confessed to shooting Kennedy."

Jasper's lips quirk up sardonically. "You can give it a go, I 'spose. He's already sent the video to the Dwyers, but he's keepin' the cam in the supply room. You'd have to scout a good place to hide it, but you shouldn't haven't too much of a problem there."

"What about Laurent?" I cautiously ask.

They both look to me, and Edward shakes his head. "Too risky to involve him, Isabella. He might not seem that bad to you now, but... well, let's just say that Laurent's had his fair share of second chances, and fucked them all up willingly. The chances of him turning on James are..." He pauses and looks to Jasper.

"Non-existent," Jasper finishes matter-of-factly.

Frowning, I pick at my nails and nod in concession. Obviously, they know better than me about Laurent's intentions, but I feel as though he deserves better, having been completely opposed

to James' earlier behavior. He isn't a monster like James. Maybe he's just in a bad circumstance like Jasper.

Edward sighs and suddenly grips the sides of the rocking chair, standing with a hissing stretch and running his fingers through his hair. Turning to me, he shoves his hands in his pocket, toeing the floor with his boot as he stares at the ground. "Is there anything you need while I'm out there?" he asks in a quiet voice.

I open my mouth, but close it, my pulse accelerating and my tongue feeling unusually dry. "You're going *now*?" I choke, gripping the quilt to my stomach and swallowing in quick succession. He's going to grill James on camera, and if he gets caught, I'm certain I know what James will do to him.

He looks up at me through his lashes with a curved eyebrow. "Of course I'm going now. You heard Jasper. And anyways, it's time for shift change," he reasons with a shrug, glancing at Jasper, who only nods.

"But—" I try to argue, fighting to understand why this overwhelming fear is only gripping me now, when Edward is danger, as opposed to when I'd felt completely helpless to save my own life.

"Are you hungry?" he asks, already moving to the door. "Thirsty? You should go back to sleep while—"

But his voice catches as I lunge forward and grasp his arm, his every step bringing him one foot closer to his possible death in the next room. It's irrational and my fear takes me off guard. It's not that I need him here to protect me. I just need him here to be certain he's okay and unharmed. If anything happened to him....

Something within the pit of my stomach propels me forward in panic, needs to have him stay with me, close to my side. And this time, it has nothing to do with my own safety.

I gaze beseechingly into his puzzled eyes, my fingers constricting around the flesh of his arms, like he'd done to me so many times before. "Can't Jasper do it?" I beg, unable to mask the urgency and fear in my voice.

His forehead wrinkles. "No," he says slowly, covering my hand with his and gently prying my fingers from his arm. "You said it yourself, Isabella. I'm a good actor." His use of my full name feels formal and stiff and makes my stomach flip. Again, his eyes flatten and dull into a despondent vacancy, his lips pressed into a thin line.

I look to Jasper and briefly consider begging as my hands begin unconsciously wringing. “I know what I said, but...”

Comprehension flashes over Edward’s features, his lips dropping to a frown as his hands grasp my shoulders, pushing me back. He whispers low enough that I’m almost certain Jasper can’t hear. “He’s not going to hurt you.” Clearly misunderstanding my worry, he sits me in the rocking chair and extracts the knife from his waistband. His back is to Jasper so that he can’t see our exchange. “Put this under your blanket,” he orders softly.

“No!” I exclaim, alerting Jasper, whose eyebrows rise questioningly. In a lower voice, I whisper, “You might need it. For protection,” I add meaningfully.

He answers dryly, “He has a gun, Isabella. I don’t think a knife is going to do me a lot of good, if you know what I mean.” And then he tucks the knife under my quilt and goes to pull away, but my hands are on his shoulders, stubborn and desperate and... a little annoyed.

“Stop calling me that,” I grind, being pulled up with him infinitesimally until he stills, looming over me with a confused expression.

He rests his palms on the arms of the rocking chair and sighs impatiently, “Calling you what?”

“Isabella,” I answer, raking my eyes over the rough gruff of stubble that shades his sharp jaw and chin. I add, “I prefer Bella,” without *really* thinking about it. Hearing the words escape my own mouth is a little stunning, as I’ve never made any such request. I’ve never had a problem with anyone calling me “Isabella.” Before I heard Edward calling me “Bella” in my dreams, I had been ignorant about how pleasantly familiar the name felt.

He exhales a sharp sigh from the corner of his mouth, narrowing his eyes in scrutiny. “Since when?”

“Since now,” I hedge, but am unable to explain further. There’s no way he’d possibly understand when even I barely can.

“Okay,” he drawls, rolling his eyes. “Can I go now, *Bella*?” He emphasizes my name with a twinge of irritation, and it stings me, deep down—so much so, that I can feel my face fall. A confusing lump rises to my throat as I carefully mask my pained expression by turning my face into the quilt.

There is a sharp intake of breath, and then his hand is tugging my chin sideways, forcing me to meet his gaze. “I hurt your feelings,” he observes with incredulity and parted lips, eyes wide

and aghast. Unable to deny this, I simply gnaw at my lip. His eyebrows furrow in annoyance as he murmurs absently. "All your mixed fucking signals..." Leaning closer, his eyes are level with mine, searching and curious and pleading. He whispers in a feathery tone, "Why don't you just tell me how you feel? You've never had a problem with that before, and I... I can't read your mind, you know."

But it's almost as if he can because he's managed to divert the conversation to the thoughts that are making my chest feel heavy. "I—" Pausing, I realize that my mixed signals are confusing myself. I make an attempt to sum my feelings up into words, fumbling through the flurry of emotions that have been mounting for days, because I've never been *like this*. Unfortunately, the only declaration I can make with any confidence is a lame, yet sincere, "I want you to *not* be dead."

Something in my words make his eyes go flat, his lips thinning into a grim line. "You want me to *not* be dead?" he repeats dryly. At my nod he drops his chin, crestfallen as his shoulders slump and he breathes, "Is that... I mean, fuck, Bella. You don't even want Laurent sent to jail. Nice to see you've grouped me lower than common criminals." Chuckling bitterly, he fixes his eyes to mine, smiling sadly. "And here I was afraid you wouldn't give me the time of day..." he trails off as his vacant eyes bore into mine, his palms slipping from the wood of the chair as he backs away.

"Wait!"

Everything's coming out wrong. I can't seem to synchronize my words with my thoughts or my feelings. He acts as if he won't still when I reach out and grab his shoulders, but eventually relents with a huff. He looks down at me with tired eyes and a blank expression, the warmth of his stare stirring my comfort, even though I know he's trying to be cold to me as I'd been with him.

"This really isn't the time," he says as his hands go back to the arm rests, rocking the chair, and coincidentally myself forward to him. I gulp as our faces still inches apart and secretly agree. This really isn't the time for my freakish mood swings or indecision, yet I can't deny the ache that pulls at me when I imagine his absence.

So I close the distance with no apropos and put my lips to his. Our eyes cross as our gazes remained locked, and I can feel his jaw tightening, hear the creak in the wood floor below as his fingers curl around the flimsy arm rests. I pout my lips with one decent kiss and then lean back, deciding to keep it quick considering that the moment simply isn't appropriate.

Edward disagrees, of course. Before I can even make my back flush with the chair, his lips are crashing into mine, his eyes closed as he takes my lips with fervor. My breathing accelerates, washing our fused mouths in warmth as he rocks me into him and forces me closer. There is a soft “thud” as I return the kiss eagerly, and I belatedly notice that he’s dropped to his knees.

His hands are suddenly grabbing my hips and I find his thighs with the heels of my feet, pressing. He’s pulling me closer and pushing his face into mine, transforming my body into a delicate bow with the opposing motions.

My fingers are threading through his hair just as the sound of a throat being cleared causes me to stiffen.

Jasper’s voice is seething with annoyance, mingled with discomfort as he disrupts, “As much as I hate to interrupt the cheesy power ballad bullshit,” Parting, we both look to him with similarly blank expressions, sucking our lips into our mouths and sliding our hands away. He narrows his eyes in disgust and finishes, “I’m afraid if you don’t get the fuck out of here, I’m gonna’ change my mind, on grounds that you’re just grossin’ me the hell out.”

Chapter 15:

A Neoteric Awakening in Forms of Bravura, Clemency Undetermined.

~|-----o|W.T.F|o-----|~

(A.K.A. Shit hits the fan and splatters the walls with Ewww.)

Jasper lulls his head back and stares at the ceiling, mouth agape. “Stop fucking pacing,” he orders in exasperation for the fifth time. I have to give him credit, I suppose. He hadn’t used the expletives the other four times.

Ignoring his request, I capture a stray lock of hair that’s falling in my face, stretching it over my lips and chewing on it anxiously. “What time is it?” I ask.

He puffs his cheeks out and raises his face, his eyes narrowing into slits. “Has anyone ever told you that—”

“—I’m really annoying, blah blah blah—yes.” With a huff around my strand of hair, I growl, “Time, Eeyore!”

He glares at me as he removes a hand from his pocket, taking one glance at his watch and answering with a sharp, “Ten forty-six.”

I nod but muse worriedly aloud, “New shift starts at midnight, though. Right?” I can’t mask the concern in my voice as my bare feet patter across the floor, my arms folding around my chest and then falling at my sides and then propping my hands on my hips. I can’t seem to figure out what to do with them.

Edward’s flannel shirt, which he’d left to dry on the back of the chair earlier, flutters around me as I pace. I take quick, surreptitious sniffs of the worn fabric and let it soothe me. Jasper looks like he’s close to vomiting every time I do.

I jerk to a halt as Jasper’s voice takes on a mocking, high-pitched tone, his eyelids batting comically. “Oh my gosh, is my poor wittle Eddie-Lovey-Fuckey-Poo-Poo-Face going to be back soon?” His face drops as he scowls and adds in a low rumble, “Shut. The. Fuck. Up.”

Grinding my teeth, I hold his gaze as I flop onto the bed and raise my eyebrows. “You’re kind of a dickhead, you know?”

Eerily expressionless, he replies. “If you ask the time again, you’re going to find out just how much of a dickhead I am, and you ain’t seen shit, shug.”

I snort at his southern terms of non-endearment and am so close to asking him what time it is that I have to physically mash my lips together. I decide to save that up though and stare at him, pursing my lips. Jasper isn't so bad, really. He's one of those broody, jaded, cynical assholes that can probably come up with hilarious insults on the fly.

Then again, maybe I have some kind of freakish draw to all dickheads—or so it would seem.

I inspect his scars and try to figure out once again how they'd occurred, if for nothing more than to distract the bubble of anxiety that flutters my stomach. The pink is raised in small flecks, and I ponder whether they are the result of some sort of chemical splash or perhaps even an accident on gravel.

He shifts almost imperceptibly under my gaze, locking his jaw as he looks away. "Ain't exactly polite to stare, either," he grinds after a few moments of my close scrutiny. Realizing that his scars have probably given him some sort of complex, I apologize and quickly look away, grimacing.

"Why don't you just ask me already?" he grouches, propping his feet on a nearby chair and crossing his ankles. He looks down into his lap, cramming his fists into his pockets and veiling his face from me with his hair.

"How'd it happen?" I whisper after a moment, gnawing at my lip as his head cocks to the side with a quick exhale.

"Windshield," he answers curtly, shoulders rigid. His voice makes it apparent that he's not open to answering any further questions, so I instead offer a quiet, "Sorry," and begin fingering the hem of my flannel pants.

Changing the subject, I inquire, "So, how many people have you and James kidnapped?" I'm not asking out of bitterness or anger or mockery. Honestly, I really am curious as to the depth of this... crew... drug-ring... whatever.

Hiking a brow, he responds, "You'd be our first."

"Really?"

Sighing deeply, he explains, "I 'spose things kinda' escalated, ya' know? First you're doing simple deals off the corner, making deliveries, fencing goods... next thing ya' know, you're planning a kidnapping." He shrugs, though he diverts his eyes to the table. "If someone told me

a year ago I'd be doing this—" He gestures to the room "—I woulda' told 'em to lay off the drugs for a while."

After a moment of his silence, my forehead creases, and I peek up at him through my lashes. "Why didn't you stop if you hate it so much?" I ask.

Facing me with numb eyes, he replies, "Who said I hated it?" After a few moments of my intent stare, he rolls his eyes and looks away. "I hate the work, not the pay. Can't have one without the other. Plus," His eyes get tight around the edges, little wrinkles fanning the corners. "James has a way of manipulating people. Just like he can make you feel like you scum—like he did to you earlier—he can also make you think you're valuable and... worth something," he explains thoughtfully. "He's—well, for instance there's this woman, Victoria," he begins with a little more animation. "Really smart lady, just back from grad school, future of gold and all that nonsense," he snorts. "But once James sank his teeth into her—decided she was useful—she wasn't nothin' but another one of his puppets, you see? Such a waste," he mumbles the last part, shaking his head.

"And Maria?" I ask cautiously.

At this, his whole body grows rigid, nostrils flaring. "Maria's his step-sister. She's the female version of him, but—" He swallows, a sickened look on his face. "Worse in some ways, better in others."

I've unintentionally made the atmosphere thick and stressful, and it makes me frown. I'd preferred our jabbing and banter to his hard scowl and bouncing legs. In an attempt to lighten the mood, I chuckle, "Sounds like some mob stuff."

His eyes jumping to mine, he responds stoically, "More than you know, shug." He thumbs the tip of his nose and lowers his feet, turning to me and narrowing his eyes. "I've seen him break a man's leg in ten places for kicking the tire of his car." At my wide gaze, he continues with a smirk, "He once made ten of us—your Eddy-boy included—jump a local girl who threatened to snitch."

"A girl?" I screech.

Nodding, his eyes darken and look away. "We didn't really do much, though. None of us could—" His voice pauses with a crack, eyes downcast. "We didn't touch her, just scared her shitless, but—James assumed something *very* different. And we let him." He raises his

eyebrows meaningfully and I shudder at his insinuation. Sniffing, he leans back in his chair and looks away, muttering, "And those are the only stories I feel comfortable repeatin' to a lady."

Well, this is comforting, I think sardonically.

I purse my lips and shift so that I'm lying on my side, propped on my elbow and trying to think of anything but the fact that Edward is out there with the same man that breaks bones and has encouraged what I can safely presume is a savage gang raping. "What do you think will happen to him after..." I trail off meaningfully, chewing on my lip.

Jasper's face goes menacing, frighteningly clam. "If he's real lucky, he'll just go to jail. If I get a hold of him first..." Meeting my gaze, he is grim and entirely serious as he decides, "I'll kill the motherfucker."

I feel a shiver climb my spine at his sincerity, the coldness of his words and the vacancy of his stare. I imagine that James and Maria must have done quite a number on him to make him so willing to take that kind of retaliation—not that I'm lacking any confidence that James deserves it. But his confession doesn't make me fear for my own life. In fact, it makes me feel... safe and protected. I didn't know if Edward has it in him to go to such lengths. Jasper obviously would not think twice to protect me from James, if only for his personal desire to hurt him.

"I don't think I could take another person's life," I muse aloud, conversationally while twirling a lock of my hair around my index finger.

Snorting, Jasper looks away, tucking his hair behind his ear and staring into his lap. "You'd be surprised what you're capable of when the person deserves it, and you're in the position to give it to him," he says wisely, lifting his hand to finger the bridge of his marred nose thoughtfully.

I wrinkle my forehead and am about to question him further when his lips quirk up into a smile, and he faces me. "You're probably more of a 'get-him-in-the-manhood' type anyways. Which—" He holds his palms up in the air. "I ain't got no personal qualms with, mind you. You ever find yourself face-to-face with that monster, you knee him in the balls hard as ya' can. Ain't nuthin' more simultaneously painful *and* humiliating for a man."

"Ha!" I bark a chuckle. "Guys always see that coming. I might be more of kneecap kind of gal, you know? Get all Tanya Harding on his ass." At this he dips his head in an appreciative nod, silently agreeing as the room is once again emerged in silence.

Time stretches on and on, and I can't find any further topics of discussion, so I strain my ears to hear Edward's distant voice, to be certain that he's okay and that his plan is working, but all I

hear is Jasper's breathing and the tapping of his fingers against the wood of the table. I chew at my nails—an uncharacteristic gesture—and feel restless, resisting the urge to get up and pace once again.

After what seems like an hour, the words are pushing at my lips, begging to be freed into the expanse of space between Jasper and me. I press my lips together while my knee bounces impatiently, making an honest effort to not annoy him further—until I eventually realize that I don't care. "What time is it?" I blurt.

His curled fist comes down on the table with a loud bang, shaking the bottle of water that rests atop it.

I stifle another smile.

He meets my gaze, and our previously amicable atmosphere vanishes as he answers in a hiss, "It's time for you to shut your motherfucking mouth before I do it for you." After a moment he adds in a thoughtful, yet irritated voice, "Come to think of it, that'd be some goddamn glorious shit."

"Whatever," I intone shrilly with a glare, standing once again and peeved at being threatened when I know how empty it is. The muscles around the thin edges of my eyes twitch. "I'd have your fucking throat slit before you could bastardize another negative. I *ain't* exactly too fond of you, either." I punctuate this with the knife in my hand and imagine I must look pretty bat-shit—though I can hardly care. Waiting another hour—possibly much more—for Edward to return seems unfathomable. I'll explode.

I recognize his scowl at the blade. Evidently, Jasper is a little put-out that Edward left me with a weapon, as opposed to him.

My breathing speeds as my eyes flit about the walls of the room, my fingers restless and twitching around the blade. I feel as though this space is suffocating me. It feels like the walls are getting closer, caging me in and causing a sudden vertigo to sweep over me. My palms sweat. My feet itch. My throat constricts, and my teeth mash together. Tendrils of my hair stick to my temples, gluing themselves in serpentine tacks that I can feel pressing against me. The stale air curls around my throat and squeezes with invisible fingers, my head tipping up in an attempt to breathe. I struggle to find some reason to get out of this room, beyond the locks and the uncertainty and the plywood and the walls and the stagnant air that asphyxiates me.

With an eager, raspy breath, I insist, "I have to pee."

His eyes lurch to mine, jaw dropping. “You—” I can see his fingers clamping into his palm, his nostrils flaring as he stands with a stomp. Something in my expression must halt his coming tirade because he snaps his lips closed and turns. “You’re going to make someone a very unlucky man one day,” he growls as he goes to the door, pulling out a set of keys and unlocking them one by one. As he slides the keys into the lock, I shuffle restlessly beside him, chest heaving while I hear him grumble. “I pray to fucking God it’s Edward.”

I gasp when the door opens, a large waft of gusty, cool air rushing into me and fluttering my hair back off my neck. I decide that I hadn’t been wrong as Jasper mimics my reaction, closing his eyes for a second and relishing in the false freshness of the house. They’d definitely failed to consider what sealing this room would do, but luckily, I’m out.

Jasper doesn’t grasp my arm or any such thing as he leads me down the hallway with soft steps. I strain my ears to hear voices but can only catch low, unintelligible mutters that don’t sound like Edward at all. I peek my head down the end of the hall when we approach the bathroom and am granted the vision of the living room.

Jasper seems to be observing with me as my hand lingers on the knob, leaning himself against the wall and craning his neck.

Though we can hear voices, the people speaking are out of our thin line of vision. I turn the knob and enter, closing the bathroom door behind me but am met with the abrupt obstacle of Jasper’s boot.

He raises an eyebrow when I turn to him. “You can’t be in there alone,” he whispers aghast, eyes crinkling at the edges. “That’d be suspicious as hell.”

“You are *not* watching me *pee*,” I hiss angrily, but he merely rolls his eyes and forces the door open with little effort.

Once inside he closes the door and travels to the sink, turning the tap on high. “We have to be careful. Mutinies ain’t exactly something you wanna’ fuck up.” Then he turns away, offering me an askew glance as he says, “Piss like this or hold it, shug. Don’t make a damn bit of difference of me.”

I close my gaping mouth and smack my feet against the tile as I stomp to the toilet and drop trou. I glare at his back as I float over the toilet—too disgusted with the thought of James’ ass touching it to do so myself—and am thankful that my time in the forest with Edward has helped me overcome my weird bladder shyness.

He's motionless as I do my business then stand, pulling up my pants and flushing before going to the sink. I wash my hands thoroughly, getting the soap under my fingernails and scouring my palms with care. I try to draw it out in an effort to simply... not go immediately back into that room.

It is on my third lather that Jasper finally turns with an impatient huff. I cut off the tap with an annoyed fling of my fingers, already fumbling for another excuse to exit the room in the very near future. But once the room has been ridded of all sound, we can hear something.

Shouting.

Jasper's pale eyes jerk to the door. He puts his palm in the air, gesturing for me to be silent and still. I close my mouth to silence the nervous breathes that emerge in little whooshes, my pulse accelerating as I turn my ear to the door.

The shouting escalates.

I shoot my panicked eyes to Jasper's, who's standing non-moving and sweeping his eyes across the room distractedly. All I can make out is distant curses, fevered and insistent, and my mind whirls, my hand locking around the knob of the door as I press my ear against it.

There is only the intermittent "Fuck," being purged loud and clear enough for me to hear, but the tones of their voices make it plain that this is more than a minor quarrel.

Alarmed, I look to Jasper and mouth, "Edward?" to which he only offers a tenuous shake of his head, furrowing his scarred brows in concentration.

My nails dig into the brass painfully as my cheek rests against the wood. My clammy, nervous sweat is returning tenfold. I flatten my palm against the door and watch Jasper intently, alerting him as I turn the knob with my slippery hand. His eyes grow wide as I begin inching the door noiselessly open, positioning myself to exit.

Before he can voice a protest, a large hand wraps around my shoulder and yanks me roughly from the doorway.

I squeak, my heart jumping as a large hand clamps itself over my mouth. And then I'm being dragged down the hallway, crushed to a chest and kicking my legs wildly. We're back in the stifling room before my mind can process it, and I'm being shoved inside.

I gasp for air as I whirl, meeting a startlingly green gaze. Edward's face is blanched and taught, the evidence of his exhaustion hidden behind affrighted and shifty eyes. And I feel as though every ounce of terror is drained from my shoulders. The realization that Edward isn't the one arguing with James is so relieving that I'm only just grasping the solidity of my connection to him.

Jasper emerges directly behind him and asks, "What's going on?" before I can coherently form the question myself.

Edward eases the door nearly closed and mutters frantically, "It's Laurent. Shit's hitting the fan—he's suspicious."

"I told you that you should've included him!" I whisper angrily, though my chest is pounding a frenzied rhythm.

Ignoring me, Edward turns to Jasper and informs anxiously, "Looks like we might have to reconsider that whole brute force thing."

They stare at each other with similar expressions, jaws taught, fists curled, eyes alert as their ears assess the intensification of the distant argument.

I wrap my hand around Edward's wrist, forcing his eyes to mine as I shake my head vehemently. "We can just slip out the back and run," I protest, eyes pleading as I tug at his arm. His eyes flit to my shoulders, absorbing his flannel shirt on me and he simply stares, wordless for a moment.

"The video," Jasper asks, stealing Edward's warm eyes from me.

He sighs, ruffling his hair with a disgruntled tugging. "I have it, but I can't get to it where they are. They'll see me."

"Fuck the tape," I hiss. "We run and I can call Charlie. He'll believe when I say it was James and not you two."

Jasper seems to consider this with a reserved and grim face, but Edward... he seems royally pissed, nostrils flaring. "I'm not leaving without that evidence," he growls and I nearly recoil, his eyes alight in fury and determination. "He mentions the files—"

"It's not worth it!" I assert, but this only seems to enrage him further.

Snatching his hand back from mine, he hisses angrily, "I didn't go through all this shit to run away like a coward when I'm this close to—" Pausing, he clenches his teeth and pinches the bridge of his nose. His clenched eyes ease second by second until they finally open. "I can't leave without it. I'm sorry," he ultimately sighs and looks to me imploringly, the same unfathomable anguish pulling and pushing him in two opposite directions.

I know that Edward knows running is the smart thing to do, and yet... this determination to complete his mission—clear his father's name—is so important to him that he'd risk getting himself killed. My heart plummets to my toes as I realize there is no swaying him, his eyes and posture firm, body gearing itself up for a fight.

I realize that *this* is my worst nightmare. Not having pictures of me taken in humiliating positions. Not being lost in the woods. Not even being kidnapped or having James' calloused fingers raking over my chest. Watching helplessly as Edward prepares to possibly die is my worst nightmare.

Without thinking, I shove the knife into his hand, knowing that it's the only thing I can offer. If I could stop him and make him stay or run, I would, but I'm powerless. He barely regards its presence as he tucks it into his waistband and listens to the escalating argument intently.

Frozen, I struggle for breath as he reaches for the door and locks gazes with me. "Stay here. In. This. Room. Do not leave for *anything*. You understand me?" he orders and all I can do is nod and clutch my abdomen, which is churning and fluttering nervously.

Jasper's arms flex, and he sweeps his hair back, inhaling a steeling breath and exiting the room first. Edward only meets my terrified gaze for a split second, trying to reassure me with the confidence in his as he slips out the door and closes it behind him.

And now I'm in this fucking room again.

I huff and puff the air madly as I resume my quick pacing. My fingers pull and tug at each other, the clamminess of my palms making them slip and slide against one another's skin. I put my palms on the plywood and push, bracing my feet against the floor. I'm not sure why I'm pushing on a wall, but all I know is that it's too close. The walls are going to implode, swallow me, crush me flat against them like a wayward insect, I just know they will.

Unlike before, I try to not hear what's happening outside the confines of my prison, too afraid and cowardly of hearing Edward being injured. I fervently push out all images of guns and

knuckles against flesh and knives and blood and corpses and James stalking away victoriously to the drop point and drinking our families dry.

It doesn't take long for it to feel like air is gone, the heat of the room oppressive and thick. I can feel the heat of my blood rushing through my veins, waiting for someone to walk back in the door, praying I don't hear a gunshot.

Just as the thought echoes in my mind, I hear the blatant, booming "pop" penetrating the fibers of wood and sheetrock separating me from him.

Everything stills.

My feet lock into place, my breath catches in my throat, my head inclines to the floor, unconsciously straining my ears to hear something. But there is utter and complete silence—silence so heavy that I can almost feel it pressing on the crown of my head.

It only takes me the span of three seconds to sprint to the door and thoughtlessly fling it open.

I'm not thinking, and even though I can realize how very stupid it is to leave the room—to disobey Edward—I *have* to know.

Not knowing is the very worst thing, my mind left to form vague and improvised visions of possibilities. It's almost like I know I'll find him lying on the floor as I pad down the hall, lips thinned and hands hanging limply at my sides. His shirt flutteres and sways behind me, flapping open at my sides, and I clutch the long sleeve cuffs in my hands. It's like I'm walking the path to my destruction and... if he's dead then why does it matter?

It's easier to do right when you have someone to do it for.

My feet are nearly silent, but then again, all I can hear is the whooshing of blood filling my ears, lush waves that ebb and flow in a cacophony of fuzzy static. The hallway is dark as I round the corner and spot the living room.

The light from the space is dim but somehow bright. Its floral sofa and loveseat are vacant, the space between them and the television seeming to go on for miles. I can hear shuffling in the adjoining room, which I assume to be the kitchen, so I approach it dazedly.

My footfalls are dull thuds, and my face feels numb and hot and pale and flushed all at once. The force that drives me is the probable vision of Edward's body on the tiles, a ragged hole in

his steaming flesh. I push a balled fist into my abdomen as I stalk forward, the tunnel of my vision leading me to a narrow entryway beyond the room.

When I reach it, I make no attempt to hide myself or be covert. Instead I just stand there in the middle of its void, staring forward into the kitchen and digging my knuckles into the soft flesh of my stomach. I can see Jasper's back, his hands buried into his hair as he looks downward, face hidden. James is hunched over the motionless body on the floor, whispering orders to have it removed and going through the pockets of the person beneath him. The form shakes with his ministrations, flopping listlessly onto the tile as James checks pocket after pocket, back and front, side and within.

But none of that matters.

Edward stands against the refrigerator with cold eyes as he surveys the pooling of blood that creeps toward the toes of his boots. His hair is wild like he'd been running his fingers through it all night. His lips seem chapped and thin as he stares on expressionlessly, gazing into the vacancy of Laurent's dead eyes.

But *he* is alive. The sight of him standing so very *not* dead unravels the knot in my belly, freeing it with a sigh that I fear they may hear. They don't.

Edward sidesteps and swallows, locking his jaw as he communicates something I can't comprehend to Jasper with his eyes. He tilts his head one way, toward the old stove at Jasper's side, and I struggle to decipher their meaning.

Jasper looks down at the stove and I catch the side of his marred face, eyebrow quirking as he shrugs and wraps his fingers around the handle of a large, cast iron skillet.

I gasp as he raises it in the air with a subtle clank that James hears. James turns to regard it but not before Jasper swings his arms forward, the bottom side of the cast iron skillet making a sickeningly loud "crack" against his temple. The gun James was holding slides across the tile with a drawn clatter.

The sound of that pan against his skull resonates and makes my own head throb. I twirl around and flatten myself against the wall. I cover my ears as I hear more shuffling and thuds, cracking and grunting, and Jasper spitting, "Grab his feet!" It goes on for what feels like forever, and I reason that two against one should be quite easy, right?

That is until I hear another large crack and a grunt that I'd recognize anywhere.

I peek around the corner. James has gotten the knife from Edward and my breath escapes in a gusty 'whoosh' as he holds it to his throat.

All three of them are huffing sharp breaths, faces red. Jasper is standing to the side as James snaps, "Make on move and I'll slit his fucking throat." Edward gulps and it presses the knife into the thin flesh of his neck. He winces. James sneers sideways at him as he growls, "I want to know what the fuck is going on. Now."

Jasper interjects, "Thought maybe you could tell us."

James and Jasper begin arguing back and forth, heated words about lack of masks and using names and set-ups, but I can't concentrate. My eyes are fixed on Edward's, staring blankly ahead as he stands rigid and still with his hands in the air. I can see him calculating and subtly panicking as the knife presses against him.

I know better than to think Jasper can talk him down from this. James will kill them both, surely. My eyes quickly scan area, for I can't be entirely useless. Maybe I can make a diversion and distract him long enough to let them gain the upper hand again.

Then, looking down to the linoleum beside my feet, I see the gun.

Quietly, almost softly, I take one step toward it and bend to pick it up off the tile, the long flannel jacket around me brushing my bare toes.

Its silver is heavy in my hand, reflecting the beam of the overhead light as it throws rays into my eyes. I've never used a gun before and have no experience with them other than what Charlie had taught me as a child about never touching his.

I swallow as Jasper continues accusing him, James making no attempt to deny any of it. Laurent's body is just.... *laying* there. I've never seen a dead body before and I sway, gripping the wall for support as I fight down the nausea that emerges. The pool of blood looks black below his head, his eyes open and staring at nothing.

I try to avoid looking at the corpse as I gulp and point the gun at James shakily. Once he sees me, there's no going back. As I come into view, Edward's eyes suddenly lurch to mine, as if he can feel me when the others are still arguing. His posture grows impossibly more panicked and it looks as though he's trying to shake his head, the blade slicing deeper. I gasp.

I quickly put my thumb to the hammer and cock it, a distinct "click" echoing through the room.

Their eyes jump to mine, words catching in their throats as Edward's jaw locks. He looks really quite angry with me, but I keep the gun pointed at James' face—eyes wide and lips parting in shock. I've visibly taken him off guard as he remains speechless for an endless moment.

Eventually, his bloody lips press together, his eyes narrow and cutting. "You should be careful where you're pointing that thing. You don't know how to use it," he says, darting his eyes to Jasper's, who stands motionless as he stares blankly at me.

"I think I can figure it out," I swallow. Charlie taught me about safeties, but considering he just shot Laurent, I know it'll be disabled. "I'm pretty sure you just pull the trigger. Right?" I ask shakily and they collectively flinch.

James' teeth seem to grind further as he speaks sideways at Jasper, "You take care of this, I'll give you Laurent's cut," with a sparkle in his eye.

Jasper snorts and says with an uncharacteristic politeness, "Thanks, but you can go fuck yourself," and hisses as he cradles his hand to his chest, obviously injured—likely from James' bruising face.

James is still holding the knife to Edward's throat and I watch it intently, only granting James' eyes the intermittent glance. His grip around the knife tightens, and his eyes.... He looks almost *nervous*. "Come on, Princess," he tilts his head and smiles warmly. "You aren't a killer, now are you?" He's not being condescending. He's attempting to sound friendly, mentoring.

Seriously? "Wanna' find out?" I ask.

Maybe I'm not a killer. But it'd be *really* easy to change that. A flick of my finger would end his world.

The shift in power would be almost comical if Edward weren't standing there with a knife pressing into his jugular.

Edward, staring pointedly into my eyes, finally speaks, lips barely moving. "Bella, give the gun to Jasper—" he murmurs, but is disrupted by a firmer pressure of the blade to his neck. He hisses in pain as his skin spills over and under the blade.

James snaps, "Don't talk to her!" and keeps pressing. I reason that much more pressure and Edward would be bleeding rather profusely.

“Let him go!” I plead, incapable of watching Edward in this position for a moment longer. I can feel tears prickling at the back of my eyes, hot and making my vision blur. “Please.” Instead of releasing him, James’ eyes are confused and enraged, the blood from his lip dripping down his chin.

Edward carelessly speaks again, “I’m okay Bella, just give the gun to Jasper and leave, alright?” Once again, the knife is pressed further into his neck and I can see blood rising to the surface of the skin, bubbling out in small drops. He winces, closing his eyes.

“Stop it!” I shriek, fingering the trigger and watching the minute trickling of blood run down Edward’s pale neck. If I give Jasper the gun, I have no way of knowing what might happen. He could aim for James and hit Edward. His thirst for revenge against his leader could make him careless and irrational. I don’t know if I can trust him with Edward’s life—something seemingly more precious than my own.

James, still confused, watches mine and Edward’s exchange with suspicious eyes, our gazes locked and intense as Jasper stands by and awaits my next move.

After a moment of total impasse, James’ jaw locks, comprehension flashing in his cutting blue eyes as he hisses, “You been fuckin’ her haven’t you,” into Edward’s ear.

The whole room seems to tense, Edward going impossibly more rigid as Jasper stiffens. It seems to confirm his accusation, his nostrils flaring as he glares sideways at Edward.

“Gimme’ the gun, shug,” Jasper whispers, but James simply presses the blade farther, Edward’s pained hiss making my chest tighten.

“How about not, *shug*,” James sneers and I know I don’t have much time. His patience is wearing thin, amplified by the realization that Edward and I are... something more. Not only is he angry and defensive, but he appears ironically betrayed. His grip on the knife makes his knuckles white, hand trembling with rage as he looks to Edward, eyes narrowed. “I’ve had people turn on me for money, but really? For some plain, overrated... *whore*?” he asks incredulously.

I then experience one of those defining moments where I know I’m going to shoot him. It’s the same as knowing when he makes the decision to take Edward down with him, his other hand taking a handful of copper hair and yanking his head back.

I can see Jasper tensing out of my periphery, readying himself to lunge forward as time slows. My fingers, sweating and shockingly steady, tighten around the gun and I make the decision.

"I am *not* a whore."

I pull the trigger.

I anticipate the kickback of the gun, but not the deafening 'pop' that accompanies it. My ears ring shrilly as I watch James' leg suddenly buckle. Edward is ducking out from under his arm before James even hits the floor, blood now pooling under his body instead. I stagger back, close my eyes and immediately bring my hands to my ringing ears, pressing the handle of the gun against one as I rub the other. My eardrums ache painfully and I flex my jaw, trying to accommodate the odd itching that follows.

Then the gun is being suddenly pried from my hand, and I open my eyes to see Edward standing before me, wide-eyed and paled.

His mouth is agape before he suddenly screeches, "You fucking shot him!" and then gestures to James on the floor, screaming in pain, trembling and clutching his leg. I avoid the sight of his blood, turning my face and focusing on Edward's bright green eyes. I realize that we've won. Edward has a shallow cut on his neck that he presses his palm too, wincing, but is otherwise unharmed. James is incapacitated and we can finally leave. It feels like the weight of the whole week is being slowly lifted from me, making me feel light and utterly exhausted. Overcome as I am, I want to collapse and jump, cry and smile, sleep and fuck... all at once.

I defend with a little indignation, "What? It's just a kneecap."

"You—" he keeps saying and then pausing, before finally meeting my gaze and raising his brows. He holds up the gun. "You wait 'til your dad hears about this," he says.

Rolling my eyes, I snatch a towel from the nearby counter and hurriedly press it to his throat, attending to his wounds as he had done for me. He tilts his head to the side and stares warmly into my eyes, covering my hand with his palm. He doesn't need to thank me, but he does.

Jasper cuts in then, reaching down to James who is too distracted by his pain and misery to care that someone is retrieving his cell phone from his pocket. He grumbles, "I woulda' aimed for his balls, but... whatever," and shrugs, flipping the phone open and dialing nine-one-one.

Chapter 16:

The Imbroglia of Wary Beneficence, Centers of Attention, and Plenary Interaction.

~|-----o|W.T.F|o-----|~

(A.K.A. Christian Who?)

I suppose I've always been a socially awkward person. Or maybe... "socially anxious" would be more appropriate?

I pace the floor of my bedroom and only stop when I pass the tall mirror above my vanity. I flatten my palms to my hair and smooth it down before retracing my steps.

The wood floor is worn in a cool, antiquated kind of way. There are deep scuffs from when my bed had been moved in here, and the chair by my desk has left two distinct tracks from pushing it out. Charlie had wanted to buy me something newer, sleeker, with wheels to go with the new computer, but I kindly declined.

With a sigh, I halt my pacing at the foot of my bed and flop onto it with a long exhale, the sides of Edward's worn flannel shirt sreading out around me. I would attempt to smell it, but sadly, his scent is long gone from it's thin fabric. I then stiffen and lurch up, snapping my eyes to the mirror across the room and smoothing down my hair again. I lie once again, but this time, gingerly, and stare up at my ceiling.

This house had been Charlie's ever since he and Renee had married. He can afford something bigger and newer, I'm certain, but he gets easily attached to familiarity, set in his comfortable routine of daily habits and simple living.

I want it more than anything.

It's been three days since Jasper had called the police in that little cabin in the woods, and it feels as though I don't know where to belong anymore. It was easier in the forest... maybe even the cabin too. I was in-between. I was neither here nor there. It was a mere stop on a route, a layover, and now that I've finally arrived, I find that it doesn't feel like my home.

The new bed that Renee had custom-ordered for me is big and comfortable but stiff. It needs to be worn in a bit, I suppose. The large closet is filled with my clothes from San Diego. In fact, it is brimming with them, clothes shoved above and below and in boxes in the attic—but I have no desire to wear them.

Instead, I've spent the last three days in my sweatpants, which is strange to me. All the time in the forest I'd been anxious to wear something else and *not* have "Juicy" spelled across my ass.

But the pants are comfortable—even more so than they had been before the forest. There is a hole near my calf from a gnarled and thorny vine that had sliced my skin and made me bleed. The stain is still visible if I look closely enough.

Charlie met with a shocking amount of resistance when he tried to throw them away. As a result, he compromised with me, agreeing to simply have them dry-cleaned.

Clearly, I'm losing my mind.

Even Charlie feels foreign to me, the grey peppering his stubble and hair surprising to me in many ways. We had talked so much before I'd decided to visit. I feel like I know him, and yet he's a stranger. I wonder if he feels similarly about me, and reason he must, given the way in which he'd spent the last three days refusing to leave my side.

He asks me random questions – things fathers should know, but he's long forgotten. My favorite food, my favorite color, the shampoo I use, what I enjoyed doing on the weekends. He's trying to get to know me, and I him.

It feels weird.

I stand up again and go to my closet, opening the door and frowning at the rows of clothes. I can't find anything to wear. Everything in here is expensive and... formal. Even the casual wear seems formal to me. I wonder how wasteful it would be for me to throw everything out. All of it. Even my fucking socks and bras and underwear.

With a growl, I begin grasping fabric and throwing it angrily to the floor at my feet. I try to find anything I'm terribly attached to but find nothing. There is a low cut dress meant to make me look taller. I rip it down the middle as I fling it aside and continue my purging. *All pinks must go!* I decide, and I rake my eyes over the assortment, picking out everything pepto, pastel, and rose-colored. I then decide that all reds must go (I'm not the right complexion, and it draws attention). I then decide that everything white, green, yellow, baby blue, and black must go. It is only when I realize that the rack is empty that I divert my attention to the shoes lining the floor.

I go through my shoes one pair at a time, tracing my eyes over the sizes and color and adding them to the heap. *Size six blue pumps... size six athletic sneakers... size six calf-high boots... size six summer flat sandals...* I grip my hair and shoot up from my crouch, my wild eyes darting to the window. Flinging myself to it, I fumble with the latch and swing it open, bracing my hands against the sill and leaning out.

As loud as I can possibly manage, I scream to the forest across the street, "I'M A SIZE FUCKING SEVEN! YOU HEAR ME? SEVEN! NOT SIX! NOT SIX AND A HALF! SEVEN-SEVEN-SEVEN—!"

"BELLA!" A shout cuts me off, and my voice stalls. I look down to see Charlie in the driveway, slamming his cruiser door and looking at me as if I might jump. My eyes flit to the red, antiquated truck parked on the grass beside his, and it makes my tension melt.

I'd seen the truck during our trip to La Push the day prior.

Charlie had deemed the rez as "suitable" for me to visit, so long as he was with me. The visit upset me. For most of the day, Billy's son had salivated over me like a dog. It was gross and disconcerting after everything that had happened. I kept my distance from him, but I couldn't help being drawn to the truck.

The truck is old. Crappy. Probably a piece of total shit. It is poor and normal and... simple.

And all I had to do was ask once, and Charlie bought it for me right away.

"Hi, dad," I chuckle nervously and begin flattening my hair again, tucking it behind my ear. I'd spent so much time trying to give him a good impression of me and here I was, blowing it.

His thick mustache ruffles up as he grimaces. "What the hell are you doing screaming out your window?" As he speaks, he moves the trunk and opens it, absently removing large, brown paper bags.

"Oh!" I squeak, holding out my palms. "I'll help with that!" And then I'm sprinting down the stairs, flinging the door open as I patter across the cement walkway to the drive. He is still eyeing me strangely as I sidle up to him and grab one of the smaller bags from the trunk, offering him a wide grin.

I've been trying to make it easy for him to have me around. I wash dishes and do laundry and cook. If Renee knew, she'd probably shit a golden brick. But I actually rather like taking care of myself—and him. All those years of having people do things for me had made me weak in ways I never comprehended. I want to do chores and get dirty. I want to know how much detergent to use for a large load. I want to mop the floor and automatically *know* that you don't wax flimsy linoleum.

I *want* to stay in Forks.

The whole debacle hadn't lessened my desire to live in this town. If anything, it strengthened it. There's no way I can return to that other life and ever convince myself I could be happy.

Charlie and Renee even had a 'phone conference' regarding my future.

They've been very hovery since the whole forest and cabin thing. I mean... geez. I get kidnapped *once*... I snort, but begin recalling the shooting and the events following, even though I've been trying to push them out of my mind for days.

After Jasper had called the police, everyone was quiet, waiting anxiously for them to arrive. Edward had gotten his tape from the camcorder and sat me down on the sofa, worried that the events had put me into some kind of shock. But I wasn't in shock. I just... was. I watched the television—the channel James had left it on—and waited for my dad to arrive while carefully ignoring the screams and moans coming from the kitchen. The blood had been a bit much for me, admittedly, and my stomach was close to purging my ham and cheese with mayo.

When Charlie did arrive, he was positively frantic. I'd never seen Charlie so visibly distressed in my younger years. I always figured his time in law enforcement had hardened his exterior—made him outwardly collected, though I'm sure on the inside, it was probably a different story. Being older made me see him in a different light, however. He was regal and had an air of power about him that demanded respect.

Charlie had gone for Edward and Jasper first, gun drawn while shouting for me to get out of there. Seeing a gun pointed at them, Jasper and Edward's immediate compliance, and Charlie's frightful fury, I put my body between them and Charlie's gun, holding up my hands. I certainly didn't go through all that shit to save them just to have my dad get trigger happy.

It took what seemed like hours to convince Charlie that Jasper and Edward weren't the perpetrators. His eyes kept shifting back and forth, his gun still drawn, even though they were both on their knees, hands clasped behind their heads. I had him inspect my gauzed hand, crediting the careful medical attention to Edward, and the incapacitation of the attacker to Jasper. I pointed out Edward's wound and the knife they'd find beside James writhing body.

Charlie couldn't believe I had shot him. Jasper had offered earlier to take the fall, but I'd declined and proceeded to tell Charlie the truth of the entire event. Well... mostly truth.

I was thankful the two could hear me as I verbally cleared them of any responsibility for planning the kidnapping. To anyone else, it would have seemed that the two had worked

together to covertly assure my safety. I figured there was no other way around it—Jasper and Edward technically being co-conspirators before the fact.

The emergency responders removed me from the cabin first, wrapping one of those scratchy, brown police-issued blankets around my shoulders. I peeked behind me once to catch Edward's eye as he sat on the sofa and began explaining the events of his week himself. He gave me a minute nod and diverted his attention to the officer, Jasper in the hallway speaking to another. Charlie turned me away as a covered gurney holding Laurent's body was wheeled out. James came next, grunting and cussing and shooting me a glare that made Charlie's hand rest on his holstered gun.

Charlie stuck to my side like super-glue after putting me in the cruiser, constantly asking the same questions over and over again. "Are you hurt? Are you cold? You sure you're alright?" These panicked inquiries were only separated by the occasional comments, "You're safe now. They won't let him get you. I can't believe I let this happen. Are you hurt?"

Charlie drove me straight to the hospital when I refused the dramatics of an ambulance. The nurses and doctors poked and prodded, and I only managed to get Charlie to vacate the room when I had to don one of those awful gowns.

I kept asking if Edward was there but the hospital staff evaded my questions. It wasn't until they finally let me leave and go to the station to make an official statement that I caught sight of him.

He was sitting beside one of the desks with what I assumed to be his mother and father sitting at his side. They both looked tired and fretful, eyes scanning the area as they each flanked him. When we locked gazes, he'd paused his words and leaned forward, as if he might come to me, but he didn't, instead slumping back in his chair and offering me a very small, very sad smile.

He'd looked exhausted.

"So, for dinner I was thinking..." Charlie breaks me from my inner musings and fumbles through the bags before emerging with a box of frozen fish sticks. "Like old times, eh champ?" And then he ruffles my hair, moving around me to place them in the freezer.

"That's fine," I agree quietly with a nod as my hands begin wringing nervously. "What are your plans for the day?" I ask casually, lifting myself to the counter and swinging my legs back and forth. I begin picking at the taped gauze covering my hand, peeking at him through my lashes.

“No plans.” He shrugs, eyeing me suspiciously as he opens a cabinet and begins unloading the canned foods.

I hum in acknowledgment, a little inwardly irritated that “No plans” probably means that he’s staying in the house all day on a Saturday just to watch over me. “I’ll be fine alone, you know?” I assure. “I think I’d have a better chance at being struck by lightening than being kidnapped twice in one week.” I add this with a wry smile, but his face falls, his eyes grim and evasive. “Too soon?” I chuckle nervously.

“I doubt it will ever be okay to joke about my daughter’s abduction, Bella,” he chastises in a quiet voice, abandoning his chores to lower himself to his chair at the table. He sighs and props his ankle on his knee, staring into my eyes with a pained expression. “You could always go back to Renee,” he begins.

I stop him by jumping onto the tiled floor with a flat “smack.” “No,” I decline firmly. “San Diego is less safe than Forks. Just because this *one* thing happened—”

“I’m not arguing with that—”

“—doesn’t mean that I have to be coddled like a child.”

We look at each other back and forth, the silence filling the space between us with unspoken apologies. I know he feels responsible, as if he failed me by allowing something like this to occur, but that kind of thinking is irrational. Edward had been right about Renee not being able to call Charlie. He never knew anything was afoot until he got the call that night. Now I have to watch him walk around the house all day, beating himself up and pouring his guilt into making sure I’m safe and happy.

But I finally realize those two don’t always go hand in hand.

“I want to go out today,” I whisper cautiously, gulping as his wide eyes snap to mine.

“Out?” he asks as if I were requesting to jump off a cliff rather than just drive through town. “I don’t think that’s a good idea,” he decides with tight eyes.

I blow a lock of hair out of my face with a huff. “Dad, this is ridiculous. I’m nineteen. You can’t expect me to stay locked up in this house all day long.” I’m satisfied he hasn’t interrupted but his eyes are suspicious, calculating.

“You want to go see *him* don’t you?” he asks intuitively. When I simply divert my stare to my toes and chew on my lip, he protests. “We’ve already talked about this, Bella—”

Grinding my teeth, I correct, “No. You talked, and I listened—” *and plotted various methods in which to defy you* “—but it makes no sense. Edward has been cleared of any wrong-doing,” I remind, raising my chin in defiance.

I can see his arguments faltering as his eyes wander the floor, contemplative. “It’s too soon,” he finally resolves.

“It’s been *three days!*” I shriek, making him flinch a bit. Frowning, I mumble a quick apology for my tone and continue, “I’m perfectly alright, okay? I—” I pause here and try to collect my emotions. Charlie has never been a big fan of dramatics and cheese, but this is important. “This is my new home, and I want to get settled in. Do it right,” I plead.

He shifts uncomfortably, removing his keys from his pocket and tossing them on the table. He folds his fists and props his chin on them, his narrowed eyes, thoughtful. I wait until I notice his surrender, a slump of his shoulders and a mustached frown, before I squeal in delight.

He flinches and rolls his eyes, though I can see his amusement at my uncharacteristic enthusiasm in the twitch of his mustache. “Take your cell ohone! And be home before dark, please!” he calls after me as I sprint up the stairs.

~|-----o|W.T.F|o-----|~

I sit in the driver’s seat and stare ahead at the small house, chewing anxiously on my lip. Then fingernail. Then hair. My bare foot lay on the peddle, and I wrinkle my nose at it. I had managed to sneak out without Charlie noticing that I wore no shoes, but... well, now I feel stupid. I check my hair in the mirror, flattening my palm to it and smoothing it down. I figure this can be my new compulsion. It seems fitting. I *am* starting new. Idiosyncrasies and all.

Edward’s house is... tiny. It appears well-kept and everything, it’s just small, red-bricked and simple. I suppose it could pass for “cozy” or some other term that doesn’t sound so disparaging, but mostly, I think it’s a miniature house. A baby house.

There is one car in the driveway, a black sedan, much like the one I’d come to Forks in, but nothing else. There is trash out by the curb, an old mailbox that appears as though it’s been a victim to late-night Mailbox Baseball more than once. The lawn is manicured, the walkway clear, and even though it is clearly small and has seen it’s fair share of unkind attention, it is the best-looking house on the block, by far and wide.

With a steeling breath, I exit my vehicle and tip toe to the front door, my mind racing and excited and eager to see him once again. I feel as though it's been years, and as though I'd known him for years before that. It does not feel like I'm visiting someone I've only technically known for five days.

When I reach the door, I flatten my hair against my head one more time, inhaling noisily and raising my fist. I knock and then begin dissecting the action. What does my knock say about me? It was a little loud, I muse worriedly, wringing my hands. They may think I'm one of those loud people who snorts when she laughs. And... *oh God...* I think I am!

Before I can panic full-out, the door finally opens, and I'm face-to-face with the same beautiful woman I'd seen at the police station that night. Her auburn hair reminds me of Edward's, her warm brown eyes welcoming as she smiles.

"Hi, Mrs. Cullen, I'm—" I begin politely, but am cut off by her warm chuckle.

"Bella, yes. I've heard a lot about you."

My smile falters, and I wonder where she has heard these things about me. From Edward or from the media? But she has called me "Bella," I realize, and my smile grows. Only two people have ever called me by that name. And that can only mean that Edward has talked about me. By name. By *that* name. Often.

I'm giddy.

"I was wondering if... Edward was home today?" I ask, clasping my hands behind my back and unconsciously peeking over her shoulder. It is only now occurring to me that he may have plans. It's a Saturday morning, but... he could be out with his friends or something. Then I realize, with horror, that I'd never even asked him if he had a girlfriend.

I'm dangerously close to losing my shit.

I realize too late as her eyes inspect my front that I'd never removed Edward's shirt before I left the house. My face heats as her lips twitch and she darts her eyes to mine.

Her pale fingers push the door open, smile widening as she replies, "Of course! He's still sleeping, mind you, but I'm sure you're the one person he'd gladly wake up for." She then steps aside, encouraging me with her soft eyes.

I try not to let her comments ease my nerves too much. The whole... not knowing whether or not he has a girlfriend thing is still fresh at the forefront of my mind. I feel utterly ridiculous for not asking something like that *before* I had let him dry hump me in the forest.

Stupid, stupid, stupid!

The woman leads me down a narrow hall, breaking off into a room that seems as though it must take up half the house. The living room has a lot of large furniture, seemingly formal and luxurious—a huge white sectional, loveseat armoire, so much crammed into the space that it looks as if the room has swallowed everything. I reason that they must have lost their mansion but got to keep the gooey center.

I'm taken aback, though, as I approach the room and see the same man from the police station sitting in a wingback chair, reading a newspaper with his glasses propped on his straight nose. His blonde hair is combed meticulously, and when he glances up to meet my gaze, I nearly gasp at the green of his eyes, so much like Edward.

But then there is also a girl on the sofa, perched on the edge and practically vibrating with excitement. Her hair is short and black, almost punky, and she smiles widely at me as the woman introduces us.

"Bella, this is Carlisle, my husband—Edward's father—" He nods at me and I nod back, wringing my fingers together still, and then she turns to the girl. "And this is our daughter, Alice."

"Hi!" she exclaims, patting the space beside her with warm eyes. Nervous, but only for my own weird reasons, I enter the room and take a spot beside her.

Mrs. Cullen stalls by the entryway and says, "I'll go get Edward," with a small grin and a meaningful glance at her husband.

I lower myself to the sofa, a little anxious that perhaps she shouldn't wake him up, when Alice asks, "How are you liking Forks?" and sits on her hands, leaned forward as though my answer is truly the most important occurrence in her world at the moment.

Shifting a bit, I glance at Dr. Cullen and answer, "I haven't really had a chance to go anywhere."

Folding his paper up at his side, he discards it on a nearby table and replies, "Your father must be very worried about you." His face is sincere and inviting, his small smile warm, friendly. I feel like I know more about him than I should, like I'm intruding.

"Yeah... he can be a little..." I trail off, unable to complete my thought sufficiently. I figure Dr. Cullen has his own choice words for my father—being that Charlie had arrested him and set out to destroy his reputation.

Yeah. This isn't awkward *at all*.

"Parental?" Carlisle hedges. I nod gratefully, thankful that he doesn't appear outwardly hostile at the mentions of him and ease back into the sofa. I feel confident that with some subtle hinting, I can get Charlie to give Dr. Cullen a call and eat a little crow for the benefit of their once-amicable relationship.

Dr. Cullen's eyes then fall to my feet, a sandy brow hiking in curiosity.

"Oh! I don't have any shoes that fit," I hastily explain, gnawing on my lip as a hot flush climbs my cheeks. I cross my feet over one another in an attempt to hide them.

Dr. Cullen chuckles, amused, but doesn't inquire further.

"Actually," I begin, pivoting to examine the girl at my side. She is three years younger than me, Edward had said. She looks smaller than me, though not tiny for her age, simply petite. The clothing I wear is tight and revealing, but on her... it would be almost natural. "Do you want some clothes?" I blurt. Her forehead wrinkles a bit, so I expound, "Well, I'm cleaning out my closet and I have just... boxes upon boxes of clothes that I have no idea what to do with." Turning to Dr. Cullen, I explain, "They're those designer kinds that you just can't throw away." I roll my eyes. "What size shoes do you wear?" I add as an afterthought.

Turning to Alice, I find her pale faced and wide-eyed. "Size six," she says slowly and my grin could break my face in half. "You're getting rid of designer clothes?" she asks in a disbelieving whisper.

Carlisle interrupts then with a stern face. "Alice," he warns, meeting my gaze. "I'm fairly sure we can accept nothing of the sort," he says softly.

"Oh," I raise my eyebrows but hedge, "If you'd rather her earn it or something, I really need someone to help me shop for new clothes. I've... grown quite a bit," I lie. "I don't know Port Angeles well enough to go shopping, and even if I did, I don't think my dad would like the idea of me going alone," I reason.

He's strangely hesitant as he looks back and forth between Alice and me. Her big brown eyes are almost pleading as he responds, "Shopping for Alice is more of a reward than an assignment..."

I wonder if this is some kind of pride or simple comportment, but before I can decide, I assure him, "Honestly, Dr. Cullen, they're just going in the trash if I don't get them out of my house. I can't even stand to be in the same room with them anymore. She'd be doing me a favor, twofold. Look at these bare feet..." I pout my lips and jut out my toes, doing my best impression of a barefoot child from a third-world country donation commercial. "I have no idea where to shop for shoes."

He seems to consider this with a twitch of his lips, and I find that I rather like Dr. Cullen. He's a total pushover. Finally he relents. "That's very generous of you," he accepts, and I can almost feel Alice's jaw dropping as she sits at my side, speechless.

"Actually, it's very wasteful of me," I smirk victoriously, sending her a sideways wink.

Mrs. Cullen walks into the room then and travels to the loveseat near the sofa. "Can I get you something to drink, Bella?" I decline with a shake of my head, but thank her—tapping every polite courtesy I can possibly muster. She opens her mouth as if to ask me something, but she is disrupted by an annoyed, raspy voice approaching from the hallway.

"Who wakes up at nine on a Saturday," Edward grouches, eyes swollen and thick with sleep as he rubs at them groggily.

When he finally looks up and locks gazes with mine, he freezes. I'm somewhat stunned by the vision of him, clean shaven and bright-eyed with one half of his hair flattened to the side that favored his pillow. There are little lines and indented into his cheek, running up his temple. The sight of the small bandage covering three inches of his neck makes my stomach clench, but I'm more elated than I thought I'd be that he hasn't removed the eyebrow ring—even though I know he doesn't need it for show any longer. More shocking is that he is wearing nothing but a tight-fitting, worn white t-shirt, and plain grey boxers. It is simultaneously the most arousing and endearing image that I've. Ever. Fucking. Seen.

Yes. Edward Cullen owns my vagina.

Sorry, Christian B.

"Oh," he breaths in surprise, then seems to do a double take of sorts, clearing his throat and sending some sort of covert glare to his mother. His eyes dart around the room as he

stammers, “Umm... can you just... wait... here... one second?” And then he spins on his heel and stiffly exits the room. My shoulders slump, and I suppress a pout as I shift my gaze to Esme.

Holy hell, I just visually molested her son, right before her mommy eyes.

My face burns.

“I suppose when I said ‘company’ he assumed you were Emmett,” she chuckles awkwardly, adding, “Though I don’t know how. Emmett’s not company. He’s more like...” she trails off with a thoughtful expression.

“He came with the house,” Carlisle concludes with a smile.

Well, in all honesty, I’m still recovering from the total mind-fuck of seeing Edward in a t-shirt and boxers, so all I can do is nod dumbly. I begin wishing that Alice wasn’t his sister so that I can turn to her and gush smugly, *“Did you see that? Yeah. I humped that shit.”*

I’m also still reeling from the fact I don’t even know if he has a girlfriend yet. I wonder if I can stealthily ask one of the people present but figure that won’t go over well. It isn’t lost on me that I just went from horny to mortified to completely depressed in the span of one minute: *I’m a complete basket case*. A little crestfallen at my lack of knowledge on his relationship status, I notice Esme’s eyes subtly anxious, flitting about the cluttered room.

“You have a lovely home,” I finally compliment, feeling ridiculous for forgetting such a basic step in protocol.

Esme’s eyes meet mine for a brief second, but I can sense her doubt and apprehension.

Frowning, I assure, “No, really. It’s very lived-in and warm,” though this sounds like something people say when they *don’t* like your house but are too polite to say so. I add in a nervous ramble, “Like, my bedroom for instance. It’s huge and great, but kind of cold and impersonal. It has this gigantic bed—really mammoth thing, but... it’s really stiff and uncomfortable. It needs worn in, you know?” I echo my sentiments from earlier that morning.

Three pairs of eyes snap to mine, wide, and silent. After a moment, Dr. Cullen breaks out into a stifled guffaw, Esme soon following, both their hands going to cover their mouths. Alice’s giggle is much more petite, but as confused as I am, I simply stare back and forth blankly.

It only takes a second to reassess my words, and as I do, my jaw drops. I put my hand over my eyes and sink into the sofa, mortified and wishing it would swallow me whole. “I’m so sorry, I... I

didn't mean it... *like that*... obviously..." I trail off, refusing to let my word vomit make my face another shade redder.

Though, I muse wistfully, that would be an excellent way to accomplish it.

Once all of the muffled laughter ceases, I chance a peek and feel awkward once again, rubbing at my ankle with my toes and shifting from side to side.

Dr. Cullen abruptly sighs, scooting to the edge of his seat and clasping his hands between his knees. His gaze is somber and remorseful as he begins, "Bella, I feel compelled to apologize for my son's behavior. I assure you we had no idea he was doing some form of... recognizance, especially on my behalf." He exhales a sharp breath, narrowing his eyes a bit. "Honestly, I probably would have preferred if he'd been going through some normal adolescent phase instead, but..." He stalls and shakes his head, clearing his expression. "I know that he's partially to blame for putting you in such an unsavory position, and... it makes me feel responsible, considering his motivations for doing so." He frowns, leaning back in his chair while his wife looks on, anguished. She reaches out to his hand and grasps it, conveying something with her stare that is intimate and deep and far beyond the comprehension of an outsider like me.

Truthfully, I feel as though he's punched me in the stomach and twisted my guts into knots. My teeth grind and I have to curl my fists to avoid throwing them in the air.

Sadly, I lack much of a filter for politeness when someone's pissed me off. "That's the most skewed version of blame I've ever heard," I grind bravely, their eyes lurching to mine in shock at the anger inflected in my tone. Unaffected, I continue, "On the upside, at least now I know that martyr complexes are genetic. I mean, have you even stopped to consider—" I pause, forcing my fury to subdue before I finish, "If it hadn't been Edward, I could be dead right now, or worse. He saved my life, for Christ's sake. How dare you apologize for something responsible for that?" By the time I finish, there is a lump in my throat, my watery vision fixed intently on a vase in the center of the room.

I'm a little embarrassed, but it doesn't lessen my conviction any. To have the only positive factor in that experience denigrated is beyond upsetting. I realize Carlisle's not seeing it from that particular vantage, but it doesn't lessen the sting of it.

"I'm sorry, Isabella," he apologizes quietly. "I didn't mean to imply—"

"Didn't mean to imply what?"

I jump in surprise at Edward's voice and find him standing in the entryway, dressed in a dark shirt and jeans, shifting to one side. His eyes are narrowed thin and gaze suspiciously at his father before meeting mine. When they do, his face falls.

"What did he say?" he asks, part accusatory and part concerned.

Carlisle interjects, "I'm afraid I misspoke. I do hope Bella forgives me," and looks to me with a sincere, pleading expression.

My anger fading, I force a smile and accept with a semi-curt, "It's okay." Edward, still suspicious looks as though he wants to inquire further, so I quickly assuage him. "It's nothing, Edward, really. People say things the wrong way all the time. I actually told your parents my bed needed 'breaking in.' No lie." I punctuate this with a wry smile and am thoroughly amused by the widening of his eyes.

Esme jumps in then. "Edward, why don't you take your guest out back? It is lovely this morning. Very comfortable weather," she suggests with a secret smile.

Nodding, he jerks his head to the hall, and I stand, offering everyone more brief pleasantries and telling Alice when to expect her shitload of designer clothes and size six shitty shoes.

Chapter 17:

A Rather Divine Denouement and Oblations of Declarations.

~|-----o|W.T.F|o-----|~

(A.K.A. Final Truths and Fuckily Ever Afters.)

I sidle up to Edward and let him lead me down the hall, the narrow space making our proximity close enough to make the skin on my arms tingle. In the middle of the hall before we reach the backdoor, I see a pair of shoes tossed against one another and smile despite my efforts not to. Once we reach the door, he holds it open for me. When I exit, I look out over the yard, observing the green expanse of their lawn and the tall, wooden security fence and gate at the edge of the tree line. I freeze as he starts walking over the grass.

“Uhhh,” I stutter, looking down at my bare feet and curling my toes into the cement of the stoop.

Halting, he turns, creases his forehead, and follows my gaze downward. Seeing my bare feet, he tilts his head and walks to me, thumbing the corner of his lips as they tug up into an amused grin. “You aren’t wearing shoes,” he observes softly.

Rolling my eyes, I explain, “I didn’t have any that fit.”

Looking up at me through his lashes, the silver ring over his eyebrow reflects the sunlight, making him appear impish as he smiles crookedly. He turns his back to me then, and glancing over his shoulder, crouches in invitation. Comprehending, I make a really pathetic hop-slash-climb onto his back, his arms locking around my knees firmly as I wrap mine around his shoulders. My breathing deepens as I feel his warmth pressed so tightly against me, my breasts crushed to his shoulder blades. My nose feels so close to the skin of his neck that I can detect the scent of his shaving cream.

He smells motherfucking glorious.

I settle comfortably around his hips, across his back as he begins walking across the yard to the gate at the far end of it. His slender fingers press into the flesh of my thighs just above my knees, and it’s like really difficult to focus on anything else. His back rises and falls with his breaths, the bounce of his steps making me hold his neck tightly. He doesn’t seem to have any trouble carrying me whatsoever. He maneuvers his hands to unlatch the gate, turning and closing it behind him.

I notice there’s a small area, likely meant to entertain guests in front of the fire pit, with a large picnic table settled against the fence.

When we reach the table, he gently lowers me to the edge. The view is really only of trees and the sooty fire pit, but I reason he and Esme had wanted to offer me some privacy, and I'm thankful. I feel like a spectacle of sorts, and it makes me uneasy—especially given how I'd totally shown my ass in front of his dad and unofficially granted their son my vagina in front of his mother.

"So," he begins slowly, ruffling his fingers through his hair before flattening the heels of his palms on the table behind him, lifting himself up beside me. Glancing at me sideways, he asks casually. "How you been?" though there is a twinge of anxiety in the bounce of his swaying foot and the crinkling of his eyes.

I shrug and respond, "Alright, I guess. You?"

He bobs his head, shoving his fists into his pockets and peeking through his lashes at the trees ahead. "Kind of weird, but... better than before, I guess." Angling his head to me, there's a small frown on his lips. "I'm sorry about whatever my dad said. He's still adjusting to the idea of everything."

"I never got to find out what happened with the tape," I immediately inquire, facing him at complete attention. I hadn't been able to get much information from Charlie regarding the evidence or the probable outcome of Edward getting it.

"They watched it. They had issues with finding it admissible, but..." he trails off and there's a smirk tugging at his lips. "I guess they found out it was the pharmacist, Victoria. She eventually confessed to doing it for James," he finishes.

I recall Jasper's story about her and feel my face fall, looking out at the trees. "Will he be able to work again?" I ask worriedly.

He tilts his head, thoughtful. "There's still some work to do after the conviction is overturned, but... he'll be able to work again," he concludes with a light sigh.

"That's great, Edward."

Chuckling, he looks to me with an impish grin. "Actually, I think they both wanted to kill me after they found everything out. I'm lucky as hell they're too distracted with legal shit right now." He leans back on his palms, kicking his legs out and swinging them back and forth.

I follow, offering him a timid glance as I hide my dirtied toes. "How's Jasper been?" I continue, feeling as though I've been secluded in Charlie's house for much longer than I actually have.

Squinting his eyes, he replies, "Left for Texas the next morning, promised to keep in touch when the trial comes around," and shrugs, dropping his chin to his chest. There is a long silence as I imagine him being with his mother, taking care of her house and maybe getting some honest work. Breaking the silence, Edward adds in a low voice, "That was a really nice thing you did for him, Bella."

I frown and divert my gaze to my toes again, though I'm melting on the inside because he's still using that name for me. "He's not a bad person, Edward. He didn't deserve the same fate as James," I say with vehemence. Of this I'm certain. I'm not so naïve as to think Jasper will change entirely. It's completely possible that he'll go back to doing drugs, maybe even resort to shady means to get them. But he has the chance he deserves now, and that's the greatest thanks I could have given him, considering what he'd done for me... and Edward.

"Still," he adds, but doesn't attempt to push it any further. "Watched any *Tiny Toons*?" he asks, nudging my foot with his playfully.

"Actually, no," I respond, raising my chin. "I figure... once you shoot a guy, you're probably too old for cartoons. Though, I won't deny spending an entire day watching a *Beetlejuice* marathon on cable."

He laughs at this, raising his eyebrows, "I actually caught an hour of that, but Delia's mom annoys the shit out of me."

I nod in silent agreement before asking, "Ever get an Angus burger, or some chocolate milk, or... you know..." I swallow thickly, finishing, "...a girlfriend?" My voice is audibly stiff by the time I finally blurt it out, and I can feel heat rising to my cheeks for the umpteenth time that morning.

Way to be subtle, Queen Psycho...

I'm not brave enough to gauge his expression as he hums, answering quietly, "I had three Angus burgers, no chocolate milk yet, though. Thanks for reminding me. I had a girlfriend for about two hours yesterday, but she kept bitching, so I had to kill her."

Jerking my gaze to him, his lips are arranged into that cocky, lopsided grin. "Is that so?" I play along, intrigued that he's being evasive but figuring he wouldn't be doing so if he *did* actually have a girlfriend. I capture my lips between my teeth as my eyes rake over him.

"Mhm," he bobs his head. "Buried her over there." He points his thumb in the yard's general vicinity, adding, "Real pain in the ass, too—all that digging." His face is mockingly annoyed,

betrayed by his stifled grin. The muscles of his arms flex as he moves, braced against them as he leans back, casual, dripping sex with his dark stare into my eyes.

"Hmm," I hum, staring distractedly at his lips and licking my own. "Thought you usually just led 'em to kidnappers. Let them do the dirty work." I wink, nudging his foot with my toes.

His smile wavers, the puffs of his cheeks falling.

I sigh, my shoulders falling. "Too soon?"

His throat lurches with a swift swallow. "I think it'll always be too soon to joke about that, Bella." And I want to laugh, but I hold it in the best I can. For two men that may never be capable of getting along, Edward and Charlie can certainly agree on more than they know.

"Sorry."

There is once again a charged silence, our feet kicking comfortably as I finger the hem of my sweater. I'm more than a little mortified at the outfit I'd chosen. The brown sweater and tight jeans really didn't do much for me, but they were the loosest items I owned. I was sick of feeling constricted and strangled.

"I missed you," Edward suddenly admits in a low whisper, ducking his chin and avoiding my gaze. I turn to him in surprise as he stutters, "I—I wanted to call, but... then your dad answered and... well, you know." He glances at me sideways and locks his jaw. "He hates me."

Frowning, I correct, "He doesn't hate you. He just doesn't know you." Before he can disagree, I meet his gaze and confess, "I missed you too."

Facing me, he stares into my eyes for an indiscernible amount of time. Our legs still as it intensifies, swallowing me in green irises and tiny black dots.

"I'd seen you before," he eventually whispers, my confused expression forcing him to elaborate with a careful, "Before you came into town."

Understanding, I simply stare blankly at him because I'd already figured as much. I'm certain everyone in Forks has seen photos of me, being a product of a small town, even if, on a bigger scale, I was completely insignificant. Now that I think about it, I feel ridiculous that I ever assumed he hadn't.

And I wasn't exactly ecstatic about the idea of him seeing my dress tucked into my panties.

“And...?” I trail off, rolling my eyes.

Swallowing nervously, he continues, “Alice kind of kept of with you, being from Forks and everything. She saw you as some kind of... I don’t know... idol or something. Like if you could get out and be all glamorous, she could too.” He rolls his eyes at this but meets my gaze and admits nervously, “I just wanted to tell you, be honest about it, because...” He stalls before his face contorts into a grimace.

If I didn’t know better, I’d think he was *blushing*.

“Tell me,” I push, offering him a small grin of encouragement.

He looks away, ducking his chin and finishing in a speedy breath, “Because it’s common knowledge around here that I always found you attractive.”

“Oh,” I exhale, my eyes widening before I purse my lips in consideration. I can’t tack down one emotion on it. I feel... embarrassed, yes. But that’s more related to the context he’d found me attractive in. I feel sad that any part of our time in the forest may have been based off of some false impression of me. I feel upset that I may not be able to live up to it.

Mostly, I feel like fucking elated, because “flattered” is something I’d say if the feeling weren’t mutual. And it is. Very much so.

And I finally realize—have this massive epiphany right here on a shoddy wooden table in the shitty side of small town Forks—that I can only be validated by compliments coming from those that matter. I’m sure the same is true for the converse, it must be.

It seems so obvious, even though it hasn’t always been. I feel stunted in some way for not seeing it sooner, yet giddy all the same because I do, and this alone frees me from every tie to public scrutiny that I’ve been bearing for years. It’s almost like I can feel the strings being cut from me, feel myself slipping from its grasp in the same way I had that first day, standing on the side of the road with Edward.

What people think about me can only matter if *they* matter to *me*.

Huh.

Well, call me enlightened and recommend me to a fucking fortune cookie factory.

“That’s really creepy, isn’t it?” he asks cautiously. When I don’t immediately answer, too busy with my whole epiphany business, he elaborates in the most comical of word vomits, “They just like to pick on me about it, and... really, it’s... blown way out of proportion. It’s kind of an inside joke, you know? Like, a teasing thing because... I know you don’t know me well enough to get it, but... it’s totally not my style to be into, or show interest in girls... like that or on TV., or just... and all it took was one innocent comment and I mean, *fuck Bella*, they really like seeing me suffer and—”

I silence his babbling with my charged lips, watching his eyes through my blurry and crossed field of vision as his panic slowly ebbs. He moves his lips against mine finally, lifting a hand to my neck and pushing my hair back over my shoulder, grazing my collar bone as our eyes flutter closed. His palm covers my neck as we kiss, his thumb rubbing small circles under my jaw.

I pull away, just enough to meet his gaze without straining my eyes. “You never really answered my question,” I chide breathlessly, battling the urge to rub my thighs together as his hand remains on my neck, sliding downward. “Do. You. Have. A. Girlfriend?”

Licking his lips, his eyes dart to my mouth, his eyebrow curving upward. “I keep trying to ask her, but she’s constantly fucking distracting me with—Hey, are you wearing lip gloss? Strawberry?” he asks, drawing closer to my face.

I scoff, pulling away and returning to my position on my elbows. “That’s boyfriend-exclusive information, Special-Ed.” I feign aloofness as I swing my feet again, looking out over the ferns, even though every inch of my body feels like it’s on fire for him.

It’s all I can do to not tackle him on top of this table and go for Dry Hump, Round Two.

My teeth grind.

Suddenly, warm lips are on my neck, flattening themselves and forming around my skin with an open mouthed kiss. I gasp, my neck falling back as my eyes roll back into my head.

Holy mother of fuck...

Edward speaks between wet kisses, his hand moving to my waist and ducking under the fabric of my sweater. “I know I don’t really have anything to offer,” he purrs seductively, and I inwardly protest as my head flops back, his tongue traveling over my throat.

His tongue darts out to lick below my ear and my elbows buckle. “I’m grumpy in the mornings, I’m addicted to caffeine, and I have no money whatsoever, no job, and no hope whatsoever of

getting into a half-decent college.” His kisses continue as he lifts himself, my breathing transforming into shallow pants. His teeth graze my earlobe and my elbows give, but his hands are pulling me up, sliding me to the edge of the table as he hops off and positions himself between my legs. A deep, longing whimper escapes me as he kisses up my jaw, muttering, “I have a criminal record... and the filthiest thoughts, Bella... most about you...” He’s breathing as hard as me now, nudging me with his nose and flattening his palm over my stomach.

I take his pause as the opportunity to wrap my legs around his waist, pulling him against me with the heels of my bare feet. “Filthy minds think alike,” I breathe, grinding against the bulge in his pants and putting my lips to his neck.

“God, Bella,” he groans, pulling me closer and thrusting against me. His sigh washes over my neck, cool and moist. “I don’t even have a car anymore,” he chokes.

“My insurance will take care of that in ten-to-thirty business days,” I say into his flesh, shoving his shirt up between us.

He hisses as my eager kisses drop to his stomach, climbing his chest. He buries his fingers into my hair, quickly pulling my lips to his and thrusting his tongue into my mouth. When he pulls away, he kisses down my throat again, panting, “My pride will be so fucking injured,” with another deliberate grind between my legs.

I moan, and the sound makes his kisses faster, rapid sucks and licks as my thighs tighten around him. When he pulls away and meets my gaze, lips swollen, eyes hooded and dark, I straighten my back and press myself into him. I stare into his eyes as my hand snakes around his back to his ass, reaching in his back pocket and fumbling for his wallet. I open it with one hand, watching his eyes darken impossibly further as I emerge with the condom I’d once assured him he’d never use.

“Fuck pride. The Volvo’s back seat is roomy, and we’ll need it,” I promise in a husky voice.

I’ve never been so glad to be proven wrong.

He looks conflicted for a moment as he sucks his lip and pushes against me, taking one peek around the area to ensure privacy before deciding, “Goddamn straight it is.” And then his lips are mine again, but this time, urgent and greedy. His large palms slide up to grasp my breasts, and he groans into my mouth as he palms them, eventually slipping under my sweater.

The crackle between us grows unbearable, the junction between my thighs unsatisfied and wanting, and the hardened bulge in his pants signifying he isn’t faring much better.

I clumsily fumble for the button of his pants, eager and ready and slipping them down, boxers and all. His tongue continues plunging in and out of my mouth inelegantly, our excited breaths bouncing off of flesh.

He removes mine next, just as ungraceful as I'd been with him. After all, his weren't painted to his ass. He laughs airily as he struggles them down my hips, managing to remove them with a final, swift yank. And then his lips are on mine again, his hands exploring the inside of my sweater with enthusiasm.

Eventually, he has to pull away. "Hey, aren't you supposed to be giving me some kind of declaration here?" he puffs as he begins sliding on the condom, eyes fretful as they fix on the gate.

I press my heels into his ass impatiently, moaning when I finally feel him near. Excitement pulses through my body as he nudges me to lie down on the table, hovering over my body and sweeping my hair back from my forehead.

I promise breathlessly, "I hereby declare you grabber of my ass, holder of my purse, owner of my vag, now... please..." I press him against me, staring into his eyes as our breaths collide.

He enters me slowly, his moan growing longer with each deliciously stretching inch. His eyebrows hunch downward as he catches the corner of his lip between his teeth, finally seated within me. "Fuck, your dad is going to shoot me," he hisses as he lifts his hips and begins thrusting into me.

I'm gasping wildly as my fingers thread through his hair, whimpering as his palms slide up my shirt once again. I respond in a laughably distracted voice, "Fat chance. I'm newly hardcore. Don't you read the papers?" And then my lips find his jaw, and I begin nibbling, avoiding the bandaged, left side.

His voice is throaty and deep as he replies, "The media sucks dick," continuing his rhythm and bathing my neck in warm huffs.

I trail my lips to his ear and intentionally raise my hips to meet him, whispering roughly, "So does your girlfriend."

He falters only momentarily, his sharp intake of breath and the twitch I feel within me making me feel rather debauched and victorious. "Only mine," he growls, grasping my hips and burying himself deeper.

I stifle my cry in his neck before guaranteeing, "Only yours. Promise to keep the eyebrow piercing?"

His breaths are erratic as he begins grunting in time with his hips, "Only if you promise to demonstrate that in the very near future."

Nodding excitedly, I promise, "Got it. Where... *God, yes...* Where are your declarations?" I ask, his tongue against my neck distracting as the building of eager friction below begins to make my thighs quiver.

He sniggers breathlessly into my damp skin, slapping against me. "I hereby declare you holder of my balls, dealer of my bullshit, owner of my... *fuck, Bella*, whatever the hell you want, don't stop that." he begs shakily, my arm now wedged awkwardly between our crashing bodies.

Smiling lazily, I explain in a gasp, "Well, I figured actually holding them makes it more official."

Suddenly, he freezes, the muscles of his arms trembling and taught. He captures my eyes and warns in a painfully strained voice, "Your hand's about three seconds away from feeding my sexual inferiority complex," and locks his jaw.

I still my hand and glance up at him apologetically, pulling it back and watching him concentrate on something over my shoulder. Slowly, he begins regaining his rhythm, his face reddened with a light sheen of sweat making our stomachs slippery. The added friction of it begins immediately effecting me, until he's eventually back to grunting, slamming into my hips with a more frenzied pace.

I can hardly speak as I continue staring up at him, feeling the pleasure he's granting me bubbling within. Wanting to assure him how *not* inferior he is, I ask in a series of broken whimpers, "Has anyone ever told you you're ridiculously hung?" I pant, clawing at his hips as our friction and his pulsing brings me close to the edge of something downright magnificent.

"No," he grunts, his eyebrows pulled tightly together. Looking down into my eyes, his lips part, hard breaths making his voice nearly unintelligible as he counters, "Has anyone ever told you that you talk a lot during sex?"

I shake my head, but it is more of a thrashing. My pelvis is crashing to meet his as I hiss through clenched teeth, "Has anyone ever told you not to bite the hand that jacks you off?"

His grunting suddenly transforms into a strangled whine, his jaw tightening as the slapping of our pelvis accelerates into a frantic tempo. "Has anyone ever told you, that... that... *oh, fuck... fuck*, here it comes..." And with one last thrust, he stiffens, placing his open mouth against mine as I then find my own release, circling my hips into him and struggling not to scream.

Ten minutes later, we both lay on the table, fully clothed and utterly gelatinous. I've settled into the crook of his arm, my leg thrown over his crotch while he twirls a lock of my hair around his finger lazily.

I turn my head and prop my chin on his shoulder, meeting his drooping gaze while my own fill with something tender and new and thrilling. His eyes, green and shining, fill me with wonder. I want to pretend to be the little flecks of gold that hide just beyond the drops of black, and scatter myself about in their fashion, spreading and resting haphazardly against the green heat of his intensity. I want to extend my fingertips and smooth away the furrow of his brow should it ever return. I want to see where the water departs when it bleeds down his skin and explore his every reaction so that I can only ever bring him happiness.

That urge is not selfless when it's *this*.

It's completely unquestionable. In the same way that fire burns and ice freezes. Much like the sun will rise and set and the ocean will wax and wane. It's similar to death and birth and rebirth.

No other option exists.

He grins lopsidedly as I stare at him, soft and slowly spreading over his lips, pulling upward and crinkling one eye. He hikes his pierced brow.

"Has anyone ever told you that you have the most captivating eyes?" I ask while staring into them, feeling that similar warmth bloom and bubble inside of me.

"Not exactly," he answers, his finger moving around my lock of hair languidly. Shifting his head to see me better, his fingers graze my cheek and he asks, "Has anyone ever told you that you're the craziest, sexiest, smartest, hardest core, fucking beautiful woman they've ever had the pleasure of being in the company of?"

Chuckling softly against him, I answer with a curved brow and a dry smile, "Um, no."

"Hmm," he hums disapprovingly, settling his head against the wood and he gazes up to the cloudy sky. It is silent for another moment, and I rest my cheek against him again, closing my eyes and drowning in cheesy, bubbly, fluffy, sickeningly sweet, lovey-dovey bullshit that I wouldn't trade for anything. His chest expands with a deep inhale, his exhale a mockingly put-upon sigh as he promises, "Well you'd better get used to hearing it, Juicy, because it's true, I'm all about the honesty nowadays."

And I smile because I know he is, much like me. Because I might not know every single thing about him yet, but he's willing to show me, as I'm willing to show him. I smile because Forks feels like home and I have so much more than just a friend.

I smile because *Withering the Ferns with Edward Cullen* is only the first chapter in a very long book that I can't wait to write.

-Fin