

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

Paper Heart

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Summary: *Bella and Edward fall in and out of love over the course of 5 years. We begin at the end, we end at the beginning, and somewhere in the middle, we realize just how easy it is to lose each other along the way.*

This story is based off of the plot in the musical "The Last Five Years" by Jason Robert Brown. This musical uses song to tell the story of a couple who, despite their best intentions, find themselves on different paths.

The outline of each chapter is based on the songs in the musical, but the back story is all original content. Bella's story is told from the end of their relationship to the beginning, and Edward's story starts at the beginning and ends at the end.

~*~

Chapter 1

We begin at the end.

Anger comes first. Flashing, blinding, consuming. It starts off slow, lapping at your lungs and your fingers and your gut, building relentlessly, compelling you to run, to scream, to destroy. Your brain is a jumble of senseless firing synapses and your entire body trembles with the nervous energy of it all, from your scalp to your lips to your toes. You can't sit still, can't eat, can't sleep, can't focus on anything but the wave of rage that drives you to the edge of insanity before it swells and finally, blessedly breaks.

But after that brief moment of reprieve, when you're crashing headfirst into the next mindfuck of emotion, you find yourself longing for those ebbing, electric tides of anger and rage. Because after the anger and the rage comes the pain.

Oh God, the pain.

Ripping you wide open to the white-hot sun, dissecting you piece by piece, and even after you're left eradicated and empty, it continues to demand more, and more, and more.

It's been three days since Edward left me, and I have nothing left to give.

They say that hindsight is 20/20, but I disagree. It's skewed and distorted, like you're caught underwater looking up. To reflect on the past five years and figure out how we got here is the equivalent of trying to find a needle in a haystack. The answer is there, somewhere, but the chances of finding it amidst the microscopic fissures and cracks in our relationship that turned overnight into gaping canyons and bottomless chasms are formidable at best.

"We're broken, Bella, and we can't fix it anymore," he'd said.

The receiver of the phone had been cool and metallic in my hand as he delivered the blow and I'd clung to it in desperation thinking that maybe, just maybe, if I held on tight enough, he would have to stay.

"It's better, for both of us, baby. I'm so sorry," he'd said, reaching across the miles, through the line, and ripping out my heart.

I wanted to beg him to come home, to love me like he'd promised- for better and for worse, in sickness and in health, until death do us part- but the reality of the situation sent ice through my veins and I couldn't move, couldn't speak. He whispered goodbye, and I stood listening as the dial tone turned into a busy signal, thinking, *why do you get to decide?*

Now I sit on the cold, hard floor in the middle of the bedroom we shared, surrounded by pieces of us. To my right, a tattered grey Amherst sweatshirt that still smells like scotch and peppermint and *him*. To my left, the napkin covered in my hurried handwriting that I'd pressed into his palm the first night we met. In front of me, a black and white photo; my arms slung around his neck, squinting over his shoulder into the sun, his face turned towards mine, lips brushing my cheek. And in my hands, the note he left me this morning.

Bella-

I called Elise to help me pack my bags, and I went downtown and closed the bank account.

It's not about another shrink. It's not about another compromise.

I'm not the only one who's hurting here. I don't know what the hell is left to do. You never saw how far the crack had opened- you never knew I had run out of rope. I could never rescue you, no matter how I tried. All I could do was love you hard, and let you go.

All I could do was love you, Bella. God, I loved you so.

Edward

I want to cry, but tears seem too small, too inconsequential for the massive void ahead of me that is life without him. I want to forget, but the essence of him is ingrained in every fiber of my being, and I could no more forget that than I could myself.

Instead, I struggle to my feet and make my way across our apartment, shoving five years of memories into cardboard boxes and trying to ignore the fact that, every time another box is taped shut, a little piece of my soul stays trapped inside. I move methodically, removing anything and everything that reminds me of him until there's nothing left.

If I could take down the plaster, the wooden planks, the nails and insulation and wiring that hold this very place together and pack them away, I would. I would pack the Vietnamese restaurant down the street, every museum we visited, every place we've kissed. I would pack away the sun and the moon, the clouds and the stars until there was nothing left but darkness and even then, it would remind me of the shadow of his smile.

We loved, once; oh God, Edward, didn't we love? Carefree and innocent, unscathed by the raw and ravaged landscape that heartbreak so often leaves in its wake. We learned together what it was like to move in synchronicity, two halves of a whole. We sang and wrote and breathed and fought and loathed and laughed and *lived*. I can no longer remember who I was before him, but I do know this: I will love him unrequited for the rest of my life.

Everyone has their cross to bear. This is mine.

When the last of the boxes are piled by the door and the first vestiges of sunrise appear outside my window, I crawl into our bed and pray for the numb oblivion of sleep.

Edward is gone, but I am still here, learning how to breathe without him and covered with scars I did nothing to earn.

I am still hurting.

Chapter 2

Edward- January 2002

I stared down at the amber colored liquid in my glass, swirling it gently before taking a sip. As the scotch seared down the back of my throat, I was grateful for the warmth that immediately spread through my body. Jane, my girlfriend, and I were having dinner at some nameless restaurant where you pay more for the decor and ambience than for the actual food. While I was trying to recognize something, *anything*, edible on the menu, she was prattling on about some client at work who was making her life a living hell. Said client was the reason for this painful excursion; they had asked Jane to check out the location before booking it for their next event.

"My life is completely inconsequential to them. It's infuriating, you know?" She sighed, pausing to take a sip of her cabernet and raising her eyebrows at me in an invitation to respond.

Fuck.

I quickly attempted to arrange my expression to that of 'concerned, loving boyfriend', nodding in what I hoped was a commiserating manner, and praying that this was the correct response. It must have been, because after a moment she was off and running again. Breathing an inaudible sigh of relief, I loosened my tie, and my mind resumed its wandering.

This was the first night that we'd spent together outside of our apartment in weeks, and yet I was anxious to escape back to the sanctuary of my small office at home. I hadn't even made it through the appetizer before her words started swimming around in my head and I found myself staring at my place setting, wondering if that many forks were really necessary.

After discerning that the *Pancetta* was the only thing on the menu without tentacles or raw fish eggs, I set it to the side and tried once again to focus on the conversation at hand. This time, instead of the silverware, my attention was drawn to Jane's lips.

God, I used to love her lips.

She tasted of honey and sunshine, the first time we kissed, and I was hit with an explosion of emotions that, at the time, I wasn't aware I was capable of feeling. As I rolled the bittersweet memory around on my tongue, the edge of my mouth curled into a half smile.

She had been my muse, then.

I've loved to write ever since I was a child. When people asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, I told them F. Scott Fitzgerald. I was such a pretentious little shit back then. Words had always come easily to me; all through high school and college my teachers and professors told me I was a prodigy; the voice of my generation. My parents, Carlisle and Esme, were arguably my biggest advocates. They worked hard so that I could attend the best schools and tune my craft into something paramount.

Truly, I was one of the lucky ones. So many people supported and believed in me that, eventually, I began to believe in myself. By the time I left my home in Forks, Washington, to attend Amherst, one of the top liberal arts colleges in the nation, I was convinced that I was destined for greatness. I was Edward Cullen, author extraordinaire, and my words were going to change the world.

Jane and I met during our junior year. I literally ran into her one night while I was out with my friends, causing her to spill the beer she was holding down the front of her shirt. I'd stammered an apology, completely mortified, but she'd just grinned, whipped off her shirt, and said, "If you wanted to get me out of my clothes, all you had to do was ask." I'd just stood there like a complete asshole,

staring, not quite sure what to make of this impulsive, beautiful woman. After a moment, she took pity on me, grabbing my hand and leading me over to the bar.

"Come on, you can buy me a drink." She'd said, winking.

It was then that I finally found my tongue. Raising an eyebrow at her, I grinned and replied, "But I've already got you out of your clothes. So really, what's the point?"

She laughed, one of those full-out belly laughs with her head thrown back, and I thought, *I wonder if I'll ever be that comfortable in my own skin.*

Then she leaned over, so close that I could feel the heat radiating off her skin, and whispered, "My pants are still on, sir. And if you plan on ever getting into them, you'd better buy me a drink."

How could I say no?

As it was, she'd been interested in me ever since a creative writing class we'd shared; it wasn't until she pointed this out that I finally recognized her. Contrary to her outgoing personality, she had always been quiet and subdued in lecture; tucked into the corner, chewing on her pen and lost in thought. She'd seemed so extraordinarily ordinary then, but after that night, I didn't know how I'd ever existed without her. I loved that she was solid, and the way her nose crinkled up when she laughed; she loved my unruly bronze hair and the way I never took 'No' for an answer.

That was then.

Not long after graduation we moved together to New York City, naïve and ready to conquer the world. And after a few months of freelance work and ramen noodles, Jane gave up her dream of becoming a writer in favor of a steady paycheck. She took a job at a local PR agency, and though she may not have loved it, she was damn good at what she did. A recent promotion kept her working most hours of the day and running out of town conventions on the weekends.

I couldn't fault her for it, but it was something that I could never bring myself to do.

After that, it didn't take long for the cracks to appear. All that stereotypical bullshit about man's deep-seated need to provide for his family never resonated with me until I was in the middle of living it. While Jane supported us financially, instead of being thankful, I grew to resent her. I felt worthless and ashamed for not fulfilling my gender role, and I'll be the first one to admit that I took these feelings out on her. What had always been calm, communicative dialogue between two rational adults now constantly escalated into screaming matches, often ending with Jane crying quietly in the bedroom while I holed myself up in my office, pretending not to hear.

In my defense, I genuinely thought she gave up on her writing career because she simply didn't want to do it anymore. Eventually, the truth came out; she'd done it because she knew we wouldn't survive with both of us on an unsteady income.

"Since you weren't stepping up to the plate, I didn't have many other options," she'd said, disdain dripping from her words. My fury and hurt at her lack of belief in me overshadowed the truth of her words, and I spent three nights at Jasper's after that, pacing and muttering and wondering where the fuck we had gone wrong. On the fourth night I returned home, flowers in hand, apologizing and promising her that I would find a way to fix things, somehow.

I didn't know it then, but it was the beginning of the end.

I threw myself into my writing, determined to pull my weight financially so Jane could quit her job. I humbly picked myself up after every rejection letter and moved on to pour even more blood, sweat, and tears into the next manuscript.

And the next.

And the next.

I had been confident in the knowledge that someone would see the greatness blossoming inside of me if I just tried hard enough. But after a little over a year of continued dismissal and rejection, I began to understand there were millions out there, just like me; full of the same ideas and talent and potential that I'd foolishly thought I alone possessed. This knowledge sobered me. I lost my edge, and any chance I may have had at being successful was lost in self-doubt. Where before I was bold, taking risks and challenging ideas, I now stuck to the norm and did what I could to scrape by.

I spent my time chain smoking and drinking and staring at an endlessly blank computer screen, futilely willing pure genius out of my fingertips but settling for whatever crap would pay the bills.

It's like the very thing that made me who I was, that brought me joy and gave me reason to live and breathe and *be*, was hiding just out of reach, pointing and laughing and waiting for me to break. I hadn't the fucking foggiest idea how to reconcile the man I was with the passion I used to exude. Even more depressing was the fact that I'd begun to embrace the apathy. It was so much easier than frustration and disappointment, and the shame of failure.

To add insult to injury, the further my career spiraled, the more distant Jane and I became. I didn't know how to reconnect with her, and I was so caught up in my own failure, I didn't even have the energy to try. We may have still lived together, but we had never been further apart.

Two weeks ago, I had considered taking on a children's book deal just to pay the rent; something about a kitten that couldn't find its way home. Jane had been out of town on business, so I spent the night consulting with a bottle of Lagavulin. In the morning, my raging hangover and I turned down the deal and dug into my dwindling savings account yet again.

Just two weeks ago, the pride I had for the beauty of my craft had still prevailed over the pursuit of a cheap dollar.

If they came along and asked me to write that shit now, I would do it. No questions asked.

Not just for the money, despite the fact that I was beginning to toe the line between 'poor' and 'flat fucking broke'. I would have done it to feel even a tiny bit of the peace that comes over me when I put words onto a page, creating beauty where there had previously been only the promise of greatness on a blank canvas of page.

I had been in writer's block hell for so long that it was physically painful for me to think about, hence my recent affinity for good scotch. Even my editor, Jasper Whitlock, was losing faith in me. It wouldn't have been so bad- most editors are slave-driving bastards in general- but he'd been my best friend since we were six. He was *supposed* to believe in me, no matter what.

Jane excused herself to use the restroom, and I threw back the rest of my scotch as my mind wandered to the conversation I'd had with Jasper the night before.

"This is shit."

I raised an eyebrow at him and took a long drag on my cigarette. "Give it to me straight, Jasper. Don't sugar coat it."

"That *is* sugar coating it. What's going on with you?"

Shrugging, I stubbed out the cigarette and walked over to the window, shoved my hands into my pockets, and stared down at the busy street below.

Jasper pressed on. "I've known you how long? You're a fucking literary genius. And this is shit. You haven't written anything decent since we were denied the contract with Simon and Schuster. You refuse to send out *Paper Heart* again, which is the best fucking book I've ever seen *anyone* write, by the way. So what gives?"

Paper Heart, my last great work, my pride and joy, had already been rejected too many times to count. The book had become a part of me, and each rejection letter served to destroy a little piece of my soul. I turned and glanced over at it on my desk, a solid reminder of my repeated failure. Jasper threw my other manuscript on top of it and I scowled, pinching the bridge of my nose in annoyance. It was a book for a smaller publishing house in Jersey. I'd written a dark drama for them last year that had sold surprisingly well in the beginning. It was still selling a few copies here and there, so they had signed me on for an additional work. This time, however, they wanted something light and entertaining. Clearly, it wasn't working for me.

Jasper was right- it was shit, but it was all I had left in me.

"You're my editor, Jazz. You're supposed to edit the words, not the content. Isn't that a rule? Don't mess with the author's voice?"

"Don't pull that with me, Cullen. You may have lost Simon and Schuster, but you still have a contract to fulfill. Besides, you're the prodigal son! We have big dreams, remember? Taking over the world, giving publishing houses a run for their money, and watching women fall at our feet? Ring a bell?"

I lit up another cigarette in response, but Jasper grabbed it out of my hand and stubbed it out before I could take a drag.

"What the fuck, Whitlock?" I growled, petulantly reaching for another, but the bastard grabbed the pack before I could and took two strides across my office, throwing them out the open window. My mouth fell open in disbelief. I didn't know whether to laugh at the absurdity of what he'd just done, or kill him.

"Edward. Listen to me. *Paper Heart* can do that for us. I wept when I read it. I fucking wept. It's the fucking Romeo and Juliet of our time. It's better than *The Notebook*, and you know I secretly love that fucking book. You have to trust me. You have to keep trying," he insisted.

"You owe me a pack of cigarettes, asshole. And I'm not sending *Paper Heart* out again, so forget it. Maybe it's time you throw your eggs in someone else's basket. I'm a sinking ship."

"Dude, Lindsay Lohan, you're 23 years old. Your life is far from over. Stop being such a drama queen," he chuckled. He fucking chuckled, and between the irritating conversation at hand and the fact that I was now out of nicotine, it was all I could do to keep from throttling him.

"Maybe I just got tired of the fucking rejection. Maybe I'm not that great after all. Maybe I should just go get a job at fucking McDonalds and call it a day!" I yelled, yanking at my hair in frustration.

He just rolled his eyes.

Fucking Jasper.

"You know that publishing houses reject 99% of what's sent to them. You just have to keep going until you make it into that other 1%. And you will."

"Drop it, Whitlock," I warned.

"No, Edward, I'm not gonna drop it. You've gotta snap out of this," he persisted.

"Snap out of this? I'm stuck writing this bullshit that I don't even care about just to fulfill a contract, instead of being able to write something that matters, and everyone except you who reads the greatest work I've written tells me it's utter shit. I'm supposed to just snap out of it? Excuse me for not being more optimistic."

Jasper sighed, and when I glanced up at him I could see the pity in his eyes. I hated it.

"I get it. Rejection is part of the business. Maybe I'm just not cut out for the business anymore," I conceded.

"It's only been a little over a year. You can't be done already. There's gotta be more to what's going on than you're telling me."

I sat down in the chair and leaned back, pinching the bridge of my nose and sighing. "I don't know, Jasper. Everything's wrong. This city, this place, Jane, everything. It's wrong."

He sighed, and I could feel his eyes searching my face for answers. I studiously avoided his gaze.

"Maybe you need a break. Take a vacation. Get your shit together," he finally suggested.

"Maybe," I shrugged. At that point, I would have stood upside down on my fucking head in the middle of Times Square and recited *The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere* for twenty-four hours straight if it meant that I would get some clarity. *Maybe some time off is a good idea.*

Jasper glanced at his watch, sighing. "I gotta go, or I'll be late for my next meeting. I'll buy you some time, but you've gotta fix that manuscript, or I'll be laughed out of the building when I try to present it."

"Thanks, Whitlock."

"Bros before Hos," he replied somberly.

I couldn't help but laugh. "How does that even apply to this fucking conversation?"

He just grinned and flicked me off before closing the door behind him.

Fucking Jasper.

Jane returned from the restroom, briefly pulling me out of my musings. I smiled at her, but it didn't quite reach my eyes. I wondered if she could tell. She smiled back and gave me that look; the one that meant she wanted something. I braced myself as she opened her mouth to speak.

"Rosalie called me today and invited us on a ski trip with her and Emmett. Middle of February. It might be nice for us to get away. What do you think?"

Jesus. My life is falling to shit, and she's debating a romantic weekend in Aspen with my sister and brother-in-law.

I treaded carefully. "That's only a month away. Are you going to be able to get the time off of work?"

Truth be told, there was no way in hell I could afford it right now, but I didn't think this would go over well.

She shrugged, her face falling slightly. It was almost imperceptible, but I knew her well enough to catch it, and it made me feel like such an asshole. I reached across the table and took her hand, willing myself to feel what I used to feel when I touched her. I drank in her features, her long blonde hair, her ice blue eyes and those perfect lips, and though I tried, I felt absolutely nothing.

When did that happen?

I opened my mouth to tell her that we could look into it, but what came out instead is, "I need a break."

What the fuck?

She frowned at me, and I began to backpedal furiously.

"That didn't come out right. What I mean is- you know I'm having a hard time with my writing, and I feel like such a fucking failure, and I think I just need to take some time off, go somewhere, clear my head," I paused, glancing up at her before continuing. "Alone."

She slowly removed her hand from mine and placed them both in her lap, staring down at them as if they were the most interesting fucking things in the world. I kept talking, desperate to fill the awkward, painful silence.

"Jane, I just need some time to get my shit together. This has nothing to do with us. I love you, you know that," I lied. I lied straight to her face. I've never lied to her before, not about things that mattered, and the words sounded hollow, even to me. I searched her face for a reaction, but I couldn't tell if she was angry, or sad, or if she had finally had enough of my bullshit.

"You did, once," she finally said so quietly that for a moment, I wasn't sure she'd actually spoken.

"Jane-"

She cut me off with a look, and when I saw the tears in her eyes, my already broken heart cracked just a little bit more. I may have fallen out of love with her a long time ago, but I still cared about her, and it still hurt.

"Don't, Edward. At least do me the decency of not lying to my face."

I remained silent. I had no fucking idea what to say, how to make this right.

"I love you, and I want us to work. But I know you're struggling, and I don't know how to help you. So you do what you need to do, and when you come back, we'll talk."

I don't fucking deserve this woman.

"I'm sorry," I said. It was pathetic, but it was all I had to offer.

"Me too," she smiled sadly. I watched as she gathered her things, leaving her food untouched, and before my addled brain could truly comprehend what had just happened, she was gone.

While I slowly sipped my drink, I stared at the now-empty chair across the table. Though it felt like it'd only been seconds since Jane left, when I finally glanced up, the restaurant was empty and the waitress was handing me the check, pity written clear across her features. I seemed to be getting that look a lot lately. It would have been amusing if it weren't so utterly fucking sad.

I paid the bill and stepped out onto the bustling sidewalk, rubbing my hands together for warmth. The biting cold of the January air helped to clear my head a bit, but I knew I was in no condition to drive. Instead, I turned up the collar of my coat and began the mile or so walk back to my apartment. Along the way, I decided that I'd pack some things and head over to Jasper's until I figured out what the fuck I was supposed to do next.

When I finally made it back to our building and climbed the six flights of stairs to our place, there was a note on the door. I recognized her handwriting immediately.

Edward-

I'm staying with Alec. I wanted you to be able to use your office if you needed it.

I hope you find what you're looking for. Call me when you have.

Love,

Jane

I told her I needed space, and she moved to her brother's place. *Like I said, I don't fucking deserve her.*

As I crumpled the note I felt my phone vibrating in my pocket. When I pulled it out, there were a slew of texts from Rosalie; Jane must have told her what had happened. In that moment, I was desperate to get away from the apartment, the building, and everything that reminded me of my fucked up life. I ignored the texts, shoved the phone back in my pocket and made my way back outside, down the street, and into the first bar I came across. Pushing my way through the crowd of co-eds, I shrugged off my jacket and claimed a stool. The bartender was looking at me expectantly.

"Glenlivet. Double, neat."

As he poured, I slid him my last ten dollars and glanced around at the drunk, smiling faces, remembering when I used to be one of them. The atmosphere was fairly typical for a bar so close to NYU. A couple just a few barstools down were alternately kissing and gazing at each other in obvious adoration. I just barely resisted the urge to interrupt them and tell them to give up, because in the end, everything would go to shit anyways. Instead, I shifted my gaze to a group of frat boys shooting pool, shouting and punching each other and being generally obnoxious in obvious hopes of catching the attention of the girls in the bachelorette party just across the room. I snorted into my glass. *Fucking pussies.*

The bartender handed me my change, and I nodded my thanks before turning my attention back to the bachelorette party. The bride was being fawned over by her friends, and she clearly loved every minute of the attention. Jane had always told me that when we got married, she didn't want a big fuss. A quick trip to the courthouse, sign on the dotted line type of thing- that was all she needed, she'd said.

I sighed and rubbed my hand over my face. *So much for forgetting.*

Suddenly, the smell of strawberries permeated the overwhelming stench of stale cigarettes and old whiskey; when I looked up, one of the girls from the party was standing next to me. She smiled and cocked her head to the side and for a moment all I could think about was how beautiful her skin was. It was pale and creamy and I had the overwhelming urge to touch her to find out if it was as soft as it looked.

"See something you like?" she grinned.

I'd like to say that I came back with something witty and charming, but that would make me a liar. Instead, like a true gentleman, I just stared at her, my drink halfway to my lips and my mouth halfway open, beyond coherent thought.

And then she giggled. The sound cut me to my core, and every god-forsaken literary cliché about love at first sight ran through my head.

You just broke up with Jane two hours ago, you asshole.

Yeah, but I fell out of love with her a long time ago.

And now I'm having conversations with myself. Jesus fuck, Cullen, get it together.

She stopped giggling and held out her hand. "I'm Bella."

"Edward. Sorry, I didn't mean to stare. I was just..." I trailed off as I shook her hand. Her skin was as soft as I'd imagined, and now I couldn't finish my sentence because I had no idea what the hell I was saying in the first place.

"It's okay. I'm sure we look pretty messed up." She rolled her eyes and gestured at the plastic necklace of penises she was wearing.

"Ah, yes. I mean, no. I mean you don't look messed up at all. You look... um...fine."

Fine? You look fine? You're a writer, for Christ's sake, and out of all the words at your disposal, you choose 'Fine'?

I groaned inwardly and started making irrational promises to God and whoever else was out there that I'd donate blood, or a kidney, or give money to the homeless- for Christ's sake, I'd do anything if they just got me through this conversation without making me look like a complete asshole.

I took a deep breath and tried again. "Bachelorette party, huh? Who's getting married?"

"Her name's Jessica. We've been best friends since college. I'm the maid of honor, so I'm required to wear the second most ridiculous getup."

She held up one finger at me to wait as the bartender appeared to take her order, and it was then that I noticed that she was literally covered head to toe in various bachelorette party regalia.

"It's not so bad," I laughed when she turned back towards me. "You could be Jewish."

A look of confusion flitted across her face and I mentally banged my head against the edge of the bar.

"I'm sorry. It's an inside joke."

The smile returned to her face. "I'm intrigued."

"You really want to know? It's not the most... how can I put this... complimentary story."

"In that case, I most definitely want to know." She poked my arm gently. "Unless, of course, you don't want to tell me."

Her chocolate brown eyes were sparkling and she was biting her lip and absentmindedly playing with her long brown hair and she was so understatedly beautiful. I wanted to take her picture so I could sit and stare at it later and attempt to figure out how, in a matter of seconds, this girl, this Bella, had turned my shitty world upside down.

Instead, in an effort to keep her next to me for as long as possible, I took a deep breath and proceeded to tell her the one of the most embarrassing stories of my childhood.

"Well, my mom is Jewish, and my dad converted for her before they got married, so I was raised Jewish. You know, the whole kippa on the Sabbath, Bar Mitzvah, Hanukkah instead of Christmas, you name it."

"No Christmas!" she gasped in mock-horror, clutching a hand to her chest.

"Yeah, tell me about it. I was the only kid on my street without a Santa Claus in the front yard. It scarred me for life."

"I can imagine," she nodded somberly. "You poor thing."

"When I was nine, my best friend Jasper and I were walking home from school together. We lived right next door to each other at the time. It was the first night of Hanukah, which is pretty close to the beginning of the Christmas season, and Jasper had been telling me all day how excited he was to put up the Christmas tree that night. He said they drank hot cocoa and listened to Christmas music and ate cookies and let me tell you, at nine years old it sounded like the coolest thing ever. So, that day in class, I decided I was tired of the stupid Menorah and that it was time to exact my revenge on my parents for raising me Jewish. I mean, clearly, it was so much more fun to be a Christian."

"Clearly," she agreed. "I'm a Catholic girl myself, and let me tell you, Christmas is the best part."

A Catholic girl. It was my mother's dream for me to settle down with a nice Jewish girl, and I could literally hear her heart break on the other side of the country. I was also fairly sure my grandfather had just rolled over in his grave. I spent the better part of high school and my first years of college dating every Schwartz, Weiss, Greenblad, and Stein that my mother and grandfather could find. Jane's last name was Shapiro, need I say more? I had never minded- I was happy to make them happy, and the girls had been nice enough. But I didn't care if Bella was Catholic, Muslim, or Wiccan, lived in a trailer park, had been in jail or had her tongue pierced, liked to drink blood or had the swastika tattooed on her side.

All I knew was that, without even realizing it, I'd been waiting for her my entire life.

"So I follow Jasper home, without telling my parents where I was, and lied to his, telling them my parents working late. It wasn't uncommon for one of us to be at the others for dinner, so that part was easy. It was the best night ever- everything I had always imagined it would be. But as soon as Jasper's dad put the star on top of the tree, the phone rang. It was my parents. They were freaking out, and they were pissed- but so was I. They ordered me to come home, and I refused. Instead, I sat underneath the Christmas tree and latched onto the trunk for dear life."

She was giggling again. "And?"

"They literally had to drag me out of the Whitlock's kicking and screaming at the top of my lungs about how I didn't want to be Jewish anymore. Ever since then, it's just been an inside joke of ours. When things get rough, or we find ourselves in awkward situations, we just look at each other and say, 'It could be worse. You could be Jewish'. "

As she was laughing at my story, the bartender returned with the drinks, and in my first intelligent move of the night I pulled my Visa out of my wallet, quickly handing it to him. She immediately began to protest.

"Oh no, Edward, you don't have to do that."

"I know I don't." I smiled at her. "But I want to. It's the least I can do, now that you've re-lived one of the greatest humiliations of my childhood with me."

"One of the greatest humiliations? You must have had quite a childhood."

"You have no idea. I was quite a character back then."

"And now?" she raised an eyebrow at me.

"I still have my moments," I smirked.

"I can imagine." She looked up at me for a moment, but I couldn't quite read her expression, and I wasn't sure how to respond. "Well then. You'll have to come meet the bachelorette so she can thank you properly."

Before I could protest, she picked up the tray of drinks with one hand, took my hand with her other, and pulled me off of my stool. I grabbed my scotch and my coat, and as we moved through the crowd I marveled at the electricity surging through my body in response to the feel of her hand around mine.

"Ladies! This is Edward, and this round of drinks is on him," she yelled over the music. "He's a good little Jewish boy, so be nice."

She winked at me, and despite the sudden emptiness that settled over me when she released my hand from hers, I laughed.

"Thank you, Edward. That was so nice of you," Jessica slurred, batting her eyelashes at me. I took her hand and kissed it gently.

"Anything for the beautiful bride-to-be." *There you go, Cullen. That's more like it.* I caught Bella's eye and winked back at her.

"I think I'm in love," Jessica swooned playfully.

A petite, dark haired girl pushed her way to the front of the crowd and shook my hand firmly.

"Hi Edward, I'm Alice! This is Jessica, Angela, Tanya...." Alice rattled off a whole slew of names and I stopped listening because I knew there was no way in hell I'd remember them anyway, and Bella was looking at my coyly from under her eyelashes and biting her lip. *How am I supposed to focus on anything when she's looking at me like that?*

It felt like I'd stepped into some alternate universe and I didn't even care because there was no way in hell I was going back to the life I was living before. We were doing some kind of dance, weaving in and out of the crowd and talking and laughing but always orbiting around each other. Each smile, each

stolen glance, her fingertips against mine and the subtle hint of strawberries that seemed to follow her everywhere; I was drawn to her like a moth to a flame. No matter where I was in the room or who I was talking to, there was only Bella.

Throughout the course of the night, I learned that she was 22 years old, originally from Ohio and studying theater at NYU. I discovered that she had a penchant for lip-gloss, an old truck back home named Tallulah, and that her favorite color changed with her mood. I noticed that she knew the words to almost every song that was played, and that when she was thinking, she had a tendency to bite her lip. I learned handfuls of useless facts about her and I stored each of them carefully in the depths of my mind. I wanted to know everything- everything that makes her *Bella*- and I wanted to become a part of it. I wanted to breathe her in deep and allow her to bring me back to life.

Bella. I think that I could be in love with someone like you.

Had I ever felt like this about Jane? In the beginning, there had been passion and eventually there had been love, but there had never been this. Jane had always been comfortingly familiar, but I knew that once this night ended, I wouldn't be able to breathe until I saw Bella again.

I had loved Jane, once. But Bella... her smile would haunt me for the rest of my life.

The bartender announced last call and I knew it was time to go, but I didn't know how to do this. I didn't know how to walk away from this girl who, in such a short time, had become the center of my world. I smiled politely and said my goodbyes, but my heart was hammering in my chest and my palms were sweating and I felt like I was seventeen all over again, all fumbling hands and raging hormones. I followed the girls out into the night and at last, I was face to face with Bella. She smiled up at me, her breath foggy in the cold air.

"It was very nice to meet you, Edward."

"And you, Bella." I hesitated as I fought back a wave of panic, a thousand 'what if's' running through my mind. This whole thing was fucking crazy. I'd only known this girl for a few hours, and I was terrified that she would walk out of my life just as easily as she had walked into it. After all, there was no way in hell she was thinking the same things as me, because that would make her fucking crazy, too. But still, I had to try.

"Listen, Bella, I-"

Suddenly, she wrapped her arms around my waist, pulling me into a hug. The top of her head fit perfectly under my chin, and she was so warm, so soft. Before I could even move to reciprocate, she tucked something into my left hand, kissed my cheek, and took off down the street to meet her friends. It wasn't until she finally rounded the corner and disappeared from view that I noticed the crumpled up napkin in my grasp. I moved under a nearby streetlight and unfolded it carefully, smoothing the creases with anxious fingertips.

"Le coeur a ses raisons, que la raison ne connaît point."

Bella

513-267-9442

"The heart has its reasons which reason knows nothing of." It was a quote from Blaise Pascal, one of my favorite philosophers and poets- but how could she have known that? I stood there for a moment, completely dumbfounded, before a flash of inspiration hit me. I suddenly knew exactly what was wrong with Paper Heart. I knew why it had been rejected so many times, and I knew how to turn it into the masterpiece that I had so naively thought it was before.

Clutching the napkin in my fist, I all but ran the few blocks back to my apartment. Letting myself in, I locked the door behind me, tossed my keys and my coat on the table and headed to my office. As my computer booted up, I carefully smoothed the napkin on my desk and traced the letters of her name with my finger.

Bella. My Shiksa Goddess. You are the story I have to write.

I pulled the Paper Heart manuscript from the corner of my desk, my fingertips found their home on the keyboard, and after 23 years, I was finally able to begin.

Chapter 3

Bella- September 2006

Wednesday, September 13th, 2006: my 27th birthday.

It was the end of my second summer doing stock theater at the Porthouse in Ohio, and though it wasn't ideal, it was a job. Last year the experience had been new and exciting, something to be proud of. This year it was simply a means to an end; a way to keep busy and stay out of Edward's way while he blazed a trail of triumph across the literary world.

While I was in Ohio, struggling to embody the carefree exuberance of Reno Sweeny from *Anything Goes*, Edward was going on book tours, meeting with publishers and executives, and enjoying his newfound status as a celebrity author.

I knew from firsthand experience how easy it was to fall for the combination of boyish charm, intelligence, and confidence that Edward exuded. When you added the chiseled jaw line, messy sex hair, and that carefree, panty-dropping grin into the mix- well, let's just say that I wasn't really surprised when his face started showing up in gossip magazines.

I remember the first time it happened; one Monday last July I had been lounging by the pool reading *People*, and when I turned the page, there he was. They'd caught him outside of our apartment, in those aviator shades I loved so much, leaning against the building, cigarette in hand. His hair was sticking up in a million different directions, no doubt as a result of his habit of pulling on it in frustration, and I could tell by his somewhat vacant expression that he was deep in thought, lost in that place he went when he was writing. The way the shadows played across his face made him look like a modern-day Marlon Brando, and the beauty of it took my breath away. *That's my husband*, I'd thought, the words rolling around my mind like marbles, foreign and obtrusive. I'd traced the edges of his face with my fingertips and realized that while the world was getting to know Edward, I felt like I no longer knew him at all. Though I tried for days and from every angle, I couldn't reconcile the stranger in the photo with the man that I loved.

I'd stopped reading *People* after that.

There was a knock at the door, and Lauren, my roommate, groaned. "What time is it?"

I grabbed my cell phone off of the nightstand, flipping it open to check the time and smiling at the 'Happy Birthday' text messages from Alice and Jessica. "It's 10:30. Late night last night?"

She yawned and stretched. "I didn't get to sleep until 3."

"I don't suppose Eric had anything to do with that." I raised an eyebrow at her as I pulled on my robe.

"Shut up!" She launched her pillow at me and I ducked, giggling, as a muffled voice came through the front door.

"I can hear you guys! I know you're awake!"

"Coming!" I called. When I opened the door, Mike was standing there, proffering a handful of daisies. "Happy Birthday, my dear Reno!"

"Evelyn, darling. You shouldn't have." I blushed as he handed me the flowers and leaned over to kiss my hand.

Mike Newton was freshly graduated with his BFA from UCLA and new to the company this year. He was funny, caring, and genuine, with typical Californian good looks: blonde hair, blue eyes, dimples, and the abs of a Ken doll. He was also one of the few straight men in the show, so pretty much every female and gay man in the company was left swooning in his wake- Lauren and I being the exception. The best thing about him was that he really had no idea how attractive he was, which of course, only made him that much more attractive.

Mike had been cast as Sir Evelyn Oakleigh, the romantic lead opposite my Reno Sweeny, and it hadn't taken long for us to become close friends. When he found out that my birthday was coming up, I begged him not to make a big deal about it; he'd just scoffed and proclaimed, "Sir Evelyn would *never* leave his lady unadorned on the very special day of her birth!" Still, daisies I could handle. I was just happy that he hadn't hired a marching band to march in my honor, or a plane to sky-write a love sonnet from Evelyn to Reno, or something ridiculous along those lines. Just a few weeks ago two of our castmates, Marcus and Felix, had gotten engaged, and Mike had hired local members of the Kent University choir to re-enact the church scene from *Love, Actually*. One Saturday night, after our final bows, the curtain had re-opened almost immediately; as we stood frozen, trying to figure out what the hell was going on, a choir began walking down the aisle, singing "All You Need Is Love." He'd even placed trumpet and trombone players strategically throughout the audience who popped up at random as they began to play. Halfway through the song, he grabbed a mic, clapped Marcus on Felix on the back, and said simply, "This one's for you, boys."

With Mike, you learned to expect the unexpected.

"Hey, Lauren," he called over my shoulder.

"Apparently I'm not going to get any more sleep," she replied grumpily, flopping down on the couch.

"She had a late night last night," I explained as I nudged the door open the rest of the way with my foot, gesturing for him to come in.

"Nice! Did you and Eric finally get it on?"

"Fuck off, Newton," Lauren swore, but she couldn't keep the grin off her face.

"Oh, they totally did!" Mike fist pumped. "Pay up, Bella."

"I could have sworn that you were going to hold out until the cast party tonight," I sighed, digging through my purse and handing Mike a twenty.

"A pleasure doing business with you, my dear." Mike gave a little half bow, pocketing the cash.

"I hate you both. I hope you know that," Lauren said, sticking out her tongue at us. Lauren and Eric were playing the other two romantic leads in the show, Hope Harcourt and Billy Crocker. Eric was new to the company this year, too, and the two of them had been dancing around their attraction for each other since the first day of rehearsal; like Corey and Topanga in *Boy Meets World*, it had been painfully obvious to everyone but the two of them. Finally, at the end of August, Eric had asked her out. When they walked into rehearsal the following day holding hands, we'd all given them a standing ovation. Lauren had blushed, Eric flicked us off, and they'd been inseparable ever since.

"Oh come on, you know we're just kidding." Mike sat down next to her on the couch and put his arm around her.

"Yeah, yeah," she grumbled.

"Anyways, I can't stay long. I just had to get you ladies up because Jacob called emergency rehearsal this afternoon. 11 am."

"Rehearsal?" I frowned.

"On the day of our last performance for the season? That's pointless," Lauren scoffed.

Mike held up his hands in mock surrender. "Hey, don't shoot the messenger."

"Leads only or full cast?" I asked as I filled an empty glass with water and deposited the flowers into it.

"Full cast. Something about changing some choreography in the Bon Voyage number."

"You're telling me I have to memorize new steps for one fucking performance?" Lauren half-yelled. "I'm going to kill Jacob. Literally kill him."

Porterhouse Theater and the nearby Kent University had always collaborated on the summer theater repertoire; it was a way for the students in Kent's B.F.A. program to gain experience and work with equity actors and for the Porterhouse to save money, since non-equity actors were generally hired on a volunteer basis. Our contracts typically ended in mid-August, but this year they'd been extended an extra month to allow some of Kent's aspiring directors to gain hands-on experience. Enter brilliant but eccentric sophomore Jacob Black; Jacob frequently toed the line between genius and just plain fucking crazy, and he liked to exercise his power as director a bit too often. We all knew he was learning, and we tried to be patient. The fact that he was gorgeous, all bronzed muscle, sparkling eyes and brilliant white teeth, had afforded the women of the cast a bit more patience than the men. But after a few weeks of random, last minute rehearsals and off the wall directors notes like "You can't just be on the ship, you have to *be* the ship!" and "You have to *feel* it, like a sea anemone opening to the sun!," most of us just wanted to throttle him.

Mike noted the furious expression on Lauren's face and decided it was time to make his exit. "Uh, I'm just gonna... go... wash my hair. I'll see you guys in twenty."

"So that gives me zero time for personal hygiene," she fumed. "Great. I'll have to go looking like I was up all night getting laid."

"You *were* up all night getting laid," I pointed out, pulling my hair up into a messy bun.

"Can it, bitch." Lauren grinned. "Alright, since you insisted that I not get you a gift for your birthday, my gift to you is first use of the bathroom today."

I laughed. "Thanks, but go ahead. I just need to brush my teeth, and I can do that when you're done."

"You sure?" she asked, and I nodded. "Alright. Give me ten, and we can head over to the theater together."

The door to the bathroom closed behind her, and I stood surveying the contents of the small apartment, noting that my possessions seemed to have doubled since my arrival in June. "I'm never going to finish packing," I sighed, heading into the bedroom to pull on a pair of yoga pants and one of Edward's old Amherst tees. Still, despite the looming tedium of packing, the thought of being home with Edward *for good* made me feel giddy and lightheaded. He was flying in tonight to see the show and celebrate my birthday, and we would drive back home, together, tomorrow. I couldn't wait to see him. Sure, we'd been fighting more than usual lately, but I chalked it up to the distance between us

and the strain it was putting on our marriage. When we were home, together, I would be able to make things right. *I have to make things right.*

I grabbed the necklace that held my wedding ring off of the small stand next to my bed, letting the cool links of the chain slide through my fingers; since Reno wasn't married, I'd taken to wearing it around my neck. I couldn't bear to part with it, even for a few hours- it was the only solid reminder I had of the promise that Edward and I had made to each other. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath as I fastened the clasp, feeling the weight of that promise against my chest.

Just a few more hours, Bella, and the world will make sense again.

When Lauren was finished, I quickly brushed my teeth, and we made our way to the theater, pulling into a parking spot just as Eric was getting off of his bike.

"Hey, baby." Eric removed his helmet, kicking the stand into place and leaning over to kiss Lauren on the cheek before turning to me. "Happy Birthday, Bella."

"Thanks, Eric," I smiled, jerking a thumb toward the theater. "Can you believe this?"

He laughed. "I know. You think we'd be used to Jacob's shit by now."

"Come on, ladies, we're going to be late." Mike appeared out of nowhere, swatting Eric on the ass as he jogged past.

"Touch me again, Newton, and I'll kill you," Eric threatened.

"That's not what your mom said last night!" Mike yelled over his shoulder, disappearing inside.

I shook my head, laughing, and grabbed my water bottle from the floor of Lauren's car. "Come on, guys, let's just get this over with."

"Actually, Bella, I need to talk to Eric for a minute. We'll meet you in there, okay?"

"You're gonna be late, you know." I raised an eyebrow at her.

"Just shut up and go; it'll only be a minute." Lauren shoved me playfully.

"Okay, okay. Use protection," I advised before turning on my heel and making my way into the theater. *And 3...2...1...*

"That's not funny, Swan!" Eric yelled.

I just grinned as the stage door swung shut behind me and the darkness of the backstage area enveloped me. I momentarily felt a sense of peace- entering the theater, for me, had always felt a bit like coming home- but the sense of peace was short-lived. It was entirely too dark and entirely too quiet; not even the track floor lighting was lit.

"Hello?" I called, my voice reverberating in the empty space. *What the hell?*

As I was wondering if rehearsal had been canceled just as quickly as it had been called, I noticed a hint of light floating about halfway down the hall from where I was. I slowly made my way closer until I could tell that it was the flickering glow of candles; many, many small candles, on top of some kind of colorful surface that looked suspiciously like a cake.

Oh, hell no.

Suddenly, the backstage lights flipped on to reveal the entire cast and crew of the show huddled together, adorned with those goofy party hats and shit-eating grins. I jumped, biting back a scream, and clutched a hand to my heart to keep it from flying out of my chest. As they all began to sing 'Happy Birthday', I felt the telltale blush begin creeping across my face, and I vowed before myself and God that when this was over, I would find and kill Mike Newton.

"Happy Birthday, Bella!" Speak of the devil. He came over and put his arm around me, while everyone else started clapping and cheering.

"Don't kid yourself Newton; just because we have an audience doesn't mean I won't kill you right here and now," I hissed through my smile.

"And this is me calling your bluff," he grinned cockily. I pinched his side, hard, and he danced away from me, laughing. Jacob was still holding the cake, so I quickly made a wish, before leaning over and blowing them out.

"So, no rehearsal then, I take it?" I raised an eyebrow at him, and he chuckled.

"Well, I was thinking about it, but-"

"Don't encourage him," Leah, the show's sound manager, deadpanned.

"Speech!" Mike yelled, effectively changing the subject, and his cheer was quickly echoed by the rest of the company. I held up a hand, and after a moment they fell silent.

"Wow, you guys. I just... I don't even know what to say." I pushed my hair back off of my face and smiled at the friends who, over the course of the summer, had become my family. "I can't believe it's our last night together, and I can't believe you did all this for me. Thank you. So much."

"We love you, Bella!" one of the stage hands catcalled, and everyone started laughing, making their way out onto the open, sunlit stage. I took the cake from Jacob and handed it to Mike to cut, glaring at Lauren and Eric as they made their way towards me.

"Did you guys know about this?"

"Of course we did," she giggled. "But Mike swore us to secrecy."

"I'm sure he did," I said dryly.

"Hey, it was either this or a bunch of Chippendale's dancers dressed in skimpy sailor costumes performing a choreographed number to the title song from the show," Mike shrugged, licking some frosting off of his finger.

"I managed to convince him that this might go over a little bit more smoothly." Eric rolled his eyes.

"Hey Lauren, can you get the ice cream out of the freezer? Eric, grab the plates; they're on one of the chairs in the front row," Mike delegated.

"Yeah, no problem," Lauren said, and they both disappeared through the curtains.

"You have to admit, I totally had you fooled with the daisies this morning." Mike glanced up at me for a second and grinned before returning his attention to the cake.

"Yeah, you did. You definitely did." I watched him for a moment, and then spontaneously leaned over to hug him. "Thank you, Mike."

"Uh, I think I just got frosting all over your shirt, but you're welcome," he chuckled, hugging me back with his free arm. I stepped back and sure enough, my front was smeared with sugary red icing. I wiped it off with my finger and smeared it across his cheek.

"Hey!" he protested, gearing up to retaliate, but before he could make his move, Eric reappeared, holding the plates and my cell phone.

"Bella, your phone is ringing. It's Edward." My heart fluttered, cake and Mike all but forgotten. I grabbed the phone out of Eric's hand and made my way further backstage to the costume shop, closing the door behind me.

"Edward," I said breathlessly, bracing myself for the worst. "Hi."

"Happy Birthday, love." I could hear the smile in his voice, and I relaxed immediately. *I think we're gonna be okay.*

"Thank you." I leaned up against the door, twisting the hem of his t-shirt in my left hand. "You're still coming in tonight, right?"

"Of course, I just...hang on." I frowned and bit my lip as I listened to his muffled conversation on the other end of the line.

"What, Jasper? For fuck's sake, I'm on the phone with Bella. Just give me five minutes and I'll be there, okay?"

"Sorry, baby." He was back.

"Busy day?"

"Yeah, Random House asked me to be a guest speaker for one of their keynote series. It's really last minute so we're all kinda stressed."

"Congratulations," I offered.

"Thanks."

With this simple, one word answer, my heart began to ache. *He's still angry.*

"I'm sorry, Edward," I whispered.

He sighed heavily. "I told you, Bella, it's fine. Just drop it."

"It's not fine. Marriage doesn't work without trust, and I never should have accused you of having an affair. I know you would never do something like that. I was just angry, and hurt, and she gets to be with you every day and I don't, and you hadn't come to see me in so long..."

"Bella, love, stop," he interrupted. "It's okay." We were both silent for a moment.

"I trust you," I said. He didn't reply. I wished I could see his face, so I could know what he was thinking.

"I'm sorry," I said again.

"I know," he murmured. "I'm sorry, too."

I closed my eyes as a single tear slid down my cheek. "Maybe we should try marriage counseling. I talked to Esme, and-"

"We'd have to be in the same state for that, Bella," he cut me off again, the harshness of his tone stabbing into my gut like a knife. "And almost as soon as you come home from your summer in Ohio, I'll be leaving on another book tour."

It was wrong; it was all wrong. We were supposed to struggle through the bad times together and come out stronger in the end. Clearly, the fates had never gotten that memo, because Edward and I simply continued to exist parallel instead of perpendicular to one another, two different lives that no longer intersected. The only things holding us together were good intentions and half-kept promises and the hope that those cliché loving songwriters had been on to something, that love would indeed find a way. I opened my eyes and stared at the girl in the mirror across the room, watching as she tiptoed across eggshells, spinning wildly and searching desperately for purchase. *What happened to our happy ending?*

Edward sighed, and in my mind I could see him running his hand through his hair and pinching the bridge of his nose. Sometimes it terrified me just how well I knew him, every gesture and nuance, every talent and fault. For the rest of my life, every time I saw someone jogging in the middle of a blizzard, or ordering coffee with one Splenda, one Equal and skim milk, or pacing around a room, tugging at their hair in frustration, I would think of him. *It's funny how the smallest, most insignificant things can break you.*

When he spoke again, his tone was softer, lighter; defeated. "I'm sorry, Bella. I don't like being away from you, either."

I didn't respond. There was nothing I could do to direct us away from this impasse, so really, what was the point?

"Look, I gotta run if I'm gonna catch my flight. I'll be there at 5. We'll find a way to make this work. I'm not giving up on us, Bella." He paused, his voice breaking. "I love you."

His promise came out of left field and ignited a spark of hope inside of me; I clung to it like a drowning man to a rope, refusing to let go until it pulled me to safety.

"I love you, too."

After the celebration, Lauren and I headed back to our place to finish packing. When just about everything I owned had been jammed into a box, I took a break to grab the mail, smiling when I noticed three birthday cards. Charlie had sent me \$50 cash, "to buy myself something pretty," Carlisle and Esme had sent a gift certificate to a swanky steakhouse back in New York, and Rosalie and Emmett had sent a beautiful photo of all of us taken when they'd come to visit Edward and I last spring. I called and thanked each of them, keeping a close eye on the clock. It was so good to hear their voices, but there was only one person that I really wanted to talk to, and it was almost time for him to arrive.

I was in and out of the shower in ten minutes, throwing on my clothes and dabbing on some light makeup. I had to take my time with my hair, since Reno Sweeny has quite an elaborate up-do. It had taken me the better part of the summer to master, but I'd finally become a pro at it. As I pinned and curled, I reflected back on Edward's and my first date. It felt like ages ago, but it had only been four years. *God, has it really only been four years?* I remembered the hopeful anticipation I'd felt that

night, the way his eyes lit up when I opened the door, and how *alive* he made me feel, like lightning crackling over the desert, charging the dry air with so much electricity that every hair on your body stands on end. Would it be like that, again, tonight?

I slid my wedding ring off of the chain and onto my finger just as my cell phone rang.

"Go get 'em, tiger," Lauren called from her spot on the couch where she was idly flipping through last month's Cosmo.

"Thanks." I managed a small smile as I flipped open my phone and whirled out the door. "Are you here?"

"I'm waiting outside, love."

"I'll be down in a second."

I threw the phone into my purse and tried, unsuccessfully, to calm my racing pulse as I embarked on literally the longest elevator ride in history. I pounded futilely on the button for the first floor the entire way, knowing it wasn't doing a damn bit of good, but somehow it made me feel better. Finally, the doors opened and I raced down the hallway, turned the corner, and saw him through the double glass doors. I shoved through them and jumped into his arms, wrapping my arms and legs around him, breathing him in deep. *Jesus fuck, fuck I'd missed him so much.*

"Bella, what's wrong?" he asked, sounding concerned.

"Nothing," I half laughed, half sobbed, releasing my death grip on his neck. "I just missed you so much."

"I missed you too," he said softly, kissing the tears from my eyes before capturing my lips with his. He tasted like peppermint and home.

"That better be the infamous Edward Cullen; otherwise, Lucy, you have some 'splainin' to do," Mike said from behind me and I giggled, sliding off of Edward and turning to face him.

"Yes, Mike, this is my husband, Edward. Edward, this is Mike."

"Nice to meet you, Edward; I've heard so much about you," Mike said as the two of them shook hands.

"Same here," Edward nodded. "Thanks for looking out for Bella this summer."

"It was my pleasure. She's a good kid."

"I'm six years older than you, Mike," I pointed out.

"Tomato, tomahto." He waved a hand, dismissing my comment. "Hey, Edward, would you mind signing this for my sister? She absolutely loves you." Mike asked, holding out a copy of *Paper Heart* and a Sharpie.

"Sure, man; no problem. What's her name?"

"Emily."

Edward set to work scrawling a message in his ridiculously perfect calligraphy-like handwriting, and I glanced over at Mike. "Geez, were you waiting in the bushes to ambush him?" I teased.

"Yeah, I wanted to catch him before you showed up, but I accidentally dozed off, and when I woke up, you were already out here," he sighed forlornly. "Three hours crouched behind a bush for nothing."

"Not true. You still got your autograph," Edward said, handing him back the book and the marker.

"The man does have a point," Mike agreed. "Thank you. If this doesn't make me big brother of the year, I don't know what will."

"It was my pleasure," Edward smiled.

"Come on, Edward; let's get your stuff up to my room." I glanced at my watch. "We only have about an hour until call time."

"Oh, I can take it. I'm heading up there anyway. Lauren's there, right? I'll just drop it off."

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"Yeah, it's no problem." Mike leaned over and grabbed the handle of Edward's rolling suitcase. "You two crazy kids have fun."

"Thanks, Evelyn," I called after him.

"Anytime, Reno!" he yelled before the door swung shut behind him.

"Evelyn?" Edward raised an eyebrow at me.

"He is the Evelyn to my Reno," I shrugged, sighing dramatically. "What's a girl to do?"

"I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that," Edward growled, pulling me into his arms and kissing me again.

"Mr. Cullen, I didn't know you were the jealous type," I murmured against his lips.

"Only when it comes to you, Mrs. Cullen." His teeth found purchase on my earlobe and I groaned.

"I don't suppose we can get rid of that roommate..."

"Not a chance," I sighed as he continued his assault down one side of my neck, across my collar bone, and back up the other side. "She hasn't even finished packing."

He planted one more kiss against my lips before reluctantly releasing me. "That's unfortunate."

"I know. But we have all night for that." I grinned wickedly. Something flashed across his face- anger? guilt? - but it was gone as quickly as it had come, and he was smiling again. *I'm probably seeing things; he's just tired from his trip.*

"So what would you like to do now?" he asked.

"Well, the lake runs behind this building, and there's a pier. I thought maybe we could just go sit and talk. You know, catch up," I shrugged, feeling suddenly self-conscious.

"Lead the way, love." He wrapped his hand around mine and I grinned, leading him around the building and down the walkway to the water. When we reached the pier, I slid off my shoes and sat on the edge, dangling my feet into the water. Edward followed suit, and I leaned into the crook of his arm, sighing contentedly.

"I just can't believe that you're really here," I said, tracing random patterns across his leg with my free hand.

Edward hedged for a moment before speaking. "Look, Bella, I know it's been a rough summer for us—"

"Stop." I nudged him playfully, smiling up at him. "See? I'm smiling. That means I'm happy that you're here."

"Yeah, me too," he grinned down at me. "I like that sweater. Is it for the show?"

"Yup. I stole it from the costume shop; I think it makes me look like Daisy Mae." I pouted, batting my eyelashes at him exaggeratedly. Edward had always had an obscure love for the infamous Li'l Abner character.

"You're right, it does," he laughed, and the easy sound of it fanned that smoldering spark of hope.

See? We're laughing. I think we're gonna be okay.

"Can I say something?" I squinted up at him, lifting a hand to shade my eyes from the sun. I felt him tense beside me, so I hurried to reassure him. "It's not bad, Edward. It's just something I feel like I have to say."

He relaxed a little. "Of course, Bella."

"I know that we're going to have to try a little harder to make this love work, to make it as amazing as it was when we first met. But, I mean, you made it to Ohio. We're together. That's a start, right?" I toyed with the wedding band on his finger, avoiding his gaze.

He pressed a kiss to my temple and said softly, "Yes. It's a start."

We both were quiet for a moment, listening to the gentle lapping of the waves against the pier.

"So, I think you're really going to like this show," I offered. "At least, I'm pretty sure it doesn't suck."

"What makes you so sure?" he teased.

I pretended to think for a moment. "Well, we were only booed offstage once all summer."

"Let me guess. Mid-show you decided to break character and do your Adolf Hitler impression, complete with finger moustache."

"Shut up." I rolled my eyes. "That only happened once, and I was just trying to make a point."

"Yes, I know. I'm sure it's quite often that hotels that don't allow swimming after midnight are compared to the Third Reich." He was laughing again, and the spark smoldered into small licks of flame.

See? You're laughing, and I'm smiling, and you're mine. We're doing fine.

"I'm sure the show is great." His thumb rubbed the back of my hand gently. "You never did give yourself enough credit."

"You're right." I hesitated for a moment before continuing. "You're so right, Edward. I think we both can see what could be better. I'm not too proud to admit when I'm wrong. And with all we've been through, we'll end up twice as strong at the end. So let's just start again this weekend. Forget the past, forget this shitty summer. We love each other, and we can get through this. We can work through whatever we need to on the drive home and start over when we get back to New York. Together."

"Bella," Edward sighed, running his free hand through his hair, and my stomach dropped.

"What?" My voice was tiny.

"I didn't want to say anything yet because I wanted to enjoy the time I had with you, but that keynote series I mentioned? It's this weekend, in Cincinnati. I can't drive back with you. But Angela booked a last minute flight for Alice; she's flying in tomorrow, so she'll be with you." He paused. "I'm so sorry, Bella. I was really looking forward to that time together."

Hurt and anger battled for control of my emotions, finally settling for a first place tie. I took a deep, calming breath, reminding myself that this was unavoidable, that this was his career. Regardless, self-pity began to run rampant. *What about me? When is it going to be my turn to be important?*

"I didn't know you had to go so soon. I thought we had a little time," I said, then forced a smile onto my face, refusing to ruin the little time I had left with him. "Look, whatever, if you have to, then you have to. It's alright. We still have tonight."

I glanced up at him again, and when he avoided my gaze, I knew the damage wasn't complete.

"The event starts tonight. There's a car picking me up in an hour," he said, throwing buckets of ice water onto the flames of hope, extinguishing them completely. It was at that point that anger won the battle; something inside of me snapped, and I removed my hand from his, stuffing both of them under my thighs, biting my lip so hard that it drew blood.

"I didn't tell you because I knew you'd tell me not to bother coming at all, and I wanted to see you, even if it was only for a short time. Please try to understand," he pleaded. "If there were any other way..."

"You know what makes me crazy?" I looked sideways at him. "I'm sorry, can I just say this? What makes me crazy is the fact that we could be here, sharing our night, spending time together, and you're going to choose someone else to be with instead."

"It's not a choice, Bella," he frowned. "I'm not-"

"Yes, Edward, it's a choice." I jumped up, turning to face him, clenching my hands into fists at my sides. "That's exactly what you're doing; you're making a choice. You could be here with me, or be there with them. As usual, guess which you pick."

He stood up, his eyes flashing. "What do you want me to do, Bella? They're my fucking bosses. They pay the bills."

"Oh, so now I don't make enough money?"

"That's not what I said, don't twist my words around," he said tiredly, pinching the bridge of his nose. "They write the checks, so they call the shots. I have to go, love."

"No, Edward. You don't *have* to go. You don't have to go to another party with the same twenty people you see every day. You could stay with your wife on her fucking birthday, and you could, God forbid, even see my show. Oh, but wait. I'm sure that would drive you crazy, because that would mean a night without all of your little girlfriends, wouldn't it?" I sneered.

"This is ridiculous. You're being unreasonable."

"No, I'm not." I shook my head slowly.

"Yes, you are," he argued petulantly, crossing his arms.

"No, I'm not! The point is, Edward, that you can't spend a single day that's not about you! It's *always* about you and your career! Isn't he wonderful, ladies and gentlemen? Just 28 years old; the savior of writing!" I yelled, clutching my hands to the sides of my head as tears of frustration began to roll down my cheeks. "You're constantly pushing through windows and bursting through walls en route to the sky, and I..."

The flash of anger that had been so quick to consume me fizzled unexpectedly and I trailed off, no longer having the energy to finish what I had so rashly started. When I looked at Edward, when I *finally* saw through the web of anger and disappointment and guilt, all I could see was a rift so wide that I couldn't even begin to know how to cross it. My whole body began to tremble and I stared at him wordlessly, pleading with my eyes for him to tell me that he was wrong, that he was sorry, that he would stay. He met my gaze for only a moment before clenching his jaw and looking away, and I wrapped my arms around my torso to keep myself from shattering into a million pieces.

"I swear to God, I'll never understand how you can stand there, and see I'm crying, and not do anything at all," I whispered. Slipping my feet into my shoes, I turned and walked until the pier met land.

He didn't follow.

Chapter 4

*Sometimes there's airplanes I can't jump out
Sometimes there's bullshit that don't work now
We are gods of stories but please tell me
What there is to complain about*

*Oh this has gotta be the good life
This has gotta be the good life
This could really be a good life, good life*

-One Republic, 'Good Life'

Edward- January 2003

For those of us fortunate enough to call New York City our home, January was when we rediscovered the magnetism, the allure that drew us here in the first place. We found solace in the steamy windows of corner coffee shops and the bright lights of the Great White Way, we rediscovered joy in the rich history showcased in our museums and the way the light hits Lady Liberty at sunset *just so*, and we reveled in the deserted Starbucks' and sidewalks and subways as the holiday tourists escaped in droves. These seemingly inconsequential things elicited deep within us a sense of pride; that we belonged to this delightfully anomalous city, and she to us.

What I cherished above all else was the quiet. The perpetually threatening sky turned the city into a greyscale work of art, snowflakes occasionally dotting the canvas and crystallizing like sugar on the tops of its buildings. People rushed from one destination to another, hands tucked into coat pockets, heads bent in protest against the wind, attempting valiantly to conjure some facsimile of warmth, and unwilling to spare heated conversation. Even taxi drivers became reticent - with the icy air slowing their movements, their hands weren't as quick to lay on their horns or flick off their fellow drivers. But the cold that diminished the frenzy of the city woke something deep inside of me; the hunger for survival, the primitive need to create.

I always did my best writing in January.

Of course, thanks to Murphy and his godforsaken law, January was the month that Bella and I ended up moving in together.

Don't get me wrong; I was beyond ecstatic to be moving in with her. But it was just too fucking cold, and I was sorely missing my yearly ritual of being cooped up in my office with my laptop. My numb fingers gripped the oversized box in my hands, and I prayed that they would stay anchored as I forced the door to the building open with my shoulder. Bella hastily squeezed through with a box of her own, and I followed her up the stairs.

"Thank God this is the last trip," she huffed. I was distracted by both the curve of her ass in her jeans and the weight of the box that was threatening to topple out of my grasp, so I didn't reply. After we set our respective boxes on the floor, I pulled her into my arms and slid my cold hands up the back of her shirt. She squealed, wriggling out of my grasp, and swatted at my arm.

"Jesus, Edward, your hands are freezing!"

"Sorry, love," I chuckled, shoving the offending appendages in my pockets. As I watched her drag a box of books across the floor - *our* floor - a wave of happiness washed over me, so powerful that I felt like I was going to fucking explode. Virtually every surface was littered with moving boxes, and yet the quaint two bedroom apartment already looked and felt like home. I knew that it was the woman in

front of me, not the space, that made this so. With Bella beside me, no matter where I was, I was home.

I know, I know; it was so fucking cliché. But it had been almost a year, and I still felt like some lovesick teenager, penning love poems, stealing glances, and counting down the moments until we'd be together again. She had dazzled me completely; everything about her left me breathless and wanting, *always wanting*, and no matter how hard I tried, I could never get my fill. As if on cue, my stomach rumbled loudly and I glanced at the clock. We hadn't eaten since before we started the move this morning, and it was already 5:15 pm.

"Why don't I run and get us some food from that Vietnamese restaurant we saw down the street? You can stay here and unpack." I knew how much she loved to organize, and I could tell by the look in her eyes that she was eager to get started.

"Thanks, baby. Don't forget the spring rolls." Smiling, she blew me a kiss, and I pulled up the hood of my jacket, trundling back out into the cold. I walked quickly down the deserted street, marveling at how quickly this past year has gone, at how much has changed. After meeting Bella, the passion that had lay dormant inside of me so long awoke, and I couldn't stop the words from pouring out of me. Still, I found myself torn between spending every waking moment with Bella and tweaking *Paper Heart*, so the process had taken much longer than usual - almost 6 months longer. I finished just before Christmas, and Jasper and I were now shopping around for a publisher. I'd yet to receive a rejection letter, which I could only hope was a good sign.

Bella was auditioning without much luck, but she kept her head held high, and fuck if I didn't love that about her. She'd booked a few workshops here and there, but I knew she was hungry for bigger and better things. She picked up a bartending job at a local restaurant where she got hit on almost constantly by sleazy Wall Street tycoons and handsy tourists who don't know how to take 'No' for an answer. While I couldn't say that I was happy about it, we needed the money that she brought in every night. The fact that I couldn't support us on my own made me feel like such a worthless schmuck. Bella deserved so much better than dingy bars and groping patrons; she had the beauty and the talent for spotlights and dozens of roses and rave reviews in the New York Times. I couldn't wait until the day I could tell her to quit and focus on auditioning, the way she would if she didn't have to work that shitty job to help us make ends meet.

As I was about to enter the restaurant, I glanced inside the large picture window just to my left and my hand froze on the door handle; Jane was standing there, innocently perusing a menu. I hadn't seen her since the day I walked out, just short of a year ago. Adrenaline surged through my body, and I was briefly torn between fight and flight. Half a second passed. I was about to turn around when she beat me to it; her eyes met mine, her expression unreadable, and I couldn't leave, couldn't bear to make this any more awkward than it already was. I still felt like I owed her the explanation that I was never able to give.

I wondered if that explanation even mattered anymore.

Sighing, I tugged off my hood, raking a hand through my hair as I pulled open the door and walked straight towards the biggest skeleton in my closet; the one thing in my life that I really, truly, fucked up.

"Hey, Jane," I said softly.

"Edward." She nodded. I flinched at the listlessness in her eyes.

"How are you?" It was so presumptuous, like we were old friends. I had no right to know. She had no obligation to tell me.

Half of her mouth curved up in a smile. "Oh, you know, living the dream."

I forced myself to laugh at the inside joke we used to share while fervently praying that she would spit in my face, slap me, scream at me, anything but force me to continue this awkward conversation.

"What about you, Edward? Are you a famous, accomplished author yet?"

I shifted my weight from my left foot to my right and back, trying to decide how to answer. I settled for honest. "I re-wrote *Paper Heart*. We're shopping it out again."

"It was good before," she offered.

"Thanks."

"How's... Bella?"

Her name on Jane's lips sounded wrong. "Bella's... good."

She nodded again, crossing her arms across her chest. "So do you live in the area now?"

"Yeah." I bit the inside of my cheek. "We, uh... I... just moved."

If she caught my slip, she didn't acknowledge it. I felt horrible for lying, but I didn't know what the right etiquette was in this situation, and something told me 'less is more' is the way to go.

"You?" The volley continued.

"No, no. I'm still living on the West side. I'm just here on a date."

I cast a surreptitious glance around the restaurant; Jane noticed and said, "He's in the restroom."

"Oh."

I licked my lips. "How's that going?"

She shrugged, tugging on a strand of her golden hair. I recognized the nervous gesture and immediately wished I hadn't asked.

"You know, the typical comb-overs and mama's boys with a closeted gay man thrown in here and there for fun. But I'm trying."

"Right." I smiled half-heartedly.

"Right," she echoed, fidgeting with her bracelet.

The cliché began to tumble out of my mouth before I could stop it. "Jane, for what it's worth..."

"You never meant to hurt me. It was you, not me. I deserve better than what you have to give. I know." Her eyes, bright blue sapphires, locked onto mine. I didn't want to see, but I couldn't look away.

"You broke me, Edward."

My gaze finally shifted to the floor, the epitome of a chastised, repentant schoolboy. She brushed a strand of my hair off my forehead and tipped my chin up so I was forced to look at her once again.

"But I wouldn't have wanted you to stay, when your heart so obviously wasn't in it anymore."

As she stepped back, putting distance between us, a man came up behind her and placed his arm possessively across her lower back. "Who's this, Jane?"

"Liam, this is Edward. Edward, Liam." We shook hands. From his lack of reaction, I could tell that he didn't know who I was, that he didn't know that Jane and I shared a history. I offered up a silent prayer of thanks for this, because he looked like the type of knuckle-dragger who enjoyed beating the shit out of douchebag ex-boyfriends.

"Ready to go?" Liam asked, holding out her jacket. Jane nodded, sliding her arms into the sleeves before turning back to me.

"Thank you. For at least giving me a chance to find the happiness I deserve."

Liam eyed me warily as he escorted her out of the restaurant, and I watched as they disappeared down the street. Suddenly, I wanted nothing more than to be home with Bella. I needed her to know that even though I fucked up before, I could do this right. I *would* do this right. I needed to do this right; for her, for me... for us.

I placed my order quickly, picking items haphazardly off the menu; it was too much food for two people, but I didn't care. Twenty minutes later I was back at our building. I grabbed the mail - we'd started forwarding it weeks ago when the last tenant was evicted - and sorted through it as I climbed the stairs. There were a few bills and some junk mail, nothing too exciting. At the bottom of the pile, a letter from Random House caught my eye and my stomach dropped.

Fuck.

First Jane, and now this.

Bella heard my muttered curses and fumbling keys and opened the door for me. Without a word, I handed her the envelope, leaving her in the doorway as I deposited the bags of food on the cluttered counter. Maybe, if I just kept moving, that letter, *that fucking letter*, wouldn't be able to catch me; wouldn't be able to hammer away at that fracture inside of me that was finally, almost, *almost* healed, and split me wide open again.

"A rejection letter?" After a year, Bella was well versed in the ruthlessness of my trade.

I started pulling boxes of rice and fragrant containers of food out of the bag, prying them open with angry fingers.

"You didn't even open it," she chastised, ripping open the envelope and unfolding the paper. As soon as I saw the letter in her hand, I didn't want her to read it; I didn't want her to see there, in black and white, what a failure I was. I wanted to tear it out of her grasp and claw at it until efficacious words became inconsequential letters, harmless a's and f's and w's scattered across our kitchen floor. I wanted to burn them until they relinquished what little hope I had left from their merciless grasp. Instead, I just stood there, trapped inside my own head.

After a moment, she wordlessly passed the letter over to me and stood with her arms crossed and her head cocked to one side, waiting.

"Bella, I -"

"Just read it," she interrupted. I frowned, finally glancing at the offending piece of paper. When I saw the name on the letterhead, I realized that there was no way in hell this was a rejection letter.

"It's from Sonny Mehta. He's the editor-in-chief and publisher of Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group." I looked at Bella in disbelief.

"Keep reading."

My eyes hungrily scanned the page, hope exploding from my chest, winding itself around my heart and my arms and my hands, pulling me up, pulling me in.

"A literary work of art... burgeoning talent... fuck, Bella, he wants to publish my book!" The pieces fell into place, and we were laughing and kissing and hugging, limbs tangled, with ardent smiles and blazing eyes. Emotions were running through me at the speed of light - elated, relieved, nervous, ecstatic, proud - on a feedback loop.

"I love you," I mumbled into a kiss on her upturned palm.

"I'm so proud of you, Edward," she whispered into my hair.

I was staring at the letter in my hand, and waiting for it to disappear like some cruel practical joke when my phone started to ring. Without tearing my eyes from the paper, I pulled it out of my pocket and held it up to my ear.

"Hello?"

"Hello, is this Mr. Edward Cullen?"

"Yes..."

"My name is Janet Maslin, I write for The Arts section of the New York Times. I'm sorry to call you so late in the day on a Friday. Is this is a good time?"

The New York Times? "Yes, it's fine. How can I help you?"

"Well, you see, Sonny Mehta of Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group is a close, personal friend of mine, and he happened to mention you to me over lunch the other day. He said he's currently bidding on one of your works, Paper Heart?"

"Yes, that's my most current project." He was bidding on it already? I had no idea. I really needed to call Jasper.

"I'm writing a piece on up-and-coming authors, and I was hoping I could include you in the article. Sort of a 'five young authors to watch' type of thing. I have some friends at the Atlantic Monthly; they let me read the first chapter of Paper Heart and I must say, it's remarkable. Poignant, without being pretentious. Quite an accomplishment. It's going to be big, if I do say so myself."

"Thank you." I managed to say as my brain struggled to keep up with the rapid change of events taking place.

"If you're interested, perhaps you would be available around 9 am Monday morning for an interview? We'll also be taking a photo of you for the paper."

"Sure. Of course. Do I need to bring anything?"

"Not at all - just your brilliant self!"

Janet started reciting the address of her office and her phone number, and I motioned frantically for Bella to help me find a pen and paper. She quickly dug a pen out of her purse, tossing it across the room to me, and I scribbled the information onto one of the napkins on the counter.

"Thank you so much, Ms. Maslin, for the opportunity. Really. Thank you."

"Please, Edward, call me Janet. And it is I who should be thanking you! Enjoy your weekend. I'll see you on Monday morning."

Bella pounced on me as soon as I ended the call. "Who was that?"

"Janet Maslin. From the New York Times."

"What?" She gasped.

"Apparently she's a friend of Sonny Mehta's. She's doing an author on up-and-coming authors, and he told her about me. They're going to feature me in the article."

"Edward!" Bella throws her arms around my neck. "This is unbelievable!"

I lifted her up off the floor, spinning her around. She hitched her legs around my waist as I slowed, leaning back to smile at me.

"We should celebrate," she purred, kissing me suggestively. My phone rang again; I pulled it out of my pocket and threw it across the room without breaking the kiss.

"You should probably get that," she mumbled against my lips before peppering feather light kisses across my jaw line. I felt the tip of her tongue, then her teeth, against my earlobe as her hands tangled in my hair.

"Probably," I said, but there was no way in hell I was going to stop what we were doing to answer the phone. We kissed again, tongues tangling, breath mingling; I could feel her heat through my jeans and I was instantly hard. She started moving her hips against me slowly, and I groaned.

"Make love to me, Edward," she whispered into my ear.

Without a word I carried her into our living room, setting her down on the couch and discarding my sweatshirt onto the floor. Bella followed suit, and her shirt landed somewhere on the floor near mine. I knelt in front of her, sliding the straps of her bra off of her shoulders one by one before reaching around to undo the clasp. She arched her back, biting her lip as I leaned in and worshipped, slowly, one nipple, and then the other, with my tongue. She tasted like summer rain and strawberries, and I paused for a moment to bury my face in her neck, overwhelmed by the rush of joy that threatened to swallow me whole.

"Are you okay?" she asked quietly, sensing my hesitation. I nodded, unable to speak, and slid my hands down the sides of her body, kissing her as I undid the button and zipper on her jeans. I slid them off, pulling her underwear along with, and gripped her hips, pulling her towards the front of the couch, spreading her legs gently. She was wet, so wet, and the sight of her completely open to me, so ready and willing, made me even harder. My dick strained against the zipper of my jeans, trying like hell to break free, but I wanted this to be about Bella. I wanted to show her just how much I loved her; that without her, all of this meant nothing.

I kissed and licked up one side of her leg slowly, inhaling her scent and avoiding the place she wanted me most. When I kissed back down her other leg she groaned, her head falling back against the couch, and I could feel her body trembling with anticipation. I spread her legs a bit further and leaned

in, flicking my tongue lightly against her clit once, twice, three times, before taking it in my mouth and sucking gently.

"Oh God, oh Jesus God," she hissed, her hands flying to tangle in my hair, her hips lifting off of the couch. I slowly, gently, slid one finger inside her, then two, moving them in tandem with the motion of her hips while my tongue continued to lap at her clit. I couldn't hold back a groan at the feel of her wet warmth surrounding my fingers, and her soft mewls of pleasure combined with the salty-sweet taste of her sex were driving me quickly to the edge. I felt her foot move to rub against my cock, and my eyes rolled back in my head. *Fuck, I've never been so turned on in my life.* Using willpower I wasn't aware that I possessed, I nudged her foot away in an attempt to stave off my own orgasm.

After a few more minutes her movements started to become more frantic, and I knew she was close. "Edward... don't stop... please don't stop," she gasped, rocking her hips against my face. Her tiny fists grasped the cushions of the couch and she arched her back, moaning loudly.

"Oh god, Edward... oh god...yes..." Bella's hands clutched roughly at my hair, and after a moment I felt her start to convulse around my fingers. She cried out, her body tensing, and as she crested over her peak I gradually slowed my movements. When I felt her relax I straightened up, kissing her softly.

"I love you," she breathed in between kisses.

"You are my life, Bella," I murmured against her shoulder.

Her hands found my shoulders, and she pushed me back gently until I was lying down on the floor. I started to protest - this was supposed to be about *her* - but when I felt her hand lightly trace my stomach along the waistband of my jeans before slipping underneath, I was rendered speechless.

"Now it's my turn," she whispered before beginning a trail of kisses down my chest. My heartbeat raced as she undid the button on my jeans and pulled them down along with my boxers. When my cock sprang free, she grasped it with both hands, flicking her tongue out to lick the head before sliding it past her lips and into her warm, wet mouth. I moaned loudly, my entire body reduced to nothing but a bundle of nerves tensed on the brink of explosion.

"Fuck, Bella," I hissed after a few moments, fighting to keep my hips still, to keep from thrusting down the back of her throat. *Holyfuckingshit.*

"Hmm," she hummed; the vibrations shot straight through me, and I almost lost it. I had to get her off me, now, if I wanted to last.

"Bella, Bella, love, stop. Stop." I groaned desperately. She released me from her mouth, still gripping me in her hand, and frowned up at me.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing, nothing's wrong. I just really want to be inside of you, and I'm not gonna last long if you keep doing that." My voice was strained.

"Doing what? This?" she asked innocently, twisting her hand while pulling it up over the head of my shaft.

"Fuck." I gasped.

"Or this?" Holding my gaze with those big Bambi brown eyes, she leaned down, sliding just the tip of my cock past her lips, circling it repeatedly with her tongue.

"I'm not kidding, Bella," I panted, my hands clenched into fists at my side.

"Or maybe this?" she asked before taking all of me in her mouth again, and this time I couldn't hold back. I grunted as my entire body tensed and I exploded down the back of her throat, her name a guttural cry on my lips. I squeezed my eyes shut as the waves of pleasure crashed over me, *sogoodsogoodsofuckinggood*. She kept working me with her mouth and her hand until the last of the waves had subsided, leaving me completely and utterly spent.

"Bella." I let out a long, slow breath, pinching the bridge of my nose. "You're going to be the death of me."

She grinned, releasing me from her mouth, and crawled up my body, snuggling into the crook of my arm. "Yeah, but what a way to go, huh?"

I laughed and kissed her forehead. "Well, we halfway christened the living room."

"Just gives us something to look forward to later," she reasoned, tracing lazy circles across my chest with her hand.

"True." I paused for a moment. "Is it later yet?"

"Hmm." She tapped a finger against the side of her mouth, and then smiled. "You know, technically, it is."

My phone chose that moment to ring again. I hadn't realized that it had landed on the floor earlier, and the sound nearly deafened me. My hand flew to my ear, and Bella reached across me to pick it up.

"It's Jasper," she said, handing it to me. "Again."

"Fuck Jasper." Bella was lying next to me, naked; why the hell would I want to talk to Jasper? *Never let it be said that I don't have my priorities straight.*

"It's the second time he's called, it's probably important," she protested, nudging me away and pulling her t-shirt over her head. I pouted at her in protest.

"Answer it!" she laughed, picking my sweatshirt up off of the floor and throwing it at me.

I sighed dejectedly, flipping open the phone. "Hello?"

"Where the hell have you been, Cullen?"

"Sorry, man. I was...busy."

"You're naked, aren't you?" I could practically hear him smirking through the phone.

"Fuck off, Whitlock."

"Hi, Bella!" he yelled, loud enough for her to hear him through the receiver.

"Hi, Jasper," she chuckled.

"Hang on." I sighed, tossing the phone onto the couch so I could pull on my jeans and my sweatshirt. Once I was dressed, I picked it up and pressed it back to my ear. "Okay, I'm back."

Jasper was all business. *"Listen, Cullen; you're smack in the middle of an all-out bidding war right now. Simon and Schuster and Random House are both going after Paper Heart with guns blazing. It's like the fucking wild west at high noon."*

"Seriously?"

"And that's not all. I just heard back from Atlantic Monthly. They want to print the first chapter as is. No re-write. And they're paying you 2,000 bucks for it!"

"Without a re-write? That's practically unheard of."

"Not for you, my friend! It's going in next month. Who's the best god damn agent ever?"

"Yeah, well, you may be the brains but I'm the talent, asshole," I grinned. "I got a letter from Sonny Mehta today singing my praises. From the desk of Sonny fucking Mehta, Jasper."

"No shit? Well, then I know which way this bidding war is going to end. There's no way Random House will back out with Mehta behind you."

"Especially because he told his friend at the Times about me, and they're featuring me in an article about up and coming authors."

"What? When the fuck did this happen?"

"Right before you called." Bella wandered back into the living room and handed me a spring roll; I inhaled it in seconds. She giggled, handing me another, and I smiled thankfully at her.

"Well it's a damn good thing I quit working as your editor and became your agent because you're gonna need me. Are you guys all settled in?"

"Our stuff's here, but we still have a lot of work to do."

"Not tonight you don't. The pixie and I are on our way over - this shit calls for a celebration. We've got the booze if you've got the shotglasses."

"Works for me." I paused. "Hey, Jazz?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks, man." Those two simple words couldn't even begin to cover what I was feeling, but I knew that he would understand what I was trying to say.

"Bros before hos," he retorted, and the line disconnected. I rolled my eyes, shoving my phone into my pocket. *Fucking Jasper.*

"Alice and Jasper are on their way over, with liquor in tow," I yelled after Bella as she disappeared into our bedroom.

"Perfect. I'm just going to jump in the shower. Care to join me?" She stuck her head out the door, raising an eyebrow.

My stomach growled and I hesitated, glancing only briefly at the array of food spread across the counter before making my decision. *Fuck it; I can eat when I'm dead.*

"Coming, love."

"Already? I haven't even touched you yet." *God, she has the dirtiest sense of humor.*

"Less talking, more stripping," I commanded, pulling off my sweatshirt for the second time that afternoon.

"I like the way you think, Mr. Cullen." She slowly pulled her own shirt over her head, walking backwards towards the bathroom, and crooking her index finger at me in an invitation to follow. I did so, willingly.

I would have followed her anywhere.

Alice and Jasper arrived a little over an hour later, bottles in hand. We drank to our youth and good fortune and dreams unfurling until exuberant laughter bubbled freely from the depths of our souls. The evening passed in a rhapsody of colors and movement, blurred by a mixture of bliss and Boone's Farm. I was drunk on wine, on success and friendship and Bella, on the infinite possibilities unfolding before us. I wished I could capture forever the invincibility; what it felt like to fly, without fear or safety nets or wings. I wanted to grasp at those moments, embrace them, clutch them in my fists, and tuck them into the corners of my mind. Then, when I was decrepit and defeated, I could recall and rejoice and say, "Look. You lived, once."

Curled up on the couch with her head in Jasper's lap, Alice was the first to give in to sleep. Jasper was next; his head fell back against the couch mid-sentence, and he began to snore lightly. Bella and I giggled at this for a few moments before her eyes began to close, too. I covered her with a blanket before moving into the room that would soon become my office.

Sitting in my desk chair, I flipped idly through the pages of Paper Heart and attempted to sort through my thoughts. I'd moved in with my own personal Aphrodite, two prestigious publishers were fighting over my manuscript, and I was going to be featured in the New York Times. Never again would I have to write crap murder mysteries or hodgepodge articles just to make ends meet. Everything I'd wanted the past 24 years was poised at the tips of my fingers. And yet...

And yet.

Cue the inevitable mindfuck that comes with the realization of your wildest dreams. I suddenly realized that the nagging, unsettling feeling the copious amounts of booze had managed to suppress until then was doubt. Some teeny, tiny part of me was waiting for the other shoe to drop, so to speak; wondering if I was good enough, questioning whether or not I deserved this, and waiting for it all to come crashing down around me. When had I become such a fucking cynic?

A knock on the door frame startled me out of my reverie.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Bella smiled sleepily. I dropped the manuscript back in the box and opened my arms in invitation. She moved across the room to settle on my lap, resting her head on my shoulder.

"I don't know, love. I just feel like... like maybe I'm getting in over my head. What if it doesn't pan out the way I hope it will?"

"Then you start again," she said before yawning widely.

"You make it sound so easy," I scoffed, twisting a lock of her long hair through my fingers.

"I'm not saying it's easy. But that's one of the things I've always loved about you, Edward. Some people freeze out of fear that they'll fail, but not you. You just keep moving."

When I didn't respond, Bella twisted around to place her delicate hands on both sides of my face, looking me straight in the eye.

"You worked hard for this; you deserve to enjoy every moment of it. And no matter what happens, good or bad, we'll handle it. Together."

I smiled gratefully. "What did I do to deserve you, Bella?"

"I don't think it's a matter of 'deserving'." She pulled my hand up, spreading my fingers and placing her palm flush against mine for a moment before tangling our fingers together. This simple act sent goosebumps racing across my skin, and I shivered involuntarily.

"We just fit, see? Whether or not we deserve each other, we would still have found each other, somehow. We're fated. Destined. I know because I feel it, here." She pulled our joined hands to rest over her heart.

"For stony limits cannot hold love out, and what love can do that dares love attempt," I murmured, my uncertainties all but forgotten. *Dear God, I love this woman.*

Bella smiled. "Star-crossed lovers."

"I only hope our ending is much happier than theirs."

"It will be," she whispered, kissing me softly.

We stayed like that, immersed in one another, and waited for the sun to rise.

Chapter 5

So the story goes on down the less traveled road

It's a variation on the one I was told

And although it's not the same, it's awful close, yeah

In an ordinary fairytale land

There's a promise of a perfect happy end

And I imagine having just short of that is better than nothing

So you'll be mine, forever and almost always

And I'll be fine, just love me when you can

And I'll wait patiently

I'll wake up every day just hoping that you still care

-Kate Voegel, 'Forever and Almost Always'

Bella- November 2005

I woke to a crack of thunder that rattled the panes of glass in the window next to our bed, and the sound of rain pounding relentlessly against the roof. Without opening my eyes, I smiled and stretched languidly, my legs tangling in the downy sheets. I absolutely loved thunderstorms. There was a sort of magic hidden inside the earthy smells unleashed by the rain, the angry rumbles of thunder, and the illuminating flashes of lightning that provoked a tantalizing mix of trepidation and deep-rooted excitement. Maybe it was the fact that, without concern for repercussions, it was easy to luxuriate in the thrill of the threat looming just outside the flimsy walls and windows; living in the middle of the city, we never had to worry about wrathful tornados or kamikaze tree branches. Maybe it was because they reminded me of my childhood- of cozy, candlelit summer nights spent huddled in the basement with Charlie, too caught up in games of Chutes and Ladders to worry about the ominous warning sirens, or the wind tearing at our shutters and shingles, stealing little pieces of our home for itself. Or maybe there was a part of me that was secretly emo, with a dark and dangerous affinity for all things...well, dark and dangerous. Whatever the reason, I'd always preferred the conflict of a storm to the impassive peacefulness of a sunny day.

Thunderstorms tended to excite me in other ways as well, and since the one going on outside the apartment was pretty intense, I was eager to advantage of it while I could. Grinning wickedly, I rolled over intending to wake Edward in the very best way, only to find his half of the bed empty.

Well, fuck, I pouted. *So much for that*. I contemplated burrowing back under the covers, but the growling noises coming from my stomach propelled me out of bed in search of food and Edward instead. *Maybe he's cooking breakfast?* I snorted at the thought. The man who wrote prose so eloquently that you were practically transported into other worlds, and played intricate sonatas on the piano with his eyes closed was adorably clueless when it came to baking, broiling, or sautéing. On our first anniversary, in arguably one of the most clichéd moments of our married life, he'd tried to make me breakfast in bed - cinnamon toast, my absolute favorite.

He burned the toast.

I tentatively sniffed the air, but the only thing I could smell was the faint afterthought of Edward's cologne. The light in our bathroom was off, so I slipped on my robe over my tank top and boy shorts to fight the chilly November air, and padded down the hall to see if he was in his office. He wasn't, but in the faint glow from the screen of his laptop, I could see that his wallet was. *Where the hell is he?* My stomach gave another angry growl and I sighed, turning and heading towards the kitchen. I started the coffee, and then peered at the contents of the fridge, trying to figure out what I was hungry for. *French toast it is.* Grabbing the milk, eggs, and bread, I nudged the door shut with my hip and set about making breakfast. As I was setting the first pieces of bread in the frying pan, I heard his keys in the front door.

"Morning, love," he called, slightly out of breath. I turned to greet him, and promptly dropped the spatula I'd been holding, flinging a yolky, milky mess across the floor and my legs. I barely noticed.

I should have known that he was out for a run. He was like the post office when it came to running: neither rain nor hail nor sleet nor snow nor heat of day nor dark of night could keep him from it. He was soaking wet, his thin grey t-shirt clinging to his broad chest, and his gym shorts slung low on his hips, no doubt from the weight of the water that they'd absorbed. His hair was in an alluring state of disarray, and the rain had darkened it from copper to a deep shade of auburn, which only served to make his emerald green eyes even more fiercely prominent than usual. His face was flushed from exertion, and I stared as rivulets of water trailed from his hair, across the stubble on his cheek, down his chiseled jaw line, and along his neck, before disappearing into the fabric of his t-shirt. Oblivious to my blatant ogling, he slid off his shoes and socks and then attempted to shake the water out of his hair before pulling off his wet shirt. Despite his best efforts, drops of water continued to run down the sculpted planes of his chest, and when his tongue darted out to lick the raindrops still clinging to his lips, I actually whimpered.

Edwards head snapped up and he frowned. "Bella? Are you okay?"

Another loud crash of thunder sounded, simultaneously snapping me out of my lust-induced haze and pushing me over the edge. I stalked across the kitchen towards him, like a lioness hunting her prey, unable to focus on anything other than the delectable meal that was directly in front of me. I had to have him. Now. Misreading my expression, guilt flitted across his face and he held up his hands in protest.

"Don't be mad. I'm sorry, I know I should have left a note..." I grabbed a fistful of his hair and crashed my lips against his, effectively shutting him up, but most likely bruising both of us in the process. I bit at his lower lip, demanding access, and as his surprise melted into lust, our tongues met and danced together. My hands trailed down his neck and across the expansive muscles of his back, alternately scratching and kneading. He groaned, and I wrapped my arms around him, futilely attempting to pull him closer. I was dying of thirst in the desert, and he was water, I was freezing in Siberia, and he was heat, I was a junkie, and he was my drug; I couldn't get enough.

He gasped as I lapped at his neck and then his chest. The combination of sweat and rain was fresh and masculine and wholly intoxicating. I tasted every inch of his exposed skin, savoring the essence of him on my tongue, and delighting in the contrast of his cool flesh against the heat of my mouth. I could feel his muscles trembling beneath my fingertips, and knowing that I was the cause of this reaction sent a fresh jolt of lust careening through my body. Then his hands were on me everywhere at once, too much and not enough. He grasped my hair in his hand, pulling my head back and exposing my neck to his scorching lips. His eyes smoldered, lightning flashed, thunder rumbled, rain pounded, and the last thread of my sanity came undone.

"Fuck foreplay," I growled.

My hands made their way blindly, desperately tugging at the waistband of his shorts until they were pooled, along with his boxers, at his feet. He stepped out of them and I ripped off my robe, whirling us around so that my back was up against the wall. Sliding my boy shorts off, I hitched my leg around

his waist and pulled him towards me. Edward grabbed my waist and hoisted me up. I locked my ankles around him, moaning and biting his shoulder as he slid into me.

"God, Bella, you're so fucking wet."

He buried his face in my neck, wrapped his arms around my waist, and slowly began to move. Our staccato breathing and the sound of my body meeting his – thrust for thrust – punctuated the sounds of the storm raging outside in a symphony of passion.

"Faster. Harder," I demanded, my hands tugging at his hair. He wordlessly obeyed, dipping his head to lap at my breasts. We groaned and licked and bit and panted and thrust and gasped and clawed, humans reduced to animals in a lust-induced frenzy. I threw my head back against the wall, moaning as he slammed into me over, and over, and over, filling me completely.

"I love the feeling of your cock... inside me... so fucking hard... feels... so fucking... good."

"Fuck! So hot!" He loved to hear me talk dirty, but I was usually too self-conscious to really get into it. *Not this time.*

Leaning back against the wall to help support my weight, I grabbed one of his hands and pulled it up to my mouth, licking his middle finger before sliding it between my lips. His eyes widened slightly, and his movements slowed as I teased the digit with my tongue, grazing it gently with my teeth before releasing it, never breaking eye contact with him. I kissed him softly before leaning in and growling in his ear.

"Fuck me, Edward," I ordered.

A guttural, animalistic moan ripped from his chest, and he eagerly obliged. My senses were heightened to the point where pleasure and pain became indistinguishable. I heard the sound of his skin slapping against mine. I felt contrast of the cold, hard wall against my back and the heat from his body against my front. I smelled the fresh sheen of sweat that covered both of our bodies. I saw the raw lust in his eyes, and I could taste the peppermint on his breath from the gum he always chewed when he was running. It was like every single nerve ending in my body had been created for the single purpose of responding to the sound, touch, smell, sight and taste of his body.

"Yes, Edward... fuck, yes... so close..." One of his hands move from my waist down to my clit, circling it roughly with his thumb and, after a few moments, I felt myself begin to reach the top of the peak. The world exploded into a million pieces and I clung to his shoulders, crying out his name as the most intense waves of pleasure I've ever felt crashed over my body, threatening to swallow me whole.

"Bella...I'm gonna come...I'm gonna...fuck..." His entire body tensed, and he slammed us both against the wall. Squeezing his eyes shut, he thrust deep and stayed there, shuddering as he emptied himself inside of me. Neither one of us moved, or said a word as we waited for our breathing to slow. It had been a long time since I'd felt so connected to him, and I didn't want the moment to end. I gently ran my hands through his hair, and I felt him smile against my shoulder.

"At the risk of sounding cliché, that was really fucking hot," he said...and then the smoke alarm went off.

"Fuck! The french toast!" I awkwardly extricated myself from him and hightailed it to the stove, where smoke was billowing from the now charred beyond recognition pieces of toast in the pan. I pulled it off the stove and turned on the cold water, dumping everything unceremoniously into the sink. Edward came up behind me and wrapped his arms around me, resting his chin on my shoulder.

"So, just to be clear...you burned the toast?"

I huffed and scowled at him. "So not the same thing. If you wouldn't have come in from your run, in the middle of a thunderstorm, all wet and sweaty and...just sex personified, then I would have been able to cook my French toast in peace."

I caught him grinning out of the corner of my eye. "Sex personified, huh?"

"Shut up." I blushed.

"Oh, *now* you're modest?" He chuckled, placing a kiss on my shoulder before releasing me. "Why don't you get in the shower and let me finish breakfast?"

"Because I'd like to be able to eat it," I teased, poking him in the side before pulling the rubber band off my wrist and using it to pull my hair up into a ponytail.

"Hey, I'm not the one who burned the toast this time."

"Fuck off," I said and then giggled. *It was pretty funny.*

"I love you too," he replied, swatting me gently on the ass before turning and heading towards the bedroom.

"Edward?" I called, crossing my arms modestly across my chest and biting my lip. He turned to look back at me.

"I really do love you." I paused. "You know that, right?"

Something in his expression softened, and he walked back towards me, taking me into his arms and hugging me tightly.

"Of course I do, Bella. And I love you, too. More than anything," he whispered fiercely. "That's why I made you my wife."

I smiled, feeling reassured and rejuvenated. "Go take a shower. I'll have breakfast ready for us when you're done."

He kissed me before disappearing into our bedroom, and I grabbed my robe off the floor, tying it firmly around my waist before picking up where I'd left off in the kitchen. Thirty minutes later, the food was ready, but Edward still hadn't reappeared. I started towards our bedroom, only to pause when I saw the light on in his office. I stuck my head in to find him huddled over his laptop, typing furiously.

"Hey," I said gently, not wanting to startle him.

"Yeah?" he replied distractedly, fingers still flying over the keyboard.

"Um, did you want breakfast? Or..." I trailed off. I usually left him alone when he was writing - when he was so focused, it was hard to get through to him - but after what we'd just shared, I really wanted to spend more time with him.

"That's okay, love. You go ahead and eat. I'll eat later," he said, still not looking up from his work.

"Oh. Okay." He must have heard the hurt I tried to disguise in my voice, because he finally paused to glance up at me, running a hand through his still-wet hair.

"I'm sorry, Bella. I was in the shower, and I had this idea for my next book, and you know how it is." He shrugged. "I have to leave for the book signing in an hour, and I wanted to get it on paper before I left." His eyes begged me to understand, and I did. It was his job, and it was important to him. I was used to it by now. When the muse graced him with her presence, who was I to stand in the way? But that didn't mean that it didn't hurt, sometimes.

I smiled. "Of course. I totally understand. I'll throw a plate in the fridge for you, okay?"

The relief on his face was palpable. He stood up to hug me, placing a kiss on my forehead. "You're what inspired this idea, you know."

"I am?"

"Yeah. That crazy sex we had this morning really got the juices flowing. Pun intended."

"Good one." I giggled.

His smile faded as he gazed at me. "I couldn't do this without you, Bella. You're a part of everything that I do. You need to know that."

I blushed.

"You're coming to the signing, right?" he asked.

"Yeah. No rehearsal today and Alice is on call, so we're coming together." I had recently secured a swing role in the new, upcoming Broadway production of Disney's *Tarzan*; it was a huge break for me, and I was having a blast. "Jess and Tyler were going to come too, but Jess had some last minute wedding party booking, so they're just going to meet us for dinner."

"Perfect." He smiled, but this time it didn't reach his eyes. I knew I was losing him to that alternate world all writers disappear to when they're inspired, and I should let him get back to it. I just wished that, just this once, I could follow him there.

"I'm just going to get ready and then head to Alice's. I'll see you later, okay?"

He nodded, sitting back down at his desk. "Love you."

"I love you, too."

I headed back to the kitchen and sat down to my plate of food, sighing heavily. I stared at it for a moment before I was struck with a random wave of nausea. I jumped back up and ran into the guest bathroom, making it to the toilet just in time to empty the meager contents of my stomach into the bowl. When I was finished, I grabbed the mouthwash from under the sink and rinsed my mouth, staring calculatingly at myself in the mirror, looking for signs of dark circles or pale and clammy skin. *Please don't let me have the flu. I really want to be able to enjoy today.* Almost as soon as I had rinsed and spit, I was ravenous. *Huh? Weird.* Grabbing my plate, I took a tentative bite of the food, chewing and swallowing slowly to see if my stomach would accept it. Five minutes later, the food was still in my stomach, so I sat down and began to eat. Six pieces of French toast, two pieces of bacon, and a glass of milk later, I was finally full. *Apparently I don't have the flu. Jesus, Bella, pig much?*

I quickly cleaned the kitchen, throwing a plate of food in the fridge for Edward, and jumped in the shower. Thirty minutes later, I was ready to go.

"See you later, Edward," I called. Not bothering to wait for an answer, I grabbed my purse and keys and headed out the door, texting Alice that I was on my way. Alice and Jasper's place wasn't far, but it was still pouring outside, so I hailed a cab. When I rang the buzzer, she buzzed me in almost immediately; I took the elevator to the top floor and made my way down the hallway to their apartment, raising my hand to knock. Right before my knuckles would have hit the wood, the door flew open.

"What's wrong?" Alice demanded.

"Um, hi to you too." I shook out my umbrella in the hallway. "What do you mean, what's wrong?"

"Something's wrong. I can sense it in your aura." She narrowed her eyes at me suspiciously.

"Quit with the psychic crap, Alice." I laughed, squeezing past her and leaning my umbrella against the wall. "Nothing's wrong."

"Okay, well if nothing's wrong, then something's on your mind." She shut the door and turned to face me, cocking her head to the side and placing her hands on her hips.

"What is this, the Spanish Inquisition?" I scowled. "I'm fine. It's nothing, really. Don't worry about it. Hey, I love your new dress."

"Spill," she said, standing her ground and ignoring my attempt at deflection. *Damn Alice and her crazy psychic tendencies.*

"Alright, alright," I conceded, plopping down on the couch and tucking my hair behind my ears. "So I had the craziest sex with Edward this morning. It was...intense. Like, mind-blowing intense."

Alice nodded, taking a seat on the opposite side of the couch and putting her feet up on the coffee table. "Go on."

"Well, he went to take a shower while I made breakfast, and long story short, he got caught up writing and never came back out. I mean, it's his job, I get that. It's just, sometimes, I get kind of sad because he gets so lost in his own world, and I feel...forgotten. Like I don't belong."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

I hesitated, trying to find the right way to explain. "It's like - one day, we're just the typical 'Leave It to Beaver' married couple, making dinner together, going out together, and making plans for our lives. And then all of a sudden, he jumps on this crazy-train to his own little world, and he's gone. I mean, he's there physically, but he's gone for all intents and purposes. He's staring out the window for hours on end without moving, or he's logging miles around the apartment, and it's like I'm not even there. But when he comes back...when he comes back, and he smiles at me, and he's there, *really* there, everything comes to life again. And how can I be mad?" I shook my head.

"Yes, he's insane, but God, Alice, he's so talented, and look at what he can do. And when he tells me that I'm a part of that? That I'm a part of what he does, of these worlds and characters that he creates? It's the most incredible feeling. And yet..."

"And yet, what?"

I sighed. "We're on this repetitive, endless cycle together, and it's exhausting. I love him, and I'm proud of him, but sometimes I get tired of tiptoeing around, of following in his stride, of taking his cue. I don't know if I like this person that I've become; someone so apathetic about her own future in the face of her husband's. I mean, just before I got the Tarzan gig, I was at this super important

audition. And then Edward called; he was at a meeting with his publishers and he'd forgotten some paperwork at home and he couldn't leave. So, I went home to get it and took it across town to him, and I missed my audition. But then he smiles at me, Alice, where else can I go? What else can I do? When you're in love, the rules just don't apply. He tells me I'm a part of it all... but am I?"

"Of course you are. You're his wife, Bella. He loves you."

"I know. I guess I just wonder if love is always enough." I picked at the cuticle on my thumb as I voiced my greatest fear. "Whatever, I'm just being a stupid, emotional girl."

"No you're not," Alice argued. "You can't help the way you feel."

"Yes, I am. I've just been so...all over the board lately. I'm having these crazy mood swings left and right, I'm always exhausted from rehearsal, I constantly want to jump Edward's bones, and I think I might be sick on top of it, because I threw up this morning. And then, five seconds later, I literally ate my face off. I'm a hot mess, Alice. Seriously."

She was quiet for a moment, then stood up and disappeared down the hallway. I frowned at her back, wondering where she was going, but she returned a moment later with a small box. Returning to her spot on the couch, she smiled wordlessly at me, and pressed the box into my hand. When I glanced down at it, my heart skipped a beat.

"Uh, what's this?"

"Don't get mad, Bella, but you and I have been on the same cycle since we were what, fifteen? And when we were out to dinner last week, and I was complaining about the cramps from hell, you said you were glad you hadn't gotten yours yet, because you had to go play nice with New York's social elite with Edward that night."

"Well, yeah, but that doesn't mean anything," I sputtered, madly doing calculations in my head. "I mean, things change, right? That can change. Right?" I was teetering on the verge of hysteria. *I mean, what the fuck? Really? Can this really be happening? Do we even want to have kids? Last time we talked about it, we weren't ready. Do we have a choice anymore?*

"Of course it can, Bells. Don't be silly." Alice placed her hand over mine in a futile attempt to calm me down. "But I picked one up just in case, and with everything you've just told me, I think that maybe you should just take it. Just to be sure, that's all."

And that's when the numbers clicked into place, like the tumblers on a lock. Seven weeks. It had been seven weeks since my last period, and I'd been so busy with rehearsal and with Edward that I hadn't even noticed.

"It's really fucked up that you're so in tune with my cycle, you know that, right?" I joked feebly.

"I'm aware." Alice grinned, and then stood up, extending her hand to me and pulling me off the couch. "Besides, I'm a doctor. It's my job to know these things. Come on." She marched me to the bathroom and said, "I'll be right out here if you need me," before shutting the door behind me.

I made my way to the toilet and collapsed onto the seat, resting my elbows on my knees and staring at the box in my hand. *Seven motherfucking weeks.* The realization that this small piece of cardboard and its plastic contents had the power to change my life, hit me over the head like a sledgehammer, and, ever the poster child for inappropriate reactions, I began to giggle.

"Are you okay in there?" Alice asked through the door.

"Yeah, Al. I'm fine." I snorted as I struggled to control myself. "I'm fine. I'll be out in a minute."

When I was finished, I opened the door and handed the offending stick to Alice. "It says to wait five minutes and then check."

We resumed our positions on the couch, and so began the longest five minutes of my life.

"So, where's Jazz?" I asked, attempting to make conversation.

"Oh, he went to Borders to make sure everything was set up right for the signing."

"Right." Thirty seconds passed.

"It's really raining out there, huh?" Alice mused.

"Yup. It's really raining." I nodded. More silence.

"If it's a boy, I really hope he has Edward's hair."

"Seriously, Alice?"

"What?" She pouted. "I *like* his hair. It's a *compliment*."

I just rolled my eyes, tapping my toe nervously against the floorboard.

"Do you think we can look now?" she asked.

"Has it been five minutes?"

"I don't know. I forgot to look at my watch."

"Me, too." We glanced at each other and then started laughing uncontrollably, clutching at our sides as tears started to roll down our faces.

"Why...is that...so...funny?" I panted between giggles.

"I have no idea," Alice cried, wiping tears from her eyes. After a few minutes, our laughter died down, and I knew it was time.

"I think we can look now," I offered, biting my lip.

"Okay. Are you ready?"

"No. But yeah." I took a deep breath as she pulled off the cap and glanced at the stick for a moment before smiling up at me.

"Okay, Alice, I don't know what that means. You're going to have to articulate," I said, even though I already knew. I'd known since I realized that my last period was seven weeks ago. You just can't argue with scientific logic.

"Bella, it's positive. You're pregnant."

With those two simple words, the world bottomed out. I just sat there, staring at Alice, trying to figure out what the hell I was feeling. Was I happy? Would *Edward* be happy?

"Bella?" Alice peered over at me.

"Yeah. Wow." I pushed my hair out of my face and attempted to smile. "Okay. I'm pregnant." The words tasted strange in my mouth.

"Are you okay? Are we happy about this, or are we exercising our right to choose?"

"What? God, no, Alice. No. I could never...no. No."

"Okay, okay, I was just trying to be supportive," she said defensively.

"I know, and thank you for that. But no." I took the stick from her, staring at the big pink plus sign, still unable to sort through my emotions. "Do you think they're going to fire me from the show?"

"What? No. What, do you think that actresses aren't allowed to have babies? Angelina Jolie has, like, fifteen kids."

"She adopted most of them, Al."

"Whatever." Alice waved her hand dismissively. "The point is, actresses have kids, too. You're going to be fine. The costume designer will find you something nice and flowy with an empire waist, and it'll be all good. It's their job to hide that shit."

"That doesn't sound like something that would normally be worn in the jungle," I pointed out.

She raised a threatening eyebrow at me. "Are you *trying* to be difficult?"

"Alright, alright, I get it," I said, shelving that concern for another time. I had bigger fish to fry at that moment, anyway. "So, I should probably tell Edward."

"Ya think?" Alice giggled, glancing at her watch. "We were supposed to leave for the book signing fifteen minutes ago. Do you still want to go?"

"Yeah. We should go so I can try to catch him before it starts." I stood up and walked back to the bathroom, placing the stick in the cardboard box and tossing it in the garbage can. When I turned around, Alice was right behind me.

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yeah. I promise. I just really need to talk to Edward."

She hugged me fiercely, and I smiled at her when she released me. "Thanks for being such a good friend, Al."

"That's what I'm here for." She moved to grab her coat and umbrella off of the back of the couch, and I did the same, grabbing my things from near the front door as she ushered me out of the apartment, and locked the door behind us.

"Come on, let's go tell your baby daddy the big news."

Borders was a mob scene. I knew Edward's work was gaining more popularity and recognition with each passing day, but that knowledge had in no way prepared me for the hundreds of women lined up halfway down the block, umbrellas in hand, all decked out in their sluttiest outfits and clutching copies of *Paper Heart*.

"Don't these bitches have to work for a living?" I grumbled at Alice as we made our way through the crowd.

"Shh, Bella, they'll hear you." Alice smiled through clenched teeth, linked her arm through mine, and then leaned over to whisper in my ear, "Don't provoke the fangirls."

"Yeah, yeah," I muttered, eyeing a particularly skanky woman who was gesturing excitedly with her hands. I distinctly heard her say the words 'fuckhot' and 'sex on a stick,' and it took every ounce of my self-control not to cold cock her in the jaw.

Alice must have sensed my irritation reaching red level, as in 'severe level of terrorist attack,' with 'likelihood that pregnancy hormone-crazed Bella Cullen will go kung-fu apeshit on the women lusting after her husband' substituted for 'terrorist attack,' because she pinched my arm hard, digging her nails into my skin.

"Ouch! Dammit, Alice, that hurt!"

"You need to stay calm. Remember, you're the one with his ring on your finger." Ah, yes - Alice, the voice of reason. As we approached the doorway, a rent-a-cop stepped into view.

"Are you ladies here to see Mr. Cullen?"

I peered up at him, frowning. "Um, yeah. Why?"

"The line starts back there." He pointed back down the sidewalk.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I'm his wife," I explained.

"Uh-huh. Sure you are," he said before widening his stance, and crossing his arms over his chest in a gesture that I assumed was meant to be intimidating. *Oh, hell no.*

"Excuse me, *Frank*?" I said, reading his name tag. "You do not want to fuck with me right now, okay? I'm cold, and wet, and it's pouring, and I need to talk to my husband. I know that I could pull out my driver's license to prove to you who I really am, but I refuse to, on principle. Now, please, just step aside, and let us in."

"Alice!" Jasper's head poked around the bear of a man. "Where the hell have you been, darlin'? And, Bella, my little Broadway star. How are you?"

"Hey, Jazz," we said in unison.

"These girls are with you?" Frank asked.

"Yessir," Jasper nodded. "Is there a problem?"

"Apparently not." Frank grudgingly stepped aside, and I only just barely contained the urge to stick my tongue out at him as we ducked into the warmth of the brightly lit bookstore.

"Jasper!" Alice squealed, abandoning her umbrella, skipping over to him and throwing her arms around his neck, kissing him passionately. I tactfully averted my eyes while they proceeded to grope each other next to a stack of Harry Potter books.

"Uh, I'm not sure that that kind of non-PG13 action is appropriate in the young adult section. How long has it been since you guys have seen each other, anyways?"

It took them a moment to remove their tongues from one another's throat in order to respond. Jasper winked at me over Alice's shoulder. "Two long, lonely hours."

"And four mintes," Alice added.

"I think I just threw up in my mouth," I said dryly.

"Oh no, Bells, are you okay? Is it the morning sickness?"

"Shut *up*, Alice!" My eyes quickly surveyed our surroundings to see if anyone else had heard her. Luckily, the only person within a five foot radius was a 12 year old boy, too engrossed in his Spiderman comic book to pay any attention to us. "I was being sarcastic!"

"Well, you know what they say about sarcasm. There's always a little bit of truth behind it." She sniffed defensively.

"You're knocked up?" Jasper grinned. "That's wonderful news! Congratulations!"

"Shh! Edward doesn't know yet!"

"Why doesn't he know?" Jasper lowered his voice before continuing. "It *is* Edward's, right?"

Oh, for God's sake. "Yes, Jazz; of course it's Edward's, and he doesn't know because I just found out, like, five seconds ago." I glared at Alice.

"Sorry." She shrugged. "It slipped."

"Has the signing started yet?" I asked Jasper.

"Not yet, we have about ten minutes 'til go time."

"Alright, I'm gonna go talk to him. Can the two of you keep your mouths shut and your hands to yourselves, for like, five minutes?"

"We can definitely keep our mouths shut, but whole 'hands to ourselves' thing? I make no promises," Jasper cackled, ticking Alice's side. She giggled and squirmed away from him to rescue her umbrella from the floor.

Jasper turned back to me and said, "Just follow the line, darlin'. There's a door behind the signing table, and he's in there. I'll stay out here and keep Mrs. Whitlock entertained."

"Good luck, Bella," Alice added, grinning widely.

"Thanks." I turned on my heel and followed the snaking line of women through the bookstore until I reached the front of the line. Squeezing around the table, I knocked gently on the door before opening

it, and sticking my head inside. Edward's assistant was sitting there, scribbling furiously on a yellow notepad.

"Oh, hey, Elise."

She looked up and smiled brightly. "Hi, Bella! Are you looking for Edward?"

"Yeah, is he around?"

"He just snuck out to grab some coffee in the café, but he should be back in a second."

I entered the room, closing the door gently behind me. "Are you sure that's wise? It's pretty scary out there."

"Tell me about it." She rolled her eyes. "Grown women dressed up like sixteen year olds, throwing themselves at the feet of a married man. It's kind of sad, but don't worry, he's incognito."

"This is just crazy. I mean, I know that Edward is talented, but I love Jodi Picoult, and I've never gotten this excited over her."

"Jodi Picoult doesn't have Edward's facial structure," Elise deadpanned.

She has a point there.

"I'm just glad that he's an author. Can you imagine how horrible this would be if he were a famous actor or something?"

I shuddered at the thought, and she smiled knowingly before resuming her scribbling. A moment later, the door opened behind me, and Edward appeared with a cup in each hand. He was wearing his favorite navy blue zip-up with the hood pulled up, and his aviator sunglasses. Despite this fact, or maybe because of it, it was amazing to me that no one out there had recognized him. After all, the curve of smile, his reddish brown stubble, and the prominent line of his jaw were still on display, as well as his hands, with those long, elegant fingers. I could have picked him out of the crowd on any one of those traits from a mile away.

"Hey, Bella." He smiled, kissing my cheek before crossing the room to hand Elise her coffee.

"It's go time, Edward. Get changed." She traded him the coffee for a hanger that held a crisp white button-up shirt underneath a deep forest green v-neck sweater. My mind flashed back to this morning, and I shifted uncomfortably as he pulled off his sweatshirt to expose his bare chest. I stole a glance at Elise to see if she was watching. I knew that it was just his chest, but dammit, it was mine, and I didn't want her to look. And she didn't, she was too engrossed in whatever it was that she was scribbling on her notepad. I breathed an inaudible sigh of relief before turning back to Edward.

"Edward? Can I talk to you for a second?"

"Yeah, what's up?" He asked as his fingers made expert work of the buttons on his shirt. It reminded me of all the times that his fingers had made such expert work of *me*, and I immediately felt a tingling in my nether-regions.

Damn you, crazy lust hormones! Focus! "Alone?"

Edward paused to glance at me, his brow furrowing, and Elise finally looked up from her notepad. "Oh, yeah, no problem. I can just... I'll be outside." She stood up, tucked her notepad under one arm, stuck

the pen in her hair, hoisted her purse over her shoulder, and left the room. *Is everything she does so damned efficient?*

"I told you she'd make a damn good assistant," Edward said, as if he'd read my mind.

"So she's always that efficient, then?"

"I'm confident that she's borderline OCD. So is everything okay?" He tugged his sweater over his head and raked a hand through his hair, waiting.

"Yeah, everything's fine. I just...there's something I need to tell you, and I couldn't wait."

"What is it, love? What's wrong?"

I shifted my weight from one foot to the other, opening and closing my mouth twice before I was finally able to spit it out. "I'm... pregnant."

He was silent for a long moment while I desperately tried to read something – anything – in his blank expression.

"You're *what*?" he said finally, shaking his head as if to clear his ears.

"Pregnant. As in, with child. Preggers. Knocked up. Gestating. Expecting. There's a bun in the oven." I couldn't think of any other clever ways of putting it, so I shut my mouth and waited.

"Really?" He squinted at me, half smiling, as if he expected it to be some kind of joke.

"Yes, Edward, it's not a fucking joke. I'm pregnant, okay?" I yelled, flailing my hands to emphasize my point.

"But when..." he trailed off. "I thought you were on the pill?"

"I am." I shrugged, crossing my arms over my chest. "But, you know, sometimes it just... doesn't work."

I still couldn't read beyond his shock to tell if he was happy or pissed, and I really needed to know so that my heart would stop pounding. The last thing I needed to do was have a full blown anxiety attack at my husband's book signing.

"Wow." He exhaled slowly as a grin spread across his face. "We're gonna have a baby."

I felt the nervous tension drain from my body, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

"This is amazing! It's...incredible!" He tugged at his hair, eyes shining, unable to contain his joy.

"Yes, Edward. We're going to have a baby." I began to laugh and cry at the same time.

He crossed the room and picked me up, twirling me around in circles until we were both dizzy. After setting me down, he knelt in front of me and wrapped his arms around my legs, pressing his ear to my stomach. "Hello there," he whispered. The happy tears continued to roll down my face, and I offered up a silent prayer to whatever higher power it was that had brought this man into my life. He was happy, I was happy, and I was pregnant, and we were going to be okay. We were going to be a family. After a long moment, he rocked back on his heels and straightened up.

"Do you know when?"

"Not really. I just took a test at Alice's. I'll have to schedule an appointment with an obstetrician sometime this week."

I heard the door open behind me, and Elise stuck her head in. "Sorry to interrupt, but the public is growing restless."

Edward squeezed my hand, glancing from me, to Elise, and then back to me, looking torn. I smiled reassuringly. "It's fine, Edward. Go. I just wanted you to know. We can talk more later."

He took my face in his hands, wiped away my tears with the pads of his thumbs, and kissed me tenderly. "I love you, Isabella Marie Cullen."

"I love you too." I straightened his collar and brushed a stray strand of his hair out of his eyes. "Go get 'em, tiger."

As he followed Elise out the door and into the crowd, the soft murmurs increased to an excited roar. I looked down, bringing my hands to rest on my stomach, and smiled to myself.

I'm a part of that.

"Bella! Bella, wake up! Wake up!"

I groaned, opening my eyes to find a panicked looking Edward. He had a vice grip on my shoulder and was shaking me so violently that it hurt.

"Edward, stop it. You're hurting me. What's wrong?"

"I have to get you to the hospital," he said, tugging at my hands in an attempt to pull me into a sitting position.

"Why? I'm fine. What's going on?" I yawned. I was exhausted. After the book signing, we'd gone out to dinner with Jessica, Tyler, Alice, and Jasper, and hadn't returned home until well after eleven. I'd immediately collapsed into bed, pausing only to remove my shoes, and had fallen asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow. I squinted at the bedside clock and yawned again. "What's so important that you had to wake me up at three in the morning?"

It wasn't until then that I saw the naked fear in his eyes. I'd never seen Edward look that scared, and the sight of it sent panic skittering along my spine.

"You're bleeding, Bella. Look." He pointed towards my legs. It was then that I noticed the pool of liquid, an explosion of chaos and color marring the white sheets on our bed. I reached down, and when I brought my hand under the light from the bedside lamp, it was covered in blood. *So much blood.* It was sticky and thick and I could taste it in the back of my throat, like sucking on copper pennies. *Our baby.* This realization and the smell of the blood sent my stomach and head reeling. I knew I wouldn't make it to the bathroom, so I leaned over the side of the bed to throw up onto the floor.

Edward smoothed my hair back with shaking hands. "I love you so much, Bella. It's going to be okay. We're going to get you to the hospital, and everything is going to be fine."

When I was finished, I wiped the tears from my eyes and choked back a sob. "Edward," I whispered. "I'm so, so sorry."

And then the world went black.

Chapter 6

*Play me a song
Your newest one
Please leave your taste on my tongue
Paperweight on my back
Cover me like a blanket
Mess up my bed with me
Kick off the covers, I'm waiting
Every word you say I think I should write down
Don't want to forget come daylight
And no need to worry
That's wastin' time
And no need to wonder
What's been on my mind
It's you
It's you
It's you*

-Schuyler Fisk and Joshua Radin, 'Paperweight'

Edward- December, 2003

"Attention passengers, this is your captain speaking. Welcome to Sea-Tac International Airport. Local time is four pm, and the temperature is a balmy 37 degrees. Please remain seated with your seat belt fastened until the plane is parked at the gate and the captain has turned off the 'Fasten Seatbelt' sign. Please be careful opening the overhead bins, as items may have shifted during the flight. At this time, we'd like to thank you for flying Delta Airlines, and wish you the very happiest of holidays."

I glanced past Bella and out of the tiny window at the familiar landscape of the airport. I'd spent so much time flying back and forth from Boston to Washington, and then New York to Washington that the Sea-Tac landscape had become as familiar as the back of my own hand, and it felt good to be home. *Damn good*. The fact that Bella was seated next to me only served to amplify the effervescent joy that was bubbling up inside of me. I couldn't wait to show her my childhood stomping grounds and prove to everyone that despite my previous failures, I had finally, *finally*, gotten something right.

Bella and I had been together for almost two years, and this would be her first time meeting my family. She'd been busy with auditions and her night job at the bar, I'd been slammed with the success of *Paper Heart*, and we'd just never found time to make the trip across the country. My parents had offered to fly to New York, eager to meet the girl who had me thinking about marriage and children and the rest of forever, but we hadn't been able to find an open weekend to have them. In October, as a last resort, they'd invited us to Forks for the holidays. Bella had been reluctant at first - she'd been worried about Charlie spending Christmas alone - but when she mentioned it to him, he told her that Sue had been talking about spending Christmas on the beach in Cancun, and the pieces had finally fallen into place.

But still, despite how blissfully happy I was, I'd worried. That morning, when I'd woken to her body tangled in the sheets next to me, all naked shoulders and haphazard limbs, her mahogany hair spilled like a Rorschach inkblot across the pillow, I'd realized that I hadn't seen her look so relaxed in months, and I'd worried. As the sun crept lazily over the windowsill, casting distorted shadows across the floorboards, I'd traced the slow curve of her back with my fingertips, and I'd worried. As I listened to the lullaby of her deep, slow breaths, I wondered briefly about the consequences that my burgeoning fame would have on our relationship, and I'd worried.

And when I glimpsed the pile of her sheet music tucked in the corner, behind a stack of copies of *Paper Heart* and the clothes she'd worn to work at the bar the night before strewn across the floor, I realized that we were already living them.

Really, what it all came down to was this: my career, the recent slew of requests for interviews and photo ops and public appearances, Hanukkah and Christmas with my family, life in general... none of it would have mattered without her. The day they placed that first, freshly printed copy of *Paper Heart* in my hands, glossy and heavy and smelling of the magic of the bookstores and libraries I'd treasured as a child, I'd thought that it was impossible for me to be any happier than I was at that moment. Then Bella had slipped her arms around me and whispered, "*I'm so proud of you,*" and, with those five simple words, she had proven me wrong. I wanted her to have that. I wanted to make her feel that way.

I wasn't sure when or why my life and my career had become our primary focus; I certainly hadn't been cognizant of the shift, or I would have stopped it. Pressing a kiss to her shoulder blade, I'd rolled out of bed, pulling on my sweatpants, running shoes, and a hoodie, scribbled a note for Bella, and forged out into the bitter December air. When I returned an hour later, red-faced and sweaty and surging with post-workout adrenaline, I had a bag in my hand, a small box in the front pocket of my sweatshirt, and a brilliant plan in my mind. Bella had been frantic - the airport taxi was picking us up in less than 20 minutes - but as I'd quickly showered and changed, hiding the bag and box in my duffel bag, I couldn't keep the smile off of my face. I knew that as soon as I gave her the gift, the stubborn, still-scattered pieces of our life together would fall into place once and for all, and I wouldn't have to worry anymore.

Now I watched as she wrapped her headphones around her iPod and pulled her backpack out from under the seat to shove them in the front pocket, worrying her lip between her teeth all the while. As the plane taxied across the tarmac, I threaded my fingers through hers and squeezed gently.

"Don't be nervous. They're going to love you."

"What? Oh no, I'm not nervous about meeting your family. I mean, a little bit, but that's not what I was thinking about. I was just wondering if Charlie was going to be okay."

"I'm sure he's going to be fine." I smiled reassuringly.

"I know he's with Sue, and he's never really been big on holidays. I just feel like I'm deserting him or something." She blew out a frustrated sigh, and her lip resumed its post between her teeth.

"I can buy you a ticket to Cancun if you want; just say the word. I want you to be able to enjoy your Christmas," I offered, while at the same time fervently praying that she would say 'No.' I wanted her to stay, but more than that, I wanted her to *want* to stay. I wanted her to need me the same way I needed her; always, like oxygen.

"No, Edward. I want to be here with you. I want to meet your family." She smiled and blushed softly, brown eyes and pink cheeks and ivory skin, and I was drunk on the exquisiteness that was uniquely her.

"Pulchritudinous," I whispered. She raised a questioning eyebrow. "Word-of-the-day calendar," I explained. "It means 'physically beautiful.'"

"Stop showing off," she teased.

"Sorry, love. Occupational hazard. You were saying...?"

"I do feel guilty, but I don't feel like walking in on a booze-laden love fest between Sue and my dad." She shuddered exaggeratedly. "I would *not* wanna be the third wheel on that gravy train."

I glanced out the window again to check on our progress before turning my attention back to her. "Well, I, for one, am glad that you're spending Christmukkah with me and my family."

"Are you kidding? I'm dying to witness a combined Christmas and Hanukkah celebration. Frosty the goyishe Snowman, a Christmas tree backlit by a menorah, honey baked ham and potato pancakes... your family is the poster child for unity and peace on earth."

Smartass. I chuckled and lifted the back of her hand to my lips, kissing it gently. "You're lucky you're pulchritudinous, or I might be pissed at you for making fun of my family's traditions."

"And here I thought you loved me for my mind." Her nose scrunched up, she stuck her tongue out at me, and I fell a little bit more in love with her just then. Random, seemingly ordinary moments continued to occasionally blindside me, reaching deep down inside and raking across my soul, using my diaphragm as a springboard to latch themselves onto my gluttonous heart. Even the little moments - Bella singing in the shower, Bella biting her lip as she poured over monologues, Bella asleep in my arms - still had the power to take my breath away.

The 'Fasten Seatbelt' sign turned off with a loud *ding*, and everyone around us jumped up and began to scramble for their stowed luggage. Bella gathered her hair into a ponytail and slung her backpack over her shoulder; I stood up and stretched my cramped joints and muscles, my fingertips brushing the ceiling of the plane, before pulling my cell phone out of the pocket of my jeans and powering it on. I shot a quick message to Rosalie, letting her know we had landed and would be at the baggage claim shortly, and she responded almost immediately.

Welcome home, little bro. Stuck on dinner duty. Emmett should b there waiting. C u soon!

I shook my head, shoving my cell phone back into my pocket as we slowly made our way off of the plane. "Looks like Emmett will be picking us up instead. Brace yourself."

"Brace myself? For what?"

I hesitated for a moment, trying to find the right way to articulate my thoughts. "He likes to make a scene. Just be prepared." *Understatement of the century.* My brother-in-law was great, and he was good to my sister, but sometimes his boisterous nature got the best of him.

We hustled across the concourse hand in hand, weaving in and out of the bustling holiday crowd, and stepped onto the escalator down to the baggage claim, where I immediately began scanning the crowd for Emmett. He shouldn't have been hard to find; his linebacker build and his permanent 'outside voice' made him damn near impossible to miss.

"Uh, Edward? Is that..." Bella's eyes widened, and she trailed off, her jaw going slack. I followed the direction of her gaze and saw a broad-shouldered man dressed in a chicken suit, beak and all, holding a sign that read, 'Swan + Cullen = 4Eva.' *Oh, hell.* I rubbed a hand across my face and pinched the bridge of my nose, sighing.

"That... would be Emmett."

"Eddie! Over here, man!" He waved - *flapped?* - frantically as we stepped off of the escalator and shouldered our way towards him.

"Hey, Emmett." We performed the manly 'handshake/half hug' .thing, pounding each other on the back. "Good to see you, man. Nice, uh, suit?"

"Dr. Clucky, at your service." He tucked the sign under his right arm and threw his left arm around Bella, pulling her into a half-hug. "And you must be Bella. You're even more delicious than Eddie said you were."

Bella sneezed and Emmett released her, picking a few stray feathers out of her hair. "Sorry, little lady. I didn't know you were allergic to faux feathers."

"Neither did I." She sneezed again and rubbed her eyes. "Nice to meet you too, Emmett. And I like the chicken suit. Bold choice. How did you get your hands on something so... unique?"

Emmett chuckled. "I got it at a thrift shop a few years ago. I wear it to work sometimes- the kids love it."

"I'm sorry, Edward never told me what you do for a living," Bella smiled apologetically.

Emmett gaped for a moment before punching me in the arm. I tried not to wince. The fucker was *strong*. "Thanks a lot, Eddie. I can see where I rate."

"Emmett is a doctor. Oncologist. He works primarily with children," I explained, resisting the urge to rub my now-throbbing arm.

"Oh, wow." She looked shocked, and I didn't blame her. It wasn't easy to reconcile the man in a chicken suit standing in front of us with a doctor who dealt with the pain and suffering of children on a daily basis. "God. That must be tough."

"It's definitely not all sunshine and rainbows, but I do what I can to make them smile. It makes it a little easier, somehow, for everyone involved, when they smile." Emmett shrugged awkwardly and tugged on his ear, the very epitome of humble.

"Well, it made *me* smile. And it suits you." Bella reached up to tweak his beak, her eyes sparkling mischievously, and he beamed back at her.

"Thanks, Bells. Can I call you Bells?" She nodded. "Come on, let's get your stuff and get home. It's almost sundown." Without waiting for an answer, Emmett grabbed Bella's hand and stalked off towards the baggage carousel, humming loudly. I vaguely recognized the tune, but it took me a moment to place it.

Silver Bells.

After we had gathered our luggage and tucked ourselves into Emmett's Jeep - I let Bella have the front seat, because she tended to get carsick - she turned to Emmett and asked, "So, are you Jewish, too?"

He chuckled, adjusting the rearview mirror and slowly backing out of the parking space before responding. "Naw, Bells. I'm a straight up, blue-blooded, Santa Claus-lovin' Christian."

"What about Rosalie? Does she still practice Judaism?"

"Only when we're with our parents," I answered for him. "You know how I feel about religion; Rosalie feels the same way. It's not that we don't believe in the traditions, we just... don't believe in the rigidity. I guess we're both kind of agnostic, with a dash of Judaism."

"Makes sense. I guess by those standards, I would consider myself agnostic, with a dash of Catholicism."

"Same here," Emmett chimed in.

Bella shifted in her seat so she could look back at me. "I don't really know anything about Hanukkah. What's it like? What's it about?"

All the time I'd spent getting ready for my Bar Mitzvah came rushing back to me as I explained the holiday to Bella. "Well, the name 'Hanukkah' is derived from a Hebrew verb that means 'to dedicate.' In 167 B.C., the Syrian-Greek emperor Antiochus made the observance of Judaism an offense punishable by death, ordering all Jews to worship Greek Gods. A man named Mattathias became the leader of the Jewish resistance, and the rebels who joined him were known as the Maccabees."

"And they were badass," Emmett interjected.

"Yeah, they were. They ended up overthrowing the Greeks, and they returned to their temple in Jerusalem, but it had been spiritually defiled by the Greeks when they had used it to sacrifice pigs and worship foreign gods. They wanted to purify it by burning ritual oil in its menorah for eight days, but they only had enough oil left for one day. They lit it anyway, and by some miracle, it lasted eight days anyway. Hence, eight days worth of burning candles. And lots of fried food. You know, to celebrate the whole 'miracle of the oil' thing."

"Are you going to wear a yarmulke?" she asked me, repressing a grin.

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I am. Out of respect for my dad."

"How you manage to get it to stay put in that sexy bedhead hair of yours is beyond me," Emmett shook his head ruefully. Bella giggle-snorted, then coughed in an attempt to cover it up.

"Bobby pins," I shrugged matter-of-factly. "Insider's secret."

"Well, I'm glad my man is so well versed in women's hair accessories."

I pouted, leaning forward to reach around the seat and tickle her in her side. She smacked my hand away, laughing.

"Anything else I need to know?"

"Yeah. After dinner, we kvetch about our favorite meshugenehs," Emmett added.

"Uh... God bless you?" Bella said, and Emmett and I both cracked up.

"It means to complain or talk about things going on in the family," I clarified.

"Oh, whoops. Got it." Bella shrugged and smiled sheepishly.

"It's really a beautiful thing to watch," Emmett commented offhand, and then added, "That's what she said," at the same time Bella did.

"Shut up." She smacked his arm playfully. "You too?"

"Hell yeah! Edward didn't tell me you had a dirty sense of humor. You really are the whole package."

"You bet your sweet ass." Bella beamed. "It's a rough job, but somebody's gotta do it."

They glanced at each other and, after a beat, chorused, "That's what she said!"

I groaned, closing my eyes and dropping my back against the headrest. It was going to be a very long drive back to Forks.

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We arrived home a little before six, thanks to Emmett's need for speed and his uncanny ability to avoid the state patrol. As I was hauling our bags out of the back of the Jeep, I heard a loud squeal, and someone plowed into me from the side, almost knocking me over.

"Jesus, Rosalie!" I yelled, surprised, stumbling a bit as she latched her arms in a death grip around my neck.

"Edward!" She yelped joyfully. "I'm so happy to see you! I can't believe it's been over two years!"

"I'm happy to see you too," I chuckled, abandoning the luggage to hug her back, kissing her cheek lightly.

"How come I don't ever get that kinda reception when I come home, babe?" Emmett pouted.

"Because you never leave me alone long enough to warrant it." She finally released her hold on me and blew Emmett a kiss over my shoulder. He pretended to catch it and slapped it onto his cheek, grinning all the while.

"You dyed your hair. It's... blonde," I said stupidly. In my defense, it was really, really blonde. Like, Marilyn Monroe blonde. Rosalie had always been beautiful, but the change in hair color made her look...stunning.

"Yeah, I was tired of the whole 'Jew' look." Rosalie shrugged. "Although, unless I can get rid of this nose, I'm not sure dyeing my hair will ever make a difference."

"Nah. It suits you." I smiled. "Very California chic."

"Thanks, little bro." She eyed the mop of hair on top of my head. "You're still going for the, 'I just got rode hard and put away wet' look, I see. How did you get so lucky with that damn hair? It's like the colors of autumn exploded on your head."

"They always say it's from their part-Irish roots. *I* think someone in their lineage fucked a leprechaun, and Eddie here got to reap the red-haired benefits. Just sayin'," Emmett stage-whispered.

Rosalie smacked Emmett upside the back of the head. "No one fucked a leprechaun, Em. Jesus."

Bella was standing off to the side during this display, tugging at the hem of her shirt and looking slightly bewildered, so I grabbed her hand and pulled her into my side, sliding my arm around her waist. "Rosalie, this is Bella. Bella, this is my sister, Rosalie," I said.

"God, it's about time we got to meet you. Seriously, you're all he talks about." Rosalie pulled Bella into a brief hug. "I'm sorry I had to send my crazy husband to pick you up; I really wanted to come myself, but I had to help with dinner. Speaking of which, we've got to get inside because dinner is ready and waiting, but don't worry; I've prepared a photo album full of embarrassing childhood pictures of Edward, and we're going to look through it together later."

"Um, thanks?" Bella raised a bemused eyebrow, looking back and forth between Rosalie and me.

"Rose," I groaned. "Really?"

"She deserves to know what she's getting in to. Now come inside. It's freezing out here, and mom and dad are waiting."

Rosalie turned to go inside, but Emmett was quicker. He bent down at the waist and hoisted her over his shoulder, straightening up and smacking her ass.

"Ow! Emmett, dammit, put me down!"

"Not until you promise to jump me the next time I come home. Excuse us." He tipped an imaginary hat at Bella and me and started towards the house, with Rosalie yelling and beating her fists against his back all the while.

I hoisted our bags over my shoulder and held out my hand. "Are you ready to meet the parents?"

She took a deep breath, sliding her hand into mine, and nodded. "Let's do this thing."

"That's what she said!" Emmett called over his shoulder as I led her up the front walkway and into the house where my parents were waiting. Esme held the door open for us, and Carlisle took the luggage out of my hands and set it next to the front door.

"It's so nice to meet you, Bella. I'm Esme." My mom folded Bella into a hug.

"Nice to meet you too, Esme," Bella said once Esme had released her.

"And I'm Carlisle." My dad placed his hand on her shoulder in a very fatherly gesture. "Welcome to Forks, and to our home."

"Thank you so much for having me," Bella smiled and ducked her head, a blush coloring her cheeks.

"Welcome home, Edward." My mom kissed both of my cheeks and then frowned at me. "You look skinny."

"I'm fine, mom. I promise," I said, just barely resisting the urge to roll my eyes. I could weigh 400 pounds, and I would still look too skinny to her.

"Welcome home, Son. I'm sorry to rush you guys, but dinner is ready and waiting," Carlisle said, clapping me on the back.

"Do you, um, mind if I change?" Bella asked.

"Not at all, dear. Edward, you're both going to be staying in your old bedroom. Why don't you take her up there now and come down when you're ready?" This was my mom's way of telling me that she knew that Bella and I were adults, and most likely sleeping together. It crept me out, but I wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

"Thanks, Mom. We'll be down in a minute." I once again hoisted our bags over my shoulder, leading her up the stairs to my childhood bedroom.

I opened the door to find everything exactly as I'd left it when I moved out over six years ago; my spelling bee trophies on the desk, an 'A Tale of Two Cities' poster on the wall, and my bookcase overflowing with novels far too advanced for any normal teenager, all of which I had devoured before my sophomore year of high school was through. Bella crossed the room and picked up one of the

trophies, her fingers tracing over the engraved letters of my name. "Edward Cullen, Spelling Bee Champion," she grinned. "No way."

"Three years in a row. And the only reason I lost my senior year is because I got wasted with my buddies the night before the competition." I dropped our bags onto the floor next to my desk.

"I'm impressed."

"You should be. I was pretty badass back then," I joked, tugging my clothes out of my suitcase, searching for a dress shirt and tie.

"Where's the bathroom?" Bella asked.

"Out the door, to the right, first door on your left." She dug around in her own bag for a few minutes, draping a change of clothes over her arm, and disappeared down the hall.

It didn't take long to liberate my dark grey button-down shirt, black dress pants, and black and grey striped tie from the suitcase; they were wrinkled, but they would have to do. I changed quickly, securing the yarmulke that Carlisle had put in my room for me on my head and tightening the tie around my neck just as Bella reappeared in my room. *Jesus Fuck*. My hands dropped dumbly to my sides as I took her in. She'd twisted her hair up into some sort of clip with soft tendrils falling around her face, and she was wearing a strapless midnight blue dress that stopped just above her knees. Her skin was a pale and creamy contrast to the rich color of the dress, and the subtle-yet-promising nature of the design left me both practically incoherent and impossibly hard.

"Bella," I breathed, tie abandoned. "You look..." I couldn't finish. There weren't words.

"Do you like it? Jess helped me pick it out." She turned in a slow circle, and a low growl rumbled from deep in my chest. I quickly closed the distance between us, snaking my arms around her waist and pulling her flush against my body, my hands cupping her ass. My lips found the naked curve of her neck, nibbling and sucking gently; she smelled like strawberries and something else, something spicy, and I wanted to caress every inch of her with my tongue because I knew that her skin tasted as delicious as it smelled.

"We can't, Edward. They're waiting for us," she protested. I pressed my hips against her, slowly grinding my erection into her hip, and she moaned breathlessly.

"Can you feel what you do to me, Bella?" My voice was strained.

Rosalie chose that moment to yell up the stairs, "Are you guys coming or what?"

I sighed, resting my forehead against hers and squeezing my eyes shut tightly, attempting to reign in my desire. When I finally opened them, she was smiling coyly at me.

"I'm taking a raincheck on this, love," I told her.

"You'd better come to collect," she purred, nipping at my lips.

"Not. Helping."

"Come on, Eddie! I'm starving!" Emmett yelled, and I sighed again.

"We're coming," I called back, releasing her reluctantly and attempting to adjust myself so that I'd be able to walk. "I love you," I whispered to her.

"I love you, too." She tightened the knot of my tie, kissing me soft and slow and sweet, and we headed down to dinner.

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Everyone else was already seated at the table, chatting amicably as they waited, and as soon as Bella and I took our seats, my dad stood up. "Thank you, Rosalie and Emmett, Edward and Bella, for joining us for the holidays." He smiled down at my mom, who was seated to his left, and took her hand in his. "Esme and I are so thankful that you're here."

"Thanks for having us, Daddy C, Esme." Emmett grinned.

"Yeah, thank you for inviting me," Bella murmured, blushing. She was nervous. I fumbled under the table for her hand, and when I found it, she squeezed mine gently.

"I usually do the blessing in Hebrew, but I figured that Emmett and Bella would be able to appreciate it more if I translated," Carlisle said, smiling warmly at Bella before bowing his head. We all followed suit, and after a moment, he began to pray.

"Praised are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, who performed wondrous deeds for our ancestors in those days, at this season."

"Amen," my family chorused.

"Praised are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, who has kept us in this life, sustained us, and enabled us to reach this season."

"Amen," we chorused once again, and this time, Bella joined in.

Esme stood up to light the candles, and we all watched in silence. There was a certain grace in these ancient traditions brought back to life after thousands of years, and it gave me goosebumps every time. I may not have practiced Judaism religiously, but the elegance of its rituals, as well as the significance of the sacrifices that my ancestors had made, were not at all lost on me.

Once all of the candles were lit, Carlisle continued. I glanced at Bella out of the corner of my eye; her head was bowed, and she looked...peaceful. Angelic, almost. The candlelight cast flickering shadows over the soft angles of her face, rounding and blurring its edges, and I was reminded of one of my favorite passages from *Paper Heart*.

When Blake stepped off the plane at Heathrow, he immediately checked his pockets; keys, wallet, cell phone- check, check, and check. Still, he knew something was missing; something would always be missing, despite the reminders that mocked and tortured him at every turn. The blonde, unruly curl of her hair in an advertisement on the wall, her slightly upturned nose on the face of a female pilot hurrying towards her next flight, the exotic, spicy sweet smell of her skin wafting from the mixture of perfumes at the Tax & Duty Free shops. She was somehow both nowhere and everywhere, all at once. The ultimate paradox.

How long would it be until he could taste honeysuckle without his blood churning and his heart threatening to beat out of his chest? How many times would he turn, startled and frantic, at the carefree and unabashed sound of laughter, sure that she'd come to find him, before he could convince himself that she was truly gone? How many mornings would he wake up in a cold sweat, tracks from long-dried tears staining his cheeks and his arms reaching out, before his body remembered how to sleep without her by his side?

How many years, months, weeks, days, minutes, seconds, until he would be able to forget?

The night before he left, in one final exercise of self-inflicted torture, Blake had stolen into Elizabeth's tiny apartment, just to watch her sleep. She always looked so peaceful when she was asleep, the troubles and stresses of her day falling further away with each rise and fall of her chest. When Elizabeth was upset, she always lit candles, and that night was no different. The flickering shapes in the shadows served to comfort her, somehow, in a way that no human ever could. Blake stood silent at the end of her bed, watching until the lines and curves of her face blurred together and he could no longer recognize her. It wasn't until then that he'd place a silent kiss on her forehead and blown out the candles next to her bed, locking the door behind him as the tendrils of smoke twisted and curled, dissipating into the atmosphere and taking the splintered pieces of his heart with them.

Poor, sanctimonious bastard. Even as I'd written him, I'd pitied him. He'd found his soulmate in Elizabeth, but he'd given up so easily. There was nothing in this world that could tear me away from Bella; this unalterable truth should have been added to the list of the only certainties in life. Life, death, and taxes, and Bella and I, together. These things, the only constants in an ever-changing world, for now, and forever, amen.

After we had sung the Ma'oz Tzur, Carlisle placed the menorah in the center of the table, and Esme flicked on the lights, disappearing into the kitchen. She returned a moment later with a plate in each hand.

"I hope you boys and girls are hungry," she said with a twinkle in her eye.

"Sufganiyot! Yes!" Rosalie fist-pumped.

"They're Rosie's favorite," Emmett told Bella.

"What are they?" she asked.

"They're like jelly-filled donuts..." Esme explained, setting a plate down on each end of the table before winking at Bella, "...but better."

Dinner lasted the better part of two hours, filled with stories and laughter and typical getting-to-know-you fodder. By the time it was over, I was so full that I could barely move. Bella took the last bite of her latkes and groaned appreciatively, dabbing her mouth daintily with her napkin before setting it on her empty plate.

"Esme, Rosalie, that was phenomenal. Truly."

"You ladies really outdid yourself," Emmett agreed. I stood up, kissing Bella on the cheek and grabbing her plate to take to the kitchen.

"I'll do the dishes, Mom," I offered.

"Let me help." Bella started to get up, but Esme shook her head.

"No, Bella. You're a guest in this house. Sit," she commanded. Bella immediately plopped back down in her chair, looking dumbstruck, and we all laughed.

"I'll help you, Edward." Carlisle pushed back his chair and stood up, grabbed some plates, and followed me into the kitchen. Just before the door swung shut behind us, I heard Rosalie ask Bella to tell her more about her acting career, and I cringed inwardly. It was a sore subject right now; she hadn't gotten an offer in months. I couldn't wait to give her her Christmas gift. I knew...or rather, hoped... that it would change that for her.

"She's lovely." Carlisle said quietly, pulling my attention away from the other room and back into the kitchen.

"She is," I agreed, plugging the drain in the sink and turning it on, squirting some dish soap into it and watching as it filled with water and bubbles. "Hey, Dad?"

"Yeah?"

"How did you, you know, know that mom was the one? How did you know when it was time?"

He leaned back against the counter, crossed his arms, and smiled, his eyes growing distant as he lost himself in the memory. "One day in August, after you mother and I had been dating for a little over a year, I had this romantic picnic planned. We were going to hike around Mount Rainier National Park, and then stop for lunch on one of the bluffs. About halfway through the morning, the sky began to turn black. The storm was moving fast, and we were about four miles away from our car, so we hunkered down under a tree to wait for it to pass. You know your mom's not really the 'outdoorsy' type, but she had agreed to go with me since I loved it there so much, and now she was caught outside in the middle of one hell of a thunderstorm. I knew that I couldn't control the weather, but I was still worried that she would hate me for it.

"After about twenty minutes, the storm had finally passed, and I glanced down at her, soaking wet and shivering, bracing myself for the onslaught. But she just grinned up at me and said simply, 'That was fun.' I knew then that she was the one, and I'll remember that moment for the rest of my life. Nothing fazed her, and I knew she would stick by me, no matter what the weather. I felt the same way about her." He shrugged, and resumed drying the clean dishes I had been piling up next to the sink. "After that, it was just a matter of time."

We fell silent as the door to the kitchen opened and my mom and Rosalie came in, hands full of the rest of the dishes from the table. They placed them on the counter, chatting away, and Carlisle smiled at Esme's back as they disappeared back into the dining room. I recognized the emotion his face; it was the same way I felt when looked at Bella.

"Life is short, Edward. But having someone like your mother to share it with? That's what makes it worthwhile."

The door swung open again and Emmett poked his head in. "Come on, guys. We're going to sing Christmas carols and Hanukkah songs around the Christmas tree!" I noticed he had put on a carpet suit jacket and there was an unlit cigar stuck in his mouth, a la 'Al' from Quantum Leap. He was obsessed with reruns of that show.

"We'll be there in a minute. Don't do anything I wouldn't do. And if you do, take pictures," I said, quoting Al.

"I'll be your Tonto anytime, bro-in-law." Emmett flashed me a thumbs up and ducked back out, and Carlisle turned to me.

"Whatever you decide, you certainly have your mother's and my blessing. She's a wonderful girl, and I can see how much you love her. It's written all over your face."

When we finally joined the rest of the family in the front room, Bella was perched on the armrest of the couch, laughing in that carefree way of hers at something Rosalie had just said. When she saw me, her face lit up, and my heart swelled to bursting.

"I missed you," she murmured.

I rested my cheek against the top of her head and closed my eyes, breathing her in, as Carlisle and Esme began to sing 'Silent Night.'

"Bella, my Bella. I've been missing you for the past 25 years of my life."

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Bang bang bang.

"Ho, Ho, Ho, Merrrrry Christmas! Wake up, you little love muffins! Breakfast is ready!"

"Emmett, shut the fuck up and let them sleep!"

I groaned and opened my eyes, glancing over at Bella, who smiled up at me sleepily and slung her arm across my body, snuggling into my chest. I kissed the top of her head.

"Good morning, love. Merry Christmas, I whispered.

"Merry Christmas, Edward."

"Do you kiss your mother with that mouth, young lady?" I heard Emmett say.

"I'm not going to be kissing *anyone* with this mouth if you don't shut. Up." Rose hissed.

"Aw, come on, Rose. I just didn't want them to miss breakfast, that's all."

"Good morning, Emmett," Bella called out.

"See? They're awake anyways," Emmett said, knocking again. "Yo, can I come in, or is there inappropriate nakedness going on in there?" I sighed and hauled myself out of bed, running a hand through my hair as I opened the bedroom door. Emmett was standing there grinning, with a very exasperated looking Rose tugging on his arm, apparently trying to lead him down the hallway and away from our room.

"Morning, Rosalie. No douchebag, no inappropriate nakedness, and that's very considerate of you to make sure we don't miss breakfast. You usually try to inhale as much as possible before anyone else can get to it."

"Well, Eddie, it's Christmas, and I figured that since Christmas is a time of giving, I might as well get in on the action."

"That's what she said!" Bella yelled from behind me.

"I never thought I'd meet anyone with a dirtier mind than him." Rosalie jerked her thumb at Emmett, who was grinning at Bella over my shoulder.

"Good one, Jingle Bells! Nice PJ's. Batman, huh? Classic. I'm jealous, Eddie. Your girl's got good taste."

"Merry Christmas, Emmett, Rosalie. Jingle Bells? Really?"

"Just trying to keep in the spirit of the season."

"Sorry about Emmett, Bella. We usually keep him on a leash, but we figured we'd let him off for a while, since it's a special occasion and all. I think the freedom is a bit overwhelming for him." Rosalie rolled her eyes.

Bella climbed out of bed and stretched, sniffing the air tentatively. "Do I smell pancakes?"

"Esme's world-famous cinnamon chocolate chip pancakes. It's a Christmas tradition here in the Cullen household," I explained.

"They smell delicious." She came to stand next to me, and I slid my arm around her waist pulling her close to my side.

"They are." Rosalie smiled. "Mom's an amazing cook."

"If Rosie hadn't snared me with her smokin' body and her silver tongue, I probably would have gone after Mrs. C instead. She definitely knows the way to my heart." Emmett winked and tapped a finger against his stomach.

"Come on, Em. Let's give them some time to wake up." Rosalie resumed her tugging on his arm.

"'Wake up?' Is that what you kids are calling it these days?" Emmett grinned, raising an eyebrow suggestively.

"It amazes me that you're the oldest one, Emmett. Truly." I shook my head.

"And wisest. And hottest." He flexed his right arm, and then added as an afterthought, "I should really be charging you guys for tickets to this gun show."

Bella giggled. "Don't encourage him," Rosalie and I chorused.

"Whatev, you haters. I'm leaving. You guys better hurry, or there might not be much food left by the time you get down there." Emmett finally allowed Rosalie to lead him down the hallway.

"What happened to the 'season of giving'?" I called after him.

"The moment's over, Eddie. Stop living in the past," Emmett called back, and they disappeared down the stairs. I glanced down at Bella, who was smiling.

"I like your family," she said.

I laughed. "I'm glad, because if I have it my way, you'll be stuck with them for quite a while."

"Good." She stood up on her tiptoes to kiss my cheek before moving to grab our robes from the edge of the bed. She handed mine to me, and we both pulled them on. "Let's go get some breakfast."

"Hang on." I grabbed her hand. "First, I want to tell you a story. A little Christmas story that I wrote. I call it, *The Story of Schmuel, Tailor of Klimovich*."

"A story?" She frowned.

"Come on, it'll be fun," I said, smiling that crooked smile I knew she loved, and led her down the stairs, into the front room.

"This better be good, because those pancakes smell fucking delicious. That's all I'm sayin'," she grumbled.

"Trust my genius, Bella. Sit." I kissed her forehead and motioned for her to take a seat on the floor. When she turned around to grab the afghan off of the couch, I pulled a small box from underneath the tree and quickly shoved it into the pocket of my robe.

"I do trust your genius, but you know how I feel about pancakes." She sat down next to the tree, curling up in the blanket, and frowned up at me. "Well, and bacon. And french toast. But pancakes mostly."

I chuckled. "Right up there with your feelings about Batman."

"I like a man with in a cape."

"Not really my type. I hope you'll forgive me for that."

"I suppose." She yawned, nodded, and smiled. "Okay, Edward, dazzle me."

I cleared my throat. "It won't take too long, so don't worry."

"That's what she said." Bella giggled.

I groaned, rubbing a hand across my face. "God, love, you have the dirtiest mind."

"You love it."

"I do. Can I start now?"

"Please."

I took a deep breath, my left hand clutching the box in my pocket, and began.

"Schmuel would work 'til half-past ten at his tailor shop in Klimovich, get up at dawn, and start again with the hems, and pins, and twist.

"Forty-one years had come and gone at his tailor shop in Klimovich; watching the winters soldier on, there was one thing Schmuel missed.

"If I only had time," old Schmuel said, "I would build the dress that's in my head -a dress to fire the mad desire of girls from here to Minsk, but I have no more hours left to sew." Then the clock upon the wall began to glow, and the clock said, "Oh Schmuel, you'll get to be happy. I give you unlimited time! So, Schmuel, go sew and be happy!" But Schmuel said, "No, no, it's not my lot. I've gotta make do with the time I've got.

"You do an excellent old-man-Jew accent. Have you ever thought about getting into theater?" she teased.

I rolled my eyes at her. "Can I please continue?"

"By all means."

"Schmuel was done at half-past ten and he said, "Good night, old Klimovich!," put on his coat to go, but then the clock cried, "Wait! Not yet! Even though you're not wise or rich, you're the finest man in Klimovich. Listen up, Schmuel, make one stitch and you'll see what you can get."

"But Schmuel said, "Clock, it's much too late, I'm at peace with life, I accept my fate." But the clock said, "Schmuel, one stitch and you'll unlock the dreams you've lost." So Schmuel, with reluctance, took his thread, he pulled a bolt of velvet and he said, "I should take out my teeth and go to bed. I'm sitting here with talking clocks instead!" And the clock said, "Oh Schmuel, you'll get to be happy. I give you unlimited time! Just do it, and you can be happy!"

"So Schmuel put the thread through the needle's eye, and the moon stared down from a starless sky, and he pushed the thread through the velvet black, and he looked, and the clock was turning back. So he grabbed his shears, and he cut some lace as the hands moved left on the old clock's face, and his fingers flew, and the fabric swirled. It was 9:15 all around the world.

"Every cut and stitch was a perfect fit, as if God himself were controlling it, and Schmuel cried through a rush of tears, "Take me back! Take me back all forty-one years!"

"And on it went down that silent street until Schmuel's dress was at last complete, and he stretched his arms, and he closed his eyes, and the morning sun finally started to rise."

I paused to gauge Bella's reaction.

"That's it?" She frowned.

"No, I just wanted to make sure you were enjoying it."

"I am, I am! What happens next?"

"Well, the dress he made on that endless night was a dress that would make any soul take flight. Not a swatch, not a skein had gone to waste, every ribbon and button ideally placed, and sewn into the seams were forty-one seasons of dreams... dreams that you could feel coming real.

"And that very dress, so the paper swore, was the dress a girl in Odessa wore on the day she promised forevermore to love a young man named Schmuel - who only one day before had knocked on her kitchen door."

Bella gasped. "What? That's amazing. He made the dress for her, and then he got to go back in time and give it to her, and... oh my God. I have goosebumps."

I nodded and knelt down on the floor in front of her, running my hand along the curve of her cheek. "You know, Bella, plenty have hoped, dreamed, and prayed, but they can't get out of Klimovich. And if Schmuel had been a cute goyishe maid, he'd have looked a lot like you."

Her brow furrowed in confusion, but I pressed on.

"Maybe it's just that you're afraid to go out onto a limb-ovich..." I paused. "Get it? Do you like what I did there?"

"Touche'."

"Maybe your heart is completely swayed, but your head can't follow through."

Bella's face fell a bit, so I took both of her hands in mine and squeezed them gently before continuing. "But shouldn't I want the world to see the brilliant girl who inspires me? Don't you think that now's a good time to be the ambitious freak you are?"

"Hey!" she protested, punching me lightly in the arm.

"I mean it with love."

"I'm sure you do."

"Say goodbye to wiping ashtrays at the bar. Say hello to Bella Swan, big-time star! Cause I say, Bella, that you get to be happy. I give you unlimited time. Stop temping, and go and be happy!" I stood up, grabbed the pile of papers I had strategically placed on the end table the night before, and handed them to her. "Here's a headshot guy, and a new BackStage, where you're right for something on every page. Take a breath, take a step, take a chance..." I pulled the small box out of my pocket, opened it, and handed it to her. "Take your *time*."

Understanding crossed Bella's delicate features as she took the box from my hand. "A watch. *Time*. Edward, it's beautiful."

"Quit your crappy job at that shitty bar, Bella. I can take care of us now. I want you to focus on your career. I want you to be happy," I said.

"Really?" There were tears in her eyes, and I kneeled back down, using the pads of my thumbs to gently wipe them away.

"Really," I whispered before kissing her softly.

"I love you, Edward. Thank you. This... all of it... is more than I could ask for." She smiled through her tears, and in the depths of her eyes, I could see the dying spark of her soul re-ignite.

I sat down beside her and pulled her onto my lap, wrapping my arms around her stomach, and whispered into her ear, "Have I mentioned today how lucky I am to be in love with you?"

She smiled, resting her head against mine, and outside the window, beyond the muted lights of the Christmas tree, snow began to fall.

Chapter 7

*She woke up in a town made of quicksand
gets harder to move every day she stays
He woke up in the same hotel he always does
just different numbers on the doors
Maybe they'll meet
Maybe they won't
Maybe they love each other
And maybe they don't
She's a gypsy
He's a pirate on the run*

-Pat Monahan, 'Pirate on the Run'

Bella- July 2005

I put the finishing touches on my makeup and turned side to side in the brightly lit mirror to admire the finished product. With my pale skin and brown hair, it wasn't easy for me to pass for Puerto Rican. *Thank God for Nars bronzer and temporary black hair dye.*

"Buenos dias, Anita." Riley came up and slung his arm around my shoulders, beaming at me in the mirror. "Nothing like a two-show day to really get the blood pumping, huh?"

"You know it, Riff." I smiled back.

"Riley? Would you mind helping me stretch?" Lauren called from the other side of the room.

"Thirty minutes to curtain. Thirty minutes to curtain."

Riley pinched my arm before following Lauren to the tumbling mats in the corner, and I smacked him back, laughing, before closing my eyes and taking a deep breath to calm the butterflies in my stomach. It was always the same, every time I heard that announcement; a thrilling combination of anxiety and excitement would course through me, sending my adrenaline surging, starting in my toes and crawling slowly, deliciously, up my body, until even my hair follicles were vibrating with nervous energy. Every nerve in my body would continue to crackle and pop with electric anticipation until places were called and I made my way to the white 'x' that was taped upstage left, just for me.

That's when the magic would happen.

The overture would begin, and each measure was the wave of a wand, each chord a shooting star, and each crescendo a sprinkling of pixie dust. I'd listen and I'd wait, eyes closed, with sweaty palms and bated breath, for the transformation to occur. And as the curtain finally rose, it would take me with it, leaving only Anita behind. She may have been a part of me, but for those two and a half hours, I handed my body over to her, willingly. I would hide in the shadows of my mind, watching from a distance as the brilliant strength of her character was brought to life through each swish of my hips, each stamp of my foot, and each 'r' trilled off my tongue. Every performance was an out-of-body experience, a sacred journey, my own personal form of communion - the closest I had ever come to God. It wasn't until the final bow was complete and the curtain closed for the last time that I would resume control, flexing my fingers and wiggling my toes to prove to myself that my body was my own, while somewhere in the recesses of my subconscious, Anita would smile, wink, and retire to rest until it was time to begin again.

I loved to be onstage. I loved it almost as much as I loved being married to Edward. *Almost.*

I settled myself into my director's chair and pulled out the letter I'd found in my mailbox that morning, unfolding it carefully and smiling at the swirling loops of Edward's handwriting as I began to read.

Isabella Marie Cullen-

It's a beautiful summer day here in the city, but the sunshine is dull and the colors are muted without you by my side. I miss you, my darling wife, more than words can adequately express.

When I was younger, Rosalie and I would spend a few weeks every summer with my grandmother at her cottage by the lake. On the days when bad weather forced us indoors, we would huddle together by the stone fireplace in her living room, and she would pull out a box of old letters - letters written to her by my grandfather while he was overseas during the war. And while the rain pounded on the roof and thunder threatened to beat down the door, my grandmother's melodic voice would transport me to a different time; a time when living was hard, and death came easy, and love knew nothing but the language of longing and the empty stretch of thousands of miles.

It was a time when wives and girlfriends and mothers would wait on their front porches, impatiently, for the postman each and every afternoon; when censored, crumpled, and dirt-stained letters were regarded as more valuable than bricks of gold; when scribbled declarations of eternal devotion and vows to return home soon were the only sustenance on which those left behind to wait, and to pray, were able to survive. One never knew if or when the hand of the man, father, brother, son, they loved most in the world, so far from home and fighting so hard for our freedom, would be eternally stilled. For sometimes, despite the best of intentions, those hands wrote of promises that they simply could not keep.

But the world is very different now, and every promise that I've ever made to you, Mrs. Cullen, I fully intend to keep. I love you, as Pablo Neruda so eloquently stated, 'as certain dark things are to be loved, in secret, between the shadow and the soul.' You have been locked away in the deepest part of my heart, and you will remain there, always.

I will be there soon, Bella. I'll finish up this chapter and be out the door- don't give up on me yet. I'm absolutely devastated that I missed seeing you in Fiddler on the Roof, but I'll make it up to you, somehow, someday. I am so proud of you, love- you're doing what you've never got to do before, and I will be there, as soon as fucking Random House stops calling. Don't lose faith, and don't despair.

I'll be there.

I promise.

All my love now, and forever,

Edward

I bit my lip to keep the tears at bay; it was 25 minutes to curtain, and I couldn't afford to fuck up my eye makeup, but Christ, the man really had a way with words. Somehow, somewhere along the way, he had learned how to sequence things *just so*, giving what were once simple nouns and verbs the ability to fill your soul with emotions so complex, so divine that you weren't even aware you could process them. *Gifted* was the word that came to mind, but it didn't seem sovereign enough to appropriately convey the breadth of his talent. I knew I'd never be able to bleed onto the page the way he did, but I wanted to at least try to reciprocate. I wanted him to know just how much I missed him during that long, godforsaken summer. I wanted to give him something tangible to fold and tuck into his pocket, so that he could trace its grooves and edges with his fingertips during his long meetings and press events and remember that I would always be here, waiting, when he was through.

"Hey, Lauren? Can I borrow some paper, and a pen?" The girl never went anywhere without her journal.

"Yeah, they're in my bag. Just grab them," she replied from across the room.

I rummaged around under the vanity, finally spotting the smoky black cardboard cover sticking out of her purse.

"Thanks," I called over my shoulder as I ripped out a page, pulling the pen out of the spiral binding and scooting my chair closer to the vanity counter. I smoothed the fresh, blank paper with the palm of my hand and stared at it for a moment, tapping the pen against my lips. *How the hell does he do it?*, I blank page was so... intimidating. It was nothing like writing music- at least with music you have the stanzas to keep you company. *What the hell am I going to write?*

And just like that, inspiration hit me. *Music*. I'd write him a song; a story about my summer in Ohio. I may not have been an award winning, adoration-inspiring author, but song lyrics? Those I could do. After deliberating for a few moments, I smiled to myself, pressed the tip of the pen to the page, and began.

My dearest Edward-

I could have a mansion on a hill,

I could lease a villa Seville,

but it wouldn't be as nice as a summer in Ohio

with a gay midget named Sam playing Tevye and Tony.

I could wander Paris after dark,

take a carriage ride through Central Park,

but it wouldn't be as nice as a summer in Ohio

where I'm sharing a room with a former stripper, and her snake, Wayne.

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April 2005

I tapped my foot impatiently as the elevator began its exasperatingly slow ascent to the twenty-fifth floor.

"Come on, come on," I muttered under my breath, watching as each number flashed momentarily before growing dark once again. When the elevator crawled to a stop and the doors opened, I practically flew out of them, almost knocking over what looked to be an incredibly flustered intern in the process.

I tossed a quick "Sorry!" over my shoulder at her, and rushed down the hallway to the spare office at Random House that Edward and Jasper would use between meetings. I didn't even bother to knock; I just threw open the door and proffered the paper triumphantly, beaming from ear to ear.

"I got the part."

Edward and Jasper both looked up simultaneously from the mountain of papers strewn across the desk.

"You got what, darlin'?" Jasper's ice-blue eyes stared quizzically back at me.

"I got the part. At the Porterhouse Theater in Ohio. May through August. Two shows – *Fiddler on the Roof*, and *West Side Story* – and they want me to play Tzeitel, and Anita." It came out in a rush. I was so excited, I could barely form words. My first professional gig as a lead. I didn't even give a shit that it wasn't on... or off... Broadway. It was something; it was a start. It was the beginning of the rest of my life.

Edward practically leapt out of his chair, crossing the tiny office in a few quick strides and pulling me into his arms. "Bella, love, that's wonderful! Congratulations! I'm so, so proud of you."

Jasper let out a slow whistle. "Wow, Bells. Congrats. Two shows? How does that work?"

I kissed Edward's cheek and moved to sit in the chair next to Jasper's. "I leave in two weeks. We rehearse, open mid-May, and perform *Fiddler* through the end of July while rehearsing for *West Side Story*, which will run through the middle of August. And then, I'll return to New York City, beautiful, seasoned, lead actress extraordinaire." I tossed my hair, smiling saucily.

"Pulchritudinous," Edward whispered.

"Come on, Cullen, you shouldn't use that type of language in the presence of a lady." Jasper frowned disapprovingly at Edward, and I giggled.

"It means beautiful," I explained. "I didn't get it the first time he used it, either."

"Actually, it means *physically* beautiful," Edward interjected.

"I'm so sorry. We can't all be the next F. Scott Fitzgerald, you know," I teased.

"Sorry- bad habit." Edward ducked his head, smiling softly.

A pang of anxiety raced through my body; I was so excited about the gig, but accepting it meant an entire summer in Ohio, alone - away from Edward, and my home, and my friends.

"I just wish the job was closer to New York, that's all."

"At least it's in Ohio. It's not like it'll be completely foreign territory," Jasper offered.

"True," I hedged, glancing surreptitiously at Edward. "It's just-"

"I'll miss you so much," he interrupted, finishing my sentence for me, and the love reflected in his clover-green eyes nearly took my breath away. "But I want this for you. And I'll come visit as often as I'm able. I wouldn't miss the chance to see you onstage again... not for anything in the world. You light up, from the inside out, when you're up there. You glow." He paused and smiled down at me. "You deserve this, Bella. You deserve to be happy."

He was right. It was just one summer, a few months – a necessary sacrifice to further my career. Edward would visit, and before I knew it, I'd be home. I had to do this... for *me*.

"Edward? Jasper? They're ready for you." Elise stuck her head in the doorway, smiling when she noticed me. "Oh hey, Bella! Good to see you!"

"Hey, Elise! Busy day?"

She shrugged. "Not bad, considering the fact that we're working with Random House's new prodigal son over here."

"Awesome! Well, keep up the great work!" I cringed inwardly; I sounded like a fucking motivational speaker. Elise was sweet, but she was... intense... and I always felt inferior around her, though I could never pinpoint why. Perhaps it had something to do with her color-coded schedules and god-like punctuality. The woman never missed a meeting, or appointment, or eyebrow wax, and she was never late. For anything. *Ever*. I glanced at her perfectly plucked eyebrows and tried to remember the last time I'd tamed my own caterpillars. I couldn't. *Not a good sign*.

"Thanks." She smiled graciously, and then turned a stern eye back on the boys. "Come on, guys. Money waits for no man."

"Yes, ma'am," Jasper drawled, giving Elise a mock-salute. "Congratulations again, Bells. We'll have to have a going away party for you. Maybe Alice and Jess could plan it. They're good at that kinda stuff."

"Yeah, they'll have it planned within an hour, right down to the champagne fountain," Edward said dryly.

Jasper scratched his jaw thoughtfully. "On second thought, maybe we shouldn't mention anything having to do with a party to Alice and Jess."

"Let's go!" Elise barked, causing Jasper to flinch, and I giggled.

"Yeah, yeah, laugh it up. See you later, darlin'." He kissed my cheek and followed Elise out the door.

Edward wrapped his arm around my waist, resting his chin on top of my head, and I hugged him tightly.

"I'll miss you too, you know," I said.

He kissed my forehead and released me. "It's just a few short months, and then you'll be on your way to big-time, Broadway star."

I sighed. "I sure as hell hope so. I need a break. This business is wearing me down."

"I know. But you've never given up, and I don't think I tell you often enough how much I admire that about you."

"Really?" I smiled, feeling giddy. *Edward admired me?*

He chuckled. "Before you came along, I'd been this close to giving up on my writing career. I wouldn't have made it if it weren't for you- my new muse. I didn't handle the rejection well."

"And just look at you now."

He nodded. "Exactly. It was worth it, in the end. I know it's been a rough road for you, but you've handled it so gracefully, and no matter what roadblocks you stumbled upon, you just kept pushing forward. It's incredibly admirable, love."

"Edward!" Elise yelled from down the hallway. "Let's go!"

He chuckled, and placed a chaste kiss on my lips. "See you at home, Mrs. Cullen?"

I nodded and smiled, offering him a small wave as he dashed down the hallway to catch up to his future.

Two lightning-fast weeks and one going-away party, sans champagne fountain, later, I had landed in Ohio. A taxi picked me up from the airport and dumped me unceremoniously at the apartment complex that would be my home for the next few months, and it felt like college all over again. I had a duffel bag slung over my shoulder, a rolling suitcase in one hand, and the welcome packet clutched in the other as I made my way into the seemingly deserted building and stood awkwardly waiting for the elevator to take me to the third floor- apartment 302 - and Lauren, my new roommate. I'd been lucky enough to room with my best friends back at NYU, but I'd heard horror stories from my classmates about their own roommate experiences. *God, I hope she's not some kind of puffy-heart loving bimbo.* If I had to deal with any squealing, or gushing over Christian Bale, or bff mani/pedi's, I was *so* out of there.

A loud *ding* signaled the arrival of the elevator, and when the doors opened, I hobbled inside, my gaze on my feet, dragging my bag behind me.

"Need some help?" a man's voice asked from my left, and I gasped, startled.

"Sorry, I didn't meant to scare you," he said.

A midget. He's a midget. Stop staring, Bella! Jesus! Say something! "Uh, no, I think I've got it," I bit my lip and awkwardly as I attempted to turn around to face the doors of the elevator. When I was situated, I let out a sigh of relief, and smiled warmly at him. He was fairly attractive, with dark skin, dark eyes, and jet-black hair- he was just... short. Really, really short.

"Thanks, though."

"No problem," he smiled back. "I'm Sam."

"Bella." I reached down to shake his hand. "Nice to meet you."

"What floor?"

"Three, please," I said, watching as he reached over to press the button.

"Are you here with Porterhouse?"

"Yeah, how did you know?"

He chuckled. "You have 'deer in headlights' look about you. It's pretty common with the newbies."

"You're with Porterhouse, too?" I tried really, *really* hard to tone down my incredulity, but it still came out with more disbelief than I'd hoped it would. I had nothing against little people, or anyone of *any* race of creed or color, for that matter, but I knew from firsthand experience that the theater was a fickle place. Typecasting, politically correct or not, was the norm, and though I racked my brain, I couldn't think of any parts in either *Fiddler on the Roof* or *West Side Story* that had been written for, um, little persons.

The elevator door opened again and he held the door open for me and followed me into the hallway. "Yup. Looks like we're going to be neighbors, too. I'm in 304."

"302. What parts are you going to be playing?" I was dying to know.

"Tevye and Tony."

"Wow, that's..." I shook my head, smiled, and hoped like hell he didn't notice the look complete and total confusion on my face. "Congrats. That's awesome."

"Thanks. It's my second summer with Porterhouse, but my first time playing both leads, so I'm pretty stoked. What about you?"

"Um, Tzeitel. And Anita. And it's my first summer. I mean, you know it's my first summer, obviously, because you said I looked like a newbie. Well, and because you obviously didn't seem me last summer. Cuz I wasn't here, I mean," I word vomited. *Smooth, Bella.*

"Congratulations right back at you."

"Thanks."

He stopped about halfway down the hallway. "This is me. It was nice to meet you, Bella. I'll see you at the meeting tonight?"

"Yeah. Nice to meet you too, Sam."

The door closed behind him, and I stood there for a moment, stunned. I felt like such a shit for being so judgmental; he was a nice guy, and quite obviously very talented, but I couldn't help but feel like I'd somehow walked into the three-ring circus of theater. *A midget? Playing Tony?* I mean, even if the guy was the next Marlon Brando, how the hell could anyone take our show seriously when our Tony had to climb halfway up a ladder to kiss his Maria? Then again, maybe the woman cast as Maria was a little person, too. If that was the case, then it wouldn't be so awkward. I could handle that.

Besides; it wasn't like I was the poster child for Puerto Rican women myself.

My duffel bag was starting to slide off my shoulder, so I tucked that train of thought away for a rainy day and rooted my key out of my pocket, unlocking the door to my new home.

It was nice. Small, but nice. The floors were hardwood, the kitchenette was painted a cheery yellow, and it was fully furnished, complete with what appeared to be a Kitchenaid mixer on the kitchen counter. *Score!* I set my stuff down by the door and poked my head into what turned out to be one of the bedrooms, decorated with plush lavender carpeting, dark wooden dressers, and a bed with an ivory colored down comforter. It was gorgeous; much nicer than I thought it would be.

After surveying the bathroom, I made my way down to the second doorway and knocked lightly. I heard some shuffling, and the door opened to reveal a very tan, very blonde woman with blue eyes and an amazing rack- not something I usually notice when I first meet someone, but they were practically falling out of her tank-top, and they looked *damn* good. I snuck a quick glance down at my own chesticles and suppressed a sigh. *So not fair.*

She must have noticed my disappointment because she laughed and said, "Don't worry, they're fake."

I squinted at her. "Really? Because, I mean, they look amazing."

"Yup. I used to be a stripper, and I wanted to supplement my income. It worked." She shrugged. "I'm Lauren."

"Bella."

"Is this your first summer?" she asked.

"Yeah. Yours?"

"My third. I'm from Fremont; there aren't many opportunities for actors around these parts."

I frowned. "Why don't you-"

"Move?" She shook her head. "No. My man is here. I could never leave him. You know how it is."

"Yeah," I said. "I do." *I really, really do.*

"So, Bella, have you met our leading man yet?"

I didn't know where she was going with that question, and I didn't want to come off like an insensitive asshole, so I just nodded.

"Well, between you and me," she whispered conspiratorially, "I think having it's going to make the entire company look like a joke."

"So the leading lady isn't, um, vertically challenged, too?"

"What? No." Lauren cocked her head at me in confusion. "Why would you think that?"

"Uh... nevermind."

Lauren raised an eyebrow, but kept talking. "I mean, not everyone is perfect. Hell, I used to be a stripper. It was excellent side money, by the way, and you actually have some perky tits, if you don't mind my saying so, so if you ever want to get into the business, let me know. I can hook you up. The only reason I stopped is because JJ didn't like it. Anyways, what was I saying?"

Oh man, this girl was awesome. "Sam."

"Right. Sam. Everyone is different- justice and equality for all and all that patriotic bullshit- but a midget playing the strapping Tevye and Tony, who's half of an illicit, poonani-tingling love affair? Sam is great, don't get me wrong. He's a wonderful actor, and a real stand-up guy, too. It just doesn't work in my head."

"I totally agree," I told her.

"I mean, sure, I've got blonde hair and blue eyes, but with skin this dark, all I need are some contacts and a little hair dye and I'll look like I just crossed the border. Oh! I almost forgot! You should know that we have a third roommate." She jumped up off of the couch and disappeared into her bedroom. I glanced around the apartment to see if I had missed a door somewhere, but I hadn't. Where the hell was this third person going to sleep?

Lauren waltzed back into the room with an enormous snake around her neck and waved his tail at me. "Bella, meet Wayne."

"What the fuck!" I screamed, pushing myself back across the couch and away from Lauren and the former star of *Anaconda* as quickly as I could. "You have a SNAKE?" There was no way in hell that I'd be able to sleep with that thing in my apartment- it looked big enough to swallow me whole.

"Well, he's not technically mine. He belongs to my boyfriend, JJ. His real name is Jason Jenks, but we call him JJ for short. He's in jail, he got involved with the forging of legal documents or something, and no one else can watch Wayne over the summer, so he'll be staying with us!"

"That's, uh..." I trailed off, eyeing Wayne warily. He stuck out his tongue at me, and then, I swear to God, he winked. "He can't get out of his cage, can he?"

She giggled. "Not usually. Every once in a while he likes to go exploring, but don't worry. He's completely harmless."

"Harmless. Right." *If giant, man-eating, nightmare-inducing snakes could be considered harmless.*

"Well, I'm going to go take a shower and get ready for the meeting tonight. We're going to have so much fun together this summer!"

She bounded out of the room, and I watched, horrified, as Wayne winked goodbye. Or maybe it was more of a, *I know where you live and I know where you sleep, and I swear to everything holy that your mother will cry when she sees what I've done to you*, type of wink. Who knew, really?

When my brain finally started working again, I pulled my phone out of my pocket and shot a quick text to Edward.

In case I get eaten by a disturbingly large snake this summer, you have my love. Oh, and please, give my regards to Broadway.

{ }

I could have a satchel full of dollar bills,

cures for all the nation's ills,

pills to make a lion purr-

I could be in line to be the British Queen,

look like I was seventeen,

still, I'm certain I prefer to be going slowly batty

40 miles East of Cincinatti.

I could shove an ice pick in my eye,

I could eat some fish from last July,

but it wouldn't be as awful as a summer in Ohio

without cable, hot water, Vietnamese food, or you.

{ }

May 2005

"Bella!" Lauren was pounding on my bedroom door. I put down the book I'd been reading and hauled myself up from my bed to open the door. Lauren was standing there, dripping wet, and completely naked. I cringed and threw a hand over my eyes.

"Dammit! Come on, I know you're comfortable with nudity and all, but couldn't you at least throw on some pasties and a g-string before you knock on my door?"

"Shut up," she giggled. "No time. There's hot water!"

"Seriously?" My eyes lit up like a kid's at Christmas.

"Yeah! Get your ass in there!"

"In that case, your nudity is forgiven. Thanks, L." I shoved past her and ran into the bathroom, slamming the door behind me and pulling my clothes off as fast as I possibly could.

"You're welcome!" she called from the other side of the door.

As soon as I was naked, I turned on the water and jumped in, reveling in the bliss that was a steamy hot shower. The apartment building we were living in had recently been refurbished, but they'd run out of money before they could get to the water heater - a fact that they had conveniently neglected to mention when negotiating the contract with Porterhouse Theater. As a result, the entire cast and crew had spent the last month suffering through unbearably cold showers.

I felt my muscles relaxing under the warmth of the water and smiled to myself as I reached for the shampoo, but almost as soon as I had poured it into my hand, the warm water disappeared.

"Fuck!" I yelled, dancing out of the now ice-cold spray and plastering myself against the back wall of the shower. "Fuck, fuck, FUCK!"

You'd think I'd be used to it, but for some reason, it just never got any easier. I quickly soaped up my hair and shoved it under the shower nozzle; the icy water took my breath away, so I rinsed as quickly as I could, teeth chattering, before returning to the wall to prepare for round two.

Grabbing the soap in one hand and my loofah in another, I took another deep breath and forged back into battle, shivering as I scrubbing every inch of my skin fiercely and furiously before slamming the water off and raising my hands in triumph.

"I will never let you keep me from cleanliness, you dastardly, evil water heater! NEVER! Ahahahahaha!" I crowed, letting lose my best villain laugh.

"You're straight-up crazy, woman!" I heard Lauren yell from the living room.

"You love it!" I yelled back.

As I was toweling off, I heard my phone ring from the pocket of my jeans. I leaned over and fished it out, tucking the towel under my arm as I held the phone up to my ear.

"Hello?"

"Hello, love."

"Edward!" The exquisite, velvety-rich timbre of his voice never failed to send chills down my spine.

"I miss you," he said.

"I miss you too. How are you?"

"Fine. Busy." He sighed. *"Mehta's been crawling up my ass over the sequel to Paper Heart. They're demanding a re-write of the last five chapters, and I have to finish it by the end of next week."*

"I'm sorry, baby," I murmured.

"So, needless to say, I won't be able to make it this weekend. Again. I feel horrible, Bella. I feel like I'm letting you down."

"Don't," I said. "Edward, it's your job. It's your career. It's what you love. I understand, and I'm not upset. We still have three weeks left of *Fiddler*. You can come closing weekend."

"Now that's where you're mistaken. You're my wife... you're the one I love, and you mean more to me than any stupid book or contract. Just say the word, and I'll tell them all to fuck off, and hop on the next plane to Ohio."

"Stop being such a drama queen," I laughed. "Really, it's okay. I'm not upset. I mean, I miss you, but it's only another two weeks. And what if it were me?"

"What do you mean?"

"What if I was in a show, traveling across the country, and you were waiting for me to come visit, and then the show unexpectedly extended its run? Would you understand?"

"Of course," he said.

"See?"

"That may be so, but it doesn't make it any easier. And if there was any other way-"

"I know," I interrupted. "Now stop with the self-flagellation, okay?"

"Okay, okay." He paused. *"I love you."*

"I love you too."

"Bella, Riley's here," Lauren knocked on the door.

"I'll be out in a minute!" I called before turning my attention back to Edward. "I gotta go."

"Hot date?" he teased.

"Very funny. Lauren's going to visit JJ, so Riley's and I are gonna grab some takeout and watch a movie."

"Vietnamese?"

"Ugh, no. They don't have a Vietnamese restaurant within thirty miles of this godforsaken town. Can you believe it? I'm going through some serious withdrawals."

"Well, when you're back in New York, we can eat all the Vietnamese food that your little heart desires. I just request that we order it for delivery, because once I get you back in our bedroom, Mrs. Cullen, I'm not letting you out for a long, long time."

My girly parts tingled at his words, and it weren't for the icy state of the water, I would have crawled back into the tub, directed the hand-held showerhead between my legs, and set it on high – Riley and Lauren be damned. "I'm going to hold you to that. Call me later?"

"I have a late meeting, but I'll call you first thing tomorrow, love. I promise."

"Mmkay. Love you."

"Love you more."

I skirted out of the bathroom and into my room, running a comb through my hair and pulling it up into a messy bun before climbing into a pair of yoga pants and my favorite red tank-top. When I finally joined Riley in the kitchen, he was busy unpacking containers of shrimp fried rice, vegetable spring rolls, Mongolian beef, and crab wontons.

"Hey Riley. Thanks for bringing dinner." I hopped up onto the counter next to him, tucking my hands under my thighs. "Nice shirt."

He was wearing a green and blue striped rugby shirt that really brought out the green of his eyes. The oversized shirt, along with the light smattering of freckles across his nose and his shaggy, sandy-brown hair, made him look like an adorable, mischievous kid trapped in a man's body.

"You're welcome. And thanks. How was your shower?" he asked.

"Are you referring to the 47 seconds of hot water I got to enjoy?"

"Shut up. Really?"

"Really. Be jealous. It was orgasmic. At least, until it became glacier water again."

"They really need to get that shit fixed. And while they're at it, maybe they could install some cable," he grumbled.

"Tell me about it," I agreed, swiping an eggroll from its container. "I never thought I'd say this, but I'd kill just to watch reruns of *Transformers*."

Riley raised an eyebrow at me. "*Transformers*, huh? I had you pegged as more of a *Sex and the City* type."

"Why can't I be both?"

"Because no woman is that cool," he said, handing me a plate, a fork, and a napkin.

"Well, I'm sorry to have to rock your world like this, but I totally am."

"Well then, I stand corrected." He grinned and bowed humbly, extending an arm towards the living room. "After you, madam."

I grabbed the plate from him, slid off the counter, and headed into the living room.

"I'm leaving, guys. No sex on the couch," Lauren said as she headed towards the front door.

"Jesus, Lauren. I'm a married woman." I grabbed a wonton and threw it at her, just missing her head.

"Yeah, yeah." She picked up the wonton off of the floor and took a bite, moaning appreciatively.

"Damn, that shit is good."

"Here," Riley threw her another; she caught it, and smiled her thanks.

"When are we going to meet this mysterious husband of yours, anyway? I'm beginning to think you made him up, and that the gorgeous rock on your hand is really a cubic zirconia."

"Yeah! Maybe Bella is the one who actually wrote Paper Heart, and she's using Edward Cullen as her penname!" Riley hypothesized.

I glanced down at my wedding ring and smiled softly. "Sorry to disappoint you guys, but he's real. Random House needs some re-writes, so he's not going to make it this weekend, but he'll be here for closing weekend of *Fiddler*."

"Well, that remains to be seen," Riley raised an eyebrow at me, and I elbowed him in the side.

"Shut up. He'll be here."

Won't he?

"What about you? Are you going to see JJ?" Riley switched his attention to Lauren and took a gigantic bite of his Mongolian beef as I pushed my insecure thoughts to the back corner of my mind, silently berating myself for my lack of faith in my husband. *You just miss him, that's all. He'll be here*, I told myself before turning my focus back to the conversation at hand.

"How'd you know?"

"That skirt doesn't even come close to covering your ass, so I figured that either you had picked up the night shift on the corner, or you were heading to see your man," Riley shrugged, and I giggle-snorted.

"Fuck you, asshole," Lauren laughed and grabbed her purse, heading out the door.

"Love you, too!" Riley sing-songed as the door swung shut behind her.

I crossed my legs Indian-style and set my plate in my lap. "Alright, what are we watching?"

"Well, for your viewing pleasure, I have the very old school but still hysterical classic, *Caddyshack*, or the incredibly beautiful, incredibly romantic classic, *Casablanca*. Which would you prefer?"

"I was thinking about something more along the lines of... The Tailor of Panama," I said, biting my lip to suppress a fresh wave of giggles. Riley was playing the part of Motel the Tailor in *Fiddler*, and over

the past month I'd been bombarding him with tailor jokes. Trust me, it wasn't easy; jokes about tailors were not easy to come by.

"Very funny," he rolled his eyes. Riley and I had bonded over a mutual love of Sondheim the first night during a trust exercise at our cast and crew meeting. It was absolutely essential that you trusted the people you were with onstage, because things didn't always run smoothly. During any given show, there was always the potential for lines to be forgotten, entrances to be missed, or for lighting or props or sound effects to malfunction. It could be an absolutely terrifying experience; your muscles freezing and mind drawing a complete blank while thousands of eyes stared at you, waiting for you to figure out your next move. That's where the trust factor came in. Knowing you had your castmates by your side to help you through the snafu and keep the show going often made the difference between a tearful mid-performance breakdown and a funny highlight for that season's blooper reel.

Riley, Lauren, and I had become the Three Musketeers, spending all of our spare time together in an attempt to keep from dying of boredom in Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio. I knew he had a thing for me, and both Lauren and I did my best to gently discourage him. Apparently, my wedding ring wasn't enough of a flashing red light for him. It was weird, but I guess I'd just never been one of those people who found cheating enticing. The very thought of betraying Edward that way, or even being single and having an affair with a married man, made me physically ill.

"Alright, alright." I chewed on my lip, gazing skyward as I tried to decide. I absolutely loved Casablanca, but I knew that watching a romantic movie while alone in my apartment with Riley probably wasn't a good idea.

"Caddyshack," I said.

"Good call." He crossed the room and squatted down to pop the DVD into the player. "Have you seen this before?"

"A few times. So I've got that goin' for me. Which is nice," I said, quoting Spangler.

"Just a few times, huh?" He chuckled. "Jesus, woman, you quote movies like a frat boy."

We settled comfortably on the couch, munching happily on our food as the movie played. About halfway through, he stretched out his left arm in the ever-classic date move and set it along the back of the couch, the tips of his fingers just brushing my shoulder. I stretched in response, faking a yawn, and shifted a bit so that he couldn't quite reach me. A few minutes later, he got up to use the bathroom, and when he came back, he sat down in the middle of the couch- closer to me than he had been before. I'd been dancing around the elephant in the room with him for weeks, and I was tired of it, so I sighed, hit 'pause' on the remote, and turned to confront him.

"Look, Riley-"

I was interrupted when his lips crashed against mine, and I froze for a moment in disbelief, the remote clattering out of my hand and onto the floor. It wasn't until I felt his tongue swipe across my lower lip that I finally gathered my wits and shoved him away angrily.

"What the fuck?" I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand, furious.

"Fuck. Oh my God, Bella. I'm so sorry." He looked incredibly distraught, but I was too pissed to care.

"I'm married, Riley. Married. See the ring?" I flashed my left ring finger in front of his face. "My husband does exist, and I love him very much. That was so not okay."

"I'm sorry, I'm an idiot. You're just... you're really special to me," he stammered, running a hand through his hair, "and I-"

"Look," I cut him off, "I like you too, Riley. You're a great friend. But this?" I gestured between the two of us. "This will never happen. And if you want to remain friends, and I *would* like to remain friends, because I enjoy your company, this has got to stop."

"You're right. You're right, Bella. I'm sorry. Can you forgive me?"

I took in the ashamed look on his face and immediately felt bad. I mean, yes, it was wrong for him to make a move, but still- it wasn't as if I'd blatantly discouraged him. Subtly, yes, but blatantly? Not really. I'd been telling myself this whole time that the reason I hadn't brought it up was because I didn't want to hurt his feelings, but deep down inside, I knew the real reason- the dark, dirty secret that I didn't want to admit even to myself.

I liked the attention.

I was to blame, at least in part, because I hadn't seen my husband in over a month, I was lonely, and it felt nice to be wanted. I never, ever would have cheated, but there was no harm in a little flirting, right?

But there was. I'd unwittingly hurt the man in front of me; a man I considered a good friend.

I leaned over and punched him in the arm. "Just don't let it happen again, okay?"

"Never. I swear." He exhaled a sigh of relief. "Friends?"

I nodded, offering him a small smile. "Friends."

I retrieved the remote from the floor and pressed 'play,' returning us to Spangler's monologue about the Dalai Lama. *And all is right with the world once again*, I thought, just as the wedding photo of Edward and me that I'd placed on the entertainment console caught my eye, and a pang of longing shot through my heart.

Well... almost.

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No, it's not nirvana, but it's on the way.

I play Anita at the matinee, then I get on my knees and pray I can state in my next bio

I'm never gonna go back to Ohio!

I could chew on tinfoil for a spell,

I could get a root canal in hell,

but it wouldn't be as swell as this summer is gonna be.

Cuz the torture is just exquisite while I'm waiting for you to visit,

so hurry up, schmuck, get unstuck, and get on the scene.

Love,

The midget, the stripper, Wayne the snake

and Mrs. Isabella Marie Cullen – that's me!

As soon as I finished signing my name, the overhead speaker called for places, so I folded it quickly, sealed it with a kiss, and tucked it into the pocket of my robe, now draped over the back of my chair.

"Break a leg, everyone!" Lauren called as we all exited the dressing room together, the air around us tense and pulsing with a frenzy of adrenaline. I ghosted down the corridor hand-in-hand with her and Riley, a pre-show tradition we'd had since the very first performance. As we reached the wings, we squeezed each others' hands tightly before letting go, and I made my way to the white 'x' that was taped upstage left, just for me, to wait for the transformation to begin.

Chapter 8

Watch your hands move along my face, they trace all the lines I've lived

It isn't hard to love your scars, 'cause that's everywhere you've been

I am yours, and I know that you're mine

You're worth waiting for... you're worth waiting for

Be my only, be my only, be my only

Your hand in mine, I swear, love, speeds up time

And wind blows southern skies like a lullaby

The good, the bad, I take it all... your love's a wrecking ball

-FM Radio, 'Be My Only

Edward- June 5th, 2004

It was a Saturday in June; a Saturday that, by any standard would have been considered ordinary. The stifling heat of the summer had yet to descend, and the breeze off the Hudson swept lazily through the streets while New Yorkers loafed about the city, enjoying the sunshine. I had the day off without any pending re-writes hanging over my head, and Bella didn't have rehearsal until later that evening, so we decided over coffee and sticky buns at Iris Café in Manhattan to spend the day sightseeing in and around Central Park.

Ordinary, by any other standard; but with the way the sunlight created an ethereal glow around Bella's silhouette that followed her wherever she went, I should have known better. I should have remembered that, with Bella, even the most mundane of moments were anything but ordinary.

The cab deposited us on Central Park West, near the infamous housing co-ops. Bella had never seen them - in fact, considering that she'd been living in New York for years, I was surprised at how much she had yet to explore - and as a lifelong fan of the Beatles, I figured it was the best place for us to start.

"Come on; the view is better from further inside the park." I grabbed her hand and took the lead, and she followed, willingly. As we strolled past families on picnics and teenagers throwing Frisbees, she smiled blissfully, lifting her face to the sky, and I tightened my grip on her hand as she unwittingly tightened her grip on my soul. She was my own, personal summer - rainbow snow cones, sticky-sweet strawberry lemonade, grass tickling between my toes, and the refreshing relief of a chlorine-filled swimming pool - and joy radiated from her like waves of heat from the sun. Her hair was pulled back in a loose ponytail, oversized sunglasses were perched on top of her head, and she was wearing an emerald green sundress that hugged the slight curve of her hips, its rich color standing out in stark contrast to her pale skin. I wanted to kiss the freckles that were spattered lightly across the tips her shoulders, so as we approached the lake, I wrapped my arms around her waist from behind, and did just that.

"It's a beautiful view," she sighed happily, shifting her weight so she was leaning back against me.

"Yes, it is," I agreed, but I wasn't referring to the skyline.

"Is that one John Lennon's?" she asked, shading her eyes with one hand as she squinted into the sunlight and pointed at the Beresford over the tips of the trees.

"No, that one's Jerry Seinfeld's." I lifted my hand to hers and shifted it a few blocks left, to point at the apartment that had belonged to Lennon and Yoko Ono. It belonged to Yoko now. "That one's John Lennon's, there."

"The San Remo, right?"

"No, the Dakota. The San Remo is up a few blocks." I moved her hand to the right, and her eyes followed. It was easy to confuse the two buildings that held what were perhaps the most luxurious apartments in all of New York. They were located only about a tenth of a mile from one another, and the German Renaissance feel of their architecture gave both buildings somewhat of a prestigious air. For the uneducated eye, the only way to tell the difference was by counting the towers; the San Remo had two to the Dakota's one.

"I thought that was the museum." She dropped her hand, craning her neck to the side so she could look back at me.

"The taller one is the San Remo," I explained, ducking my head to kiss the side of her neck, "and the shorter one is the Museum of Natural History. Have you been there?"

"No. Charlie brought me here once when I was younger; he had some kind of policemen's convention, and couldn't find a sitter. He wanted to show me the museum, but we never had time." She shrugged. "And when I was at NYU, I spent most of my time in the theater. I guess I just never gave much thought to all that this city has to offer outside of the Great White Way."

"You don't know what you're missing, love," I sighed. "The history, the gorgeous architecture, the night life, watching the sunrise from the Brooklyn Bridge--"

"Then show me," she said quietly, cutting me off, her pulse fluttering in her throat. "Show me everything. I want to see it all, I want to feel it all, with you." And inexplicably, my entire world shifted. Angel, devil, sinner, saint, and everything in-between; the woman in my arms was both my savior, and my downfall, and I couldn't wait any longer- not another hour, minute, second, or breath- to make her mine.

"Will you share your life with me for the next ten minutes?" I murmured.

"I think I can handle that," she said.

"Then how about the next ten, and the next, and the next? Because when I'm holding you, Bella - when you're here, in my arms, where you belong - I'm compelled to keep asking you for more."

"Take them all." She turned to face me, her brown eyes brimming with tears. "Hours, minutes, seconds; take them all. They're yours."

I should have been nervous. I should have been *terrified*. Instead, it was one of the most peaceful moments of my existence. It was... we were... *right*.

"There are so many things I want to share with you; ten lifetimes, a million summers, until there's no one left who has ever known us apart." I pulled out the ring I'd painstakingly chosen months ago - I'd been carrying in my pocket every day since, waiting for the right time - and offered it to her; my heart, in circle and diamond form, for her to wear, for the world to see. "Without you, I'll always be half. Marry me, Bella. Make me whole."

She stared silently at the ring for a moment before whispering, almost to herself, "I don't know how anybody survives in this life without someone like you."

"Is that a yes?" I searched her face for the answer, and when she finally looked up, the elation in her eyes told me everything I needed to know.

"Yes, Edward. Yes," she laughed. "I want to be your wife. I want to bear your child. I want to die knowing I had a long, full life in your arms. I want forever, with you."

Her hand trembled only slightly as I slid the ring onto her finger, kissing her eyelids reverently before capturing her lips with mine; and on that ordinary Saturday in June, amidst joggers and baby-filled strollers and the cool breeze off the Hudson, Bella gave me the greatest gift of all.

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Bella- January 21st, 2005

Our wedding was simple; a cold, gray Friday in January, our closest friends and family, a bouquet of snow-white calla lilies, and a Justice of the Peace. I didn't need anything more than that, because I already had more than I deserved; the love of a brilliant, beautiful, flawed, selfless man, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer... *until death do us part*.

We'd ridden together to the courthouse, our sweaty palms fused together in the backseat of a New York City cab, him in his best suit, and me in a white, vintage party dress that had belonged to my grandmother. I'd paired it with a gorgeous beaded necklace I'd borrowed from Jessica and earrings that Alice had bought to match, and at the last moment, Rosalie had tucked a sprig of delphiniums into my hair; something old, something new, something borrowed, and something blue.

Our friends and family met us there - Alice and Jasper, Jessica and Tyler, Emmett and Rosalie, Carlisle and Esme, and Charlie and Sue - and as I stepped out of the cab and onto the sidewalk, a light snow began to fall. I paused for a moment, closed my eyes, and lifted my face to the sky, letting the Lilliputian snowflakes melt on my tongue. They tasted like joy.

The entire ceremony was a blur; I was too mesmerized by the man standing in front of me to notice anything but the feel of my hand in his, the calm intensity in his eyes, or the soul-consuming love and adoration that seemed to transude from his every pore.

*I can't believe you chose me. I can't believe you want me. I can't believe you love **me**.*

"I do," he said reverently. A few moments later, I echoed the sentiment and placed the ring on his finger, binding him to me for life.

A mere formality; ring or not, I had always been his, and I always would be.

When he finally pronounced us man and wife, Alice cheered, Esme cried, Charlie beamed with pride, Edward's lips found mine in a symphony of rapture and promise, and I was finally, *finally*, home.

Dinner was at Jean Georges, where we nestled ourselves into a large, secluded booth and celebrated with ridiculously expensive champagne, buttery sea scallops, and the most delicious - and only - honey-rhubarb tart I'd ever tasted. Edward fed me bites of the dessert in-between snippets of conversation, his eyes on my lips and his hand on my thigh. When he used his thumb to wipe a bit of whipped cream from the corner of my mouth, my tongue darted out to meet it, and his eyes darkened almost imperceptibly, leaving me breathless with longing.

We returned home just after dusk, flush-faced and giggling like teenagers as we ran up the stairs to our apartment. Sweeping me up in his arms, he carried me across the threshold, refusing to set me down until we reached our bedroom-turned-honeymoon suite. There, he removed my dress slowly, tenderly, kissing every inch of flesh on my bare and trembling body before succumbing to the all-consuming need that was threatening to swallow us whole.

"I love you, wife," he said, filling me from the inside out.

"I love you, husband."

But the words weren't enough, so we moved quietly against one another, fingertips and tongues and promises whispered in the dark, striving to prove to each other with our bodies what our souls already knew. With every thrust he filled me further, until there was no room left inside of my heart for anyone but him, and I tangled my hands in his hair and whispered into his ear, *"mine, mine, mine."*

"Yours," he promised.

"Forever?" I demanded.

"For longer," he assured, and with the moments of the day flickering through my mind like photographs, bursts of color amidst so many years of gray, he murmured my name, and together, as husband and wife, we came undone.

Chapter 9

*And all I do is miss you and the way we used to be
All I do is keep the beat, the bad company
And all I do is kiss you, through the bars of a rhyme
Juliet, I'd do the stars with you any time*

*Juliet, when we made love, you used to cry
I said, "I love you like the stars above, I'll love you till I die"
And there's a place for us, you know the movie song
When you gonna realize, it was just that the time was wrong, Juliet?*

-The Killers, 'Romeo and Juliet'

Edward- June 2005

A single, solitary bead of sweat trailed from his forehead to his chin before dropping off to the ground below. She imagined the sun catching it and throwing prisms of color across the sky, the same way his smile was throwing prisms of color across the drab grey of her soul. "Kind of depressing for a summer job, isn't it?" she said.

He was used to this reaction, and it didn't faze him in the slightest. "It's peaceful. You bury the dead next to sprouted seedlings of daffodils or chrysanthemums, or a newly ripe batch of wild blueberries. It's very Zen - the circle of life, all that." He plucked a few of the aforementioned blueberries from the bushes next to him and offered them to her. "Here, try them."

It was out of fear of poison that she had avoided these berries for the past five months, but she was inclined to trust the man with the kind eyes. She tossed them into her mouth without another thought, and the green, ripe essence of pulp and juice and skin made her dizzy. She tasted sun and earth and joy, and as she swallowed, they left the lingering promise of magic on her tongue.

"I told you they were good," he said. He'd been eating wild blueberries in that particular cemetery since he was a child. Morbid, perhaps, but it was his safe place, and it loved him in a way that his parents never had. The trees provided shade, the bushes provided fruit for nourishment, and the small spring trickling on the west end doubled as a swimming pool and the sweetest, most refreshing water he'd ever tasted. That cemetery was his home.

"Oh my God, Jen, I was so fucking hammered last night. I have seriously never been this hung over in my life."

*I scowled as the voice of the young co-ed from the table next to me pulled me out of the peaceful cemetery, thrusting me back into the bustling café. As I re-adjusted to my surroundings, I was suddenly and acutely aware of the clattering of cups against their saucers, the obnoxiously loud giggling and valley-girl gossip of the co-eds to my left, and the exasperating *tap tap tap* from the woman on my right as she drummed her fingers impatiently against her table. I tossed my pen onto my notebook and leaned back in my chair, sighing heavily. *This is why I don't try to write in coffee shops.**

*I'd always preferred the sanctuary of my small home office to the distracting surroundings of any public venue, but for the first time, I had been overwhelmingly distracted by the complete *lack* of noise in the apartment, so I'd headed to my favorite café to try to get some work done. I hadn't realized until Bella left to spend the summer in Ohio just how much comfort I found in the sound of pots and pans clanging against the stove as she made dinner, or the rustling sound the pages of her scripts made as she turned them, murmuring her lines under her breath, or even just in the simple energy of her presence.*

I missed her; oh God, did I miss her. Even three months after our wedding I still hadn't had my fill. But when she came to my office that day with stars in her eyes, I'd told her to go, both because I wanted her to be happy, and because even I couldn't be so selfish as to ask her to stay. I'd wanted to; the words had been on the tip of my tongue, threatening to explode and destroy and expose me for what I really was without her - insubstantial, effete, desolate, a complete non-entity. Instead, I'd taken her in my arms and murmured all the things I was supposed to, and a few weeks later, she was gone.

The knowledge that our separation from each other was only temporary served to keep most of the desolation at bay, but every morning when I woke up and rolled over to find her side of the bed vacant, the emptiness would immediately displace into my gut, where I knew it would linger until I saw her again. Luckily, Random House had finally accepted the last of my rewrites on *All of My Days*, the sequel to *Paper Heart*, so as of eleven o'clock the next morning, I'd be on my way to Ohio, and to Bella.

While I was seriously debating whether or not jail would be worth stabbing the still-squealing college girls next to me with my wooden coffee stirrer, my phone rang. I glanced at the caller ID before flipping it open and holding it up to my ear.

"What's up, Whitlock?"

"How's my favorite cash cow?"

"I'll be even better if you're calling to tell me that the cover ideas for *All of My Days* are ready for my perusal." If I could check that one off before I left, I'd be able to stay with Bella even longer.

"You got it, champ. You up for a drink?"

I glanced at my watch. "Dude, it's eleven-thirty on a Monday morning."

"Okay, so we'll go to an Irish bar," he said matter-of-factly, and I chuckled.

"Did you have one in mind?"

"I'll meet you at McSoreley's in fifteen. Oh, should I invite Elise? We could talk re-writes, mix business with pleasure... kill two birds with one stone."

I hedged for a moment before responding. "Nah. She has an exam tomorrow she has to study for, and besides, I need a break."

"Writer's block?" he asked.

I glanced over at the girls next to me. "You could say that. I'll see you in a few."

I quickly packed up my messenger bag and slung it over my shoulder, depositing my mug into the dish bin and heading out into the sunshine. The pub wasn't far, so I tucked my headphones into my ears, my hands into the pockets of my cargo shorts, and began the short walk up 17th Street to the sounds of Bruce Springsteen's *Thunder Road*. As I rounded the corner, I felt my phone buzz against my palm, alerting me that I had a text message. It was from Elise.

7 pm the Sofitel 2night. Tux is waiting at ur apt. Car will pick u up at 5:30. C u then.

I texted her back a quick 'thank you,' wondering for the umpteenth time what I would do without her. Back in February, I'd done a reading back at Amherst, my alma mater. One of my old poetry

professors, Emily Young, had been in attendance, and we'd spent a good half-hour afterwards catching up. She'd been my mentor in college, and I credited her with my refined talent for prose. I mentioned to her that I'd been searching for an assistant; my schedule was a mess, and with the number of readings, signings and publicity events that Jasper and Random House had been sending me on lately, I needed someone to help me keep track of them all. Bella had offered, but I wanted her to focus on her career - she'd sacrificed enough during the early days of my success, and I wasn't going to let that happen again.

Emily was quick to recommend her best and brightest student, Elise, who had just so happened to mention to her earlier that week that she was struggling to find a part-time job in order to make ends meet. I was hesitant to hire a student - the ones I'd interviewed so far were more sorority than scholarly - but Emily assured me we'd be a great fit for one another, and I trusted her judgment. A few moments later, I found myself face-to-face with a plain, albeit pretty, girl, with sandy-blond hair, blue eyes and a dimple that graced her left cheek when she smiled. She seemed quiet, subdued, but there was an air of authority and confidence about her that I immediately liked. I handed her my business card and asked her to send me her resume; she pocketed my card and pulled a color-coded, cross referenced resume out of her satchel, announcing that she'd be happy to talk more about the job right then, but she only had seventeen-point-five minutes, because she had a previous engagement.

I hired her on the spot.

The three of us were a well-oiled machine; I handled the creative, Jasper handled the business, and Elise kept us focused and made sure we got where we needed to be when we needed to be there. She was my own, personal, walking, talking, calendar-slash-watch, all for the low price of fifteen dollars an hour, paid out of Random House's pocket... and the rest, as they say, was history.

When I arrived at McSoreley's, I scanned the crowd, which was surprisingly large, considering the time of day, and found Jasper standing by the bar. He signaled me over with a wave, and I tugged out my headphones as I crossed the sawdust-covered floor, wrapping them around my iPod and shoving the bundle into my bag. I absolutely loved McSoreley's; the history was rich and prevalent in every part of its design, and it was both alluring and charming in its authenticity. It had opened its doors in 1854, and not much had changed since then, except for the necessary addition of a women's restroom a few decades back. It was home to an original 'Wanted' poster for Abe Lincoln's assassin, Babe Ruth's farewell photo from Yankee Stadium, and a backroom that was legendary for its role in serving ale during Prohibition. Walking into McSoreley's was like walking into a living, breathing piece of history.

"What can I get you, boss?" Jasper asked as I belted-up next to him at the bar... literally. There were no stools; they hadn't been part of the original design.

"Dark," I said. The pub only served two types of beer, McSoreley's Light and McSoreley's Dark. Jasper signaled the bartender and ordered our drinks, fishing a twenty out of his pocket as we waited. I glanced around the general vicinity, looking for his padfolio, but it was nowhere to be found.

"Uh, Jazz, did you bring the cover art ideas?"

Jasper's face blanched. "Shit."

"Are you serious?" I laughed, half amused, half annoyed.

"I was on my way out the door, and Alice asked me to take out the garbage, so I set it down on the table, and I must have just forgotten to pick it up." He shrugged sheepishly.

"You are so fucking whipped." I punched him in the shoulder. "Worst literary agent ever."

"Fuck off, Cullen." He chortled, punching me back. "I gotta listen to the little woman, or my little man doesn't get any love."

I cocked an eyebrow at him, waiting for him to realize what he had just said.

"Shit, I mean, big man! Big man. HUGE man." He emphasized his point by holding his hands three feet apart from each other.

"Sure, sure." I laughed, taking a swig of my beer and leaning over to rest my elbows on the bar. "That's okay, just bring them to the reading tonight; I'll check them out there."

"You got it." Jasper mirrored my stance and turned his head to the side so he was looking at me. "So, are you excited to see Bella?"

"You have no fucking idea." I shook my head, absentmindedly playing with my wedding band. "I want to get everything taken care of before I go so I can spend as much time as possible in Ohio with her. We've been talking about taking a trip up to see Charlie and Sue, too."

"Are you working on something new already?"

I frowned at the abrupt change of subject and glanced over at him. "How did you know?"

He nodded his head towards my messenger bag, still slung over my shoulder, and I noticed my notebook peeking out.

"You never go anywhere without that thing when you're working on something," he said.

"Yeah, I guess. As soon as I finished those rewrites on *All of My Days*, this idea came to me, and it just keeps coming. I don't know if it's any good, but..." I trailed off, shrugging.

"Shut the fuck up." He rolled his eyes. "Everything you touch turns to gold. You're like the King fucking Midas of publishing houses. What's it about?"

"Love, pain, redemption." I took another swallow of my beer. "Finding yourself."

"I mean, what's the plot?" he clarified.

"Loosely?" I asked, and he nodded. "'A young woman loses her husband in a car accident. She travels to his hometown to bury him, she spends the summer there with his family, and meets this guy. They end up falling in love, but halfway through the summer, she learns that he's dying. I'm not sure exactly what's going to happen, but the gist of it is, he dies, but he teaches her that love can conquer even death, and somehow, in that, she finds the strength to go on.'"

Jasper was silent for a moment, contemplating his beer, before shaking his head with a rueful smile. "Do you think you're even *capable* of writing something uplifting?"

"*All of My Days* had a happy ending. Well, sort of." I frowned, scratching my wrist. "They ended up together, anyway."

Jasper choked into his glass, and I stood up to slap him on the back as he sputtered. When he was finally able to speak, he said, "Seriously, Cullen? The two of them died in a plane crash on their way across the ocean to start their new lives together."

I shrugged. "It's poetic. They weren't destined to be together in this life, but they have eternity in the next."

"It's depressing as hell! I mean, it's pure, money-making genius, but it's still depressing."

"It's beautiful," I argued, scowling at him. "To feel the pull of another's soul, to go through that many years as only half of a whole. God, Jazz, can you imagine how painful that would be? I gave them each other, but I couldn't give them everything. It wouldn't have been right."

"I get that every story doesn't have a 'happily ever after,' but still." He chuckled. "You take angst to the extreme, my friend."

I shrugged again and took a swig of my beer, swallowing before I responded. "You know I'm not a 'happily ever after' kinda guy. I like to brood. I've got the whole 'tortured artist' aura thing going on, and it works for me. I like to deal in the kind of shit that real life hands you."

"I didn't realize that real life had been handing you that much shit," he drawled, resting his elbows on the bar again and grinning over at me. "You're married to the love of your life, every publishing house in this city is creaming their pants over you, and God gifted you with a smirk that inspires women everywhere to drop their panties. Must be rough."

"I didn't say my life was rough, asshole." I grinned. "I just said that I like to write about how rough life has the *potential* to be. And by the way, Jazz, are you ever going to drop that Southern drawl? We grew up in Forks, Washington, for fuck's sake."

"What can I say, cowboy?" he asked, exaggerating the drawl for my benefit. "You know how much the ladies love it. Alice, especially; it makes her hotter than two rabbits making babies in a sock, you know what I mean? "

"I actually have no idea what you just said." I laughed, shaking my head. He opened his mouth to clarify, but I cut him off. "Forget it. Really. I don't need to know."

Jasper and I had fallen in love with old John Wayne movies in high school, and he had somehow gotten it in his blonde, white-boy-fro covered head that if he learned how to talk with a Southern accent, he'd have the ladies falling at his feet. He spent over a month watching those movies over, and over, and over, and *over*, until he had the accent down pat, and practically overnight, he went from invisible, chess-loving nerd to the most sought-after 15-year-old boy in our school; just a tip of his imaginary hat and a slow, "Morning, ma'am," would send every teenage girl in the vicinity into an excessive hormone-induced coma. At some point over the years, the accent had stuck. I wasn't even sure that he knew how to speak without it anymore.

"Don't look now, Cullen, but the busty barmaid over there appears to have her eye on you," Jasper whispered conspiratorially, and of course, since he'd told me not to look, that's exactly what I did. There must have been a shift change when I wasn't paying attention, because she looked nothing like the burly man who had served us our beers when we came in. She was absolutely gorgeous, and even if I hadn't been married, she would have been completely out of my league, but Jasper was right, she was definitely checking me out. The moment I made eye contact with her, she sauntered over to us, her shirt clinging for dear life to her voluptuous bosom, and I watched, hypnotized. It was like I was caught in a tractor beam emanating from her chest; I couldn't look away.

I'm a married spud, I'm a married spud, I'm a married spud.

"Can I get you boys anything?" she purred, raking her eyes up and down my body, making me feel violated in the very best of ways.

"Yeah, we'll take two more, Dark," Jasper said from my left.

"Sure thing." She smiled like a snake ready to strike, her eyes never leaving mine. "Coming right up."

When she turned to grab new glasses, Jasper chuckle-snorted, and I kicked him in the leg.

"Not fucking funny," I said through gritted teeth. Thankfully, he remained silent as she poured our drinks. I handed her a ten with my left hand, making sure that my wedding ring was prominently on display, and waved off the change. She smiled again, and slowly slid it into her cleavage. Apparently, she'd missed my subtle hint.

"If there's anything else I can get you - anything at all - you let me know," she said, her words dripping with innuendo, before ducking out from behind the bar to check on the patrons around the room.

Once she was out of earshot, Jasper let out a loud guffaw, and I groaned, unable to keep from watching her shapely ass as she walked away. "You know, Jazz, everyone tells you that the minute you get married, every other woman in the world suddenly finds you attractive. I don't think that's true."

"After seeing that pornographic display, I'd beg to differ." He giggled - *fucking Jasper* - and I threw him my best death glare.

"No, see, I believe that it only affects the kind of women you've always wanted to sleep with. I mean, they wouldn't give you the time of day before, and now they're banging down your door and falling to their knees. At least, that's what it feels like, because you *cannot* touch them. In fact, you can't even *look* at them."

"Just close your eyes." He nodded wisely. "That's your best bet."

"Yeah, except then you're sitting there drinking beer, minding your own business, and all of a sudden, this pair of breasts walks by and smiles at you and you're like, 'That's not fair.'"

"Amen, brother." He agreed, gesturing to an imaginary pair of boobs with his hand. "Where were you four years ago?"

"Exactly." I pounded my fist on the bar top to emphasize my point. "In a perfect world, a miracle would happen, and every other girl would fly away. It would be me and Bella, and nothing else would matter, but it's fine; I mean, I'm happy. It's not a problem, it's just a challenge."

"A challenge," Jasper echoed, chugging the rest of his first beer and starting on the second. "Is everything okay with you and Bella?"

"Of course, man. We're fine. You know how much I love her. I just miss her, I guess. That's all." I tugged at my hair and let out a frustrated sigh. "She's been spending all her time with this guy named Riley, and I want to pummel his fucking face in."

"Did something happen between the two of them?" Jasper frowned.

"No, no, nothing like that. I'm just jealous, I guess. I hate that he gets to be with her, and I don't."

"Yeah, I don't know how you do it. I would hate being away from Alice for that long," he commiserated. The barmaid walked by at that moment and winked at me, sending Jasper into a fresh fit of giggles, and I groaned, running a hand over my face.

"It's bad enough that I get hit on when Bella's not around, but when she is? It just exacerbates the problem! Like all these parties and readings we have to go to where I'm the center of attention, the grand fromage, if you will, and here they come, with their 'Let's get a cup of coffee!' or 'Will you look at my manuscript?' And I'm showing them my left hand, I'm gesticulating with my left hand, and then, *boom*, there's Bella, because *she* knows."

"They always know," Jasper agreed.

"Yes!" I exclaimed, jabbing my pointer finger in his direction. "And then there's that really awkward moment where you try to show that you weren't encouraging it, though, of course, you sorta were. And you don't want to look whipped in front of *that* woman, which is dumb; you shouldn't care what she thinks, since you can't fuck her anyway."

"I'm right there with you, man." Jasper nodded. "Temp-fucking-tation."

I drained the rest of my beer before responding. "Wouldn't it be nice if, right after you got married, every other girl turned into, I dunno, Mister Ed, or something? I mean, I love Bella, and I will always remain faithful to her, but Murphy's Law is a *bitch*."

"That it is, my friend; that it is." Jasper paused, tracing the rim of his glass with his index finger, his head cocked to the side in thought. "We're lucky sons of bitches though, really, to have women as wonderful as my Alice and your Bella to come home to at night. I know many a better man who aren't afforded such a luxury."

"There's no question about that, Jazz. Every morning I wake up, and I look over at Bella, and I wonder what the fuck I did right that I get to spend the rest of my life with her. I was just saying that it's crazy that all these women are coming out of the woodwork all of a sudden, now that I'm married. It's unnerving, that's all."

Truth be told, with Bella gone for the summer, it felt like the entirety of the female race was conspiring against me. It was all a part of being in the public eye and under the microscope of their judgment, or so I'd been told. With women fawning over my work at every turn, and provocation in every direction, the million different negligible, unconscious decisions I made each day had the potential to change my life for the worse. Every time I smiled at a woman at one of my book signings, or held the door for another at a reading, or bought a drink for a colleague of the female persuasion, I worried that its meaning would be misconstrued. The simple fact that I was wearing my wedding ring, and that I missed my wife desperately, wasn't enough; actions always spoke louder than words, and besides, they couldn't see inside my head to know that no matter how many busty barmaids tried to get into my pants, there was, and would always be, only Bella.

"I went through the same thing right after I married Alice." Jasper clapped me on the back. "Don't worry; it'll pass, and soon, you'll just be some old, boring, married schmuck with a Prius and a bald spot." He paused, eyeing the top of my head. "Actually, you'll probably get to skip the bald spot, you sanctimonious bastard."

"Don't hate the player, hate the game." I smirked smugly.

He laughed, balling up his bar napkin and tossing it at my head. I caught it and threw it right back at him; it bounced off his forehead and landed on the bar, and he threw a hard elbow into my side, laughing.

"Alright, fucker, I'm gonna take off, I've got a meeting with another client across town. See you at the reading tonight?"

"Yeah. Am I picking you up?"

"Nah, I'm going to ride over with Alice."

"Fair enough." I nodded. "Don't forget the mockups, okay?"

"Aye-aye, captain." Jasper drained his beer and tossed a mock salute my way. "Later."

"Later."

I contemplated ordering another round for myself, but when I glanced at the barmaid out of the corner of my eye, it looked like she was preparing to move in for the kill, so I sighed resignedly and pulled a couple bucks out of my pocket, tossing them on the bar. I needed to go home and pack, anyway; I wouldn't have any time after the reading, and I knew I wouldn't be able to get my ass up early enough to do it before I left for the airport in the morning.

"Leaving so soon?"

Fuck. I hadn't heard her sneak up behind me. "Yeah, sorry." I smiled at her and adjusted my messenger bag on my shoulder. "I've gotta pack; I'm flying out tomorrow morning to see my wife."

"Long distance, huh? Well if you need someone to keep you company on those long, lonely nights..." she trailed off suggestively, smiling, and offered me a slip of paper with what looked suspiciously like her phone number written on it.

I shook my head, smiling politely. "No thanks. I'm not that kinda guy."

She pursed her lips, appraising me for a moment before crumpling up the piece of paper in her hand and tucking it into her pocket. "Lucky woman."

"No, see, you've got it all wrong." I glanced down at my wedding band and smiled. "I'm the one who's lucky."

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A few hours later, I was packed, freshly-shaven, and dressed in my tux, minus the bowtie. Elise was more skilled at those damn things than I would ever be; I'd make her tie it once I arrived. On my way to the Sofitel, I sipped Laphroaig in the back of the company car and stared out the window at the sunset, deliriously drunk on the knowledge that, in just a few short hours, I'd be reunited with my wife... my Bella.

The reading went off without a hitch; it wasn't until afterwards that the trouble started. I was in the middle of an enchanting conversation surrounding the merits of the public library over the World Wide Web with the elderly Mrs. Bradbury, one of New York's wealthiest widows, when Jasper appeared at my elbow, his face taut with anxiety.

"Excuse me, Mrs. Bradbury, do you mind if I borrow him for a moment?"

"Oh, not at all, dear." She waved her hand dismissively. "I didn't mean to monopolize our guest of honor."

I spared her my most charming smile, bowing slightly. "It was my pleasure, Mrs. Bradbury."

She blushed, smiling girlishly, and I took my leave, following Jasper into the far corner of the room.

"What's wrong?" I asked as soon as we were out of earshot, my nerves on edge. "Is Bella okay?"

Jasper didn't respond; he simply held out his phone, motioning for me to take it. I frowned, my heart pounding as I held it up to my ear.

"Hello?"

"Mr. Cullen! This is Sonny Mehta speaking. I trust your reading went well?"

Sonny Mehta? I mouthed at Jasper, who shrugged helplessly. "Yes, very well, sir, thank you." I paused. "May I ask; to what do I owe the honor of this phone call?"

"Of course, of course." He laughed heartily. "I can imagine that it's strange to be hearing from me at eight o'clock on a Monday evening."

"To be quite frank, Mr. Mehta, it's an honor to be hearing from you at all," I said. "How can I help?"

"Well, my dear boy, it appears that there has been an oversight in terms of your latest manuscript, *All of My Days*. It's an oversight that requires immediate attention, and I wanted to handle the matter personally."

"Manuscript? I thought we'd moved on to the design stages." I frowned at Jasper, who looked pissed. Alice and Elise joined us in the corner, and Elise began whispering furiously back and forth with Jasper; I wanted to listen, but Sonny had started speaking again, so I forced my focus back to the conversation at hand.

"Well, that's just it, I'm afraid. Unfortunately, the rewrites you completed are missing. They were given to an employee who, rest assured, is no longer with the company, and after they were approved and handed off to him for design, they mysteriously... disappeared."

I breathed a sigh of relief. "That's no problem at all. I have a backup copy in my office; I can bring it to you first thing tomorrow morning."

"That's wonderful to hear." He sounded relieved. "Then I'll..."

"Um," Elise cleared her throat, looking panicked. "Actually, Edward, you don't."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Mehta, can you hold for a moment?" I placed my hand over the receiver. "What do you mean, I don't?"

"You erased the rewrites last night, remember? To make room for your new work on the jump drive."

Motherfucker. My stomach plunged into my shoes. She was right. I always, *always* backed up my work, but I'd run out of space on my jump drive late last night - too late to run out to an office supply store - and as a rule, I never saved things directly to my laptop; I'd been hacked one too many times. I'd texted Elise last night and asked her to get a copy of them back from the editor for me this morning. *Fucking shit.*

"Why didn't you tell me you couldn't get the copies?" I snapped at her, and tears sprung to the corners of her eyes. Alice placed a comforting hand on her shoulder and shot me a warning look.

"I called Random House this morning; they never got back to me. I figured I'd follow up tomorrow," she explained, her voice wavering.

"Don't be an asshole, Cullen. It's not her fault," Jasper chastised, and I sighed resignedly.

"Shit. I'm sorry, Elise; don't cry. It's not your fault; it's mine. I'm just a fucking idiot." Thinking about how long it had taken me to complete those re-writes the first time around made me feel like crying, too. I took a deep breath and removed my hand from the receiver.

"Mr. Mehta, it would seem that I, unfortunately, do *not* have copies of the rewrites."

He sighed. "After hearing that Ms. Chalgren had called this morning requesting a copy, I assumed that would be the case. Oh, dear. This puts us in a very unfortunate position."

"Well, I'm flying out to see my wife tomorrow, but I'll be back in a week, and I can have the rewrites re-completed a week after that," I offered.

"I'm afraid that won't work. The manuscript was already green-lighted for the design stages, so we're now on a tight deadline schedule, and I'm going to need those rewrites by the end of next week. I apologize. I will be happy to refund you the cost of your airfare, as well as handle the cost of any re-bookings that you require."

God fucking dammit. I kicked the leg of a nearby chair in frustration, drawing the attention of some of the guests. Elise and Alice were quick to move to distract them, and Jasper grasped me firmly by the elbow, tugging me out of the room.

"Of course, Mr. Mehta. No problem at all," I finally said through clenched teeth.

"I truly am sorry, Edward. Please rest assured that this will never happen again. Now, may I please speak with Jasper?"

I didn't respond; I simply handed the phone to Jasper and slammed both of my palms against the wall before pacing angrily up and down the corridor. Random House fucked up, and yet I was the one being punished; what the fuck kind of sense did that make? I mean, yeah, I should have had copies, but I'd never needed them before; they'd always been a simple precaution. And now, the one fucking time I needed them, I didn't have them. *Fucking Murphy and his fucking law.*

"Yes... uh huh... yes...of course, Mr. Mehta... no problem." Jasper watched me out of the corner as his eye as he finished his conversation. "Yes, we'll be there. Thank you. Goodbye." He hung up and turned to me. "You need to get your shit together, man."

I rounded on him furiously, jabbing a finger into his chest. "Do *you* want to call Bella and tell her, again, that I can't come see her? Do you want to try to explain to her why my career always has to come before her? Because I don't know how to explain it, Jasper. If I had a choice, I'd be on that fucking plane, but I don't know how to explain that to her without sounding like I'm making excuses."

"Hey, don't get pissed at me." He shoved my hand away from his chest and took a step back. "This isn't on my head."

"Yeah, well, it's not on mine either." I pushed the jacket of my tux out of the way and rested my hands on my hips, dropping my head before adding, "Well, at least, not entirely."

"Not to add insult to injury, but Sonny wants us in his office tonight to go over some things before you get started. There's a car picking us up in an hour." Jasper paused for a moment. "I'm sorry, man. I know how much you miss her."

I waved my hand dismissively before squeezing my eyes shut and pinching the bridge of my nose. "I'm the worst fucking husband ever."

"Don't be so hard on yourself. Bella will understand," Jasper pointed out.

"Of course she will." I laughed darkly. "That's what makes it even worse."

Alice poked her head out of the ballroom, her head whipping back and forth between the two of us for a moment before asking, "Is everything okay?"

"Yes," Jasper replied at the same time I said, "No."

"Ookay then." Alice offered me a comforting smile. "Anything I can do?"

"Thanks, darlin', but no. We'll be back in a minute," Jasper told her, and she smiled again ducking back inside.

"I'm going to go call Bella. Can you cover for me for a few?" I asked him.

"Of course." He nodded, and I turned, making my way down the hallway, through the lobby, out the revolving door, and onto the sidewalk. The air was humid – thick and heavy – and it smelled clean, like rain. Like Bella. Taking a deep breath to loosen the ache in my chest, I pulled my cell phone out of the inside pocket of my jacket and leaned against the wall as I dialed her number.

"Hello?"

The sound of her voice caused my throat to constrict with unshed tears. "Hello, love," I managed to say.

"Edward!" she exclaimed happily, and it tore my heart in two.

"I miss you." So many hidden messages and meanings wrapped up in those three little words. I wondered if she could decipher them all.

"I miss you, too. How are you?"

"Fine. Busy." I sighed, debating with myself about just how much I should tell her. God help me, but I didn't want her to know that the reason our separation would be prolonged was partly my fault. I felt like enough of a schmuck as it was. "Mehta's been crawling up my ass over the sequel to Paper Heart. They're demanding a re-write of the last five chapters, and I have to finish it by the end of next week."

"I'm sorry, baby," she murmured.

"So, needless to say, I won't be able to make it this weekend. Again. I feel horrible, Bella. I feel like I'm letting you down."

"Don't," she said. *"Edward, it's your job. It's your career. It's what you love. I understand, and I'm not upset. We still have three weeks left of Fiddler. You can come closing weekend."*

"Now that's where you're mistaken. You're my wife... you're the one I love, and you mean more to me than any stupid book or contract. Just say the word, and I'll tell them all to fuck off and hop on the next plane to Ohio." *Because, Bella, in a perfect world, a miracle would happen, and it'd be me and you, riding it out together, and nothing else would matter.* Unfortunately, the world was far from perfect. I'd learned that the hard way.

"Stop being such a drama queen." She laughed. *"Really, it's okay. I'm not upset. I mean, I miss you, but it's only another two weeks. And what if it were me?"*

"What do you mean?" I frowned.

"What if I was in a show, traveling across the country, and you were waiting for me to come visit, and then the show unexpectedly extended its run? Would you understand?"

"Of course." I would have understood. I would have despised every moment of it, but I would have understood.

"See?"

"That may be so, but it doesn't make it any easier. And if there was any other way -"

"I know," she interrupted. *"Now stop with the self-flagellation, okay?"*

"Okay, okay." I paused, overwhelmed with a mixture of sadness and guilt. "I love you."

"I love you, too."

"I'll be out in a minute!" she called to someone on her end of the line. *"I gotta go,"* she said to me.

"Hot date?" I teased, praying that it wasn't with Riley.

"Very funny. Lauren's going to visit JJ, so Riley and I are gonna grab some takeout and watch a movie."

Fucker. My blood began to boil, but I trusted her implicitly, so I swallowed hard and asked, "Vietnamese?" It was my way of connecting us over the miles; reminding her that I knew what she liked, that I knew who she was. Reminding her of something that we shared.

"Ugh, no. They don't have a Vietnamese restaurant within thirty miles of this godforsaken town. Can you believe it? I'm going through some serious withdrawals."

"Well, when you're back in New York, we can eat all the Vietnamese food that your little heart desires. I just request that we order it for delivery, because once I get you back in our bedroom, Mrs. Cullen, I'm not letting you out for a long, long time," I told her. I meant every word.

"I'm going to hold you to that. Call me later?"

"I have a late meeting, but I'll call you first thing tomorrow, love. I promise."

"Mmkay. Love you."

"Love you more."

I hung up and pocketed my phone, rubbing my face with my hands. *We are going to make it through this, and nothing else will matter,* I told myself. *We'll be fine. We are fine. We're fine.* A moment later, a rumble of thunder sounded ominously, as if some higher power was attempting to discredit my assertion. I turned my face to the sky and scowled. *We're fine,* I insisted stubbornly before pushing through the revolving doors and heading back to the ballroom, ignoring the sense of trepidation that was settling like an elephant on my chest.

I'll be there soon, Bella. I swear I will.

Chapter 10

*It's like forgetting the words to your favorite song.
You can't believe it; you were always singing along.
It was so easy and the words so sweet.
You can't remember; you try to feel the beat.*

*You spend half of your life trying to fall behind.
You're using your headphones to drown out your mind.
It was so easy and the words so sweet.
You can't remember; you try to move your feet.*

-Regina Spektor, 'Eet'

Bella- March 2003

"Number one-twenty-three?"

I stood; my heart began to pound erratically, so I took a deep breath to calm my frazzled nerves.

Stay loose, Bella. Confident. You can do this.

"Follow me." The man in the headset turned and walked briskly through the door to the backstage area, and I hurried to follow. As we wove through props and curtains, I mentally ran through the lyrics to my audition piece and shook out my wrists to dispel the lingering nervous tension. When we reached the wings of stage right, he stopped so abruptly that I almost crashed into him. Raising an eyebrow at me, he gestured towards the spotlight; I smiled, took another deep breath, squared my shoulders, and walked confidently onto the stage.

When I came to a stop in the center, the light was so bright that I couldn't see my audience, so I moved further downstage until the panel that would decide my fate came into view. Four men, perfectly coiffed and dressed in black, sat sipping various concoctions from Starbucks, looking bored out of their minds. I'd never understood why thespians, or any artistic type for that matter, favored black. It was such a bland color; how did that in any way reflect the *joie de vivre* that was art and theater?

"Number one-twenty-three?"

I nodded, tucking my hair behind my ear. "Bella Swan."

"Love the outfit." One of the men winked at me. *Definitely gay.*

"Thank you." I grinned, thankful that I'd had Jess help me pick out an outfit the night before. I usually wore all black to my auditions, but I'd wanted to look especially nice for this one. She'd chosen a short-sleeved, black cashmere sweater, dark, skinny jeans, and a soft, mauve decorative scarf to drape around my neck. She'd also loaned me a pair of adorable black ankle boots, but I'd forgotten to grab them when I left her apartment, so I was stuck with the clunky, outdated Doc Martens that I'd had since high school. I sincerely hoped that the panel of men wouldn't be able to make them out from where they were seated; those shoes were a serious fashion faux pas.

While I stood there trying to hide my feet, the men appraised my 'look,' whispering to each other and jotting notes into their pretensions moleskin journals. I hated this part. I was all for proving by way of song and dance that I had some modicum of talent and could carry a tune, but the fact was that typecasting was prevalent in the theater. I'd never been dismissed from an audition before I could

even open my mouth, but I'd heard plenty of horror stories from people who had, and I wasn't eager to experience that kind of shame.

The bitch of it was that every producer and casting director had a certain look in mind, and you never knew what it would be. Although Sandy from Grease was traditionally petite and blonde, they may have been imagining an urban twist, and were looking to cast some Asian punk rock chick for the part. It was all a huge crapshoot, really. I usually went for presentable, but plain. 'Plain' was moldable. 'Plain' could be whatever they wanted it to be. Then I dazzled them with my vocal chops and astounding comedic timing.

While the men continued to appraise and whisper and jot, I took in the ambiance of the theater. The Gershwin had always been one of my favorites; it may not have been the most decorated, but it had incredible presence. Oklahoma! had just closed last month, and they were casting for a new musical called 'Wicked' that was set to open in October. I'd read the script, and it was phenomenal; I could tell it was going to be the next big thing, and I wanted to be a part of it so badly that the ache bordered on physical. I needed some reason to believe that I wasn't going to be wiping ashtrays at some bar for the rest of my life.

Oh God, please don't leave me wiping ashtrays at that bar for the rest of my life.

"Proceed," the director finally commanded, snapping me out of my musings. Or, at least, I assumed he was the director, because he was wearing a hat, and all directors seem to wear hats. That, and there was an air of self-importance about him. I carefully counted out the tempo of my audition piece for the pianist, but when she started the intro, it was way too slow. I couldn't make her start over without looking like an asshole, so I began to sing, praying that I could pull her up to speed along the way.

"When you come home to me, I'll wear a sweeter smile, and hope that for a while you'll stay...."

I should have told them I was sick last week, they're gonna think this is the way I usually sing. Why is the pianist playing so loud? Should I sing louder? I'll sing louder. Maybe I should stop and start over? I'm gonna stop and start over. Why is the director staring at his crotch?

"...When you come home to me, your hand will touch my face, and banish any trace of grey..."

Why is that man staring at my resume'? Don't stare at my resume'; I made up half of that thing. Look at me. Stop looking at that, and look at me! NO, not at my shoes, don't look at my shoes, I hate these fucking shoes. Why'd I wear these shoes? Why'd I pick this song? Why'd I pick this career?

"...Soon, our love will rise anew, even greater than the joy I felt just missing you..."

Why does this pianist hate me? If I don't get a callback, I can go to Crate and Barrel and buy a couch. Not that I want to spend a day at Crate and Barrel, but Edward needs his space to write, since I'm obviously such a horrible, annoying distraction to him. What's he gonna be like when we have kids?

"... and once again I'll be so proud to call you mine..."

Why am I working so hard? These are the people who cast Linda Blair in a musical. Jesus Christ, I suck.

"...when finally you come home to..."

I trailed off as the director held up a hand. "That will be all, Ms. Swan. Thank you for coming by. We'll be in touch."

I recognized the universal theaterspeak for, 'There's no way in hell you're getting a part in my show,' and my face burned. Regardless, I mustered one last smile.

"Thank you. Thank you so much."

I practically flew off the stage, grabbing my purse and jacket from the storage locker in the hallway, and avoiding eye contact with the rest of the hopefuls in the waiting area as I rushed out onto West 51st street.

When I was finally outside, I leaned back against one of the poles that supported the overhang outside the theater and slid down until my butt hit the ground. Tears pricked the back of my eyes, threatening to overflow and reveal to the world my that my self-assured façade was nothing but a sham, and I pressed the heels of my hands to my eyes in an attempt to keep them at bay. I wanted more than anything to call Edward, but he was in a big meeting with his publisher, and wouldn't be out until later that afternoon, so I just sat there for a few moments, watching the world and my life pass me by. When the tears had finally receded and I was starting to feel like myself again, my phone began to ring; I fished it out of my purse, glancing at the caller ID before flipping it open.

"Impeccable timing, Dad." I half-smiled into the receiver, resting my cheek on my knees.

"Hey, Bells. I take it you just finished your audition? How did it go?"

I chewed on my lip as the tears made a second appearance. He sensed my hesitation.

"Not good, huh?"

"I'm climbing uphill." It was the first thing that came to mind.

"What?"

"I'm climbing uphill." I repeated, sighing.

"Do you need me to call you back?" He sounded confused, which made me laugh.

"No, Dad, I'm being metaphorical. What I'm saying is, I get up before dawn every morning and I stand in line for hours with these women who look and sound just like me. And while I'm standing and waiting, the directors are listening to all of these clones, singing the same song, wearing the same outfit, with the same haircut and the same hopeful smile. By the time I get in there, I'm just another girl. I don't know if I can do this anymore." I paused. "I'm climbing uphill."

"Well, Bells, nothing worth it is ever easy." Charlie's famous words of wisdom.

"I know. But someone, somewhere, has to give me a break. Someone, somewhere has to look at me and think that I'm worth it. They *have* to. Right?"

"Do *you* think you're worth it?"

"Yes. No. Maybe?" I heaved a sigh. "I don't know anymore."

"You know as well as I do that unless you believe in yourself, you can't expect anyone else to believe in you," he reminded me gently.

"It's just hard." I sniffled, feeling utterly and completely sorry for myself. "I hate working at that stupid bar. I don't get any sleep, and it takes away from time that I could be using to prep for auditions."

Pity, party of one...

"I'm not disagreeing with you there, sweetheart, but you've gotta pay the bills."

At that moment, a group of schoolgirls walked by, ensconced in gossip and sucking on Blow Pops. I could smell the sickly sweet scent of sour apple and bubble gum as they passed, and I felt a stab of nostalgia for the carefree days of my childhood.

"You light up when you're onstage, Bells. You love what you do, and you're good at it. And I'm not just saying that because I'm your dad. Don't give up yet."

"It's just... Edward has been so successful with his book, while I've gotten nowhere since college, and every audition I come out of without a job makes me feel more and more like a failure." I groaned.

"You can't compare yourself to Edward. Begrudging him of his success will drive a wedge between the two of you. Trust me, Bells, you don't want that." When I didn't respond, Charlie continued.

"You're your own person, on your own path, and you're right where you're supposed to be at this moment. Life is hard, but there's no doubt in my mind that you'll make it, that things will get better. You just have to keep at it. Besides, you've always been too hard on yourself. Maybe the audition went better than you think it did."

"Maybe." There was no point in arguing; he was right. I was too hard on myself, but I still knew that I wouldn't be getting a callback for this particular audition.

"Listen, I've got to get back to work. Keep your chin up. Everything will turn out alright in the end. If..."

"If it's not alright, then it's not the end," I intoned. "I know, dad."

"Love you, Bells."

"Love you too."

I pocketed my phone and sighed again, banging my head backwards on the pole a couple of times. I had another audition later that afternoon; I couldn't afford to fall apart now.

"Come on, Bella, get it together. You're a good person. You're an attractive person. You're a talented person."

Dear God, grant me grace...

A shadow fell across my face, and when I looked up, Edward was standing there, seemingly the answer to my prayer. He was the epitome of beauty personified, with his white t-shirt under a black sport coat and dark jeans, his messy, copper-colored hair falling in his eyes just so.

"What are you doing here?" I didn't really care what the answer was. He was here, and he believed in me, and he was mine, and everything that was so wrong a moment ago was rendered inconsequential as I was reminded of just how much I had to be thankful for. I launched myself up and into his arms and he laughed, placing a kiss on the top of my head.

"I thought you had a meeting," I mumbled into his chest.

"I did. Well, I do. But the meeting can't start without me, and I wanted to wish you luck before your audition."

"No, no, you never say good luck!" I half laughed, half groaned, tears and self-pity forgotten. "It's bad luck to say 'good luck.' You're supposed to say 'break a leg'."

"Sorry, sorry." He tightened his arms around my waist. "Although, to my credit, that makes absolutely no sense."

"Nothing about the theater makes sense," I said dryly. "I just finished with the audition, actually, but I'm still glad you're here."

He frowned slightly for a moment, his forehead creasing, before breaking into a wide, easy smile. "Then I can wish you luck before your *next* audition."

"Thanks. I think I'm going to need it."

"That good, huh?" He peered down at me questioningly, and I shrugged in response.

"How'd you get here? Did you walk?" I asked him.

"Company car." He gestured to a black town car parked at the curb. "You have lunch with the girls between auditions, right?"

I nodded, glancing at my watch. "Yeah, I'm supposed to meet them at Hurley's in twenty minutes."

He bowed facetiously, offering me his hand. "Would you care for a lift, mademoiselle?"

I placed my hand in his, and batted my eyelashes in my best Southern Belle impression. "Why; yes, sir, I do believe I would."

We settled side by side on the rather large backseat, and after instructing the driver where to go, Edward turned to me.

"So why don't you think your audition went well?"

I hedged, toying with the strap of my purse. "The pianist was horrible, but other than that, it was okay, I guess."

"Bella, you're much more talented than 'okay.'" He frowned, kissing the palm of my hand.

"I know that. It would just be nice if some of these casting directors would realize it, too." I shrugged self-consciously. He slid his arm around me, and I snuggled gratefully into his side.

"You're just going through a slump, love. Trust me, I've been there. But you're beautiful, and you're talented, and you're determined. You'll get your chance."

"You're biased," I scoffed.

"This is true," he mused, scratching his chin thoughtfully.

"Hey!" I protested, elbowing him in the ribs. He winced, laughing.

"Bella, I'm a man of honor. I speak the truth, or I do not speak at all. You, my darling, are the next Sutton Foster, only hotter; much, much hotter." He leaned over to whisper in my ear, "And if we didn't have an audience, I'd prove it to you."

He grinned and inclined his head towards the front of the car. I looked up, giggling when I caught the driver's gaze in the rearview mirror for a moment before he hastily averted his eyes. When I turned back to Edward, he was holding a rectangular black velvet box.

"For you," he said, handing the box to me with a smile.

"Edward..." I protested.

"I know, I know, but I had to get this for you. You'll see why." His eyes were lit up with excitement, and I just couldn't deny him. I sat up and slowly opened the box, tucking back a layer of cotton to find a pendant, some sort of Celtic design, hanging from a delicate silver chain. I pulled it out and held it up, and it shined in the sunlight filtering through the windows.

"It's beautiful, Edward. What does it mean?"

"It's a Celtic maze. It symbolizes one's journey through life - finding your way, if you will." He shrugged, suddenly shy. "It made me think of you."

"I love it. Will you help me put it on?"

He nodded, so I turned and swept my hair off the back of my neck, fingering the pendant lightly as Edward fastened the clasp.

"Maybe it will bring me luck," I murmured, glancing at my reflection in the window before turning back to smile at him. "Thank you."

"You don't need luck, Bella. Everything you need to find your way is already inside of you, here." He tapped a finger on my chest, just above my heart. "I believe in you," he whispered, kissing me so tenderly, so lovingly, that Romeo and Juliet wept in their graves. As I lost myself in his lips, I just barely registered the fact that the car was slowing to a stop, and without warning, the door that I'd been leaning against opened, sending me flying backwards. I was *this close* to tumbling ass over heels out onto the pavement, but Edward grabbed me just in time.

"Well look at you, Mister Company Car. Can you give me a ride to the meeting?" Jasper leaned against the open door, squinting into the sun with one hand shading his eyes.

"Jesus Christ, Jasper! Are you trying to kill me?" I yelled indignantly, clutching a hand to my chest to calm my racing heart. I was still a little shaky from my near-death experience, but I managed enough strength to turn around and punch him in the arm.

"Ouch, dammit!" Jasper winced, rubbing his arm. "Your girl packs a mean punch," he told Edward.

"Tell me about it." Edward chuckled, so I turned and punched him in the arm too before extracting myself from the car.

"Dammit, Bella," he swore, but he was laughing.

"You scared the shit out of me. What are you doing here?" I asked Jasper.

"Afternoon delight, my lady." He wiggled his eyebrows suggestively.

Edward, who had shifted so he was sitting on the edge of the seat with his feet on the pavement, groaned and rubbed a hand across his face. "There are just some things that I don't need to know."

I looked back and forth between the two of them for a moment before it finally hit me.

"Oh. OH." I blushed, scowling at them as they both laughed at my innocence.

"This from the woman who uses 'that's what she said' at every possible opportunity," Edward shook his head morosely. I gave him my best bitch brow in response.

Jasper slid his thumbs into his belt loops, rocked back on his heels and shook his head slowly. "That little pixie is all hellfire and brimstone in the *very* best of ways."

"In the *restaurant*?" I hissed, my eyes widening in disbelief. I knew Alice could be freaky, but that was a little much, even for her.

"Well, I'm all for exhibitionism little darlin', but no. And it was the least I could do to escort my beautiful fiancée over here from our apartment to meet you ladies for lunch."

"You were supposed to be at our meeting 30 minutes ago, Whitlock." Edward raised an amused eyebrow.

"So were you, my friend." Jasper grinned back, and they had some kind of macho, manly stare-down for a moment.

"Touché," Edward conceded, nodding once. "Get in."

"Bella." Jasper tipped an imaginary hat in my direction before folding his lanky figure into the backseat.

"Break a leg this afternoon, love. I'll see you when you get home." Edward smiled that crooked smile that I loved so much, and it was all I could do to keep myself from crawling back into the car and into his arms. Or pants. Whichever came first... pun fully intended.

"Knock 'em dead, little lady." Jasper winked before pulling the door shut. I waved half-heartedly, watching as the car pulled away from the curb, and disappeared in the city traffic.

"Geez, lovesick much?" snarked a voice from behind me. I didn't even have to turn around to know who it was.

"Good to see you too, bitch." I turned to smile at Jessica, linking my arm through hers. "Come on, let's go find Alice."

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Two hours later, we were thoroughly stuffed with both food and gossip, and I was leaned back in my chair, lazily sipping my martini and reveling in how gratifying it felt to be reunited with my two best friends. With Alice in med school *and* planning a wedding, Jess recently married, and my crazy audition schedule plus my part-time job at the bar, the three of us didn't get much girl time anymore.

"Now don't forget, you both have fittings tomorrow for your bridesmaid's dresses. Two-thirty at Kleinfeld. I'll meet you guys there after my rotation." Alice clapped excitedly. "I can't wait! My wedding is going to be so much fun!"

"If you consider wearing taffeta and tripping over your heels while walking down the aisle in front of hundreds of people 'fun', then yes, it will be," I grumbled good naturedly as I bit one of the blue cheese-stuffed olives off of the sword-shaped toothpick in my drink.

"How dare you!" Alice smacked me on the arm. "I would *never* make you wear taffeta."

"Alright, Bella. The jig is up," Jessica said out of nowhere, pulling my martini out of my hand.

"Hey! Give me my drink back!" I protested.

"No. Not until you tell us what's going on. You've been way too quiet all afternoon. What are you hiding?"

"You do have a point," Alice agreed. "What aren't you telling us, Bella?"

Damn them for being so observant.

I grabbed my martini back from Jessica while furiously debating whether or not it was a good idea to bring this up. Then again, they were my best friends. If I couldn't tell them, then who *could* I tell?

"I'm swearing you guys to secrecy on this," I warned.

"Nothing goes outside the circle." Alice nodded somberly.

"Scout's honor," Jessica added, holding up a two-finger salute.

"Okay. Here goes. I'm... well, I'm really having a hard time with...I'm just..." I floundered.

"Spit it out, woman!" Alice rolled her eyes.

"Never. Classy girls don't spit." I grinned wickedly.

Jessica made a face. "Oh my God, Bella. Gross. What are we, fifteen? And quit stalling!"

"Okay, okay." I took a deep breath, exhaling slowly. "I'm... jealous of Edward's success."

The words tumbled like weights from my lips in rapid succession. This knowledge had been swirling around inside of me for days like poison, threatening to purge itself at the most inopportune moments like some sort of twisted, self-destructive prophecy; it was such a relief to finally share its burden.

"Actually," I continued, "it's not that I'm *jealous* of him, per se. I love him, and he's worked hard and he deserves all of this success. I'm happy for him. Really, I am. I just feel so... insignificant, I guess, in light of everything. I mean, look at what he's amounted to, and look at me. I haven't gotten a decent gig since graduation."

"That's just insecurity talking, Bella," Alice was quick to reassure. "And you have no reason to feel insecure! Sure, you've hit a bit of a rough spot, but this too shall pass. Besides, you're not insignificant - not to us, and certainly not to Edward. Have you seen the way that man looks at you? It's like you're his own, personal sun."

"Have you talked to him about it?" Jessica asked.

"No," I scoffed. "Are you kidding? I can't tell him. What kind of girlfriend envies her boyfriend's success?"

We fell silent for a moment as the server dropped the check off at our table, and I twisted the edges of the napkin in my lap anxiously.

"You guys remember what happened to Angela," I reminded them.

Alice gasped. "Bella, are you pregnant?"

"No, no." I laughed, despite the fact that my stomach was in knots. "I'm not pregnant, Alice. But I do believe you just called me fat."

Alice rolled her eyes again and waved a hand at me impatiently, gesturing for me to continue.

"Angela had big dreams too, right? But then she got pregnant, ended up marrying Ben, and now she's stuck playing housewife while Ben's band gets more successful every day."

Jessica frowned, looking perplexed. "What does that have to do with you?"

"I don't want to be *that girl*! I want to *make* something of myself, not spend my life trotting along at the genius's heels, wearing an apron and serving drinks and growing an herb garden. I don't want to be the girl who requires a man to get by."

"No one said you have to be," Jessica pointed out as she drained the last of her Cosmopolitan. "And if Edward told you he wants you to be his little housewife, I'll kick his ass myself."

"Of course he didn't. And that's not the point." I blew out a frustrated sigh. "It's just - the more successful that Edward becomes, the more insignificant I feel. What if I never get my big break? I'll just be 'that girl married to the fabulously talented Edward Cullen'."

"You're engaged?" Alice gasped again.

"Well, no." I cursed the telltale blush that was creeping its way up my neck.

"Ah, the good old Freudian slip." Jessica grinned, elbowing me conspiratorially.

"Yeah, yeah." It was my turn to roll my eyes. "What I mean is, I'll be defined by him and his success instead of my own. I don't want to be that girl. I don't want to be Angela."

The server returned to pick up the check, and Jessica slid her credit card into the holder and handed it to her. Alice and I began to protest, but she held up a hand.

"You can get it next time, ladies. This one's on me."

"Thanks, Jess." Alice smiled gratefully at her, and then turned back to me. "You really need to talk to Edward about this though. You don't want this to end up coming between the two of you."

"I can't, Al. Don't you see? He's worked so hard for this. I know Edward; if I tell him how I feel, he'll feel some misplaced sense of guilt that will diminish his pride over all that he has accomplished. I can't do that to him; I'm not that selfish."

"Bella..." Jessica began, but I cut her off.

"No, Jess, Al. You promised that this would stay between us. I can't do that to him. I *won't* do that to him."

They exchanged a worried glance, which I pointedly ignored.

"Besides, this will pass. I'll get a gig within the next few months, be able to quit the bar, things will go back to normal, and we'll live happily ever after. And if they don't... I'll talk to him about it then. I promise."

"Hey, it's your relationship, Bella. We're here to support you no matter what, but at the end of the day, you have to decide what's right for you," Jessica affirmed, and Alice nodded her agreement.

"I know, and I appreciate that more than you know." I smiled gratefully at both of them. "And you're right, communication is important in relationships... but it's just as important to know what needs to be brought up, and when."

"She does have a point," Alice mused. "Like how I didn't tell Jasper that I bought those new Prada shoes until it was past the date that they could be returned."

"Or how I waited until our honeymoon to tell Mike that I'm the one who put the scratch on his BMW." Jessica giggled, and just like that, things were back to normal. I drained the rest of my martini and glanced at my watch.

"Shit! I gotta go, or I'm gonna be late for my next audition."

We said our goodbyes, and promised that we'd do lunch again soon. They wished me luck, and Jess and I promised Alice numerous times that we wouldn't be late for the fitting tomorrow. Stepping out onto the sidewalk, I hailed a cab to take me back to the theater district, and as the city rushed by my window, I reflected on my conversation with Jessica and Alice. *Maybe they're right. Maybe I should talk to Edward about how I'm feeling.* My phone beeped from my purse and I pulled it out, flipping it open to read the incoming text message.

I love you, and I believe in you. Break a leg. -E

And as quickly as the thought had crossed my mind, I rebuked it. I couldn't tell him; it would be selfish. This was something that I had to work through on my own.

Less than ten minutes later, the cab slowed to a stop in front of the theater, and I thanked and paid the driver before hopping out and following the sidewalk around to the stage door entrance.

"Are you here for the audition?" This time, the person holding the clipboard and wearing a headset was a woman.

"Yes." I smiled, digging my resume, headshot and sheet music out of my bag, and handed them to her. "Bella Swan."

"Bella... Swan..." she noted on her clipboard, then handed me a number - forty-two - before opening the door, and ushering me inside. "You can wait in here."

I smiled and thanked her, settling myself into one of the chairs before pulling out my phone and typing a reply to Edward.

'How silver-sweet sound lovers' tongues by night, like softest music to attending ears.' I love you more. -B

Chapter 11

Here we stand, somewhere in between this moment and the end

Will we bend, or will we open up and take this whole thing in?

Everybody else is smiling and their smiles don't fade

And you don't even wonder why, you just don't think that way

Maybe you and me got lost somewhere

We can't move on, we can't stay here

Well maybe we've just had enough

Well maybe we 'aint meant for this love

You and me tried everything

But still that mockingbird won't sing

Oh man, this life seems hard enough

Well maybe we aint meant for this love...

-Rob Thomas, 'Mockingbird'

Edward – May 2006

"Cocktail hour starts at six, but as the guest of honor, you don't really have to be there until seven, so the car is picking me up at six-fifteen, and we'll be by to get you and Bella at six-thirty. Your tux is hanging in your closet, your shoes are in a box on the floor underneath it, and there's a copy of your speech on your desk, so make sure you go over it sometime today."

"Elise, have I told you yet that you're a godsend?" I smiled into the receiver as I pulled open the door to my closet to find my tuxedo and shoes, just as she'd described.

"Only every day, Edward. Now remember, there'll be a red carpet, so you're going to have to stop to answer some questions. There are some note cards with sample responses next to your speech for you to peruse, based on questions you've been asked before and the type of media coverage you've been receiving recently. "

I groaned. "A red carpet for a book premiere?"

"You should be used to this by now. Besides, it's your own fault. If you weren't so damn attractive, the media wouldn't be having such a field day with you."

"Oh, so I'm attractive, am I?" I teased, and I could practically hear her rolling her eyes through the phone.

"Feeding your ego is not part of my job description, Cullen." That was one of the things I respected most about her. With most of the media and my fans falling at my feet, it was refreshing to have someone by my side to help me 'keep it real,' as it were. Elise had never been afraid to call me on my bullshit.

She pressed on. "The media feeds off of the people, and they need pictures of you to appease the women across the globe who're building internet-based shrines to you and your – what is it they're calling it? Oh, right, 'sex hair.'"

"I've been working my entire life in the hopes of establishing myself as a successful author, and instead, I'm known for my 'sex hair.' I don't know whether to be flattered or offended," I mused as I sat down on my bed, cradling the phone between my shoulder and my cheek so I could pull on my running shoes.

"Didn't your mother ever teach you not to look a gift horse in the mouth?"

"I'm Jewish, Elise. The only thing my mother ever taught me was that I was the most talented, most handsome man on the face of this planet, and that if I wanted to walk on water, I probably could," I joked. "Oh, and that if I don't call home at least once a day to let her know I'm alive, I will be single-handedly forcing her to an early deathbed."

Elise giggled. "Come on, I've met Esme, remember? She doesn't seem like the typical Jewish mother."

"That's because you're not her son."

"Fair enough," she conceded. "All right, now that you're taken care of, I need to go find something for myself to wear tonight. If you need anything else, let me know."

"You're the best."

"I know. See you later."

I pressed the 'end call' button on the phone and stood up, tossing it onto the dresser and retrieving my iPod and headphones from the top drawer. After clipping my iPod to my shorts, I tucked the ear buds into my ears, pulled on my old Amherst sweatshirt, and headed outside, starting off at a brisk jog west down 73rd to the sounds of 'Wanted' by Bon Jovi. The air was still slightly chilly for May, but that was New York, and after just a few blocks, I was grateful for the breeze. Bon Jovi morphed into Bruce Springsteen and then into Tom Petty, and I began to pick up the pace. Running had always been a borderline religious experience for me. Everything about it was a struggle —feet slapping against the unforgiving pavement, lungs fighting for air, quads and hamstrings screaming for mercy — and overcoming all of that, pushing past the wall of pain in your mind to experience the euphoria of truly being one with your body, was my own, personal form of communion.

As I made my way through Central Park with the legions of other New Yorkers out for their morning run, I glanced over at the very spot where I had proposed to Bella just a few short years ago, and my mind began to wander. Things had been less than ideal between us lately, but I still loved her to the point of obsession, and the ever-growing distance between us had been tearing me apart. When Bella had gotten the ensemble part in Tarzan last fall, I'd thought that our troubles were over. Securing a role on Broadway had given her a sense of worth and self-confidence that I hadn't seen her exude since the early days of our relationship. Unfortunately, it hadn't lasted long; Tarzan had opened to incredibly poor reviews in January, and Bella had sunk back into her cycle of self-loathing once again.

In April, the Porterhouse had asked her to return for a second season, offering her the lead, and since Tarzan appeared to be a sinking ship, she had accepted. She was looking at it as a means to an end –

a way to perk up her resume so she could return to New York in the fall and get another Broadway gig – but I knew that she was dreading the prospect of yet another summer doing stock theater in Ohio.

Where Bella's career had floundered, mine had flourished, which served as yet another cause of tension between us. My new book, *Summer Savior*, had hit the fast track and was being published less than a year after the release of my last; it was my third work to be published in as many years. I had become the golden goose of Random House, and they were throwing me a party that evening to both celebrate the success that I had brought them and boost the publicity for the upcoming release. Bella hated these things — the schmoozing, the pretentious men, and the way that women threw themselves at me right in front of her—but I would be lying if I said I didn't enjoy being the center of attention. And damn it, why shouldn't I? I'd worked hard to get to where I was. I wanted so desperately for Bella to share in my happiness, but I could always tell by the look on her face and the barely concealed shame in her eyes that my success only exasperated her own sense of failure. I'd spent most of my time with her lately vacillating between feeling like a complete asshole and being angry at her for making me feel that way, neither of which was any help to our suddenly strained relationship.

To add insult to injury, when Bella *did* join me at my publicity events and readings, she would refuse to leave my side. She'd never outright accused me of cheating, but the suspicion was there, in the slight narrowing of her eyes when I laughed at another woman's joke and the possessive feel of her hand on my arm whenever another woman so much as glanced at me. I understood that it was her insecurity in herself that made her act that way, but her lack of trust irked me beyond belief. Those women were all nameless faces with plastic, too-perfect bodies; there was nothing real about them. *Bella* was real— the tiny mole on her left shoulder, fingernails ravaged from her nervous habit of chewing on them, and the way that her left foot was slightly larger than the right. It wasn't until those cookie-cutter women had started throwing themselves at me that I realized how much joy there was to be found in her imperfections. Bella was worried that I would cheat on her, when in fact, this parade of scantily clad women with their nipped and tucked flesh only made me love her more.

We'll be fine, I told myself. At the end of the day, we had love on our side. Things might have been a bit bumpy, but I would rather have fought with her than made love with anyone else. *Great, now I'm quoting shitty romantic comedies.*

As I rounded 72nd and began to make my way out of the park, I shook my head to clear it and focused back on my run. The rest of the world disappeared as I transitioned into a sprint, weaving in and out of the crowd at what felt like lightning speed. Faster and faster I ran, with my legs threatening collapse and my lungs begging for air, past trees and fire hydrants and children playing hopscotch on the sidewalk, past the 'what-ifs' and the 'whys' and the 'hows' of my marriage until there was nothing but those three words echoing through my head every time one of my feet met the sidewalk.

We'll be fine.

I slowed back to an easy jog a few blocks from home, stopping outside our building to stretch a bit and catch my breath before making my way up the stairs and back into our apartment. Tossing my keys on the dresser, I checked my cell phone to find a voicemail from Bella, and I put it on speaker so I could listen to it as I started the shower.

"Hey, Edward, it's me. Just wanted to let you know that Alice, Jess and I are going dress shopping so I can find something to wear tonight. I'll be home around six or so. If you could make dinner so I could have something to eat before we leave, I'd really appreciate it. There's some pasta sauce in the fridge, just throw some noodles in, and we can have that; nothing too fancy. Thanks. I'll see you tonight."

There was a pause and then a soft, "I love you."

I smiled. *I told you we were going to be fine.* Stripping off my sweaty clothes, I tossed them into the hamper and jumped into the shower, groaning appreciatively as the hot water and steam began to soothe my tense, aching muscles. I stood under the spray until it began to run cold before I shut it off and stepped out, grabbing my towel from the rack. As I began to dry my hair, a necklace that Bella had left on the counter the night before caught my eye. The steam from the shower was swirling in the air around it just so, the beads of condensation lending an otherworldly glow to the grayish-white pearls, and just like that, I was swept away by a wave of inspiration.

Day quickly gave way to night, and an otherworldly mist floated above the grass, hiding her footsteps as she slipped through the shadows. She crept slowly, slowly, clutching the pearls in her grasp, the strands spilling out of the top of her fist like a geyser. The night enveloped her, and she lost herself willingly under its silky cloak. It wasn't until she arrived at his doorstep that she realized where the stars had led her; to repentance, and reconciliation, and remembrance. And as the owl announced his presence in the old oak tree, she dropped to her knees, the pearls falling into the dewy grass, and wept for a beginning that could never be.

I didn't even remember getting dressed. All I could see was the necklace on the counter, and I knew its image would haunt me until I was able to purge it onto paper. The banging of pots and pans finally snapped me out of my stupor, and after the moment it took to get my bearings, I realized that Bella must have come home. When I glanced at the clock on my laptop, I wasn't surprised to see that almost three hours had gone by. I did my best work when I was lost inside of an image, and a quick glance over what I had written confirmed the fact that I had the beginnings of another publishable novel on my hands. *Thank you, Bella, for leaving that necklace on the counter.* I grinned in satisfaction and hit 'save' one last time, pushing my chair back and stretching a bit before heading into the kitchen. Bella's back was to me, and she was slamming cupboard doors in what seemed like more of an effort to make as much noise as possible than to actually accomplish anything.

"Bella, love, what are you doing?" I chuckled, coming up behind her to wrap my arms around her waist. She stiffened immediately and slid out of my embrace.

"Making dinner," she said coldly.

Shit.

"Dinner. Right. I'm so sorry. I got caught up writing, and I just..."

"I know, Edward," she cut me off.

I sighed and ran a hand through my hair, knowing damn well from the tone of her voice that it wasn't fine. "Look, I said I was sorry. I mean, is it really that big of a deal? We can just grab some takeout on the way to the party."

"No, it's really not that big of a deal. I'm just tired of it, you know? Your writing always comes first. It's your career, I get it, I do, but I asked you to do one thing - *one thing* - for me, and you're not even capable of that. It's not just dinner, Edward. It's the fact that I feel like I can't count on you. "

Her words were as sharp and stinging as a slap to the face, and they sent me reeling.

"You get lost when you write," she continued, "and every time I ask you for something - to come to a show, to pick up something from the store - it's a fifty-fifty chance that you'll actually remember. I'm tired of it. I'm tired of trying to guess when you'll actually come through."

"Come on, love, don't do this. It's my job. I have deadlines to meet. We have bills to pay," I tried to reason with her, though I knew it was useless.

"Don't even make this about money." She whirled around to face me, her eyes flashing. "I know that you have to work. That's not the point. And besides, you love what you do, so stop acting like such a martyr."

I took a deep breath to keep myself calm. "I may enjoy what I do for a living, but that's no reason to crucify me for it. And I don't just do it for me, Bella. I do it because I want to take care of you. I want to provide for you. I don't care if you're working or not. I want you to do what makes you happy, but you have to understand that I have to write, to sell my manuscripts, to keep a roof over our heads and food on the table."

"Because I'm not capable of doing any of those things." Sarcasm. Her tone was acidic, her hand was on her hip, and I knew we were venturing into waters deeper than either of us would be able to swim in.

"I didn't say that you weren't, but I'm sorry, the bottom line is, you don't." The look on her face was one of sheer outrage, but I held up my hands supplicatingly and pushed on. "Let me be clear. I don't *care* that you don't. I know you're struggling with your career, and I want you to focus on making yourself happy. I'm not accusing; I'm just stating a fact. I'm the breadwinner, and I'm happy to assume that role. Why won't you just let me take care of you? Why does it always have to become a fight?"

"I don't need to be taken care of. What I need is to be treated like an equal in this relationship, not some damsel in distress. What I need is for you to be here, and not just physically. I need you to be here emotionally, too. I need to matter to you. You're throwing money in my face, and I don't want the money! I want you."

"Well, someone has to pay the bills, love." Jesus Christ, I sounded like Jane. Her words from so many years ago echoed in my head, and I marveled at how quickly things had come full circle.

"I know that, Edward, I'm not a child, but we have more than enough to hold us for at least a few years. I'm just saying that your writing consumes you. I feel like we barely spend any time together anymore, and when we do, it's at one of those god-awful publicity events for your next book, and your next, and your next. When are things going to slow down? When will we get to be us again?"

"I thought you understood my line of work by now, Bella," I shrugged. "I can't just turn it on and off when I want to. Who knows how long the inspiration will be there, or how long the success will last? It could be over tomorrow, for all I know, and I don't want to miss a second of it. I've worked too damn hard for this."

"So I'm just supposed to wait in the wings until then?"

I'd reached my boiling point. "Who's waiting in the wings? You're the one running off to Ohio every summer. "

Apparently, so had she. "Well, maybe if you believed in me, maybe if you gave me the fucking time of day, I wouldn't feel so worthless all the time, and I wouldn't have to."

Her words caused my anger to dissipate as quickly as it had flared. *Oh, Bella*, I thought sadly as she turned back to the stove, angrily cracking noodles in half and dropping them into the pot of water. *I do believe in you. I always have. You've just never believed in yourself.* And that was something that, despite the numerous ways I had tried, I simply could not change.

"I'm sorry," she said quietly, bracing her hands against the edge of the counter. I noticed the tension in her back, the defeated slump of her shoulders, and it cut me to my core. "Look, let's just skip the

party, stay home, and spend some time together, okay? We'll rent a movie, get some takeout. It'll be way better than stuffy company and cold canapés."

"As wonderful as that sounds, love, you know I can't. I have to go."

She turned around to face me. I watched the tempest of her anger stir once again behind her alluring brown eyes, and my very bones began to ache with weariness.

"You don't *have* to go."

If only it were that simple.

"Bella, be reasonable. I'm the guest of honor, and it's being thrown by my employers. I have no choice."

The winds of the tempest began to howl, and I was immediately lost in its merciless rage. "There's always a choice, Edward. I guess that, just this once, I was hoping you would choose me. Have fun at your party."

Shoving past me, she stormed down the hallway, into our bedroom, and slammed the door behind her. I knew that pushing the argument any further was futile; Bella and I had been approaching this dead end for weeks, from all angles, and neither one of us had yet been able to find a way out as of yet. After a few moments, I calmly walked down the hallway and tried the doorknob. Locked, as I knew it would be.

Leaning my forehead against the door, I closed my eyes and said softly, "Look, they're throwing me a party because they're publishing my book, and while you've made it very clear that you're not going, I *will* be going, and that's done."

Behind my eyelids, I pictured her on our wedding day, the very moment before she said 'I Do.' Her lower lip had trembled, only slightly, her eyes shining bright with unshed tears, and I'd taken her hand in mine, using skin on skin to promise that I would always be there, that I would always protect her. I'd never taken into consideration that the person she would need protection from was me.

"But what's this *really* about, Bella? Can we please, for one minute, stop blaming and say what we feel? Is it just that you're disappointed to be touring again for the summer? Did you think this would all be much easier than it's turned out to be?"

Nothing.

"Please just talk to me."

Still nothing.

"Bella, if I didn't believe in you, we'd never have gotten this far. If I didn't think you could do anything you ever wanted to, and if I wasn't certain that you'd come through somehow, I wouldn't still be standing here. Fuck, we wouldn't even be *having* this fight. I would have just thrown up my hands and walked out the door. But I didn't, and I won't. I can't. I love you, I made a promise to you, and I refuse to break that promise."

I pressed both palms against the door, as if pleading for it to give in; as if it had the power to show me the right way to reach her.

"Don't we get to be happy? We've been going in circles for so long now. At some point down the line, don't we get to relax, without some new tsuris to push me further away from you? I'm cheering on your side, so why can't you support mine? Why do I have to feel like I've committed some felony doing what I always swore I would do?"

"Just go." Her voice cracked, and my anger surged. I was tired of feeling like the bad guy.

"Look, Bella. You're strong, and you're talented, and you're beautiful, and some day, someday soon, one of those bastard casting directors will recognize that. But don't make me wait until they do to be happy with you."

"I'm sorry I make you so miserable!" she yelled from the other side of the door.

I slammed my fist against the wall in frustration. "God damn it, Bella, will you listen to me? You're not hearing what I'm saying!"

"Fine, Edward, I'm listening." Her voice was clearer, and I could see the shadow of her feet underneath the door. I knew I had to choose my next words carefully. I wanted to tell her that I loved her, and that I was sorry, and that it would be okay, but I'd promised never to lie to her.

"I want to give you the world, but you have to have the courage to take it. No one can give you that courage, Bella. I will love you, whether you find that courage or not. But I will not fail so you can be comfortable. I will not lose because you can't win."

I watched her shadow under the door for movement, but there was none, so I continued.

"If I didn't believe in you, I wouldn't have stood before all of our friends and said, 'This is the life I choose; this is the thing I can't bear to lose.' That's what I thought we agreed on, Bella." My hand found the doorknob, but it was still locked. "Come on, love. Why won't you put your dress on, and we'll go? Can you just do that? Please?" I tried the knob again, to no avail.

"Please?" I pleaded softly. After a moment, the knob began to turn, and I breathed an audible sigh of relief, hope running wild through my veins. I was about to take her in my arms when she shoved something towards me, almost knocking me backwards. I grabbed it reflexively and looked down: my tux, my shoes, and my phone.

"Goodnight," she said, shutting the door in my face. I heard the lock click into place once again, and the world fell down around me.

"Edward."

I turned slowly to find Elise standing in my kitchen, dangling the spare key that I had given her from her hand where it swung like a metronome, the rhythm of its path capturing my full attention. Left, right, left, right; who knew where it would end?

"I'm sorry; you weren't answering your phone, and we're going to be late..." she trailed off, and my eyes met hers, and just like that, the rhythm stopped.

"I know. It's okay. I just have to - change." The irony of the statement wasn't lost on me. I ducked into the bathroom and threw my t-shirt and shorts in a pile on the floor, pulling on my tuxedo. When I met Elise back in the kitchen, she walked up to me slowly, warily, her eyes never leaving mine. When she was so close that I could smell the subtle hint of her perfume, she reached out and gently touched my cheek, her fingers lingering for a moment before moving to my collar to make expert work of my bow tie. I watched her eyes narrow in concentration as she worked, noticing for the first time the flecks of gold in the green.

"You look beautiful," I told her, because she did. Without a word, she stepped back and offered me her hand - and a way out. I took it gratefully, and she led me out into the hallway, locking the door behind us.

I only looked back once.

Chapter 12

Fire and laughter, fence posts flying

Feel the fever in the air

Can't remember what came before him

And what comes after, I don't care

Hands are trembling, I swore I wouldn't

One more look and I'll give in

A hundred reasons why I shouldn't

But I lost my heart and wanted him to win

I hear the leather on his voice

It's a calling, not a choice

And I can't keep myself from following the sound

Yeah you may never know how fast that you can go

Until someone lifts your feet up off the ground

So we run...

-Sugarland, 'We Run'

Bella – September 2002

"All right, Alice, it's your turn," I instructed, twisting around in my seat to face her. She tapped a finger against her cheek as her face scrunched up in thought, and a moment later, a mischievous smile spread across her face.

"Edward!" she chirped, and he gripped the steering wheel a little tighter in response. "Bella, Jessica, and me."

We were in the middle of one of my favorite games, 'Cliff, Sex, Marriage.' The game was fairly simple: someone would name three people, and then the person who was 'It' had to decide whom they'd push off a cliff, whom they'd have sex with, and whom they'd marry. Although usually when we played, we used celebrities and acquaintances. *Leave it to Alice to pull out the big guns.*

"And don't forget- you can't have sex with the person you marry, ever!" Alice crowed.

"I'm glad you got this one instead of me," Jasper said, grinning at him in the rearview mirror.

Edward contemplated for a moment before answering. "Well, I'd push Jess off a cliff, but only because she's not in the car to give me hell for it."

"Poor Jessica," I murmured sadly. "I'll have to let her know that you'd rather kill her than have sex with her. It's my duty as her best friend."

"Don't you dare, Isabella Marie Swan," Edward growled, and I giggled, reaching over to take his hand. He lifted our clasped hands to his mouth and kissed the back of mine, causing my heart to start fluttering around in my chest. I wondered if he'd ever cease to have that effect on me.

"Come on, don't distract him!" Alice whined.

"Okay, okay." He paused for a moment, and then said so quickly I almost couldn't make out the words, "I'd have sex with Alice and marry Bella."

"WHAT!" I shrieked at the same time Alice pumped her tiny, traitorous little fist in the air and yelled, "SCORE!"

"Wait, wait, wait- let me explain!" He was laughing. "I'd have sex with Alice simply because I cannot imagine my life without Bella in it, and if I have to forego sex with her in order to be with her for the rest of my life, then so be it."

"Aww." Alice grinned. "That's so romantic."

"Nice save, Cullen." Jasper nodded his approval.

Edward winked at me, and I blushed.

"Oooh, look, we're here! Turn left, Edward!" Alice squealed, effectively piercing my eardrum. I cringed as my hand flew to my left ear in an attempt to clear out the ringing.

"Jesus, Al, I might need that ear in the future."

As we pulled into the driveway of Alice's childhood home, Jasper leaned over to look through the windshield at the mansion masquerading as a house looming up ahead, and a look of panic flashed across his face. "*This* is where you grew up?"

"Yep!" She smiled, happily oblivious to Jasper's apprehension, and yanked off her seatbelt. "Come on, Jazz, I can't wait to introduce you to everyone!"

I smiled reassuringly at him. "It'll be fine, Jasper. The Brandon's are good people."

"Bells, are you coming in?" Alice asked as Jasper valiantly attempted to drag their suitcases up the driveway.

I glanced at the dashboard and frowned. "I wish we could, but it's already five o'clock, and I still have to cook dinner, but tell Mom and Dad I say 'Hi.' I'll call you tomorrow."

"You'd better!" She blew me a kiss, and Edward and Jasper flipped each other off as Edward threw the car into reverse, heading back down the driveway.

Edward and I had been together for eight unbelievably wonderful months. It was now the end of September, and we'd driven from New York to Ohio for the weekend so that he could finally meet my father. Alice and Jasper, Edward's best friend and editor, met just a few short weeks after Edward and I had started dating. I'd never really thought about playing matchmaker with the two of them. Jasper seemed a little too serious to be Alice's type, and Alice was never much for monogamy. One Friday night, Alice tagged along with me over to Edward's apartment for a movie night, and Jasper's date

cancelled on him, so he joined us as well. After learning they both shared a love of 80's movies and J.D. Salinger, they became virtually inseparable.

When I told them over dinner a few months later that Edward was coming home with me to meet Charlie, Alice suggested that she and Jasper tag along so that he could meet her parents as well. It shocked the hell out of me- Alice had *never* brought a guy home before. It wasn't until that moment that I realized just how hard she had fallen for him.

As we pulled into the driveway of my childhood home, I reveled in the calm that was slowly settling over me. I may have been living and thriving in New York —the city was pretentious, and daunting, and exciting, and brimming with opportunities for would-be actresses like myself—but I would always love the familiarity of my hometown. Edward cut the engine and ran a hand through his hair, sighing audibly.

"Nervous?" I asked, even though I already knew the answer.

"I just don't like knowing that he's got a loaded gun in there." Reaching across the console, he pulled me awkwardly into his arms and kissed the top of my head.

"Will you come to Forks with me soon? To meet Esme and Carlisle and the rest of the family?"

"I suppose it's only fair, with the torture I'm subjecting you to this weekend," I teased, feeling utterly giddy at his request. *He wants me to meet his parents, too.*

He laughed and released me as his eyes shifted to take in my front yard and the rest of my childhood home. "I'm so happy that you want me to be a part of your life. Thank you for wanting that. Thank you for wanting me here."

I leaned over, cupping his face in my palm and turning it gently towards me.

"Always," I whispered, kissing him softly at first, and then tugging at his bottom lip with my teeth. He groaned and fisted his hands in my hair, returning the kiss with urgency. After a moment, his hands started to wander, and God knows I didn't want him to stop, but some distant part of my brain was yelling that Charlie was most likely watching through the front window, and that getting it on in the driveway was probably not the best idea.

Still, he was the first to pull away.

"I know it's not the time or place for this, but damn it, Bella, I want you. I always want you."

"Well," I kissed along his jaw line to whisper his ear, "I've always fantasized about making love to someone in my childhood bedroom. Do you think you can help me with that later?"

"Fuck," he swore, crushing his lips to mine once again. When we finally separated, we were both breathless.

"You're going to be the death of me." He was tracing my lips with his thumb, and my head was spinning.

"But what a way to go, huh?" I winked at him cheekily. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the front door open. Charlie poked his head out, and I waved through the windshield as he began to head down the driveway towards our car. Edward cringed, closing his eyes and pinching the bridge of his nose.

"I sincerely hope he didn't see any of that."

"He didn't," I assured him. "Otherwise, he'd have the shotgun."

"Not helping," Edward muttered through clenched teeth, and I giggled and placed a kiss on his cheek. Pulling open my door to greet Charlie, I had one foot on the pavement when Edward grabbed me by the arm, pulling me back.

"Just in case I manage to fuck this up royally, I want you to know that I love you, Bella."

"I love *you*, Edward. And Charlie will, too. I promise."

After hugging my dad, I formally introduced the two of them, and they shook hands, chatting amiably as we unloaded our overnight bags from the car. I was momentarily disoriented as I watched my two worlds - my past and my present - collide, but instead of being awkward, it just felt... right.

Charlie cleared his throat awkwardly as he led us up the stairs and into my childhood bedroom. "I put fresh sheets on your old bed, Bells. You guys can stay in here."

It was his way of telling me that he was okay with Edward and I sleeping in the same room, and I smiled gratefully at him..

Dinner passed in a haze of good wine and pleasant conversation. Almost as soon as the last of the chicken was gone, Edward's cell phone rang. He glanced at the caller ID and smiled apologetically.

"I'm sorry, it's my publisher. I have to take this."

I waved him outside, and Charlie and I moved to clear the table as Edward disappeared onto the back patio.

"Isn't it a little late for his publisher to be calling?" Charlie asked, raising an eyebrow.

I filled up the sink with soapy water and began to wash the dishes. "Not at all. It's part of being a writer. A very in-demand writer."

Charlie took his place beside me with a dishtowel, and I handed the first clean dish to him to dry. We were silent for a moment.

"You really love him, Bells." It was a statement, not a question.

"I do." I glanced up at Charlie. "And the two of you seem to be getting along."

"He seems like a good man, and he has a *relatively* steady income..."

"Dad," I reprimanded him, frowning. "It's not always about money. I don't exactly have a steady job, either. Besides, he makes me very happy."

"I know, I know. I just want to make sure you're taken care of." He held up his hands in a gesture of surrender.

"He loves me," I said simply, the words warming my heart. "Everything else might take some work, but I think it's a pretty good place to start."

He fidgeted with the dishtowel for a moment. "Just don't forget, Bells; I'll always be here for you, no matter what."

"I love you too, Dad," I replied, knowing exactly what he was trying to say.

Edward re-joined us in the kitchen a moment later, and I raised my eyebrow at him as a way of asking if there was any news. He smiled and shook his head, then grabbed the broom from the corner and began to sweep the floor. We chatted and laughed amiably as we finished cleaning, and once everything was put away, I stretched and yawned. It had been a long day.

"I'm going to get to bed. I have to work the early shift tomorrow. You kids sleep well." Charlie hugged me and kissed the top of my head before nodding silently at Edward, who smiled in return.

"Night, Dad," I said, and Charlie disappeared up the stairs. As soon as I heard the door click shut, Edward pulled me into his arms, and I closed my eyes, resting my head on his shoulder.

"How'd I do?" he asked, his hands rubbing lazy circles over my lower back.

"You were perfect," I said. He was perfect, flaws and all.

"Things got a little iffy there when we started talking baseball. It took me a while to catch up."

"But you did." I pulled my head back to look up at him. "Thank you, Edward."

He kissed me then, and what started as sweet and innocent quickly turned into anything but.

"I vaguely remember you saying something about a fantasy of yours," he mumbled between kisses, and a spark ignited somewhere deep inside of me.

"Follow me," I whispered, taking his hand and leading him up the stairs to my room. As soon as I closed the door, he pushed me up against the wall, covering my body with his. I gasped as his lips traced down my neck to my collarbone, leaving a burning trail in their wake. I pulled his shirt off, discarding it carelessly on the floor, letting my hands ghost across his stomach and the solid planes of his chest before moving around to clutch at his back, pulling him closer, always closer. His leg slipped between mine and our movements became primal, instinctual. Hands, lips, tongues, fingertips- I couldn't tell where he ended and I began, and I didn't care, not at all. I felt his hand slip under my shirt, cupping my breast in his hand. His thumb traced my nipple, and I gasped, my teeth finding purchase on his earlobe, and my hands tangling in his hair. He groaned softly and pulled away.

"You have entirely too many clothes on, Bella."

I quickly discarded my shirt and bra, and pressed myself against him once again, fire on fire, and we stayed like that for a moment, kissing and panting, before he carried me over to the bed. When he took a step back to look at me, the mixture of passion, raw lust, and love shining in his eyes took my breath away. I bit my lip and unbuttoned my jeans, slowly sliding them down over my hips as he watched, completely still but for the slight clenching of his jaw. My jeans got caught on my right foot, and without thinking, I impatiently kicked them off. I felt my foot hit my bedside lamp, which, as my luck would have it, went crashing to the floor, plunging the room into total darkness. I froze for a moment before collapsing into a fit of giggles.

"I swear, love, you are the most accident prone woman I've ever known," Edward said, exasperated, but then he was laughing, too. A moment later, I heard Charlie's footsteps in the hall, and we both attempted to shush the other, which only made it worse. I had tears in my eyes, and was gasping for breath. Edward wasn't much better off.

Charlie knocked on the door. "Everything okay in there?"

"Yeah, Dad, sorry." I laughed even harder, pressing a fist to my mouth to stifle the sound as I felt Edward scramble in the dark, presumably to find his t-shirt. "I just knocked over my lamp. We're fine."

"You sure?" Charlie persisted.

"Get your damn clothes on, Bella!" Edward hissed, tossing my shirt and jeans at me, but I was still hysterical, doubled over and clutching my stomach, and they fell in a useless heap next to me on the bed.

"Yeah, I'm sure. Thanks," I finally managed to choke out.

"Okay. Uh, if you, um- need anything, I'm just down the hall."

As Charlie's footsteps retreated, Edward located the offending lamp, set it back on the bedside table, and switched it on.

"Well, I think that sufficiently killed the mood," he pouted, which brought on a fresh wave of giggles. When I still hadn't calmed down after a minute or two, he lay down next to me on his back, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"I'm glad you think it's funny, love."

"I'm sorry." I took a deep breath, finally managing to calm myself down. "That was just insanely classic."

He eyed my almost-naked body for a moment, and then squeezed his eyes shut tightly. "Bella, I may be incredibly embarrassed, and your father may have been five seconds away from castrating me with his shotgun, but I'm still a man, and if you don't put your clothes back on, we're going to end up knocking over more than just a lamp."

"Hmm, sounds tempting," I teased, toying with the button on his jeans, but he just glared at me in silent warning. I sighed resignedly and rolled off of him, moving to dig my yoga pants and t-shirt out of my suitcase. We both changed into our pajamas and brushed our teeth before crawling into bed. Edward lay behind me, wrapping his arms around me, and I yawned contentedly, relaxing into his chest.

"Goodnight," he whispered, kissing my neck, and I drifted off to sleep with a smile on my face.

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After breakfast the next morning, I took Edward on a tour of my hometown. We started at my old high school, and I showed him the stage where I first found my voice and some semblance of grace in spite of my clumsiness. Backstage, I pointed out the photos of me as Wendy in Peter Pan, Robin in Godspell, and my personal favorite, Sandy in Grease, and he mentioned off-handedly that he'd like to hear me sing. I told him I'd sing for him if he would play the piano for me, and he immediately sat down at the piano that was just stage left, fingers poised above the keys, and raised an eyebrow expectantly. We spent the better part of an hour laughing and kissing and singing, time flying as it always seemed to do when I was with him. When we had finished a rendition of Ella Fitzgerald's 'Bewitched,' he strode across the stage and lifted me into his arms, nuzzling my neck.

"Your voice is thoroughly enchanting, Bella."

"Thank you." I blushed. "You're not so bad yourself."

Our next stop was the Dairy Queen, where I spent my junior and senior year mixing up Blizzards and stealing kisses outside the employee entrance with my then-boyfriend, Oliver. We ordered a cookie dough Blizzard, settled ourselves in a corner booth, and took turns feeding each other. It was sweet at first, but ended with both of us giggling like children with more ice cream on our faces and hands than in our mouths. After cleaning ourselves off, he dragged me outside and around to the back of the building, kissed me softly, and insisted rather emphatically that Oliver would *not* be the only boy I remembered kissing at this Dairy Queen. I looked up at him quizzically and asked who in the hell Oliver was. The smile that lit up his face was dazzling.

I took him to the Fremont Community Theater where I'd spent my summers alternately volunteering and performing, the Police station where Charlie spent his days, the diner where Jess, Alice and I had shared milkshakes and secrets, and the bank of the Sandusky River where we'd spent lazy summers gossiping and working on our tans. I shared with him every place that I'd frequented in that small town, because it was a part of me, just as much as he was. It was my way of letting him in- of beginning the process of reconciling my life before him with who I was *with* him.

As the sun began to set that evening, we sat on the bank of the river, side by side with my head resting on his shoulder, and watched the resplendent explosion of color in companionable silence. I breathed deep and thanked God for whatever cataclysmic event had woven the threads of our lives so tightly together, because without Edward, I would have still been oblivious to the pure joy that could be found in the simplest of things. Without Edward, I would never have realized that a part of me was missing, because although we'd only just met, I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that half of my soul had always belonged to him- and it always would.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, interrupting my thoughts. Pulling it out, I glanced at the caller ID. Edward looked at me questioningly.

"Alice," I told him before I flipped it open. "Hello?"

Even Edward could hear the ear-piercing squeal that emanated from the phone, and he laughed as I yanked it away from my face. Once she'd calmed down, I moved it back to my ear.

"I'm sorry, Alice, you're going to have to call me back later because until I can find an ENT specialist to operate on my eardrum, I won't be able to hear anything you say."

"Bells! He proposed! Jasper proposed!"

"WHAT?" I yelled, although in my defense, it wasn't *nearly* as loud as Alice's squeal.

"We're getting married!" She squealed again, and I could practically feel her excitement vibrating through the phone.

"Tell me everything!" I demanded.

"Well, apparently, as soon as I invited Jasper to come home to meet my parents, he decided he would ask their permission to marry me. Last night, while we were cleaning up the kitchen, he said he wanted some time to talk to my dad. I figured he was just trying to get on his good side- you know, cigars and brandy after dinner, all that manly stuff."

"Alice, you've watched Titanic *way* too many times." I shook my head, laughing as Edward pulled himself up off of the sand, causing me to marvel for a moment at the way the colors of the sunset seemed to set his bronze hair on fire before turning my attention back to my best friend.

"Not the point! How gentlemanly is that? He asked my dad for permission!"

"It's very - Jasper," I agreed.

"So we went to the farmers market on Front Street this morning, and then we spent the day walking and driving around. I showed him all our old haunts and stuff, and when we were hungry, so we decided to go to Whitey's for food. On the way, we walked past the old drugstore, and I was rambling about how much I love fall and pumpkins and hot apple cider- which reminds me, by the way, that Jess told me she has some great couple Halloween costume ideas for us this year."

"Alice!"

"Sorry, sorry! Okay, so as I'm rambling, I look over at Jasper, and he's got this funny look on his face, like he's a million miles away. I wave my hand in front of his face and ask if he's okay, and all of a sudden, he drops to his knee right there on the sidewalk in front of the drugstore. At first, I thought he passed out or something, until I realized he was holding a ring. A gorgeous, princess cut, Tiffany's, two carat diamond ring, I might add."

The exact ring that Alice had been drooling over forever- or, at least, ever since we'd spent that one weekend when we were younger planning our perfect weddings, complete with a scrapbook of magazine cutouts. We had affectionately dubbed it the 'Wedding Bible.' I still had it, somewhere.

"Princess cut? How did he know?" I frowned for a moment, puzzled, before it dawned on me that the answer was standing right in front of me, skipping stones on the river. He knew that Jasper was going to propose, and he didn't tell me. *Bastard!*

"I have no idea, but it's gotta be some kind of sign! Anyway, he's down on one knee, and he looks up at me and says in that sexy Southern drawl of his, 'Marry me, darlin'. I couldn't live with myself if I let you get away."

"Aww, Alice! I am so incredibly happy for the two of you."

"Bella, I love him so much. I never- I never thought I'd find someone like him, you know? When I'm with him, I'm content to just... *be*. It's like nothing else matters."

I glanced over at Edward. "I know, Al. I really, really do."

"I know you do." She sniffled a bit. "All right, I have to call Jess, but my parents are throwing a celebratory breakfast before we leave. You and Edward are invited, and so are Charlie and Sue. Ten o'clock sharp tomorrow morning."

"We'll be there. Are we still going out tonight with the old crowd?" I asked.

"Of course! I talked to everyone today, and we're meeting at the bar at ten. Celebratory drinks are *definitely* in order!"

"You got it. See you then. Love to you and Jasper, and congratulations!"

"Love you too, Bells."

I slid my phone back into my pocket with one hand and shaded my eyes with the other, squinting up at Edward.

"So, Jasper proposed to Alice."

"Really? That's exciting." He tossed another stone, and it skipped one, two, three times over the glassy surface of the lake before disappearing into the murky depths.

"Yeah. *And* he managed to buy the exact ring that Alice has wanted since she was thirteen. Isn't that crazy?"

He just nodded and tossed another stone.

"Especially because Jess and I were the only ones who knew what ring she wanted, and I know for a fact that Jess didn't tell him."

"How do you know that?" he called over his shoulder.

"Because she would have told me that he asked her. We're girls. We tell each other *everything*."

He brushed his sand-covered hands off on his jeans and moved to stand in front of me, blocking the sun with his body. I leaned back on the heels of my hands and looked up at him. The silhouette from the fading sunlight that surrounded him made him look like some kind of corporeal angel.

"All right, you got me." He smiled crookedly. "I saw the 'Wedding Bible' in your bookcase one day."

"You didn't." I cringed.

"When Jasper told me he wanted to propose to Alice, we couldn't go to you or Jess because we knew you wouldn't be able to keep the secret, so one night while you were sleeping, I dug it out to do a little research."

"Oh God." I felt that godforsaken blush creeping up my neck. "How much did you see?"

"I was strictly looking for intel on Alice, I promise. But, I must say, that wedding dress you picked out? With the really poofy sleeves and the butt bow? Sexy."

"Give me a break, Edward; it was the early nineties." I was bright red now, and irrationally grumpy with him, and he sat down cross-legged in front of me, rubbing my knee affectionately.

"I like the powder blue tux with the ruffled shirt for the groom, too. That was nice."

"Yeah, yeah. What can I say? I've always had a thing for pastels," I mumbled, crossing my arms in front of my chest. When I finally looked up at him, he seemed on edge, anxious, which immediately put me on edge, too.

"Edward? What's wrong?"

It was his turn to look away, and my stomach was immediately in knots. Why wouldn't he look at me? I wondered if all this talk about weddings had him freaking out. *Crap, crap, crap.*

"Edward, that 'Wedding Bible' was just a joke. We were kids, it doesn't mean-"

"It's not that, Bella." He cut me off.

"Then what?" I placed my hand on his knee, and my heart threatened to pound out of my chest. *Dear God, please don't let him leave. Please don't let this end. Not yet. Not ever.*

"What is it?"

"I just..." He picked up a handful of sand, watching as it fell through his fingers. "Are you upset?"

"About what?" Now I was confused, but at least the rhythm of my heart had started to decelerate.

His eyes turned to the trees, the sky, the sand, but he still wouldn't look at me. "I just thought, you know, because they met after we did and now they're engaged, and we haven't really even talked about it..." he trailed off, and the relief coursing through my body was so potent that I momentarily felt weightless. I couldn't help myself, I started to laugh, and once I started, I couldn't stop. Edward was looking at me like I'd sprouted three heads. I felt horrible because he was so vulnerable in that moment, and I wanted to explain why it was funny, why I was so relieved, but I could barely breathe in enough air to speak.

"Edward, I'm sorry, I don't mean to laugh, and I'm not laughing *at* you; I'm just so relieved."

"Relieved?" It was his turn to look confused, and a little hurt.

"That- that's not what I mean." I felt horrible for continuing to screw. I wanted to crawl into his lap, wrap my arms around him, and stay like that until he could hear the song that my body sang. Until he could hear that in every beat of my heart, blink of my eye, twitch of my finger- in the very blood in my veins- was *him*.

Instead, I stood up, brushed the sand off my jeans, and extended a hand down to him.

"Come on. There's one more place I want to show you."

The urge to show him the last piece of my soul consumed me, and I drove without regard for speed limits. Edward remained silent as I wove between cars and dotted yellow lines, finally pulling off onto a gravel road that was all but invisible in the quickly fading sunlight. I parked at the edge of the trees and jumped out, slamming the door behind me, and Edward followed suit. I went to him, intertwining my fingers with his, and pulled him quickly through the brush. My feet knew the path so well that I didn't think twice about the impending darkness. When we reached the clearing that was my meadow, I released his hand, lifted my face to the sky, and closed my eyes, breathing in the smell of lilac and sweet grass and memories of a forgotten childhood.

"It's beautiful." Edward turned in a slow circle, taking it in.

I lay down wordlessly on the soft grass, facing the sky, and patted the ground next to me in invitation. As he settled beside me, I began to demolish the last of the walls around my heart- walls that had begun to crumble the moment I'd met this achingly beautiful, intelligent, and selfless man.

"Did you know that there used to be four of us?"

"Four of whom?" Edward's brow furrowed in confusion.

"Everyone calls Jess, Alice, and I the 'Three Musketeers,' but there used to be four of us."

He took my hand, and I smiled up at the appearing stars.

"Her name was Angela, and we met her freshman year. It had been just the three of us for so long, we never really needed anyone else. But then Angela came along, with her Motley Crue and her kickass ripped jeans, and she just- fit. Her junior year, she started dating Ben, the badass guitar-player, and by senior year, she was pregnant."

"Small town scandal," Edward mused, worrying a piece of grass between his fingers.

"They got married the summer after graduation, and little Kimberly was born in July. Ben's parents bought them a house just down the road from mine as a wedding present; Angela stayed home with the baby, and Ben got a job in some record store at the mall. As the summer wore on, we saw less and less of her. Our lives just became so *different*. We were set to go off to college, and I was going to pursue my dream of becoming a famous actress on Broadway. I remember thinking at the time that I could do so much better than that, and it made me feel like a horrible person. When we all went away to New York, we lost touch with her. I don't even know if she lives in Fremont anymore."

I paused for a moment, rolling onto my side and propping my head up on my hand before continuing. "When I started at NYU, there was this guy in my acting class, Rob. He looked a lot like a young George Clooney, and he knew it. He asked me out seventeen times before I finally said yes, just so he would stop asking. But he was cute, and he was sweeter than I thought he would be, and the sex was decent."

Edward frowned, and I squeezed his hand gently in reassurance.

"Besides, it wasn't like I had guys banging down my door. I ended up dating him for close to a year, and I remember it like it was yesterday. It was this gorgeous spring day, and I was jogging in Central Park, remembering the romantic dinner that Rob had taken me to the evening before. Things were really falling into place at school, and I felt so alive in that moment. For the first time, I thought, 'This can work.' I could actually see myself having a future with him, and I was so happy. I couldn't wait to talk to him, to tell him how I felt. When I got back to my apartment, there was an envelope slipped under the door. He needed time apart, to focus on his acting career. He blew me off with a letter, Edward, but even as I was crying into a pint of Ben and Jerry's later that night, you know what I thought to myself? I thought, 'Bella, you sure as hell can do a lot better than *that*.' And even then, I knew it was true."

Edward was quiet for a moment, then pulled himself up into a sitting position and smiled down at me. "I know there's a reason you're telling me all of this, but I can't figure out what it is."

"Move in with me," I blurted out.

"What?" His face cast in shadow, I couldn't tell if he was surprised, apprehensive, or elated.

"Move in with me, Edward. It feels like all these events in my life have had a single purpose: to lead me to you. For the first time, I *know* this is right. I don't care if you hate the music I listen to, or if you leave your dirty socks on the floor, or if you refuse to eat eggs because you hate their texture. I don't care because I want *you*."

"Bella," he whispered, but I wasn't finished.

"I don't care that Jasper and Alice are engaged and we're not. I don't need a lifetime commitment because finally, *finally*, I have something worthwhile to think of each morning, and that's enough for me right now. Just think of all the bullshit we've both been through. We can do better than that, Edward. You and I, together."

When I finished my impassioned plea, I felt physically and emotionally spent. I had laid my soul bare; it was now Edward's to do with it as he would, and this knowledge was both terrifying and exhilarating. The crickets chirped, the cool evening air caressed my face, and I waited with bated breath for his answer. A lifetime passed. Finally, he spoke.

"Words are my life, Bella, but at this moment, there are none that can adequately express what I want to say. None that can explain how, a thousand times each day, I can fall in love with you over

and over again, every time you smile, or your hand touches my face, or you do any other normally ordinary thing. It's entirely beyond my realm of comprehension, but waking up to you each morning would be more of a gift than I could ever hope to receive."

"So that's a yes." I needed to hear him say it.

"Yes, Bella. That's a yes," he affirmed, smiling that crooked smile, and just like that, I was on my way to 'happily ever after.'

Chapter 13

I can't get to bed, but I'm really tired

The things in my head you used to admire

In your sundrenched world

It couldn't be worse

Don't bother asking and here comes the nerves

While I'm trying to bask in your sundrenched world

I'm talking to you, and you're not listening

I don't know what to do

My heart is blistering, writing this song

Tell me I'm not wrong

Tell me I'm not alone...

-Josh Radin, 'Sundrenched World'

Edward – April 2007

I woke to sunlight streaming across my face and opened my eyes too quickly, squinting against the harsh glare. It took me a moment to get my bearings, and when I did, an idiosyncratic mixture of calm and dread settled over me, suffocating me under its weight. These hotel rooms were all the same – white sheets, tiny bottles of soap, and the faded fingerprints of a thousand guests gone by – but that morning was different. That morning was the beginning of the end.

After all of the arguing and blaming and counseling; the guilt trips and broken promises and apologies; the chaste kisses and make-up sex and anger fucks against our kitchen table, I had asked for only one thing: a piece of myself to call my own. Bella's love was a black hole, craving frantically and endlessly; she needed – no, demanded – all of me, and though I had always given it to her willingly, it was never enough. So I'd asked for one, small, private room, deep at the back of my heart that was mine and mine alone, knowing that, if I didn't, she would have eventually consumed us both; but every time I found some shred of my former self to cling to, Bella would send out battalions to claim it and blow it apart.

Our lives had been reduced to a series of reactionary maneuvers; I would grip, and she would grip, and we'd slide, faster and faster, sliding, and spilling, and in the end, what could I do?

What could I do?

Foreshadowing was an integral part of any decent piece of literature, and as I traced the cool, smooth contours of my wedding band, I realized, too late, that I was better at it than I'd ever imagined. For in every book, every short story, every manuscript that I'd ever written, there had been pieces of her and I.

Foreshadowing. I'd never written a happy ending. Somehow, I'd known all along.

"Good morning," I murmured, kissing her forehead when she began to stir.

"Mmm, good morning," she mumbled, burrowing her head into the crook of my neck. I felt her lips on my collarbone, and I wrapped myself around her in an effort to prolong the moment, knowing that it would be our last.

Her hair was strewn across my arm and the pillow behind her, creating a halo-like arc, and I smiled at the beauty of it. "You look like an angel," I told her, and I felt her lips curve into a smile in response.

"We should get up." *One, two, three...* I counted the rhythm of my heart, wondering how something so eradicated could still beat; could still pump blood in support of a life that no longer existed in any sense but the physical. "Bella is waiting."

Elise sighed quietly. "She spends her life waiting on you, you know."

I swallowed hard. *Not anymore.*

"I was thinking," she began, pulling herself up into a sitting position, clutching the sheet tightly to her bare chest. "I know you want – no." She stopped, then started again. "I know you *need* to be in love—"

I started to protest, but she spoke over me, stumbling over her words.

"No. Stop. Ignore it all you want, but it's a part of who you are, Edward. You only seem to thrive when you're in love. And I just thought that, maybe, you know... I mean, since things didn't work with you and Bella, maybe..." She paused to bite her lip, and all I could see was Bella. "Maybe you could be in love with me."

I brushed a stray lock of hair behind her ear. The idea was as foreign to me as snowflakes in June. "Maybe," I lied.

I spent forty-five minutes underneath the scalding hot spray of the shower in an attempt to cleanse myself of last night's sins before resigning myself to the fact that I'd never feel clean again. Afterwards, I watched from the chair in the corner as she pulled on her stockings and tucked her blouse into her skirt, and when she slipped on the heels that she'd worn while I fucked her the night before, I told her it was over. To be fair, it had never really begun.

"Although I don't deserve it, I need to ask you for one last shred of kindness," I said as I slid off my wedding ring, tucking it into my pocket. I couldn't look at it without wanting to scream.

She touched my cheek. "I would do anything for you, Edward. You're not a bad man. You're just... lost."

Even I didn't believe that.

"Don't tell Bella," I said quietly. "I need to do it myself."

"I won't." She paused, cocking her head to the side and staring at me for a moment before adding, "I'm sorry you didn't realize it sooner."

"Realize what?" I frowned.

"Just how much you actually love her."

We left the hotel room then, hidden under oversized sunglasses and a cloak of regret, and I watched Elise's taxi pull away, the trails her tears made as they ran down her cheeks burned forever into my memory. Tucking my hands into the pockets of last night's tuxedo and hunching my shoulders against the wind, I began to wander through the streets of the city. I couldn't go home. Bella was my home, the one sacred thing in this ridiculously fucked up world, and I'd given that up the moment I'd stepped into that hotel room last night.

What have you done?

Each word was a fist landing in my gut. I wanted to tear my hair out by its roots, to cut off my hands, to launch myself into the white-hot fire of the sun, for surely that pain would be more manageable than the thousand knives that were currently piercing my heart and bleeding it dry. A flash of brown hair caught my eye, the same color as my Bella's and, as this thought crossed my mind, I froze. No, not *my* Bella. She wasn't mine anymore. The force of this realization sent me collapsing onto a nearby park bench, where I rested my elbows on my knees, cradled my head in my hands, and wept.

When the tears finally began to slow, I was emptier than I'd ever imagined I could be, and I watched as the fog of my breath formed and dissipated. "Take me with you," I whispered to the disappearing clouds of air, for I was already invisible; surely it couldn't be that difficult to simply vanish and leave the suffering that I'd brought upon myself behind. The thought reminded me of a conversation I'd had with Bella when we'd first met, just five short years ago.

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"Tell me something that no one else knows about you," Bella said, tracing the lines of my palm with her fingertips.

"Hmm," I frowned. "Like what?"

"Tell me a secret."

"Okay." I crooked my finger at her, gesturing for her to come closer, and when my lips reached her ear, I whispered, "I love you."

She laughed, swatting playfully at my chest. "No, a real secret."

"You first," I said.

"Okay." She paused, and her face grew serious. "You know how most kids love being left with babysitters? You know, the whole pizza, junk food, no bedtime thing? Well, when I was little, and Charlie left me with a babysitter? I used to be terrified that he wouldn't come back. The first few times, I screamed myself to sleep. He stopped leaving me with babysitters after that. I think that because my mom left me, I was scared that Charlie would leave me, too."

"I'm so sorry, love," I murmured.

"Don't be sorry, Edward. I'm just saying, if you ever leave?" She paused to look up at me from underneath her eyelashes. "Take me with you."

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I'd promised to never leave her. I'd promised her so many things. And as I sifted through the shattered pieces of those promises, of our life together, I realized that there was still one promise that I could still keep. I could still love, and cherish, and protect her, in the only remaining way that I was able.

Nobody needs to know.

This one last kindness I could grant her; the gift of ignorance.

With trembling fingers, I pulled my cell phone out of the inside pocket of my jacket and dialed the familiar number, gritting my teeth and clenching my jaw in an effort to hold myself together.

"Edward? Where have you been?" The sound of her voice grated over my heart, and I buried my face in my free hand, swallowing all of the things that I really wanted to say. I wanted to tell her that I loved her, but if I'd really loved her, I would have never done what I'd done. I wanted to beg for her forgiveness, but I didn't deserve it, and anyway, this wasn't about what I wanted. Not anymore.

"It's over, Bella," I said.

She was silent for a moment that seemed to last for an eternity. When she finally spoke, there was an edge of panic to her voice. "Don't do this, Edward. Please."

Steeling myself, I continued. "We're broken, Bella, and we can't fix it anymore."

She didn't say anything, so I closed my eyes and delivered the final blow.

"It's better for both of us, baby. I'm so sorry," I said, ending the call and tossing my phone into the storm drain in front of me, and as it disappeared into the darkness, a passage from my latest book sprang unbidden to my mind.

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She approached him slowly, tentatively, with a mixture of wariness and unbridled heat in her eyes. He froze, waiting, both wanting her to stop, and terrified that she actually would. Her fingertips halted a mere inch from his cheek, and they both could feel the vibration pulsing in the air between them.

"Do you feel that?" Beau whispered.

Elena nodded, swallowing hard.

"My body sings for you," he said, the very marrow of his bones aching with restraint.

"And mine for you."

When her fingertips finally met his flesh, he closed his eyes and rested his cheek in the palm of her hand, letting the warmth from her hand travel straight to his soul.

"I tried not to love you," he said, "but my heart wouldn't listen."

"I tried not to love you," she said, "but I don't know any other way."

The moon chose that moment to break through the clouds, shining its soft light down upon them, reflecting off the diamond on the ring she still wore on her left hand. For the first time, the sight of it didn't threaten to tear her in two. Removing her hand from his cheek, she slowly removed the ring from her finger and turned it over in her palm, closing her fist around the familiar weight as a million yet-unlived summers flashed behind her eyes.

"He would have wanted this," she said finally, and she was surprised to find that she actually believed it. "He would have wanted me to be happy."

Beau watched as Elena turned to kneel before her late husbands' grave and began to claw at the earth with her hands. Soon, she'd dug a shallow hole, in which she placed the ring before replacing the earth and patting it down firmly. When she was finished, he offered her his hand, and after brushing the dirt off on her jeans, she took it, allowing him to help her up.

"I still love him, you know," she whispered.

"You always will," he said, "and I know that wherever he is, he still loves you, too. That's why I know he would want this for you. If it were me - if I were him - I would want the same thing."

"How can you be so sure?" Elena asked him.

Beau pulled her into his arms and whispered into her ear, "Because sometimes, loving someone, really loving them, means letting them go."

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Foreshadowing. Somehow, I'd known all along. And although I could no longer remember who I was before her, what I did know was this: I would love her unrequited for the rest of my life.

Everyone had their cross to bear.

This was mine.

Chapter 14

*Now take your time to answer me
For the beauty of romancing
Is to calm your trembling hand with mine
While begging love to fill your eyes
I can hardly breathe while waiting
To find out what your heart is saying
And as we're swirling in this flavor
The world is tilting in our favor*

-Chris Rice, 'Lemonade'

Bella- January 2002

It was hopeless.

Pushing my hair back from my face with both hands, I exhaled loudly, making a face at myself in the mirror. I was trying to do something, anything with my hair, but it was refusing to budge from its normal state of mousy brown, straight, and limp, and Edward was going to be there in less than an hour. *Fuck.*

For the most part, I'd always been happy with the way I looked. Pale skin, chocolate brown eyes, short but not too short and thin but not too thin; arguably forgettable, but it worked for me. I'd never been one to enjoy the center of attention - unless I was onstage. Back in high school, that had been the one time when I wasn't a complete klutzy, blushing, stammering mess. Some kind of otherworldly grace seemed to come over me when the stage lights came up, and that was how I, Bella 'Uncoordinated' Swan, ended up at NYU, pursuing the almighty Bachelor of Fine Arts degree. I was slated to graduate in May, and although I would probably end up combing newspapers for auditions and waiting tables for the rest of my life, at least I'd be able to say that I'd pursued my dream. Not everyone is so lucky.

Jessica Stanley and Alice Brandon, my two best friends, had followed me from our hometown of Fremont, Ohio to the Big Apple. The three of us had been inseparable since the third grade, so it was only appropriate that we ended up sharing a tiny two bedroom in the middle of the city. Alice was the one to snag her own bedroom, and even then we could barely fit all her clothes and shoes into one closet. The girl had a penchant for shopping and her daddy's credit card to support it, but she was far from the privileged, selfish bitch that she very well could have ended up to be. She was attending NYU with me; she'd started off pre-med, and had just been accepted into their medical school this year. Incredibly kind, intelligent and driven, Alice would give you the shirt of her back if you asked for it. Now that she'd started med school *and* had started dating one of her classmates, Laurent something-or-other, she wasn't around much. The apartment actually seemed kind of sad without her bubbly energy.

Jess had always been a whiz with hair and makeup, so she'd come to New York to study cosmetology at Paul Mitchell's Staten Island campus. After graduating last year at the top of her class, she ended up snagging a job at John Barrett, the infamous salon on the penthouse floor of Bergdorf Goodman. She loved it, and with her penchant for celebrity gossip and insane talent, her clients loved her. When we'd first moved out to NYC, she'd broken up with her high school sweetheart, Tyler Crowley. It was a mutual split; neither one of them had been digging the idea of a long distance relationship. Though she always had a steady stream of men available for fun on the weekends, she never quite got over him. Luckily, Tyler never really got over her either. A year after they had split, Tyler moved to the city to be with her, and six months later, he proposed. They'd found a place just down the block, and she'd moved out in September. I loved having my own room, but I missed having her around, especially in times like these.

Grabbing my phone off the bathroom counter, I sent a quick text to Jess. If anyone knew how to fix the situation, or lack thereof, happening on top of my head, it was her.

My hair is trying to mutiny. SOS. Need reinforcements.

Her response was almost immediate. *Hang tight bb. Be there in ten.*

I flopped down on the couch and flipped on the TV as I waited for her to arrive, but I couldn't focus, so I flipped aimlessly through channels instead. In less than an hour, I would see him again. Edward. Just thinking about his crooked smile turned the butterflies in my stomach into stampeding rhinos.

It'd only been a week since we met, and he hadn't left my mind since. I'd seen him all over the city since that night, little pieces of him in every stranger passing by. Anytime I smelled peppermint, or scotch, my heart would skip a beat, and I'd find myself convinced he was nearby and begin to survey the crowd, desperate for a glimpse of him. I was beginning to feel like I was losing my mind.

I'd had my share of boyfriends, and I'd even been in love, once, but it'd never been like this. In fact, I'd never believed that *this* existed- this 'can't breathe without him', 'doodle his name in hearts', 'plan our wedding and name our children' type of lust, or love, or whatever it was. I'd always believed that relationships were mature, mutual agreements between adults who cared deeply about each other. Now that I'd met Edward, all my ideas and theories about love and relationships had gone straight out the fucking window. Clearly, love at first sight *did* exist. My heart simply wouldn't allow me to believe otherwise any longer.

As I waited for Jess to arrive, my mind drifted back to the night of her bachelorette party. I'd seen him watching us from across the room. Unfortunately- or fortunately, depending on how you look at it- so had Alice. After ogling and giggling for a few moments, it was determined that it was my duty as the single one of the group to go up and talk to him. Although I was normally very shy, this time, I had been happy to oblige. He had been so frazzled and charming and utterly gorgeous, with that bronze sex hair, crooked smile and those brooding green eyes. Even as he told me some crazy story about having to be dragged kicking and screaming off of the trunk of a Christmas tree when he was a child, I could sense an air of sadness about him. I was surprised to find that I wanted to make him smile. With confidence that I rarely exude around men, I'd grabbed him by the hand and led him over to meet my friends.

Throughout the course of the evening, no matter whom I was talking to or where I was in the room, I found myself unable to focus on anyone or anything but him. Every time his eyes met mine, or he brushed against my body, electricity would surge, and my skin would explode in goosebumps. I discovered that he was a writer, originally from Washington, and he'd studied at Amherst before making his way to New York to further his career. I learned that his pet peeve is people who tried to sing along to songs they didn't know the words to, and that his favorite book was *The Time Travelers Wife*. I noticed that he had a nervous habit of running his hands through his hair, and that when he smiled, it didn't quite reach his eyes. But no matter how much I noticed, learned, and discovered about him, I remained hungry for more.

As the night had come to an end, I'd wondered frantically how to ensure that he didn't walk out of the bar and out of my life forever. Just the thought of being away from him caused my chest to tighten uncomfortably, and I knew wouldn't be able to breathe freely until I saw him smile at me again. Borrowing a pen from Alice, I'd grabbed a napkin and scribbled my favorite quote, which happened to be incredibly appropriate for the situation, along with my name and cell number. *This is who I am, I'd thought, echoing the sentiment of the great Idina Menzel. Take me baby, or leave me.* With my heart pounding out of my chest, I'd hugged him, tucked the quote into his hand, kissed his cheek, and took off down the block. I didn't look back. I was scared that, if I did, I'd see him crumpling up the napkin on which I'd placed my heart and tossing it into the gutter, along with the delicate threads of hope that had already begun to anchor my life to his.

It had taken him four days, fourteen hours and twenty-seven minutes to call- not that I had been counting. And thank God he called when he did- my classmates had been ready to kill me, and I'm pretty sure my professors were ready to kick me out of class. We'd been working on hotINK at school, an international festival of play readings that brings together playwrights from around the world- it was a huge deal, and I had, unfortunately, been more than a little distracted while waiting for his call. As soon as I heard his voice, I wanted to hop in the first cab I could find and make my way to him, but I had been stuck in rehearsal over the weekend, so I'd been forced to wait.

I glanced at the clock- it'd been over twenty minutes, and I was starting to get worried that I wouldn't be ready in time, so I picked up my phone to text Jess again.

Did you get distracted by something shiny?

A moment after I pressed 'send', she burst through the door.

"You bitch." She laughed and set down her rather large bag of weapons; curling irons, brushes and styling products. *Oh my.*

"I'm screwed. He's going to be here in, like, forty minutes. And that's *if* he doesn't show up early. Just put a paper bag on my head and let's call it a day."

"Come on, Bells, you've known me how long? I thought by now you'd have a little bit more faith in my mad skills." Before she'd even finished her sentence, she had the styling products spread out on the counter and the curling iron warming up.

Groaning, I dragged myself off of the couch, and she raised an eyebrow at me.

"That's what you're wearing?"

Looking down at my carefully chosen ensemble, I frowned. "What's wrong with my outfit? I like it."

"Bella, Banana Republic is great for baby showers and job interviews, but not for first dates. I mean, khakis? Really? You might as well just put on an apron and a pearl necklace and ask him what time he wants you to have dinner ready every night."

My fantastically dirty mind ran away with me, and I couldn't help but giggle.

"Ugh, not that kind of pearl necklace. Gross." Jess threw a throw pillow at me and disappeared into Alice's room for a moment before moving into mine. She returned with my favorite, and only, pair of Seven jeans and a black, long-sleeved, off the shoulder top of Alice's.

"Is that even going to fit me?" I eyed Alice's shirt warily. "She's so damn short."

"It's long on her." Jess said as she dug around in the hall closet, finally producing a pair of Alice's black, patent leather Louboutin short boots and handing them to me with a flourish.

"Voila."

"Jess, these are three-inch heels. I'm going to kill myself."

"No, you'll be fine in the three-inch. It's the four-inch that you have trouble with. Besides, they just scream 'fuck me,' don't they?"

"Is that *really* the kind of impression I want to make? 'When I first laid eyes on her, all I could think was, 'Damn, those shoes are hot.' And I wanted to fuck the life out of her.' That'll be a great story for the grandkids."

"Grandkids? You really like this guy, huh?" Jess grinned, and I blushed. "This won't be the first time he sees you anyway. Now stop being such a prude and put on the shoes," she commanded, spinning me around and shoving me in the direction of my bedroom.

After I changed and looked myself over in the mirror, even I had to admit that Jess was right- the shoes, and the outfit, were perfect. I joined her in the bathroom, sat down on the chair that she'd dragged in from the kitchen, and she began to work her magic.

"Where's Alice today?" she mumbled through a mouthful of bobby pins.

"She's at some seminar for school."

"On a Saturday? Ew." Jess shook her head. "I will never understand how that little pixie fits all that knowledge into that tiny little body."

"Well, Laurent is with her, so I'm sure she's enjoying herself too." I felt a bobby pin jab into my scalp and I yelped, elbowing her in the stomach. She retaliated by yanking on my hair. *We're so mature.*

"Sit still, bitch! How's that whole thing going?"

I yawned and shrugged. "He's nice, but I don't know if he'll be able to keep her attention for long."

Alice was a notorious 'love 'em and leave 'em' type of gal, and had a tendency to leave a lot of broken hearts in her wake. "But let's talk about you! Are you ready for your impending monogamy?"

"I can't believe it's next week already." She groaned. "The planning has just been so stressful, but I'm pretty sure everything is set. I'm glad we got everything done early. It's nice to have this weekend to relax before the shit invariably hits the fan. But I kinda can't wait until it's over and we can just enjoy being with each other."

"Yeah, and the fact that you're going to 'be with each other' in Maui can't hurt, either."

"I know, right? Ten days of nothing but sun, sand, fruity drinks and sweet lovin'. It's gonna be epic."

"Epic?" I snorted.

"Yeah, epic. You gotta problem with that?"

"You make it sound like you're going to a frat party that's serving free beer."

"Well, not quite that *epic*, but epic nonetheless." She grinned, flicking me off in the mirror, and I stuck my tongue out at her. "So, what do you think?"

In less than fifteen minutes, she'd taken my stick straight brown hair, added a loose curl, and pinned half of it up, leaving the rest to cascade over my shoulders. It was gorgeous.

"You deserve an Oscar, Jess. You're like the fucking Nicole Kidman of hairstylists. "

"I know." She smirked. "You're welcome."

I glanced at the clock again, and the butterflies-slash-stamped rhinos returned with a vengeance. She must have sensed my anxiety, because she leaned down to give me a hug.

"Everything is going to be fine, Bells. You're gonna knock his socks off, and you guys will end up married with fifteen little munchkins and a dog. I just know it."

"I don't know what it is about him, Jess. I mean, I've only met him once, but I can't stop thinking about him. I feel like some stupid, lovesick teenager. I've *never* been like this. What's wrong with me?"

"Nothing's wrong with you." She pulled me up out of the chair and turned me around to face her. "Sometimes, you just... know. You know?"

She quickly packed up her things, saying something about wanting to see Tyler before he left for his bachelor party, and I appreciated her kindness. I was sure that Edward's arrival would be met with blushing and stammering of epic proportions on my part, and it was bad enough that *I* had to endure it. She may have been my best friend, but having her there to witness my embarrassment would have only made things worse. I thanked her profusely, and promising to call her the moment I got home. As soon as she was out the door, I dashed into the bathroom to put the finishing touches on my makeup, and noticed that she'd left her spare key on the counter. Almost immediately, the buzzer sounded, and I jogged back to the front door, pressing the intercom button.

"Forget something, Jess?"

"Um... Bella?"

Oh Jesus.

"Edward?"

He chuckled. "Yeah, it's me."

"I'm so sorry, I thought you were... I mean, Jess was just...Um..." *Smooth, Bella.* "Come on up. I'm in 215."

I banged my head against the wall a few times as I buzzed him in, then pulled my lip-gloss out of my pocket and quickly reapplied. A few seconds later, there was a knock at the door. I took a deep breath in an attempt to slow my racing pulse, and opened it.

He was standing there with raised eyebrows, that half smile on his face, his hair in beautiful disarray, holding a bouquet of flowers. My heart sputtered when I realized that they were gloxinias, the flower symbolic of love at first sight. Had he known that when he'd picked them? And then he was looking at me, and his green eyes were smoldering, and I was suddenly incapable of coherent thought. All I could comprehend was the beauty that was uniquely *him*; jeans slung low on his hips, a white button up that hugged his sculpted torso, and his long slender fingers clutching the flowers that symbolized everything I was terrified to put into words. He politely cleared his throat, snapping me out of my trance, and I blushed.

"Bella." He inclined his head slightly and offered me the flowers. "You look beautiful."

"Thank you. And thank you for the flowers, they're gorgeous. Won't you come in?"

Won't you come in? Christ, Bella, what is this, some seventeenth century romance novel?

I closed the door behind him and headed into the kitchen to find a vase. "I'm just going to find a vase for these, and then we can get going to...um... actually, where are we going?"

"Well." He cleared his throat again. "There's this new Vietnamese place nearby I've been wanting to try. That is, if you like Vietnamese food."

His voice was lower, huskier than I remember, and I had to struggle to concentrate on his words, because I didn't really care what he was saying. I was content just to listen to him speak.

"Actually, Vietnamese is my favorite." I located the vase under the sink, filled it with water, carried it out to the living room, and set it on the coffee table. "Although I wasn't aware that it was a staple of the Jewish diet."

I'd been trying to make a joke, but it came out all wrong, and now it sounded like I was some kind of haughty, anti-Semitic asshole. I felt the blush returning to my cheeks, but he just ran a hand through his hair, looking adorably embarrassed.

"Actually, you know, I was raised Jewish, but I don't practice anymore. Haven't since high school. Just don't tell my parents."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean..." I stammered, apologizing for the second time in a matter of a few minutes and resisting the urge to bang my head against the wall once again.

"Don't apologize. It was funny."

"Well then." I grabbed my purse and quickly zipped up my jacket, eager to reverse the direction of the conversation. "Shall we?"

He hailed us a cab, and we spend the short ride in silence. I was both surprised and relieved to find that it wasn't at all awkward. There was something almost comforting about his presence, and I was finally able to relax a little. When we arrived, we were seated in the back; a dim, quiet corner, our table lit by a single paper lantern hanging from the ceiling. Edward helped me out of my coat and pulled out my chair before taking his own seat across for me.

"Such a gentleman," I teased, but underneath my calm exterior, I was still desperate for this evening to go smoothly, because I wanted to be able to look forward to the next, and the next, and the next. I wanted to be able to look forward to a thousand evenings, just like this, by his side, and blissfully happy with complete and utter normalcy.

He smiled that crooked smile. "You can thank my mother for that."

I made a mental note to do just that, provided that I ever get to meet her. *I really hope I get to meet her.*

"You told me a little bit about your parents. Do you have any siblings?" I asked, opening my menu to peruse the selections.

"I have a sister. Rosalie. She's older than me by three years. She was married last year. Her husband's name is Emmett."

"Do you get along with them?"

He hesitated. "For the most part. Emmett is great, he's boisterous and kind and he loves my sister very much. As for Rose, she has a tendency to toe the line between self-assured and just plain selfish,

and she crosses it a bit too often for my taste. But she's my sister; we're supposed to fight, you know?"

"In theory, yes, but I'm an only child, so I can't say that I know firsthand."

"Are your parents still married?"

I studiously avoided his gaze. "Typical sob story. My mom took off when I was a baby, and I haven't seen her since. My father, Charlie, raised me. He's the police chief over in Fremont. Needless to say, we're pretty close."

When I forced myself to look up at him, I was expecting to see pity. It was the normal reaction to my story, and I hated it. Instead, I saw nothing but compassion, and I was completely taken aback.

"I'm sorry, Bella. That must have been difficult," he said simply, and I was thankful when he let it go at that.

The waiter came to take our drink order, and then disappeared back into the kitchen.

"What about your parents?" I asked.

"They're still married. Carlisle is a doctor; he works in the emergency room at the hospital back in Forks. Esme is an interior designer. She owns her own business."

"She must be very talented."

"I think so, but then again, I'm biased." He chuckled.

The conversation continued to flow smoothly. At some point, the waiter returned to drop off our drinks and take our order, and when he disappeared again, we picked up right where we left off. It was fairly typical first date fodder, all flirting and icebreakers, but there was something deeper lying beneath the playful banter. While I answered his questions, he watched me as though he was trying to commit me to memory, and more than once I found myself blushing under the intense scrutiny of his gaze. He made me feel mysterious and beautiful, charming and captivating, and I slowly opened up to him, coming undone one stitch at a time.

When our food appeared, we momentarily lapsed into silence. It was delicious, which we eventually begin to discuss at length. He was quite the connoisseur of Vietnamese food; this small fact made me irrationally and incredibly happy. Vietnamese food was one of my guilty pleasures, one that I'd never been able to share with any of the men I'd previously been in relationships with. Without thinking, I shared this little tidbit of information with him, and immediately wanted to kick myself, because I had now become 'that girl'. You know, the girl who assumes after one date that you're going to spend the rest of our lives together. But before I could backtrack, I saw a flash of something - determination? desire? - in his eyes, and he said huskily, "Bella, if it meant that I would get to see you smile, I'd eat Vietnamese food with you every day for the rest of my life."

Well then.

The sexual tension between us was suddenly very palpable, and although I was doing a victory dance inside my head, I wasn't quite sure how to respond to his admission. I contemplated ripping off my shirt and throwing myself at him, but decided, sadly, that it wouldn't be appropriate given the circumstances. Instead, I decided to do what I did best, and diffuse the situation with my sparkling wit.

"Well, Edward, if it meant that I got to run my hands through that gorgeous sex hair of yours anytime I want, then I'd be happy to eat Vietnamese food with you every day for the rest of my life."

His eyes widened in shock, which is exactly the reaction I was hoping for, and after a moment he burst out laughing. I wasn't far behind.

"That is *not* the answer I was expecting." He was wiping tears from the corner of his eyes. "Gorgeous sex hair?"

"I call 'em like I see 'em." I shrugged.

"Clearly." He was looking at me again. "I like that about you."

"I like that you like that about me." We smiled at each other. A moment passed.

"I don't know if this is your thing, Bella, but there's a jazz club not far from here. It's relatively quiet, so we'd be able to talk, and the music is great-"

"I'd love to," I said, interrupting him. I knew the club he was talking about. The atmosphere was incredibly relaxing and he was right, the music was wonderful. Regardless, he could have asked me to accompany him to a lesbian strip club or an underground midget wrestling match, and I would have happily obliged.

I half-heartedly attempted to pay my half of the bill, but he waved me off, as I knew he would.

"What kind of gentleman would I be if I didn't pay for dinner?" he scoffed.

The club was within walking distance, so he offered me his arm. I breathed him in deep - peppermint, scotch and cologne, just as I remembered- and resisted the urge to bury my face in the crook of his neck. It was fairly mild for January, but despite the fact that my shoes threatened to kill me with every step, I enjoyed the walk. Once we were seated in the club, he disappeared to the bar, returning with a scotch for himself and a dirty martini for me. He'd remembered my drink from the week before. The simple gesture made this, us, feel familiar, and I liked it.

There was a trio onstage - piano, trumpet and sax - and they were playing a low, melancholy tune that conjured the heartbreak of solitude. It reminded me of the character I was playing for the playwright festival, and I found myself delving deeper into her past through the prominent pain in the music.

It was an acting thing.

Edward seemed to read my mind. "What's it like? Being an actress?"

I pondered his question for a moment.

"It's a lot of dichotomy. Heaven and hell, love and hate, joy and sadness."

"Just like life," he mused.

I nodded. "It's *interpretation* of life."

"You really love what you do." It was a statement, not a question, and there was a sense of wonder in his tone.

"I do." I paused, trying to find the right words to explain. "When I'm onstage, I get to breathe life into these wonderfully complex characters, and it doesn't matter who I am, or who I'm not. All that matters is that I'm creating beauty. Auditioning is terrifying, and jobs are hard to come by, but the craft is so delicate, so precise, so *real*- something perfect in the midst of such a flawed world. It makes all the hell worth it, in the end, for those two hours or so of heaven."

"Dichotomy." He smiled.

"And you?"

"Writing is- different. It's solitary. Just you and the page. The world I create, I create alone, in my head. And when your thoughts won't translate from your mind to the paper..." he trailed off. His hands were in his hair again. I wanted to hold them, but I was afraid. "It can be the most frustrating thing in the world. But it's also just like you say; creating something beautiful in such a flawed world."

"Dichotomy," I whispered, mesmerized by the way his mouth moved as he spoke. He nodded, sipped his scotch, and took a deep breath, as if to steady himself.

"I used to think I had talent. For the past year, though, everything I've written has been shit. Then I met you." He paused, fidgeting with his glass. "I literally haven't been able to tear myself away from my manuscript for the past two weeks. I know I've only met you once before this, but you saved me, Bella. You brought my writing back to life." He looked down and took my hand in his, winding our fingers together, his thumb gently tracing the back of my hand. After a moment he looked back up at me, his emerald eyes on fire. "Is this okay?"

My heart soared. I nodded my acquiescence to both his confession and his hand in mine, and as I reveled in the feel of his touch, I decided it was time to make a confession of my own.

"I've been so distracted lately that my professors are ready to expel me from the program. It's because, everywhere I look, I see your face. When I close my eyes, I see your smile. You're all I can think about, and it scares the hell out of me."

Something passed between us. Understanding. Hope.

"I'm glad I'm not the only one," he murmured. "I thought I was losing my mind."

Half of me wanted to resort to my fallback and make a joke to lighten the mood. The other half wanted to kiss each one of his fingertips. I settled for somewhere in-between.

"So where do we go from here?"

He lifted his free hand to my face and gently traced the curve of my cheek. "Where else is there to go but forward?"

"Forward." I closed my eyes and rested my cheek on his palm. "We can do that."

We sat like that for a while, hand in hand, listening to the music. There was so much I still didn't know about him, but I wasn't concerned. There would be time to discover everything about one another, to figure out if *this* would work. For now, I simply wanted to enjoy his company and the feel of my hand in his. I was so content, so comfortable, that it didn't take long for me to realize how exhausted I was. The emotional roller-coaster ride of the day had finally taken its toll, and a yawn escaped before I could stifle it.

"You're tired." He frowned. "I'm sorry, Bella. I didn't realize."

"No, Edward, don't be sorry. I'm having a wonderful time, but I am exhausted. It's been quite a day."

"Come on." He was already out of his seat and offering me my jacket. "Let's get you home."

The wind had picked up, and even inside the taxi, I was shivering. He pulled me close to him, wrapping his arm around my waist, and I rested my head on his shoulder. The ride back to my apartment passed entirely too fast. When we arrived, he told the driver to wait, and once again helped me out onto the sidewalk. As we approached the front door, I was still digging in my purse for my key when he began to speak.

"When can I see you again?" There was an urgency in his tone that caused the butterflies to return.

"Tomorrow?" I smiled, but I was only half joking.

"I'll call you, then. Tomorrow."

I finally located my key, and as I was fumbling with the lock, I felt his hand touch my face. He cupped my chin in the palm of his hand and, slowly, lifted it until my eyes meet his.

"Bella," he whispered.

"Edward." I sighed, and then he was kissing me, and I forgot how to breathe. His lips were soft and hungry and gentle and exquisite, and I prayed that he would never stop. After a few moments, he rested his forehead against mine, taking a breath as if to speak, but I quickly placed a finger against his lips.

"Don't. Anything you could possibly have to say, everything you're feeling, was wrapped up inside that one perfect kiss. Let's leave it at that, and as soon as you turn that corner at the end of the block, I'll be waiting, and I'll keep waiting until you call, willing my feet to touch the floor and trying to recall how to breathe."

He kissed my forehead lightly, and I could feel the smile on his lips. When he stepped back, I felt the loss throughout my body immediately, but I stood firm. As he opened the door to the taxi, he hesitated, and then turned back to face me.

"Goodbye, Bella. Until tomorrow."

I waited and watched as the taillights disappeared into the night. I was standing on a precipice, scared and overjoyed and thanking God that I may finally have something worthwhile to think of each morning; that it just may have been the beginning of the rest of my life.

"Goodbye, Edward," I whispered.

I have been waiting for you.

END