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Chapter 1 to 46

Afraid To Dance by Shannon Carr

Bella goes to Dartmouth and gets engaged to the WRONG guy. When she finds the courage to walk away from an abusive relationship, she meets safe and sweet Jacob and dangerously attractive Edward. Can she learn to trust and love again? AU/AH. ExB,RxE, AxJ.(Complete)

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Chapter: 1

*The search for my future has brought me here.
This is more than I'd hoped for, but sometimes I fear,
That the choice I was made for would someday appear,
And I'll be too late for that flight...*

David Wilcox

Prologue

I stared out at the treetops as the shadows moved across them. A storm was brewing. The air felt thick with humidity. It would've been a lovely time to sit and relax in the warm breeze, but I couldn't shake the chill that had seeped into my core. This just wasn't right.

Had it ever been?

How long have I been fooling myself? The garden and pavilion were booked, the wedding party had been chosen. They'd all seemed so excited. The invitations, the dresses and tuxes had all been chosen carefully. But the gnawing feeling in my stomach would not go away. I'd never wanted a wedding like this. It had all gotten so out of control.

I came to this spot when I needed to make a decision. For me, the hardest part was wrestling with the dilemma. Once my mind was made up, my convictions were set in stone. And everything

was easier. A finalized decision was freeing somehow.

This time, though, I'd made too many decisions without weighing them carefully. How had I gotten here?

We'd met two years earlier over spring break. He came down from Ohio to visit all of his high school buddies. He'd made me laugh, and in that brief week, our connection had seemed too good to be true. All of his friends—my friends at Dartmouth—had been surprised. I wasn't the type of girl who usually got his attention. I was different. He said I was passionate about things that really meant something. Intelligent. I made people laugh. And I was kind. He said that was what it was. He was impressed by my strength.

But I was a different person now. Unsure of myself. What had happened? I hadn't felt passionate about anything in a long time. I just felt...well, I just felt resigned. This was the way things were. I would have to make it happy and ideal.

And yet that was what was nagging at my heart. Why wasn't it just happy? Why wasn't I excited about the rest of my life? He was a great guy...wasn't he? He made me smile a lot. I didn't laugh much anymore, but I smiled. And still—I felt like I was about to make a huge mistake. I wasn't certain of anything at all anymore.

I whipped my head up as the first drop of rain stung my shoulder. The winds were picking up. As I looked at the clouds swirling, I knew one thing only. The storm was almost here, and I needed to run for shelter.

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Chapter: 2

I was dead with deciding, afraid to choose

I was mourning the loss of the choices I'd lose

But there's no choice at all if I don't make my move

And trust that the timing is right...

David Wilcox

Chapter One: Josh

“Josh?” I approached him in the crowded cafeteria. He'd transferred to Dartmouth the semester

after I had said I'd marry him.

"Hey, Bella." He finished his conversation with the two guys from his business administration class. "Where have you been? I thought we were supposed to meet at 5. I waited for you for a few minutes, but I was so hungry I went ahead through the line."

"I went for a walk. I had to iron some things out in my mind. I'll be right back...just gonna get some dinner."

"Okay." He watched me walk away, like he *always* watched me. It didn't feel right.

I stood in line wondering how to tell him what I was thinking. He wouldn't react well. I was sure of that. He got so upset over the littlest things. I was always trying to keep him content. And this thing wasn't so little.

As I stood in line, I suddenly felt sick. I grabbed a tray and went over to the soup bar instead of braving the chicken medley. I walked back to the table and pulled the chair back. "I forgot a spoon!"

Josh smiled and mussed my hair affectionately. "That sucks, but it's okay. I'll sit here and wait for you. I'm not in a hurry."

I shoved my chair back quietly and trudged over to the silverware cart. When I came back and sat down, he looked me over.

"You look rough...and wet. Did you get caught out in the storm?"

"Yeah," I said. "I was up on the hill watching the storm come in."

"Huh. Well, if you'd been here at 5, you'd be dry." Almost as an afterthought, he added, "I know you like it up there. What were you thinking about?"

There were too many people around for this conversation. And yet, I wasn't sure I wanted to be completely alone with him when I told him. "I don't know. I've just been struggling with some stuff. I'm thinking about changing my major...just a little. To English Lit with secondary ed instead of elementary ed. I'll still be able to teach...just something I enjoy a little more. I just felt weird about where things were headed." *And there's more*, I thought.

"Weird about where things were headed," he repeated dully.

You have no idea.

"Well, whatever you think. You'd be good at both."

The soup was finally beginning to warm me up. I looked out the window. The rain had let up a little. "What are your plans tonight?"

Josh leaned back in his chair, tipping the front legs up. “I don’t know. I don’t care, really. You?”

“I have some studying to do. And a case study to finish...and some lesson plans to write. But I’d like it if we could walk back toward the dorms together,” I tested almost questioningly.

“Yeah. No problem.” We got up and threw our trash away, setting our trays and silverware on the conveyor belt. I went back to push our chairs in and get my backpack. Josh waited by the door. I shrugged on the pack, and he extended his hand as if showing me the door. I pushed it open, and shivered as the breeze hit me. Josh took my hand as we headed back to the dorms.

If he thought I was quiet as he rambled on and on about his day, he didn’t say anything. When we got close to my dorm, I sat on a bench under one of the lights. “Got a minute?”

“Sure.” He sat down. He was still laughing about the story he’d just finished. I smiled, and I hoped it looked more genuine than it felt. I was quiet for a while, wondering how to begin.

“Bell?”

“Listen, Josh. I don’t really know how to say this. I know it’s kind of out of nowhere, but this afternoon...up on the hill, I realized something isn’t right. I don’t know what it is, but I know what it means. I’ve got to make some changes. It’s not just my major. That’s a part of it, but...I just can’t see myself getting married right now. I feel like all of this has really gotten out of hand.”

“Out of hand?” His jaw clenched. He looked down and saw me twisting the engagement ring. *His* engagement ring.

“Yeah. I never really wanted a big wedding, for starters. Everyone’s just kind of taken over...not that I haven’t appreciated the help. But...it’s more than that. I’m not sure my life is...I don’t know. I don’t have any reasons that will make sense to you, but I just know I can’t do this right now.”

“What do you mean *right now*? Can you do it later? Are we postponing this, or are you *trying* to break up with me?!”

“I’m not sure, Josh.” I couldn’t look in his eyes at the moment. I was afraid of what I’d see there. But he tipped my chin up at him roughly.

“Bella. This. Is. Crazy. You can’t even give me a good reason? You don’t even know why you feel this way?? You haven’t thought this through enough to make a big decision like this!”

“Josh, please. Believe me, I wish I had better answers for you. I don’t, and I’m sorry.” I was nervous. More than nervous. I had been afraid of how he’d react. He was yelling, and his fists were shaking. Relieved, I noticed a few other people slowly approaching from the direction of the cafeteria. I pressed on. “But I have this...certainty...that getting married isn’t right for us

right now. Maybe one day, I'll be ready to take this back, but I don't want it now." I put the ring in his hand and closed his fingers around it. "And I need to be able to walk away. I need some space to figure things out for a while, so...I guess it *is* more of a breakup than a postponement. I'm sorry."

Josh was silent. I sat and waited for a moment. He didn't say anything. His knuckles were white and his brow was creased. He was breathing hard.

Quietly, I stood. "I guess I'd better go. I'm sorry, Josh." I discreetly made sure there were still people nearby, and I walked slowly toward the door, leaving him on the bench.

I thought I heard him muttered through his teeth, "You *will* be sorry." I'd heard him wrong, right?

I hoped I was wrong.

Everyone acted surprised at the news, but Angela caught up with me after lunch the next day. "I know that must've been hard. You haven't seemed like yourself for awhile. Is this what it was?"

"Yeah, I think so. I just couldn't go on. I suddenly just felt like it was all a charade. I felt like I was walking into a prison. Weird, huh? You're not supposed to feel that way about your wedding."

"No. You're definitely not. I heard he was pretty angry you couldn't give him a decent reason...do you know why??"

"I don't, Angela." I was suddenly very thankful for her friendship. She was the only one of my friends who hadn't known Josh before I did. "I just knew I had to get out."

"Well," she encouraged me. "There are only two weeks left in the semester anyway. You'll get to stay real busy with papers and finals, and then you can go away for awhile."

"Yeah." Suddenly, I was ready to get started...and lock myself away in my room.

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Chapter: 3

As I swam away from our possessions

I imagined they were gone forever more,

And for once, I was glad that all I treasured

Would still be with me, when I reached the other shore.

David Wilcox

Chapter Two: New Beginnings

The next semester offered a fresh start in so many ways. I had changed my major, and was getting ready to begin upper level English classes. I was actually excited. I loved reading...especially classics. I looked forward to spending a lot of time tucked away in my room, listening to good music and reading. Getting credit for it would be nice, too.

I had a new roommate. She was unbelievably gorgeous, and she knew it. Not the easiest person to be around, but I was all about new relationships. I'd told Josh he could have all of our friends...they were his first anyway. I just didn't want things awkward and complicated. I was ready for new *everything*.

Just not love. I felt done with that.

I was hoping that Rosalie didn't mind my music. I always had background music. I couldn't really function without feeling like there was a soundtrack playing in the background of my life. For the most part, though, she didn't spend time in the room. She liked to be out and about—enjoying the gawking perusals from the underclassmen. Oh well, to each her own.

On the first day of class, I got to my American Lit class a little early, so I could snag a seat away from the door. I opened my book and started reading Kate Chopin's *Awakening*, when the desk beside me moved. A ruggedly good-looking guy was smiling at me when I looked up.

“Hey,” he offered. “I'm Jacob.”

I smiled back. He was friendly. “Bella Swan. Nice to meet you.” I looked back down at my book, until the professor came in. Class was starting.

Dr. Rommer didn't seem to want to spend too long on introduction. He passed out the syllabus, and explained the class requirements. A lot of short papers, a 20 page term paper comparing a modern novel with one of the classics on his list, a mid-term, and a final. No problem. When the professor added that we'd have a daily quiz on the reading, Jacob leaned over and rolled his eyes at me, smiling again. He had a nice smile.

We began the semester with Mark Twain, one of my favorite American authors—when I needed something light. Truth be told, I preferred British Lit: Shakespeare, the Brontes, Austen. But this was going to be a good class just the same. I could tell.

Jacob waited for me when Dr. Rommer dismissed us. “Where ya headed?”

“British Lit. My favorite. What about you?”

“Anatomy and Physiology.”

“Yikes,” I said. I’d be terrible at that. I couldn’t stand to think about the dissection that would go on in those labs! I paled just thinking about it. Since my class was in the same building, I didn’t have far to go. I smiled as I said, “See ya later, Jacob.”

As I turned to walk into my British Lit class, I saw the single most extraordinary looking guy I’d ever seen in my life.

And he was staring at me.

I’d never seen a look so intense, or a face so devastatingly handsome. I didn’t know what to do with myself, so I looked away and tried to stroll in to the room. Again, I took a seat away from the door. The room was small, and so the desks filled quickly. I was glad Greek god didn’t appear to be taking this class.

The professor entered with his briefcase, and—much to my chagrin—Adonis followed. And the only desk left in the room was directly behind me.

He sat down and exhaled sharply. Despite the fact that this was going to be my favorite class, I felt completely uncomfortable. Why had he been staring at me? Who was he?

As the stack came around, I took my syllabus. But when I tried to deftly maneuver the pile of papers over my shoulders coolly, I dropped them all. I thought I’d die from embarrassment. I spun around in my seat to pick them up and my chin slammed into the back of his head.

He was already getting them.

“Oh!” I whimpered. My mouth was filling with blood. He looked up at me, irritated, rubbing the back of his head. He took a syllabus and passed them back.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“Mmm-hmm.” I said, pointing to my mouth. I smiled a weak *forgive me?* and shrugged. “You?” I questioned.

“I’ll be fine.” He took a deep breath and turned his attention back to the professor.

I tried to do the same.

I wondered what he must think of me *now*. It was true I was clumsy. But it had been a long time

since I'd worried about making a first impression.

And why, exactly, was I worried about it now? This was the semester I was going to be super-focused. I was going to accomplish great things with nothing holding me back. Next year I'd do my student teaching. This year, I was trying to build my resume...I was heading the Literary Society, volunteering to run a homework club in a low-income housing complex. I'd be too busy to be distracted. *Right? Come on, Bella! Focus. This is British Lit!*

I took a deep, cleansing breath and settled into my seat. As I flung my hair over my shoulder, I thought I heard Adonis sniff quietly. He cleared his throat and shifted in his seat.

I held it together for the rest of the class, and planned to fly out of there as soon as the professor dismissed us. I tucked my notes quickly into my backpack, but before I could even look up, he was heading out the door, one binder under his arm.

I walked out of the room, heading toward the cafeteria, infinitely glad I'd made plans

to meet up with Angela for lunch. I needed to tell her about my morning.

My head was pounding as I walked into Thayer dining hall. I got my lunch from the grill, and then scanned the tables for Angela. I saw her over by the windows. I had just headed that direction when someone bumped into me from behind. I looked over my shoulder.

Josh.

"What have *you* been up to?" he chided.

I felt sick. "Nothing," I answered. *I don't owe you any explanation.* I didn't ask him anything back. I found it hard to be polite. We may have had a history, but I was incredibly uneasy about this. "I'm going to sit down and eat now, Josh."

He grabbed me tightly just above the elbow. "I wasn't finished talking to you, *Bella.*" I looked around, nervously. Angela noticed, and was already on her way to my rescue. Suddenly she stopped, an intrigued look on her face.

"Bella, is this guy bothering you?" a voice asked over my shoulder. Josh looked up, surprised. He let go of my arm suddenly.

"I'll see you *later*, Bella." Josh warned.

I turned and faced my advocate. It was Jacob. He shrugged and smiled at me. "You okay? What was *that* about?"

"Umm...I used to be more involved with that guy than I'd like to admit. I...I guess I didn't

realize what a creep he was.”

“Shhyeah! I guess I’m glad I came by when I did. I’ll keep an eye on him for ya. What a schmuck.” He smiled at me. “See ya, Bella.” And then he was off. He sat with a table full of his friends, and I finished my too long walk over to Angela.

“You all right, Bell? What did he *say*?” Angela queried.

“He just asked what I’d been up to, but it was creepy.”

“Sorry. I was hoping he was going to be nice about all this...but, umm...what did the *other guy* say? Josh looked pretty scared.” She smiled.

“Oh. He just asked me if that guy was bothering me. Good timing, huh?”

“Yeah. Who was he?”

“His name’s Jacob. He sat by me in my American Lit class this morning. Seems really nice.”

“He does. Making friends already, see? A new start won’t be too bad for you.”

“I guess.” Suddenly I was picturing this year a little differently. I wasn’t sure if things were going to be as easy as I’d imagined. There was such a pounding behind my eyes. I put my hand to my head and rested my elbow on the table. I think I had banked too much on Josh being a bit more grown up about our break up.

“Headache? I have some Tylenol,” Angela offered. She pulled the small bottle out of her backpack and set two pills on the table. “I’ll be right back, Bella. I bet some coffee will do the trick.”

“Thanks, Angela. Some coffee sounds perfect.” *You’re a good friend.* I rested my head in both hands then, and closed my eyes.

When her chair scraped the floor a few moments later, I looked up. She smiled. And over her shoulder, Mr. British Lit was watching me, a perplexed look on his face.

He looked away as soon as we made eye contact.

Angela pulled me back into conversation then. “My physics professor seems crazy. This semester could either be really interesting or really tough.”

No kidding. Mine, too.

“How were your classes?”

“Good. I think I’ll like them. It’s cool that I’m getting to study some of my favorite authors this

semester. I'm hoping I'll see them all from a new angle." It felt good to talk about something familiar. "The work load isn't too bad either. Which is good, since I'm going to be busy with the afterschool club.

"Yeah...when does that start up?"

"Next Monday. I'm looking forward to throwing myself into something meaningful. I hear the kids have really struggled...and they've had a hard time keeping the club staffed. Those kids just need some consistency, I think. Imagine what things are like for them at home!"

"You're right. And you're perfect for that, Bella. I think you'll be really good for them...and probably them for you, too."

"I think so."

We chatted for a while more, enjoying the chance to relax before the semester really got super busy. But after about half an hour, we knew that we really needed to get started on our assignments...and Angela had to be at work at four. We headed back to our rooms, and said we'd see each other tomorrow. My head was feeling a little better, but I didn't have quite the spring in my step that I'd had earlier. I just felt...something heavy. I hoped it would go away soon. I needed my life to get back to normal. Back to the way it was *before* Josh.

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Chapter: 4

Author's Notes: First, thanks for reading. I love hearing your thoughts, questions, challenges...so keep 'em coming!

Next, I need you to understand a couple of things about the story. This is definitely an Edward and Bella story. But you need to know that for a while, Jacob will be a huge part of it. There's no attraction there for Bella. He's just nice. Nice and safe. Coming out of a relationship that she doesn't even *realize* was abusive yet, all of these relationships will take time to build. And they'll be vastly different relationships. Jacob's safe, protective friendship comes first...but Edward will be better, trust me. As Bella begins to remember *clearly* the parts of her relationship with Josh that have been mercifully unclear until now, she'll feel like damaged goods. And that will take a lot of healing. But the boys will help her through it. ;) Wink, wink.

Third, if you don't know who David Wilcox is, all you need to know right now is that he's a folk singer. Not your usual Twihard style, for sure, but the lyrics on this particular album are *so apt*, that I couldn't *not* include them. As far as his albums go, ironically, this is probably my least favorite, so if you decide to check it out, don't go blaming me if the music irritates you. Lyrical

genius; musical...what? He strayed from his gifted area and got a little dorky with background singers and whatnot. If you're determined to check him out, and you like folk music and storytelling with acoustic guitar, PM me, and I'll give you a *real* recommendation.

Fourth, and perhaps most important: I added almost 1000 words to chapter 2, so go back and read the rest of it—if you've already read it before—ere you continue.

Let me know what you think!

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Chapter: 5

You say you see no hope, you say you see no reason

We should dream that the world would ever change.

You're saying love is foolish to believe

'Cause there'll always be some crazy with an Army or a Knife

To wake you from your daydream...put the fear back in your life.

David Wilcox

Chapter 3: Funk

I walked into my dorm, up the stairs, and let myself into my room. No Rosalie. Good. I needed some solitude. I looked for a CD to match my mood. Brad. Perfect. Mellow, angsty. *What was going on with me?*

I flopped onto the bed and stared up at the ceiling. Honestly, I didn't feel like anything really mattered. I had a plan for the future. I knew what was good for me, but I felt like something was just wrong with me. I hadn't been wrong about my decision to break up with Josh. That was for sure. I'd enjoyed not having to spend the summer making someone *else* happy constantly. I didn't live in a constant state of anxiety. But I didn't exactly have a good summer either. I just made my plans for the semester—fraught with loads of busyness to occupy me—and determined that I'd probably feel better when I could just get on with it all.

But now I was here. Was this the "getting on with it?" Somehow, it didn't seem like my busy schedule would fix the numbness in my heart. I'd have to try to make some other changes. Maybe I needed to be proactive in surrounding myself with safe people who made me smile. The

kids at the homework club. Helping them would make me smile.

And I could look for the good in things. Surely I had a lot to be thankful for. My dad, Charlie, was pretty great. He and I really understood each other. We hadn't always gotten along. When my mom left him and we moved to Phoenix, I used to have to go to Forks every summer. And I hated it. I felt forced to act like I enjoyed the rain and gloom...and like I didn't fit into my dad's life.

Then, when my mom and Phil got married, things had changed. Not between Mom and me, but I saw that she wanted to travel with Phil when he went out of town for his baseball games. She felt like she was missing out. She'd never have *said* that to me, but I'm just perceptive when it comes to *other* people's needs. And I wanted her to be happy. So, I'd moved back to Forks with Charlie. It was rough at first, but after some time developing a routine, we both realized how much we were alike. Though we didn't share everything like mom and I had—we trusted each other. We liked hanging out together sometimes. And I knew he was proud of me. Wow! The look on his face when I told him I'd been accepted to Dartmouth! He was so overcome. He was actually on the verge of tears. He couldn't say much, but he eked out, "I knew you could do it, Bells. Good job, Kid."

Mom and Phil were great, too. I didn't see them as much, since they lived in Jacksonville, but they were happy. And I was glad my mom was finally *really* enjoying life. She'd been so aimless for so long. Phil really *was* good for her. Now, if I'm being honest with myself, I'll admit, they'd been a little hard to be around over the summer. I mean, I enjoyed the Florida sunshine. Still, the laughter, the banter...I don't know what it was...it kind of grated on my nerves this time. I couldn't laugh with them. It's not that their senses of humor weren't funny. It was just—well, it was almost like *I didn't have a sense of humor anymore*. What had happened to change all that? I used to think my mom was so hilarious.

Maybe some new comedy could make me laugh.

That's what I needed. To laugh! It had been a while.

Huh. How long *had* it been???

Okay, Bella! Get a grip. You've got lots to do, and you've got to make this count.

I changed the CD to Debussy, one of my favorites, and pulled out my American Lit book. When *Reverie* came on, I leaned my head against the wall and lost myself for a while.

I was in a meadow...a really peaceful clearing in the forest. Nothing around for miles. I laid out a blanket, positioned myself so that I could feel the sun on my face, and just basked. Alone. I felt safe there. The sun warmed my skin, and I found that so peaceful, so relaxing. When I awoke in the meadow, the sky was a beautiful melon color, and I was chilled. I didn't feel alone anymore. I looked up, startled, but no one was around. I pulled my sweater out of my backpack, wrapped myself in its toastyness, and gathered my belongings.

It was time to head back to reality. The song was over anyway.

Clair de Lune was playing as I began reading my assignment. Emily Dickinson. The peaceful happy music sounded so dissonant. The words I was reading! I understood how she felt!

After great pain, a formal feeling comes—

The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs—

The stiff Heart questions was it He, that bore,

And Yesterday, or Centuries before?

The Feet, mechanical, go round—

Of Ground, or Air, or Ought—

A Wooden way

Regardless grown,

A Quartz contentment, like a stone—

This is the Hour of Lead—

Remembered, if outlived,

As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow—

First—Chill—then Stupor—then the letting go—

Would I outlive this hour of lead? Was there any way in the world I'd start to feel more than a chill or a stupor? Contentment like a stone?

Could I somehow let go? Could I get away from all this? Not if Josh has anything to do with it.

Oh, Emily Dickinson was too angsty! *I'll come back to this later.*

I pulled my thick, maroon sweater—well worn—out of the top of my wardrobe, and slid it over my head. It was time for some fresh air. I wished I could find that meadow.

It was only about three o'clock, but the campus wasn't teeming with people. It was brisk as I headed out of Mass Row and up toward the Green. I needed to see peace...but I didn't want to go back up on my hill yet. The last time I'd been up there had been...the afternoon of the storm.

Besides, I knew it was likely there'd be more people at the Green, and that made me feel safer.

Out of nowhere, Josh was beside me. "Bella," he seethed. "Who was your *friend*?"

"Just some guy I met in class this morning. No big deal. *Why* do you need to know?" *Just keep moving, Bella. Get somewhere that people are around.*

"He seemed pretty protective of you."

"Maybe he thought I needed protection from something." *You creep! You act like you still own me.*

"What is *that* supposed to mean?"

"Well, I didn't appreciate the way you grabbed my arm, for one. And, honestly, I didn't really feel like talking. I had a headache and wanted to sit down. You weren't being very friendly anyway." *Like you're not being very friendly now.*

"Do you *want* me to be friendly?" The corner of his mouth curled in a menacing way.

"Umm...actually, I don't think we have a lot to talk about anymore." *Three minutes to the Green. Maybe I can walk faster. Or, I could duck into Dick's House. I wonder how he'd feel about me walking into the security office...*

"Bella, you've never given me a chance to respond to your words last spring. You ripped the rug out from under me. I didn't see that coming from a mile away. *We* were so *happy*. So *good* together. You used to make me feel...well, you'd have done *anything* for me. I *know* that. Anything I asked, you did. And you did some stuff that surprised even *me*." He smirked. "Why'd you get so *selfish* all of a sudden? I swear, you were so full of yourself that night!" I could tell his anger was building. "What were you *thinking*?! You *belong* to me. *We belong together*. Don't you see that?. You can tell your boyfriend from lunch that you won't be seeing him anymore. If I can't have you, no one will, *Bella*." *He was practically hissing.*

Oh, God, why didn't I go into the security office?? Two minutes to the Green. I've got to calm him down.

His jaw was clenched again. I couldn't breathe well.

Suddenly, the door of the Moore Psych Building opened. And there was Adonis. I shot him a panic-stricken look. He froze, trying to understand.

"Oh, hey!" I shouted, desperately, trying to sound like I *wasn't* in a crisis at the moment. "Aren't you in my British Lit class? I have a question about our assignment. Do you have a second to walk with us to the Green?" My eyes were *pleading*.

"Well, I have to..." Something about my face must've suddenly registered with him. What good

is a psych major who can't read complete and total *panic*?? "Yeah. I do. I have a minute." He looked at Josh icily.

As Adonis approached, Josh fumed silently next to me. Then he turned me to face him, cupped both my cheeks in his hands, and threatened through his teeth, "This *isn't over, Bella.*" And then he was gone.

I was alone with Adonis, and I didn't even know his name.

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Chapter: 6

So now the stage is set. Feel your own heart beating in your chest.

This life's not over yet, so we get up on our feet and do our best.

We play against the fear. We play against the reasons not to try.

We're playing for the tears burning in the happy angel's eyes.

David Wilcox

Chapter Four: Numb.

"Are you okay?" Mr. British Lit asked.

"I...uh...I guess so." I couldn't look away from where Josh had been standing.

He stepped around me until he could see my face. Bending at the knees a bit, until his eyes were on a level with mine, he pressed, "*Really?*"

"I don't know. He just...he came out of nowhere."

"You know him, right?"

I did not want to explain the whole situation to this guy. He just seemed to have it way too together. What must he think of me? Suddenly I was ashamed to be standing in front of him with no words. I had to speak up...but I knew everything that came out of my mouth would make him think less of me. "Yeah. I broke up with him last semester, and he just...he won't let me go." *And I'm afraid of him now.*

He nodded in understanding. And his eyes were watching mine closely. *Is he trying to guess what I'm thinking? He's looking for the fear. Oh, God. Don't let him see it!*

“How would you like it if I walked you back to your room? Or somewhere to get something little to eat? You look like you might need a bite.”

I did want something, but I couldn't imagine sitting across from him for any amount of time. For some reason, I just couldn't bear the thought of him thinking less of me—and I was confident that he would.

“Where were you headed before you were...*accosted*?” He was looking at me gently.

I relaxed a little bit, but *just* a little. “I needed some fresh air. I was headed to the Green.”

“Oh, good then. Berry Library is on our way. We'll just stop in and get something at Novack Café.” He bent to look in my eyes again. “Okay?” he offered kindly.

“Sure. I think some hot chocolate would be perfect.”

“Okay then.” He stood up and looked satisfied. We headed off in that direction.

We were silent for a while as we walked. I hated keeping him from whatever he'd been headed to do, but I was so deeply thankful for his *presence*. So much for needing solitude. Solitude was starting to scare me.

I tested, “If you have somewhere you need to be...”

“Nowhere that's pressing. I want to make sure you get back okay. Do you mind if I walk with you?”

“No. That's...nice.” He could tell I felt awkward, though.

“Do you know,” he said as if an idea had just occurred to him, “I don't believe we've officially met. I'm Edward.”

“Bella.”

He smiled at me. “That fits.” After a moment he added, “So Bella, how is your tongue?”

“What??” I looked up, surprised.

“I think you bit it quite hard this morning. Am I right?” He had a striking smile.

“Oh...I...er...it's okay. Thanks. How's your head?”

He was still smiling. “They say I'm going to make it. That's why I was in the Psych building.”

“Right,” I chided. “Well, I’m so glad to hear you’ll be okay.” Back to reality. “Are you a psych major?”

“I am. You? What are you studying?”

“English. I want to teach.”

“High School?”

“Umm, maybe for a while, but I didn’t really like high school the first time around. I think I’d like to teach at the college level.”

“Interesting.”

Interesting? That wasn’t the response I’d expected. I wasn’t sure what I *had* expected, but I didn’t want him to think me just *interesting*. He was probably having to work really hard to come up with conversation. Though he seemed enough at ease.

We walked on quietly for a few more minutes, though it wasn’t uncomfortable.

Berry Library was just ahead. He held the door open for me, and we walked inside. The café was busy. “Why don’t you sit for a moment, and I’ll order.”

“Okay.”

“Hot chocolate, right? With whipped cream?”

“That sounds great.”

He looked a tad uneasy for a moment, maybe trying to choose his next words carefully? “And, Bella...I’d really feel better if I could get you something small to snack on, too.”

I looked unsure, but studied the choices for a moment. “I’d love an apple cinnamon muffin, then.”

He looked relieved. “Great.” He smiled at me again.

I found a spot over by the window that was warmed by the sun, and closed my eyes. Too much had happened today. His soft voice interrupted my thoughts after a few minutes.

“Bella? Here you go.” I took the cup gratefully, and he offered, “How about that fresh air? Would you like to find a bench out on the Green?”

“Uh-huh.” Oh, this hot chocolate was perfect. He held the door open for me again and said, “I see two benches. One in the sun, to our left, and the other under a tree over there.” He was

pointing with my muffin bag. “Which would you prefer?”

“In the sunshine, please.” I added quietly, “I love the sunshine.”

“I do too,” he replied softly. I didn’t realize he’d heard me.

We strolled over to the bench, and he gave me my muffin as we sat down. It was warm! “Mmm. I thought they’d been sitting out for a while...but this is still warm,” I said incredulously.

“No, I smelled some freshly baked muffins, and so I just asked if they had any in the back that were still hot. They did. I’m glad you like it, Bella. You looked like you could use some warmth.”

That was it. He was just doing all of this because he felt sorry for me. Well, I didn’t want his pity. I wanted the muffin, and the hot chocolate—and I wanted to look at him a little more—but I didn’t want his pity. I didn’t say anything in response.

He leaned back and rested his ankle on his knee, not bothered by my silence. I watched as a breeze blew and he ran his fingers through his bronze hair. He wore it tousled, messy. I liked it. He was looking out at the Green, watching a game of Ultimate Frisbee. I was looking at him. I’d never seen anyone like him. He was almost...inhumanly beautiful. His face looked like it had been chiseled out of stone, and Someone had breathed life into him. And I loved the way his hair went in every direction, a little falling down around his eyes. He wore a mocha colored turtleneck sweater under a dark brown leather jacket. It looked very expensive. The fabric of his khaki pants and his excellent pair of brown shoes added to that impression. He reached up to push the hair out of his eyes, and I could see the play of his muscles under his jacket.

And his eyes. I could just sink into the color of his eyes. They were so unusual, a light brown, almost a deep amber. Beautiful. And I felt safe when he looked at me.

But I also felt like he pitied me. In each of the two encounters we’d had with one another, I’d needed rescuing. Of course, this morning hadn’t been so earth shattering as this afternoon, but I hadn’t even been able to manage handing him a stack of papers efficiently. He’d seen that I was clumsy, experienced that I was accident-prone, and now he’d had to save me from Josh. Had he realized I’d been in danger? Or just that I seemed uncomfortable?

He looked over at me, a crooked smile playing on his lips. *Excellent lips.* “Did your family go to Dartmouth, Bella?”

What? No...he feels like he has to remind me we are worlds apart. “No, I’m the first. I have a full scholarship. It was really exciting for my dad. You?” *I bet your family founded Dartmouth.*

“I’m the sixth generation. I didn’t really have a choice. Not that this isn’t a great school. It was just...*expected.*” Family expectations, high breeding, aristocracy, prep school since birth. Yeah, he was letting me know that we weren’t even in the same *class*. I felt sad, somehow. I thought maybe he’d at least continue to be friendly.

I heard sudden footsteps running toward us and looked up to see who it was. “Bella!” A delighted Jacob was heading my way, Frisbee in hand. I smiled. I couldn’t help it. Jacob looked so *glad* to see me. “Were you watching the game?”

“Yeah.” *Not really. Edward was, though, and I was watching him. Does that count?*

Edward looked back and forth between us for a moment, seeing the easy camaraderie, then stood, extending his hand. “Edward Cullen.”

Jacob seemed unaffected by anything. “I’m Jake,” he grinned. “Jacob Black.” He directed his attention back to me. “The game was so great. Today’s the perfect day for enjoying the air! I love the fall.” He was still grinning, looking at me. I had to admit, it was infectious. “What are you guys doing? I’m just getting ready to head back to my dorm.”

Edward’s confidence and ease never changed, but something about him had shifted. “Well, Jacob, I’ve got someone to meet. Since you’re headed in that direction, would you mind seeing Bella back to her dorm?” He didn’t act like that was an awkward request.

“Sure, sure,” Jacob answered. “I’d love to.” He was like a Cheshire cat.

Edward leaned in a little, “Jacob, I saw that you noticed Bella’s awkward conversation at lunch, am I right?”

Was he trying to intimidate Jacob? He must feel so above us. Jacob was nonplussed, but did seem a little intrigued by the question. “Yeah, I did.”

“Well, then,” Edward added firmly, placing a hand on Jacob’s shoulder, “I need you to walk her all the way to her dorm. To the door, all right?” He was looking into Jacob’s eyes seriously.

Jacob caught on. “I won’t let her out of my sight, man. I’ll be by her side as long as she wants me there.”

Edward seemed satisfied with that, and yet there was something else on his face that I couldn’t read. “Okay. Thank you, Jacob.” Then he turned back to me. “Bella? I’ll see you Wednesday, in class. Be safe.” He picked up our trash, asked if my cup was empty, and walked back toward the library.

I watched him leave, thankful that he’d been so willing to help me today, sad that our worlds were so different. Then, I turned to Jacob.

“Let’s go, huh?” he said, still chipper. We skirted the library and headed toward the dorms. He talked almost the whole way back. As we neared my dorm, he smiled over at me. “I don’t know what your schedule is like tomorrow, but how about I meet you here Wednesday and walk to American Lit with you. Sound okay? And I’ll be around tomorrow, too. If you want.” His voice held a question.

“I think I’ll stick to my room as much as I can. I love the fall, but I’ve got a lot of work to do, and...well, it seems like a good place to hang out.”

“Bella, you shouldn’t have to hide in your room. You’re free to do whatever you want.”

I wanted to defend myself. “I’m not *hiding*, Jacob. I just didn’t get much done today, and I’ll have work tomorrow, too.”

“Sure, sure. I know. But...well, listen. If you want to go anywhere, and you need some company, I’d be glad to tag along.” He jogged up to a passerby with a backpack. “You got a piece of paper and a pencil for a second?” Apparently so.

A moment later, Jacob returned. “Here ya go, Bells. If you need *anything*, okay?” He was grinning again.

“Okay, Jacob. Thanks.” I smiled back and headed up to my room.

Rosalie still wasn’t in the room, though I could tell she’d been there. There was makeup on the counter, and the room smelled like mangoes. Her backpack was flung on the bed, books and papers spilling out. I found a note on my desk. *Be back late*, it said. The first night of class. How different we were.

I put in my favorite Sting CD, *The Soul Cages*, made some hot tea and sat down at my desk. Three hours later I had finished my reading. I finally felt good about something. I grabbed a granola bar and pulled the milk out of my mini-fridge. A snack would be enough. It was time to crash.

Rosalie woke me up when she came in. I looked at the clock. It was after 11. I hoped she’d studied while she was out, too, but somehow I doubted it. Of course, I didn’t really know her at all. She quietly grabbed a change of clothes and headed into the bathroom. I heard her get in the shower, and then I dozed off again.

“Hello?” I answered the phone.

“Bella, it’s Josh.” I smiled at the sound of his voice. I was so glad our friends had introduced us. My friend Angela and I had hit it off with them, nearly as soon as we’d met. We’d both come from Forks on scholarships. They’d all gone to Saint Charles Prep School in Ohio. A handful of them had come to Dartmouth and the other boys’ had gone on to Yale. Josh was a Yale boy. We’d met over spring break, and had been keeping in touch long distance since then. He was so impressive.

“Hey, you. I’m glad you called. I just got in from the movies. We saw the best movie. It was...”

He cut me off abruptly. “You went out again? It’s a weeknight. I’d hoped that wasn’t it. But I had called three or four times and got no answer.”

“Yeah, well I’m big enough to make my own decisions. I don’t have a curfew. Besides, your friends are taking good care of me.”

“That’s what bothers me, Bella. You keep going out and having fun with my friends—without me.”

Surprised, I answered, “Oh, come on. You know I’d rather be with you...but they’re the ones that go to my school. And you know how fun they are. Besides, if they weren’t my friends I’d never have met you...and...I’m so glad I did, Josh.” I hoped that would appease him. Why was he being so jealous?

“Whatever. I’m glad I met you, too, but I don’t like you having fun without me. I want to watch you have fun. I want to be the one to make you smile.”

“Okay, Josh? On one level I can really appreciate that you want me to smile, but what’s your game here? You want me to just sit and sulk in the corner until the holidays? I’m just supposed to put my life on hold?” He couldn’t really want that.

“Well, yeah.” He added quickly, “If it’s not too much to ask.”

“Actually, it is too much to ask. Way too much.”

“Bell, I’m just looking out for you. It’s like you’ve gotten so consumed with me since we met that you’re not taking your studies seriously anymore. You need to concentrate...to keep your scholarship. You don’t have it as easy as my boys and I do. Our going to an Ivy League school was always a given. We don’t have to work as hard. I just don’t want you to let them pull you down...to drag you away from your studies just to hang out. It would be embarrassing if you lost your scholarship, Bella.”

Wait. What?! “Embarrassing for whom, Josh? You? I’d like you to remember that you didn’t know me or my schedule six months ago. You have no idea how much time I spent studying, and how much time I spent out with your boys. I’m perfectly capable of recognizing my own needs and limits. I can make good choices. I’d been doing it for a long time without you. So don’t be so full of yourself.”

“Bella, sweetie. You’re misunderstanding me. I was only thinking of Charlie and Renee. You know they’d never tell you they were disappointed in you. You’d end up at a community college somewhere with their finances! Think how awful they’d feel. You’re the one being selfish, Bella. We both know that without the scholarship you’d never have had a dream about anything but a little, po dunk community college. Where were you gonna go, Peninsula??” He laughed. “You’re actually in a position now to make all your dreams come true. The education, the great career, if you want. Of course, if you wanted to just marry me right out of college and be a rich man’s wife, that’s okay, too. You’d look great on my arm at all the parties.”

I didn’t even know what to say. Better to keep quiet.

Josh continued, “Bella, Bella. You are the most beautiful person I’ve ever met in my life. I can’t imagine being without you. We belong together, and I’m so glad I met you. I just worry sometimes that one of my boys will try to steal you away from me. I’m just trying to protect you. Have you seen the way Travis looks at you? Never mind. Don’t even think about that. Truth is, Bella, I’d just die if you weren’t mine. I love you, Bella. I love you. You know that, right?”

Yeah, I thought. I did know. “I guess.”

“Bell, I need you to know this—not guess. I am not going anywhere. Now that I know someone like you exists, I couldn’t possibly be satisfied with anybody else. I love you more than you could possibly understand. Okay?”

“Okay, Josh. I love you, too.” Something didn’t feel right, but I couldn’t argue anymore tonight.

“Now, it’s late, so I want you to go to sleep. Don’t worry about studying tonight. You’ll have time to catch up. You’re not going to be so busy in the evenings anymore. I’ll tell the guys that you need to focus more on your workload. They’ll understand. Rest well, Bella.”

I was startled awake by Rosalie stepping out of the bathroom. The beam of light fell right across my eyes. She didn’t see me open my eyes, though, and she gracefully walked over to my stereo and turned off my music.

I felt sick. I remembered that conversation too well. The warning signs had all been there, and I’d missed them somehow. I guess, if you only see each other every few weekends, you can put on a pretty impressive show. Why had I been so blind, though? Was I so desperate to be treasured? To know what love was like?

Well, no more. I’d finally figured it out. Love was a total lie. It was the stuff of cheap, idealistic dreams. I wasn’t going to hope for that anymore. I wasn’t even going to believe in it if some guy fell at my feet. I was finished with all that.

I’d just stay busy, like I’d planned. New friends, sure. *Nothing* else. I could be happy alone for the rest of my life. I’d sure rather do that than swallow such an immense *lie* again.

As a matter of fact, I wasn’t going to be afraid either. I didn’t care about Josh. What a schmuck! It’d be better if I just didn’t feel anything anymore.

Resolved, and enjoying the new numbness, I fell asleep. I slept hard for the first time in months.

End Notes: I know this chapter was longer than the others, but they’re actually too short for my taste. This is my new “goal” length. Please let me know what you think of that.

Also, since this is my first FanFic ever, I would really love to know very specifically what you like about each chapter...what characterizations, phrases, descriptions. And equally, what you don’t like. Question me, too. Tell me where I need to elaborate. I’m learning from

all of this! Aerosoldoc, you've been a great help so far. Thanks mucho!

Lastly, I will try to publish one more chapter before the weekend, and then I'll be out for a week...please be patient with me. I'll try to get something up again next Thursday. I've already got it written in my head.

Love you guys! (And since I'm new, spread the word...if you like the story, please tell your friends!)

#####

Chapter: 7

How good would it feel to control me,

To know that I would do whatever it took

For you to take me again?

David Wilcox

Chapter Five: Guarded

I got up and showered early the next morning, thankful for my sleep of oblivion. Today, I started with Literary Criticism, and then Grammar and Composition. And Wednesday nights, in addition to my two lit classes in the morning, I'd be taking Zoology. Wednesdays were going to be almost too busy once I started the homework club...no, wait. That was the way I *used* to think. There was no such thing as *too* busy. I'd welcome the change. Time on my hands hadn't turned out too well yesterday.

Rosalie was getting dressed when I came back into our room. I thought it'd be a good idea to at least try to get to know her a little. "Good morning...have a good time last night?"

"Too good!" she smirked back.

"Well, thanks for leaving me the note. I'd have wondered."

"No problem. I don't want to bug you, but it might be nice to keep tabs on each other some."

That's a better idea than you realize. "I've got one of those little whiteboards we could hang up for phone messages and stuff," I offered.

“Okay, let’s do it.” She smiled. “That’ll be easier than keeping up with sticky notes.”

“So, did you go out with friends last night?” *Let’s find out about you, Rosalie Hale.*

“Nah, after I studied in the library for a while yesterday, I went to dinner and then to one of the bars nearby. I met somebody there.”

“Oh? Was he nice?”

“Well, he was *good*, if that’s what you’re asking.” She giggled.

I wasn’t...but I couldn’t say I was surprised that’s what she *thought* I was asking. “Well, what was his name?”

“Jeff, I think...no. David! Oops. Hope I didn’t say the wrong one!” She was laughing again. She noticed I wasn’t laughing. “Bella, you okay? You’re not always this serious, right?”

“I’m fine,” I answered numbly. “My creepy ex is following me around.”

“Seriously?” She actually seemed a little concerned. “Were you scared?”

“Well, I don’t know. Yesterday it was really uncomfortable. We were actually engaged last year...I have no idea why. The whole relationship was more serious than I ever intended for it to be. It was like I was swept up in it—out of control, literally. I couldn’t give him a decent reason for the breakup at the time, but my gut told me to get out while I could. So, I gave him his ring back right before finals last semester.

“I thought it’d be okay, but I wish I’d thought about how controlling he’d always been. He hurt my wrist in the dining hall yesterday, and then, when I went out for a walk in the afternoon, he appeared out of nowhere and was *really* creepy.”

“That’s crazy! What did you do?”

I remembered Edward appearing at just the right moment. *He was so stunning.*

“Bella? I asked what you did! What did you *say* to him?” she pressed.

“This really amazing guy from my British Lit class, that I hardly know, walked out of the psych building headed straight for us. I acted like I had a question for him about our assignment. I guess my face communicated the right amount of panic, because he came to my rescue. Josh took off, of course. Not until he threatened me, but he was out of there. He talks big, but he’s such a coward. He did the same thing at lunch. I think he’ll only ever be a real problem if I’m alone.”

“He threatened you?”

“You know...it was the dumbest thing. Like out of a cheesy horror flick—“ ‘If I can’t have you, nobody will.’ Whatever. He can’t even think of anything real to threaten me with...but, I was still pretty shaken up by it all.”

“And so this ‘amazing guy’? What did he do? What’s his name?” She leaned in to get the low down. I smiled. *I’m keeping this one to myself. He may be too good for my world, but I’m not sending you anywhere near him!*

“He walked me up to the green, and we got something to drink. Then I walked back with a guy from my other class.” *See? I can make it seem like it was nothing.*

“But still, Bella, you had a *hero!*” She grinned. “Didn’t you at least find out his name?”

“Umm...Edmund...Eric...I don’t know. Something like that. Oh! I hope I didn’t say the wrong name to *him!*” Got her.

She smirked at me. “I guess I know how *that* is. How about the guy from your other class? What’s his name?”

“Jacob Black. He’s really sweet...and forever smiling.”

“Will he keep an eye out for that skeezy guy? What’s his name?”

“Josh...yeah. Jacob said he’ll walk with me and stuff, if I need him to. Today’s going to be so busy, though, I won’t even have time to think about it.” *Please, please, God, let that be the case. I need today to just be easy. Busy and easy.*

“Well, point him out to me sometime, and I’ll watch your back, too. Too bad your hero didn’t stick around.”

Nope...he seemed ready to let me walk away. Too bad, indeed.

Tuesday turned out to be much as I’d hoped. My classes were definitely going to be interesting. Well, not so much the grammar class, but that’s just because I was a grammar nerd. The composition end of it should be fun, at least. We’d be writing *about* style, using different styles. I already knew what my term paper was going to be about. As Dr. Cole discussed the possibilities, I found my mind wandering through all those great works of literature in which the writers *flaunt* that they’re breaking the rules. Blatant sentence fragments. Edgar Allen Poe and William Faulkner and their sentences that go on for pages. I’d write about breaking the rules and doing it with flair.

Was I sad that neither Edward nor Jacob were in my classes? I don’t know. I was at least able to concentrate well. I met Angela for lunch, and tried to fill her in about my crazy afternoon. She listened raptly.

“Bella, I’m so sorry! I wish I hadn’t been at work. You needed someone to talk to! I could’ve walked with you.”

“Aww, Ang. You’d have been busy studying in your room. I still would’ve walked out there alone. That’s not *supposed* to be a dangerous thing, you know?”

She nodded.

“Still, thanks. I know you would’ve gone with me.”

She asked about Edward and Jacob, and watched my face, reading more than I volunteered to tell. She was good at that...but then, we’d been best friends for almost 5 years. “Hmm” was all she said.

I sat quietly and thought about how great they’d both been, and how I hadn’t been able to stop staring at Edward...and how it was probably a good thing that we didn’t have anything in common. Because if someone like *him* ever told me they loved me, I might get even more messed up. How could I deny those *eyes*? *Those lips*? *That smile*? But that was exactly what I was going to do with every guy for the rest of my life. Deny, deny, deny. I had traded in my trampled, deceived, weirded out heart for a heart of stone. *Yes. It was a great thing that he had walked away.*

Then, after a moment, Angela spoke up. “Point them both out to me sometime, okay? Just so I know.” She smiled.

I nodded back, and then my stomach dropped to the floor. Directly behind Angela, only a few tables away, Josh had arrived and was settling in to eat his lunch...watching me. I looked down and nibbled at my food, clearly upset.

“What is it, Bella?” Angela asked. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s Josh. He’s sitting behind you and just leering at me.” I looked back down...decided to get a book out of my bag and read some of my essays for Lit Crit. *Better to keep the mind busy, Bella.* Then I heard Angela gasp.

I looked up. She was watching something intently, smiling. She turned slowly in her seat, and I saw what had caused her amazement. Jacob was walking around our table from his table in the corner, toward Josh. He sat down across from him and blocked his view of me. They appeared to be having a very animated conversation. Josh shoved his chair back from the table and stalked away.

“I’m guessing that was Jacob Black, huh?” Her face was lit up with amusement.

“Yeah,” I said, dumbfounded.

“And so *that*,” she intoned, pointing off over my other shoulder, “must be your insanely handsome Edward Cullen.”

I turned the other direction. Edward was standing up in front of his chair, leaning over a bit with both of his fists pressed down on the table, like he was trying to dig his knuckles in to the wood. His icy glare was following Josh out of the cafeteria. I gulped.

When Josh was gone, Edward turned back toward Jacob. He nodded once, and then sat back down. Jacob headed back to his table, shrugging at me with a smirk as he walked past.

“They’re really something, Bella.” Angela was grinning. “Looks like you have your own personal body guards.”

“That was so weird. They sure do make me feel better though.”

“I have no doubt they’ll be keeping an eye on you,” she reassured me.

“Am I wrong to wish that Edward had done more than just stand there? Ughh. I need to stop looking at his face, Ang. He’s probably just as dangerous as Josh somehow.”

“Well, don’t feel like he wasn’t going to do something. He *and* that huge guy he’s sitting with were actually standing *first*, but they looked like they were going to shed blood, so Jacob waved them off and hustled over.”

“Really? They looked angry?” I was incredulous.

“Yeah...and Bella? I don’t think Edward liked being waved off, either. He was *ready*. It must be nice to have so many heroes, eh?”

“It is, I guess. And I don’t even *know* the big one.”

“Oh, I do. He’s in my upper level math classes. Amazing mind...and he’s funny, too. His name’s Emmett.”

I felt safe all day. Probably because Josh was getting used to my S.W.A.T. team. I had a lot of work to do, so Angela and I headed to the library together. We worked until dinner time, ate at one of the other little places on campus, and walked back to our rooms. We said good night, and I threw my backpack on the bed and sat at my computer. Time to email Renee. She hadn’t heard from me since I’d gotten back, I realized. *Well, this is one time I’ll keep it surface level for sure.*

I was in the mood for rhymes, so I cranked up Jason Mraz, and pulled out the rest of my homework. I was just getting started when the phone rang.

I picked it up on the third ring. “Bella, I don’t appreciate your friends telling me where I can sit.”

“Josh. Leave. Me. Alone.” Click.

It rang again. The answering machine picked it up. “I’m not finished. You’d better listen to me.” Beep. Answering machine off.

I put in my earphones. Jason Mraz couldn’t get loud enough to block out the stupid phone. I grabbed my stuff and headed to Angela’s room. We called security, and they asked me to come down and file a complaint in writing. Angela and I didn’t want to go out in the dark alone, so I called Jacob. He met me downstairs.

“Hey, Bells! Better day today?” I don’t need to mention he was smiling.

“Yeah. Thanks for scaring him off at lunch.”

“Oh, that? Sure, no problem. I don’t think I scared him, but I sure as hang pointed out that your other two friends looked scary. What’s that guy’s name? Edward? He was ready to take Josh out, I think.” He shrugged. “The less blood in the cafe the better, you know? People have to eat in there!”

“Well, I’d definitely still like to walk with you to class tomorrow, if that’s okay.”

“Sure. Hey! Did you get all your reading done for our quiz tomorrow?”

“Of course I did, Jacob.” I didn’t tell him how hard it had been to get through my reading that day. “You?”

“Yep. Emily Dickinson is a crazy poet. Don’t you think?”

“Well, some of her stuff is a little strange, but I really understood where she was coming from in a few of those poems. It was surprising.”

“Huh. Well, I don’t like her. Sorry you understood her so well. You must be crazy, too.” He was laughing.

“Who are your other favorite writers?” he asked.

“The Brontes, Austen, Shakespeare, Robert Browning, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Alfred Lord Tennyson...my list goes on and on. You don’t really want to keep listening...right?”

“Favorite music.” The quiz continued.

“Depends on my mood, on the time of day, on what I have to be doing at the time. I listen to a little bit of everything.”

“Oh. I listen to 70s music only. Like Peter, Paul and Mary, you know?” He watched me to see

how I'd respond.

"Shut up. You do not," I bantered.

"Nah, you're right. I like classic rock. I rebuild cars with my friends back home in Pennsylvania, and the music just fits. Know what I mean?"

"Yeah...and there's some really good classic rock. Zeppelin for one, the Eagles, The Steve Miller Band."

"Yeah! Except Robert Plant is a lunatic."

I laughed with him this time. "I know! I saw him in concert solo once, opening for Sting, and I think he was having some kind of a mean flashback or something. He didn't even make sense! I'm sure he thought it was still 1979." It felt good to laugh.

"Sting, huh? The Police are pretty good."

"Yeah. I like them a lot...but his solo albums are better."

"You're weird, Bells."

And before I knew it, we were there. Dick's House. The Campus Security Center. I filed a written complaint, and Jacob pulled one of the guards aside to talk outside of the office. I don't know what he said, but he seemed pleased as we were heading back out.

"They said they'd block his number for me," I offered.

"Great. You need to be able to leave your phone on. I think you'll be okay, Bella."

"Thanks, Jake. I really appreciate all this."

"Who knew, huh? Glad I can help. I'm pretty sure you've got more people looking out for you than you realize."

Jacob let me mull that over for a while. It was true. And if they stayed outspoken enough, or present enough, I knew Josh wouldn't have the nerve to bother me.

We kept walking, our way lit by the streetlights. I wondered what Edward was doing. And then I wondered if I'd be able to quit thinking about Edward. He'd been such a gentleman. He was kind. That was rare in someone of his status. Most of his peers, I'm sure, were probably a lot like Josh and his boys from St. Charles. He seemed like an exceptional person...not just in appearance, but in character, too. He'd thought of every little thing. *I've got to get Edward out of my head. I'm not in his.* Aside from his willingness to stand up for me, I knew we'd probably never really get to know each other.

We were already back at my dorm. “See ya at eight?” Jake asked.

“Yep. Thanks again for helping on such short notice, Jacob.”

“Sure, sure. Glad to...good night.”

I walked up the steps and into my room. It was quiet, though I’d left Jason Mraz playing in my earphones. I turned off the music, finished the last little bit of my work, prepared my backpack for the morning, and climbed into bed. Again, I slept pretty soundly. But this time, I dreamed of Edward.

#####

Chapter: 8

New World—big horizon

Open your eyes and see it’s true

New world—across the frightening

waves of blue

David Wilcox

Chapter Six: Dreams

I woke up Wednesday morning with my stomach curled in anticipation. *I would see Edward today.* I knew when I’d climbed into bed that I had to get Edward out of my head. Edward himself had said that Dartmouth was the college—the beginning of the future—that his parents had always *expected* of him. That meant he was one of *them*—one of the boys who wouldn’t lose their coveted place at Dartmouth unless they were charged with a crime or something.

But dreams don’t consider our parents’ expectations. And my dream didn’t give a flying flip what Edward’s parents thought. It didn’t even care that I was doing my best to pretend Edward wasn’t real. Instead, it took over my senses right along with my better judgment and made me very, *very* acutely aware of his existence...and of the fact that within a few hours, I would be in the same room with him.

Control yourself, Bella! This was what had happened with Josh. I met him, and his first impression had gotten my attention. A few days together before he’d headed back to Yale, and I knew I’d wait to see him again. That knowledge made Edward almost dangerous to me. I needed

to stay as solitary as possible. Deny, deny, deny!

But the knot in my stomach was telling me the opposite. Edward dangerous? Was I insane? How compassionate he'd been on Monday, how thoughtful! Even as he'd dismissed me and sent me off with Jacob, he was still gentlemanly, looking out for me.

And in my dream, he certainly hadn't dismissed me. He'd responded altogether differently when Jacob had asked what we were doing that night. He'd said, "I was planning on going for a drive with Bella, showing her some of my favorite places around here...if that's okay with you, Bella?" He had turned and looked into my eyes, smiling, hopeful. I'd said yes, and Jacob had said that was cool.

"See you guys later."

Edward had taken our trash and thrown it away and then turned to look at me. "My car is just over there. Would you like me to run you by your room for a jacket? It might get chilly while we're out."

I'd nodded and started off in the direction of his car. He'd walked a few steps behind. When we got to the lot, he'd pulled out his keys and hit his unlock button. A silver Volvo sprang to life in the corner of the lot. As he'd headed around to the passenger side to open my door, a group of loud boys came around the corner of the building. It was Josh and his friends Travis, Will, and Chad—all going to Chad's car. Josh had stopped in his tracks and stared, looking back and forth between Edward and me.

Travis had smiled at me awkwardly and thrown his arm over Josh's shoulder. "C'mon! Let's go, Bud. I told ya, we're really gonna have fun at the pub. A bunch of girls are gonna be there."

Josh had answered through his teeth, "I. Don't. Want. Another..."

Chad and Will had moved in to form a strange type of huddle around Josh. I'd heard someone say, "Hey, don't make this awkward, Man."

I had stood there, frozen, until Edward had gently cupped his hand around my upper arm and turned me to look into his eyes. "Bella?" he'd said softly. "Let's go now." He'd opened my door and watched as I sat, pulling both legs into the car. Then he'd closed the door gently. As he'd climbed in, he'd smiled kindly at me and searched my eyes. When I'd looked down sadly, he'd tipped my chin up toward his face and said, "Hey. Don't look back. It looks like his friends are trying to help. He'll get over you, Bella. He'll just have to go on with life. And you've got to keep going with yours. *Don't let him take anything more from you than he has.* You're too lovely for that." He'd traced my cheekbone gently with his thumb, and smiled tenderly.

Then, he'd cranked up the car and pulled out.

That's when I'd woken up.

Now, somewhere in the back of my mind, I knew that none of those things had actually happened. He *had* turned me over to Jacob and left. And I needed to remember that. But every time I tried to clear my mind, I'd imagine his fingers turning my head, and I'd look into those eyes.

And that thought made me smile.

So, when I bounced down the steps to head to breakfast, I was smiling. I opened the door and let the fresh air wash over me, and I was startled a little by the voice I heard right at my side.

“Morning, Bells. You look happy today.” It was Jacob.

“Yeah, I slept really well.” *Thanks to Edward.*

We meandered toward Sanborn House, the English department building, and stopped at Novacks Café so I could get a muffin. I remembered my warm muffin from a few days before and smiled.

“Where in PA are you from, Jacob?”

“Fishing Creek. It’s a little place in the mountains, just above the Susquehanna River. You?”

“Forks, Washington. It rains 364 days out of the year, but I got used to it. I liked living with my dad,” I answered.

“You lived somewhere else before that?” he inquired.

“Yeah. Phoenix—with my mom. I loved the sunshine all year.”

“You didn’t miss the seasons?” Jacob asked, surprised.

“No...but I did learn to appreciate them more in Forks.”

“Hmmm. I love winter,” he told me.

“Yeah, it’s nice...so, you said the other night that you rebuild cars?”

“Yep,” he smiled. “I love it.”

“Ever build a ’67 Mustang? I’ve always liked those.”

He shook his head. “Nah, but I just finished a VW rabbit for myself. It’s a good little car.”

“They’re cute,” I said.

We were nearing the building, and I stopped by a trash can to throw away my muffin bag. *An hour 'til I see Edward.*

But when I looked up, someone else was coming toward me. It was Travis, my old...Josh's friend. "Hey, Bella."

"Travis." I was unsure what to say, or how to act. "How've you been?" I tried.

"Pretty good, pretty good. Do you realize how much we miss having you around?"

"Yeah—I enjoyed hanging out with you guys, too. But I don't think it'd be wise right now. You know?"

"Or comfortable," he laughed awkwardly.

"Right," I smiled.

Jacob stepped closer, getting Travis's attention for a moment. He put out his hand. "Hey man, I'm Jacob Black."

"Travis Anderson. I've seen you around with Bella."

"Yeah, I try to be around a lot—to make sure she's...comfortable." He let his words sink in.

Travis looked down for a moment, and when he looked back at me, there was resolve in his face. "Bella, I'm *really* sorry about how all this turned out. For what it's worth, we'd *all* rather be around you than Josh these days." He smiled.

I shrugged. "Trav, I had no idea all this would be so awkward, but you guys have all known each other forever. It's just better for everybody if I walk away. That way no one has to choose between us."

"But, *Bell*...it's not the same..."

I cut him off. "Travis. Please don't make this harder than it already is. Josh needs you guys right now. I think he's going a little crazy. He's honestly creeping me out. If you care at all, and you want to do something nice for me, just keep Josh occupied...seriously."

A note of realization flashed in his eyes. He looked away sadly. "Okay, Bella. If that's what you need."

"Thanks." Jacob and I started to walk away.

"Bella, listen," he called after us. "I'm *really* sorry."

"It's not your fault, Travis, but thanks. Bye."

He turned slowly and walked away.

Jacob nudged me. “He didn’t seem like too bad a guy,” he offered.

“He’s not. He’s probably the one I miss the most, but it’s really better that I just walk away and start over, you know?”

“Sure, sure. I understand, Bells.”

We walked into class. After the quiz, the professor asked us what we’d thought of Emily Dickinson. A few students answered positively. Jacob, however, confessed, “I get what she’s saying—at least where she’s coming from...but I hope I never feel that way. It was *awful*.” Out of the side of his mouth, he muttered to me, “...and *real* choppy. I’d hate to be *her* English professor.” He grinned.

It made me smile, though I wondered if Jacob Black ever took anything seriously...and what he’d say if he knew I could’ve written those poems.

Our reading assignment this time was a list of several of her happier poems. Jacob was looking forward to them; I’d identified too much with Dickinson’s morose side to be excited.

When we were dismissed, I gathered my things slowly, and took deep, cleansing breaths. *It’s not a big deal, Bella. None of that stuff happened, and Edward’s just too different from you. Don’t think about him.* My mantra began: Deny, deny, deny. Although this time it was more like deny yourself, deny yourself, deny yourself...Edward wasn’t even interested in me. I *sure* didn’t have to worry about denying him.

But there was a knot in my stomach just the same.

And no amount of reason could make it go away.

Jacob talked most of the way to the other end of the building, but I wasn’t really tuning in. When I heard him say, “See ya, Bells,” I managed a smile in his direction.

The door to my class stood open, but I didn’t see Edward anywhere. The disappointment I felt was palpable. I went in and sat down against the far wall.

A few moments later, Edward came in, and he took the first empty chair he came to. *What? Oh...He doesn’t want to sit near me.* He looked amazing, of course, his perfect hair strewn all over his head. He had on jeans and a charcoal gray v-neck sweater with a fleck of white t-shirt showing at the neck. *He sure fills that sweater out well.* I willed him to look in my direction, but nothing.

When the room was almost completely full, the professor came in. I looked over one last time. Finally, our eyes met, and he smiled—an amazing, kind smile. My insides melted.

Something wasn't right, though. Edward's eyes looked sad. And when he looked away a moment later, my stomach sunk.

Bella Swan, get that boy out of your head. He has no use for you.

I bent my will to concentrate on the lecture, and even joined in the discussion. The professor seemed impressed by my insight. I didn't look over at Edward again, but continued taking notes and reading. At the end of class, the professor announced when the Literary Society would begin meeting: Thursday afternoon at 4:30. I scribbled down the information. *Finally*. We were to bring two pieces of writing: one that we loved, and one of our own.

I couldn't wait.

After class, I steeled myself not to look at Edward, gathering my belongings quietly. He was so hard to read. Hadn't he wanted to protect me from Josh the other day at lunch? Why was he so distant now? I looked up, and noticed that he'd already left the room.

I started walking to the dining hall to meet Angela. I noticed Edward then, walking slowly a few yards in front of me. He looked so strong, and I was enjoying watching the way his jacket moved as he swung his left arm. The other arm was busy carrying his book and binder, but I noticed that his jacket clung tight to his bicep. *Nice*.

Suddenly, he stopped in his tracks and turned around to face me. I could tell he was surprised by how close behind him I'd been walking.

"Hello, Edward," I said, my eyes questioning.

"Bella. Are you doing okay?"

Now he's concerned. I don't get this. "I'm all right. How are you?"

"I'm well...and I'm headed to the dining hall. Could we walk together?"

Could we walk together? Why would he have to ask? Doesn't he see the way I look at him? Can he not tell what his on again/off again smiling protectiveness is doing to me? "Yeah, sure. I'd...um...I'd like that."

He looked visibly relieved. "Did you have a good time with Jacob after I left the other night?" he asked sincerely.

"Well, yeah. Jacob's really nice. But, I really enjoyed getting to know you, too." I took a deep breath. "Edward, I never really got to thank you for...stepping in. You honestly rescued me from a really bad situation."

"So I'm beginning to realize," he replied.

“Well, thanks. Really. You were there at the perfect time.”

“I’m so glad that I was, Bella. You have no idea how glad I am about that.” He looked unsure of himself for just a moment. Then, “I enjoyed chatting with you over the hot chocolate and muffin, too. It was nice.”

“The *warm* muffin,” I reminded him.

He turned his head slightly in my direction, and I saw the most dazzling crooked smile I could ever have imagined. My heart raced. I was afraid he’d be able to hear it. He looked ahead again, and I imagined he was trying to put the right words together. “You’re really easy to talk to, Bella...to be with.”

“You, too, Edward.”

“Actually,” he added, “I liked that I didn’t always feel like we *had* to talk. I was comfortable *just* being.” He smiled.

“I noticed that, too, and I agree. I thought it was nice, just sitting...and, of course, sitting in the sun is *always* a good idea.” I smiled at him.

“Hey,” he began something new. “I noticed that you were writing down all of the information for the Literary Society. Are you planning on going?”

“Definitely,” I said. “I’ve been waiting to find out when and where the first meeting would be. I love to talk about writing, and—most of all—I love to write. It’s such a perfect venue for both. I really enjoyed the discussions last year. And...honestly...I’m kind of looking for things to fill up my time. The busier I am, the better, I guess. It’ll keep things a little less complicated for me, I think.”

“Hmm. I see your point.” He paused. We were nearing the dining hall. “Well, I was wondering if you’d mind if I met you somewhere and we went *together*.”

Was it just me, or had he emphasized the word ‘together’?

“You know? I’d love that.”

“Wonderful.” He added, “I’d really feel better if I could walk with you across campus. I like to know you’re safe.”

Was that all it was? He was going to be my walking buddy?

“Great. I do feel safer when I’m with people...I sure hope this doesn’t last all year.”

“Or even all semester! Don’t worry, Bella. I’ll be watching out for you. And I’m not the only

one, I'm sure you realize."

"I know. It's nice. Thanks for being willing to help the other day at lunch."

"Oh, you saw that?" He grimaced.

"No, but my best friend did. She told me you and some big guy were ready to jump in and handle things."

"Well, we *were*, but your friend Jacob did a very diplomatic job. I'm not confident I would have *been* so...*polite*." He was smirking now. *I love your facial expressions, Edward Cullen.*

"Yeah, Jacob is pretty laid back," I agreed.

"He seems like a good friend," Edward tested.

"He's always smiling. It's kind of infectious...but I only met him a few days ago. I don't really know him that well."

I saw Edward breathe in sharply. "I thought you guys had known each other for a long time."

"No. He was in my first class... just before British lit. He's just really friendly."

"Oh, well, then, I hope you were comfortable with my turning you over to him the other night."

"Oh, yeah! It was fine!" *Don't be too emphatic, Bella.* "I mean, he's nice. And I did feel safe, for sure."

"I'm glad." He paused. "Really glad." He looked *relieved*.

We had arrived at the dining hall. Angela was at our usual table, and when she noticed Edward beside me, she smiled.

"Well, Bella, I see your friend. I enjoyed walking with you. Thanks for letting me hang around. Should I meet you outside of your dorm tomorrow afternoon?"

"I enjoyed it too, Edward. Thanks for tagging along. Outside of my dorm would be great." I smiled up at him.

The smile that he gave me before he walked off was the most incredible thing I'd ever seen in my life.

#####

Chapter: 9

Because you cannot make me happy,

not when I'm empty inside of me.

But you can pull yourself right in here with me,

My misery'd love to have your company.

David Wilcox

Chapter Seven: Threatened

I joined Angela at the table after choosing my lunch, and smiled as I took my seat. She smiled back, aware that my mind was rushing and trying to sort out all I had to tell her. She waited patiently while I gathered my thoughts.

After a few moments, she simply said, "Already an eventful day."

I looked up at her and nodded, a grin playing at the corner of my mouth. "I just feel taken care of, and it's nice, Angela. Jacob met me this morning and walked me to class. Edward walked here with me after British lit. And they're both very sweet."

"But nothing alike," she guessed.

"No," I smiled. "Nothing at all."

"So what *are* they like?" she asked.

"That's the weirdest thing. I hardly know either of them, but they both seem intent on looking out for me. I don't know why they're so *personally* concerned. I know Josh is a creep, but it's like these guys go beyond gentlemanly or chivalrous behavior and are serious about protecting *me*. It's strange.

I took a bite of my food, and after a moment, I continued, "Anyway, Jacob's pretty easy for me to figure out; but Edward is a bit of an enigma."

"Okay, so tell me about Jacob first," Angela decided.

"All right. He's friendly, funny, and laid back. He seems like the type that just kind of floats through life, not letting anything get to him. Not a drifter, but I don't think I've ever met anyone as easygoing as Jacob. He's always joking and trying to make other people happy."

“Does it always work?” she asked.

“It does on me,” I said, smirking. “It’s not the annoying kind of ‘never knows when to quit’ type of humor...though I do wonder how he’d handle it if something really terrible ever happened. I wonder how he can keep it up all the time.”

“Well, he sounds pretty fun to be around. And you *need* to smile more, Bella. So, I approve of his friendship. Keep him around, okay? As a matter of fact, do you have anybody to walk with you to your night class—or at least back? It’ll be dark, so...”

“I don’t. But you’re right, I shouldn’t walk alone in the dark. I’ll talk to him.”

“Good. And Edward? What’s the big mystery with him?”

How can a normal human being be so incredibly handsome? Or did you mean the other mystery? I felt the blood rush to my cheeks, and wondered if she suspected my train of thought. *Better to just answer.* “Well, I can’t read him well. He’s not nearly as open as Jacob, but there’s something deeper there. He’s like a well...I can’t see beyond the surface, but I know there’s lots more to him than I know. And I think I’d be surprised by his depth. So far, he’s been really gentlemanly, but he’s done some things that I can’t quite make sense of.”

“Like...” she prompted.

“Well, after the situation with Josh the other day, I didn’t know what he was thinking. I thought he had just kind of...*dismissed* me and gone off to do whatever he had been on his way to do before I needed rescuing.”

“But, you do realize that—even if he *did* do that—it wasn’t a bad thing. He not only got you away from Josh, but spent a *while* with you before he left...and he left you in capable hands when he did have to go.”

I nodded. “Yeah. And he told me today that he’d thought Jake and I had been friends for a long time.”

“Right. I’m sure he thought he was doing what you’d be most comfortable with.”

“I guess...but then today, he came into class and didn’t even sit near me. I mean, really, he sat as far away as possible...and wouldn’t even look at me! Finally, after I had stared at him for entirely too long,” I said, smirking, “he looked my way. And *then* he gave me this smile that melted me...but his eyes looked sad. I just don’t get it.”

“Hmm. Maybe you’re right about the well. I bet he’s got a lot going on under the surface that you just don’t understand.”

“Well, it’s weird for me anyway, because I don’t like being attracted to him. I don’t want to be

attracted to *anybody* right now. I just want to be focused. I don't trust love, and I'm not even really half of who I was anymore. But I'm probably sending mixed signals with all of my staring. I can't keep him out of my head. It's just the way he looks, I'm sure. I've never seen anyone like him. Have you?"

"No. You're right. He's gorgeous...Bella, I bet he's just struggling the same way you are. He probably wants to be a gentlemanly friend, but not confuse you by making you think he's after you. He seems to realize what your last relationship was like. And...that's a good thing, right?"

"Yeah. It is." But I was a little sad. There was apparently half of me that wanted someone like him to not just be my walking buddy or guardian angel.

And my other half was trying to squelch that part of me. Attraction was dangerous. Love was deceitful and damaging. I wouldn't go there again. I could learn to be friendly with this protective angel. After all, if it meant he'd be around, I could look at him as much as I wanted. Right?

"Well, let me tell you what happened *after* class" I said. She nodded. "He left without looking back, and I got out of there a little after him, but we were both headed in the same direction. I was trying not to catch up, when he stopped walking, turned around and—I guess—looked for me. It was weird...but then we walked the rest of the way together. He said he'd enjoyed our time together the other afternoon, and then he asked if he could walk with me to the Literary Society meeting tomorrow afternoon...so he'd know I was safe."

"He sounds kind of undecided about you, huh?"

"That's what *I* thought. Isn't it strange?"

"I don't know. It's still nice...I'd just relax about it if I were you. Especially since you don't *want* this to go anywhere anyway."

"You're right. You are...it's just...I want to figure it out."

"Well, if things keep going the way they are, then I'm betting that *little by little* you'll find out what's under the surface."

"Thanks, Ang."

"And, if the mystery frustrates you, do something with 'easy-to-figure-out Jacob Black.' Also, I seem to remember he's not so shabby himself, just in case you *want* to look at something easy on the eyes."

I grinned. That was a good idea.

We talked about her day, and how work was going. She had to work again this afternoon, but her manager and coworkers seemed nice. Plus, she was getting good experience interning in the

accounting department of the New England United Way. I listened as she talked, and as we ended our conversation, I promised I'd call her tonight when I got back from class.

After lunch, I walked back to my room to study. After about an hour and half, I decided I'd better try to catch Jacob.

His roommate answered. "Hello?"

"Hey. Is Jacob around?" I asked.

"No...he's out running. And he was gonna try and get a game of Ultimate Frisbee going. I'm guessing by now he's up at the Green. Can I leave him a message for ya?"

"Yeah, sure. This is Bella Swan. I'm in his American..." He cut me off.

"Oh, yeah! I know who you are. He'll be sorry he missed you."

He knows who I am. That's nice. "Well, he told me I could call if I needed anything. I've got this weird situation with my ex."

"Yeah, yeah. I was sitting with Jake the other day at lunch when he had to run interference for ya. What a loser, huh?"

"Definitely. Well, I've got a late class tonight...it's over at 9, and I don't want to have to walk back alone in the dark. Would you tell him to call me if he can walk with me?"

"Absolutely...but I'm pretty sure he can. He doesn't have anything going on tonight. And he's pretty serious about making sure you're okay."

"Well, thanks."

"Hey, Bella?"

"Yeah?"

"If Jake isn't free, he's gonna be upset about you being alone. I'll just go ahead and tell you to count on one of us being there. I'll come meet you if he can't. What time does your class start?"

"Six."

"Okay. One of us will meet you outside of your dorm at 5:45, all right?"

"Umm...okay. Thanks a lot. I really appreciate it."

"No problem...I'll let Jake know. See ya."

“Bye.” I hung up. *What nice guys.*

5:45 rolled around quickly, though I'd had plenty of time to get my studying done. I threw a jacket on and grabbed my backpack. I wrote a quick note to Rosalie on our whiteboard reminding her where I would be, and headed out. Just outside of the door, Jacob was standing there, grinning.

“Hiya, Bells. Glad you called me.”

“Yeah, well, thanks for being my body guard on call,” I smiled back. We started walking toward the science building.

“Any time! I meant it.”

“I can see that. Hey, your roommate was nice.”

“Oh, yeah. Seth and I met our freshman year in Botany. He's a science major, too, so we had lots of classes and labs together. He's cool. A lot like my friends from back home.”

“Well, he actually offered to walk me if you weren't free. Quite an offer considering we've never met,” I added.

“Yeah, he told me. He's been around every time I've gotten to chat with Josh in the dining hall, so he knows how mad that whole thing makes me...but I'm glad *I* was free.”

We talked easily the whole way to class. Jacob was telling me about volunteering in a summer program for the kids in the projects every year. “...and so that's what I do. Every summer when I get back home, I spend my days with these great kids. We play ball, pool, and Ultimate Frisbee, of course. Two days a week, we're able to get up to my dad's garage, and I let them help me with the cars.”

“Jake, that is so cool. I love that you do that. I'm going to be running an afterschool program for kids in the lower income housing area up here this semester. No chance you'd be interested in helping me, is there?” I was looking at him hopefully. An extra set of hands and ears would be great, and we were definitely low on volunteers. Plus, I knew that Jake would be good for the kids. They needed that smile, too. And it'd be good to have a guy with me, since I'd be in that shady area of town. I felt pretty sure Josh was going to be keeping tabs on me.

“Sure, sure. I just can't help on Tuesdays...I've got my Anatomy and Physiology lab. Maybe Seth or Edward could go with you that day, huh? What do you think?” *He was thinking of my not being alone out there, too.*

“Yeah, I'll ask. Good idea...and I'm really glad you'll be helping. The kids need somebody like you around. They need smiles.”

“Well, I do smile a lot. But, I’ve got a lot to be happy about, Bella.”

I smiled back, glad that he was content. “I’m looking for things to make me smile. There’s a lot of good in my life, Jake, but the bad just kind of overwhelms me recently. You know?”

“Yeah, I understand.” We had arrived at the Gilman Life Sciences Building. “Well, take good notes, okay? I’ll meet you right back here in the lobby at nine.” He punched me on the arm gently. “Don’t cut up too much in class, Bells. Nobody likes a clown.”

“You got it. And thanks again.” I started turning to go into my lecture hall.

“Sure, sure.” He grinned at me and headed out the door.

Class wasn’t too difficult. I did take good notes, because the professor really made it clear what was important. He wasn’t one of those boring professors who droned on and on at the same tone as the heater in the back of the classroom. I’d had *that* guy the year before in History of the English language. *What a stupid class!* I’d wasted too many hours of my life on *that* one. No, Dr. Meyers was a great speaker. He held my interest, for which I was deeply grateful. There’s nothing worse than a boring *night* class.

He gave us a break at 7:30, and we all headed out into the lobby. I ran outside to get a candy bar from the vending machine, when suddenly I was looking at a lovely yellow rose. I spun around to thank Jacob, to tell him it was too much for him to look out for me on my break, too, when my eyes landed on the one face I wanted to see least in the world. Josh.

“Bella,” he cooed. “We’ve gotten off to a bad start this year.”

“Yeah...well, I’d like it if we could do things a little differently, too.” *I can’t make him angry. Why didn’t anybody else from my class need a candy bar? C’mon, somebody. Walk out that door.*

“So, I wanted to bring you this rose. I’d have brought you a red one, but it seems that you want to take your time on this...and that’s okay. I can be patient.”

“Josh, I think you’ve got the wrong idea.”

“No, ma’am. *You* don’t seem to understand how completely we belong together. This isn’t something that can’t just be undone. I won’t live without you, Bell.” He stepped forward, placing his hand on my neck, tracing my jaw with his thumb. I was completely pressed against the vending machine.

“Josh,” I said, trying to smile—certain that there was fear in my eyes, “I’m not right for you. I want too many different things. You’d get tired of me. I’d...well, I’d probably seem selfish to you. You need someone who can just be...*devoted* to you.” I swallowed. *Was he buying my concern?*

“Bella, *you* used to be devoted to me. Do you remember the things we used to do together? The way we made each other feel?” His breath was hot on my face, and it reeked of alcohol. I closed my eyes. “I know you could still make me feel better than anybody else.” He raised his arms, dropping the rose on the ground, so that both hands were flat against the glass. I was pinned under him. He leaned in to kiss me, and I was afraid to breathe. Before I could say anything, his lips were on mine—hungry and desperate. Suddenly his left hand was tangled in my hair, pulling my head and body closer to him, if that were possible. I felt like I was going to suffocate. *God, help me!* I turned my face away from him, and he pulled back, a look of shock and anger on his face. He slammed his hand into the vending machine, and yelled, “Bella, don’t *do* that. You *know you still want me!*”

I shook my head no. Resolve was stronger than the fear just now. I don’t know where it came from, but I was glad it had reared its head. “No, Josh. I don’t still want you. I don’t want you anywhere near me.” He staggered backwards, hoping the rejection on his face would make me feel sorry for him. Just then, a security guard strolled past about 30 yards away.

“Excuse me!” I shouted over his shoulder. The officer had turned and was walking in our direction. When Josh realized what I’d done, he looked at me with such venom that I was reeling. His voice sounded eerily calm when he spoke. “We’ll finish this conversation later, Bella. I know your schedule, so I’ll be around.” As he walked off, he stepped on the rose and twisted his foot, ripping it to pieces and leaving it there on the ground.

The officer arrived then, and looked down at the rose. “Lover’s tiff?” he smiled.

“No sir. I’ve already filed a complaint in writing about him. He’s my ex, and he will not leave me alone. Your office has blocked his calls to my room, but he’s good at finding me when no one is around.” I took a deep breath and tried to steady my nerves. “So what do we do about *this?*”

The officer said I’d better come back with him and file another report. I told him I was in the middle of class, and he said he’d talk to the professor. It was best handled right away. So, I went to get my bag as he stepped up to have a talk with Dr. Meyers.

Dr. Meyers advised loudly that I’d need to get the rest of the notes from someone, and I nodded as I walked out of the room. After I filed the report, and had emphasized that Josh knew my schedule and had threatened to find me again, they assured me that they would try to have someone patrolling the areas where I’d be in class.

The officer walked me back to my dorm, and then I called Jacob.

He answered quickly. “Hello.”

“Jake? It’s Bella.”

“What? Where are you?” He was upset. He could tell something was wrong.

“I, umm...I just got back to my room. A security guard walked me back.”

“Bells, *what happened?!?*”

“Well, I just went out to the vending machine during break, but Josh was outside waiting. He...he just...he scared me. There was no one around, and...”

“Did he *hurt* you?” Jacob sounded worried.

“No...but he pinned me against the machine and kissed me. It was awful.”

“Bells, I’m coming over, okay?”

“No...I...I just want to be alone right now. I’ll call Angela in a minute or two. I just wanted to let you know not to meet me after class.”

“Are you *sure?*” he asked.

“I am. Thanks, Jake. I guess I’ll see you...maybe at lunch. I don’t know.” I was tired of talking.

“Okay. I’ll see you tomorrow, Bella. I’ll see you somehow. I’m sorry I wasn’t there.”

“It’s okay, Jake. You can’t always be. I’ve got to handle this myself.” I was resolved...and the numbness was coming back. “Good night.”

“Night, Bells.”

I called Angela, and she came right down to my room. She hugged me for a long time. I didn’t cry, I just kind of shut down. I never cried anymore.

After we’d talked about everything, she started to look through my CDs. Rockwell Church. Perfect. She smiled slightly and sat down in front of me, propping her stocking feet on my bed. I was piled in the corner with every blanket in the room.

The phone rang. She waved me off and reached over to answer it. “Hello?” She listened. “She’s um...she’s right here. Let me see if she feels like talking, okay?” She covered the mouthpiece with her hand and mouthed, “It’s Edward Cullen.”

What?? I nodded yes. Taking the phone and breathing deeply, I tried to sound normal. “Hello, it’s Bella.”

“Bella,” I could hear him smiling. “How are you?”

“I’m...all right.”

It must've suddenly registered that Angela had said *'Let me see if she feels like talking.'* "Are you really? What's happened? Josh?"

I could imagine how he looked right now. Trying to frame my words carefully, I answered, "I just stepped outside the Gilman building to get a candy bar during my break. He was waiting outside, and there was no one around."

The words came rushing out: "Did he scare you? What did he say? Did he *touch* you? Are you *hurt*?"

"I'm okay...physically. I think he's really psycho though, do you give free evaluations?" My attempt at humor failed miserably.

"What. Did. He. Do?" Edward was seething.

Do I want to tell him everything? Suddenly, I do. "He brought me a rose, and tried to convince me that our being together was right. I didn't know what to say without making him really angry, so I tried to talk calmly to him. I guess it gave him the wrong idea. He shoved me against the vending machine and kissed me...he was...all over me. I...felt sick."

Edward was silent, so I continued. "When I turned away, he got really angry. I thought he was going to hit me, but he hit the glass behind me. Then I saw a security guard and yelled to him. Josh glared at me and told me he knew my schedule and he'd be around anytime I was alone."

His voice was calm when he responded, but it belied his anger. "Bella, I'm so sorry. Someone should have been with you. I didn't know you had class tonight."

"Well, Jacob walked me to class, and was going to meet me afterwards, but neither of us thought about the break."

"Oh." Did I hear disappointment? "Well, I'm glad you made plans...Josh is more creative than I'd thought. You won't be alone there again, though. I can study in the lobby."

"Edward, you don't..."

"Bella, I know you don't understand this, but I need to be there. Will you just trust me? Will you let me help you?" He sounded so vulnerable.

"Umm, yeah. Okay."

"Can I bring you anything? You need a hot chocolate from Novack's? I hear they use lots of whipped cream..."

"No, that's okay. I'm fine."

"Are you positive? I'm on my way over there right now for myself."

“Well, if you’re going anyway...a hot chocolate would be really great.” Angela cocked her eyebrow at me and smiled.

“How about your friend? What’s her name?”

“Angela...” To Ang, I asked, “Want anything from Novack’s?”

She said quietly, “Hot chocolate, too.”

“She’d like a hot chocolate, too.”

“Does she like as much whipped cream as you?” I could hear a smile in his voice now.

“Yeah, she likes whipped cream.” Angela was grinning.

“I’ll be there in ten minutes, Bella. Which window is yours?”

“Second floor, third on the left from the stairwell.”

“Okay...get a sweater on, and I’ll see you soon.” His voice was so soft.

“Kay. Bye.” I hung up and looked up at Angela, surprise on my face. She was grinning from ear to ear.

“He’s good with the hot chocolate, eh? That’s a nice surprise.”

I couldn’t stop smiling. “Yeah, it is.”

There wasn’t any need to say any more. I went to find a snuggly sweater, and tossed another good one to Ang. Then, I washed my face and brushed my hair. Sooner than I’d expected, we heard a *thunk* on the window.

“Did he just throw a *rock* at your window?” she teased.

“I think he did.” I walked over and pushed open the window, looking down.

He was smiling up at me, a drink carrier in his hand. “Do you want to come down for a minute, or should I bring the drinks up? I didn’t want to intrude.”

“I’ll be down in a sec.”

Angela whispered, “Okay. I’ll close the window, but *I am going to watch. Don’t give me away.*” She grinned.

I ran down and out into the cold, realizing too late that I was still in my slippers. They were super

soft, but they looked like someone had made them out of poodle fur. “Cute,” he nodded at my feet. He smiled at me, and said, “I’m so glad you wanted the hot chocolate. I just felt like I *had* to do something for you.” He held out the drink to me, and I took it, smiling. But as I stepped backwards, my foot came out of my slipper, and I lost my balance, the hot liquid splashing on my hand. Edward was there with a napkin before I knew what had happened. He took the hot chocolate and set it aside, and then carefully wiped my hand. When I looked up to thank him, his eyes locked on to mine intently. “I hope you’ll forgive me if I’m overstepping my bounds,” he said, “but there’s something I just need to do.” He paused, studying my face. Then he asked, affectionately, “Could I...would it be okay if...would you mind if I just hugged you?”

I froze, not knowing what to say. *Is he serious? Oh! That look on his face! He is serious.* “Umm...okay.” I was hesitant.

I took a step forward and stopped. He slowly, carefully walked the rest of the way toward me, and opened his arms, smiling tenderly. I moved in closer, and all at once, I was enveloped in his strong but gentle arms. *He smells amazing.* I wrapped my arms around him, and the hug began to feel more natural. I heard him breathe in deeply, and then he sighed. I didn’t want to move. For the first time in ages, I felt *safe*.

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Chapter: 10

But you can seal up the pain, build walls in the hallways

Close off a small room to live in

But those walls will remain, and keep you there always

And you’ll never know why you were given...the lonely.

David Wilcox

Chapter Eight: Poems

I think I could’ve stayed there all night. Not because I liked the feel of Edward’s arms around me, though I did, but because I felt so safe. I felt like nothing could hurt me there. I sighed quietly, and hoped Edward hadn’t heard. My head fit perfectly into the space between his shoulder and his neck, and I was fairly certain he was smelling my hair. I didn’t mind, though.

After a moment, Edward gently released me and said quietly, “Thank you, Bella. I needed that.”

I took a small step backward, looking up at his face wondering what in the world he could mean by that. *Wasn't I the one who'd been attacked tonight?* He looked at me with a crooked smile and sighed deeply. Then, bending down, picked up my hot chocolate and held it out to me. "Don't let it get cold."

"I should run Angela's upstairs." I reached out for it, but paused when I saw the look on Edward's face.

"As much as I'd like to stay out here with you, I don't want to keep you up. I'm sure you need rest after all this...And I have some writing to do tonight. I'm looking forward to going to the meeting together tomorrow. I have to spend some time in the arts center for my music composition earlier in the afternoon, but I can meet you here about four o'clock. Maybe we could walk slowly and just talk a little. What do you think?"

"That sounds good. I'll see you then." I smiled slightly.

Edward reached out and tucked a piece of hair behind my ear. "Sleep well, Bella. Be safe until I'm with you tomorrow, all right?" He was looking into my eyes intently.

"I'll try," I answered.

"Well, then, I guess that'll have to do," he replied, giving me his crooked smile again. "People are watching out for you, so don't worry."

"Okay...good night, Edward."

"Good night, Bella. I'll be glad to see you tomorrow." He smiled sweetly, and I turned to go in, wanting to remember his smile. "Bella?"

"Yes?" I twirled back.

"Angela might not forgive me if I left with her hot chocolate."

"Oops," I grinned. "You're probably right."

"Well, we can't have *that*." He was grinning, too. *What a perfect smile.* He held out the drink to me.

"Thanks. See you tomorrow." Our fingers touched as I took the cup, and I liked it. He looked into my eyes intensely, once more. "Rest *well*."

"Mm-hmm. You, too." I turned again, and walked inside.

I wasn't sure what I felt...it wasn't giddy, for sure. But there was a certain sense of...contentment. I felt like things would be okay. It was a good way to end the night.

When I got to my room, I stepped in and closed the door gently behind me. Angela was sitting on the edge of my bed, looking up at me with an inquisitive smile. She reached out and took the hot chocolate I offered, but didn't say anything. She just waited.

"He asked if he could hug me, Angela." She smiled and nodded. "He *asked*. He said he needed it."

"He seems pretty wonderful, huh?"

"Yeah. I don't get it.

"Don't get me wrong," I added quickly. "I really like it...I just don't understand it."

"I don't think there's anything to do but just enjoy it," she said. "He seems to have decided that he wants to be around. Do you mind?"

"Mind?" I laughed. "No, I don't *mind*. I could use that hug over and over again."

"It was nice, huh?" she asked.

"It was...different than I expected. I felt really...*safe*, Angela. I felt protected. Like I didn't have to worry about Josh there."

"I bet Edward would like to know that."

"Well, I'm not gonna tell him!" I sat down beside her and pulled my knees up to my chest. "I'm still nervous about something, though."

"What's that?"

"That he'll be out of here when he realizes how little there is left of me. I don't have much to offer a friendship anymore...I'm just too empty. He'll get tired of it, I'm sure."

"Bella, there's still more to you than you realize. You'll be fine...and I don't think Edward is going to just walk out of the picture. He seems too...stable for that, you know what I mean?"

"I hope you're right." My head was starting to pound again. When my forehead creased and I started to rub my temples, Angela stood up.

"I'll get out of your way and let you rest. Good night, Bella. Sleep well, okay?"

"Okay," I yawned. "G'night, Angela. See you tomorrow."

"I won't be at lunch, remember? I've got to work early."

"Okay." I laid my head on my pillow.

She flipped on the bathroom light and turned off the overhead light on her way out of the door.

A fire was burning in the brick fireplace, shadows dancing on the walls of the dark room. It was supposed to be cozy and romantic, but I just felt uneasy. The same thing happened every time I came to his house, every time his parents went to bed.

Though I found myself counting the days until the visits, I was always anxious at night. During the days, we went on walks, I'd listen as Josh played guitar, we watched movies. It was easy being with him...as long as he wasn't upset about something. But usually when he asked me to come to his parents for the weekend, he had a lot of nice things planned. We stayed so busy with his...entertaining me, that we rarely had any real conversations. Sometimes I felt like I wasn't really getting to see all of him. It was like a carefully built-up façade.

He came in wearing his loose-fitting pajama bottoms and a white t-shirt, bringing a cup of coffee and some juice for me. "It's time to relax, Bell. Just you and me now. My parents are asleep."

I swallowed, painting a smile on my face and reaching out for the juice. I set it down on a coaster, and said, "Hey. Why don't we do something a little different tonight? Let's play cards or something and actually get to know each other better. There are so many things I want to know about you."

Josh smirked at me, taking my hand in his and pulling me closer. He cupped his hand under my chin and looked into my eyes, his own eyes dark with lust. "I already know all I need to know about you. I know that you make me happy, and that we belong together." He leaned in to cover my lips with his, and the kiss was deep and strong. Too strong. His hands were in my hair, sliding down my back, cupping my neck, furiously searching my body for a response.

I wanted him to slow down! I felt so uncomfortable, but then I began to question myself. What was the matter with me? Wasn't Josh an amazing guy? And he wanted me! I forced myself to kiss him back, reminding myself that it was never a good thing for him to feel rejected. I should be thankful that someone of his caliber noticed me. I needed to let him know he was special to me, too. Talking myself into it slowly, I wrapped my arms around his neck, smiling at him as we kissed.

That was what he was waiting for. As soon as he sensed that I was playing along, he slid his hands from where they had retangled themselves in my hair down the sides of my neck to my shoulders and pressed me back into the soft leather couch. Taking my hands in his, he moved them up over my head and began kissing my neck feverishly, pressing himself against me. I willed his parents to walk into the room, the phone to ring, anything. Why didn't I want this? Something wasn't right.

"Josh?" I ventured.

“What, *Bella*?”

I swallowed but pressed on. “Tell me what you love so much about me.”

“Well right now, I’m just thinking that I like it when you’re quiet, and all you can concentrate on is me...and how I make you feel.”

“Oh, I’m concentrating on how you make me feel,” I answered back. You have no idea. “I’m sorry if I talk too much.”

“It’s fine. Just shut up and touch me... now, before I die. I want you to need me like I need you!”

His breath was hot on my neck, and he was still pressing my hands down behind my head. He was too hungry, and the look in his eyes made me feel like a piece of meat.

I closed my eyes and wished for the weekend to be over.

“Guess you didn’t sleep well, last night, huh?” Rosalie asked the next morning.

“No...it was terrible.” I pushed the mental images out of my mind, hating myself for giving in to Josh over and over. What kind of person was I? Hadn’t he liked me *because* of my convictions? Because of my strength?

In the end, I had become a weak toy to him. I wondered this morning if that had been his goal all along.

“Bad dreams?” Rosalie pressed.

“Yeah...I’ve been having them off and on all week. I think my psycho-ex is getting to me. We had a little run-in last night, again.”

“Bad?” she asked.

“Well...the worst yet. He pinned me to the wall and kissed me.”

“Did you haul off and slap him?!”

“I wish,” I answered, smiling slightly at the thought. “I did stop him, and then I yelled to a security guard. This is just getting more and more complicated, you know?”

Rosalie answered quietly, “Most guys are jerks.” *You’re right.*

“I thought you liked guys,” I tested gently, a question in my voice.

“Yeah, well. Sometimes I really, really do...and then, sometimes, it bothers me when I realize they probably don’t even remember my name the next day.”

“Do you remember *their* names?” I asked, thinking of an earlier conversation.

“Not unless they blew me away...and *that* doesn’t usually happen. But I want them to remember *mine*. I keep hoping that someday I’ll find somebody different. Worth sticking around for.”

“Well, you probably won’t meet him in a bar,” I offered, but then added quickly, “but what do I know? The one guy I’ve really ever been in a relationship with is a total skeeze. You seem happier than *I* am most of the time.”

“Well, it’s just a front, Bella. I’m just going along trying to fill my life with a little excitement. One of these days, I’ll stop and do things differently. For now, this is what I know how to do...besides academics.” She smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes. “Hey, are you going to go to Dartmouth night, for the bonfire and all?” Our school held an annual celebration of its history each fall on the Green, as a part of freshman orientation.

“I hadn’t thought about it. I went my freshman year, of course, when I didn’t have a choice, but I didn’t go last year. Are you going?”

“I think I am. I like the scene...dark, crowded, good food, loud music. And lots of new guys thrown in free!”

“True,” I said, “But I don’t know...I’ll probably just see how I feel right before everything starts.”

“Sounds good,” she said. And then we concentrated on getting dressed and ready for the day in earnest.

My classes were great again—just the right balance of interesting and challenging. By the time lunch rolled around, I was famished.

Still thinking about my awful dream and the memories it dragged back into my mind, I was wondering about the poem I’d written for the Literary Society meeting today. It would probably be too heavy...a topic people didn’t want to think about.

Then I realized I didn’t care. I’d let everybody know how empty I was. Better to let them see reality right away so I wouldn’t have to work too hard to keep up appearances.

And what Edward would think? Hadn’t I said I was scared he wouldn’t stick around? Well, that would probably be best. Then, I wouldn’t have to walk that increasingly difficult fine line of enjoying his company and keeping him at a distance. I wouldn’t have to work so hard to *not* be attracted to him. It would be easier.

And if he did stick around? Then that would be a bonus. At least he wasn't pushy...he just wanted to be my friend. I didn't understand all of that, but I was thankful.

I tried to remember how I'd felt last night. How just his voice on the phone made me feel better. How his being there... and his kind smile...made me feel good about myself. How his hug had wrapped me in safety. How he'd been so thoughtful.

And again the question I'd never understand: Why had *he* needed that?

Well, whatever the explanation, it had been nice. I'd felt content for a while. So vastly different than I felt now, when the hollowness was causing a dull ache, making me wonder if I'd ever feel normal again.

But I was looking forward to going up to Romano Circle housing complex to meet with the LEAD Director today. That would get my focus off of myself and put it on others where it belonged. Usually, the LEAD program arranged mentoring relationships which were set up with an emphasis on character development and avoiding destructive behaviors. I had begun working with the organization last year, through the Tucker Foundation.

I'd wanted to do a little more this year, though, than meet with the group once a week, and I knew that their Wednesday meeting would conflict with my night class. So, I'd arranged to develop a "Homework Club" in the housing complex, too. I could work on building those relationships on a daily basis, while all these kids would've been at home alone anyway. Helping them with their homework would just be an added privilege...meeting a practical need.

Feeling better about myself and the direction my day was taking, I approached Thayer.

Jacob was standing outside.

His eyes locked on mine as I approached and he looked me over carefully, concern etched on his face. "Bells? I'm so glad to see you! How *are* you?"

"I'm okay. Rough night, but I'll make it. Thanks for walking me to class and all."

"Sure, sure...are you positive you're okay?" He gave me a big, gentle hug. It was surprising, but kind of nice.

Leaning back and looking at my face closely, he questioned, "You look...different somehow."

"Oh, I just have a lot of stuff on my mind." *I don't want to make him overconcerned.* "Mostly the homework club. I'm ready to get started on that." I started walking into the dining hall.

"Well, then let's grab our lunch and go. Maybe once you meet with the director you'll feel better."

And so we did. The afternoon flew by, probably largely because I was feeling numb again. We ate our lunch quickly, Jacob doing most of the talking. I nodded here and there, but he didn't seem to mind. I guess my earlier explanation had really satisfied him.

We walked to the student parking lot after we'd finished eating, and I pulled out my keys.

"Wait. Don't tell me. Let me guess which car is yours." Jacob scanned the lot, finally settling on a well-kept white Honda Accord. "That one, right? Understated, but very safe. Well-maintained..."

I smiled and then walked over to my classic 1953 Chevy pick-up. Jacob's jaw dropped.

"No way that's yours! Seth and I were admiring it the other day." He was laughing now. "It's definitely not your average Dartmouth-mobile. My dad had a truck like that when I was growing up." He smacked the fender appreciatively. "Nice, Bells."

I unlocked my door and climbed in, leaning over to unlock the passenger side. When I cranked it up, the noisy engine made Jake laugh even more. "This is fun," he said.

We drove out of Hanover, into the Upper Valley. The change of scenery was nice at first. Leaving Dartmouth and heading into Lebanon was like reentering the normal world. Fifteen minutes out, the housing and buildings were starting to look less and less...well-to-do. I was thinking of Forks, quietly. Thinking about Charlie.

"Hey, this looks like where *I'm* from," Jacob said.

"Uh-huh. Me, too. My dad's the police chief in a normal town. What about yours?"

"My dad's on disability...he had an accident a few years ago. He's in a wheel chair now."

Way to go, Bella. "I'm sorry, I...didn't..."

"Hey, it's cool." He smiled at me. "Don't even worry about it. All he ever wants to do is fish anyway, and now he's got unlimited time to do it...and the disability checks keep on comin'. He's really pretty content."

"Oh... Well, that's good." I said, smiling back.

Jacob laughed. "You're somethin', Bells. I bet my dad would like you."

"Thanks, I guess."

"No, I'm sure of it...at least he would if you drove up in this truck." I shrugged, a smile tugging at the corner of my mouth. I drove for a few more minutes and then turned into the Romano Circle housing development.

Pulling in next to the office, I noticed a few of the neighborhood kids walk around the corner of the building to check out the newcomer in the big truck. The director, Mrs. Anderson, walked out to meet me. “Bella, it is lovely to see you again. We’re so excited about what you want to do here this year.” She extended her hand with a smile.

Giving her hand a firm shake, I assured her I was looking forward to it as well. I introduced her to Jake, informing her that he’d be joining me four out of the five days, and she was excited.

“Wonderful, Bella. I’m confident that anyone you recommend will be well-suited to the job.” To Jacob she added, “Very glad to meet you. A strapping young man with a good smile is *just* what we need.”

He grinned back, “Well, I’m glad to be here. Are those some of the kids over there?”

“They are, yes.”

“Well, I’ll go get to know them a little bit while you two talk. Bella, just give me a holler when you’re ready.”

“Okay, thanks,” I answered. “Can we take a look at where you’d like us to meet, Mrs. Anderson?”

She led me inside, and showed me the updates that had been made to the housing complex’s rec center. They’d apparently been looking forward to this. I was so glad it was all working out. I needed this as much as the kids did, I was sure.

After discussing details and getting a little bit of basic information on each child to take back to school with me, our meeting was at an end.

“We’ll see you next week, Bella. I’ll be here the first day, to help with the introductions and transitions, but after that, I’ll just stay out of your way unless you need me. You’re a very capable young woman, and the parents, community leaders and I are all just waiting to see all of the good that will come of this. Have a great weekend.”

“Thank you so much, Mrs. Anderson. Your confidence in me means a lot. You have a good weekend, too.” I turned to head outside, and she sat down at her desk.

When I stepped up to my truck and got ready to yell to Jacob, I noticed a black Saab Turbo X circling the parking lot. *Josh*. I knew I needed to call Jacob, but my voice had left me. I just climbed inside the truck, and started the engine.

Jacob came running over, laughing. “What’s up with *that*, Bells? Were you gonna leave me here?” He got in the truck and then noticed my face, pale and serious. “What’s the matter, Bella?”

I whispered, “Josh followed us here...the black Saab.” Jacob turned in his seat to look.

“That punk. Bells, do you have any paper?”

I couldn't move. “In the glove box.”

He looked inside and pulled out some scrap paper and a pen. Squinting to see clearly, he wrote down the tag number. I'll report him to security when we get back. Don't worry, Bella...we're gonna get this jerk to leave you alone.” He was quiet for a moment, then, “Are you okay to drive?”

“Umm...I think it's better if you do, if...if you don't mind.”

“Sure, sure...no problem. You slide over, and I'll come around.” He jumped out and switched sides.

We drove back to Dartmouth in silence. When we pulled back into the parking lot, Jacob parked, but I just sat in my seat, unmoving. He came around to help me down out of the truck, and then pulled me into a hug. I stood there, limp. Talk about *numb*. I was *frozen*.

Jacob got my backpack out of the truck, locked the doors and then put the keys in the small front pocket of my pack before slinging it over his shoulder. He put an arm around me, and we started to shuffle off. Well, *I* was shuffling, and he was patient. I looked up, finally bothering to notice something other than my feet.

That was when I saw Edward standing beside his car, watching us. His face showed a combination of emotions, really. His brows were creased, and his lips in a tight line. He seemed to be resolved to just stand and watch, but when our eyes met, he *did* offer a slight smile. He looked down at his watch. We were supposed to meet in fifteen minutes.

When he looked back and saw me still looking at him, very blankly, that was it. Concern pushed him into motion, and he was standing next to us within seconds. “Bella? Are you all right?” To Jacob, “What happened?”

Jacob answered, “We drove into Lebanon where Bells is going to be volunteering and running a homework club every afternoon. Josh followed us.”

Edward was listening to Jacob, but he never took his eyes off of me. When he heard Josh's name, his whole body tensed. “And did he say anything? Do anything to Bella?”

“Other than creeping her out just by circling the building repeatedly, no. But she's pretty shaken up.”

Edward exhaled through his nose. “I can see that...I was on my way to meet her at her room. I had planned to walk her to the Literary Society meeting.”

Jacob took the hint, and saw an opportunity to get over to Dick's House quickly, so that he could

file a report. “Well, I got his tag number, so...if you’ll take over from here, I’ll go report the creep.”

Edward nodded quietly and reached for my backpack.

Squeezing me with the arm he still had around my shoulders, Jacob said, “I’ll see you later, Bells. I’m going to go take care of this for you.” He tousled my hair and added, “You’ll be okay.”

I nodded blankly.

When Jacob stepped away, Edward immediately stood in his place, smoothing my hair where Jacob had mussed it. Edward’s touch was tender. He pulled me in to a hug again, and held my head soothingly against his heart. I could hear it beating...racing, actually. When he stepped back, he cupped his hand under my chin and gently turned my face up to his.

He spoke softly, gazing into my eyes. “Oh, Bella. What can I do to help you right now? What do you need from me?”

I shrugged weakly.

He sweetly pushed a few strands of hair out of my face. “Do you want to forget the Literary Society for this afternoon, or do you think you need to go on?”

“I need to go.” Resolve was fortifying me, finally. “I don’t want him to disable me...besides, I’ve really been looking forward to this. It’s one of the only things I have left that’s...*me*.”

“Well, then,” he smiled down at me, “you *must* go. We’ve got to keep you *you*, at all costs...and I’m glad to hear you say that. You’re much too special for me to *let* him disable you. You deserve to be free—*truly* free.” He wrapped his arms around me once again, and I heard him whisper, “...and I’ll see to it that you are.”

I felt myself relax in Edward’s arms. He must’ve noticed it, too, because, he released me with a sigh, and turned us to walk over toward the Green. “Do you need to go by your room for your writing?”

“No...I have it with me. I didn’t know how long my meeting would go,” I was able to answer, more sure of myself now.

“Okay, then. Off to Berry Library. We’re meeting upstairs in the conference room, right?”

“Yes.”

We didn’t say anything else as we walked, but I felt content in his company. There was no need to fill the air with idle words. I liked that.

He jogged ahead a step to open the door for me as we arrived at the library. We went in and headed over to the steps. When we got to the conference room, we found seats in a corner. Edward sat beside me, but on the opposite wall, so that he could look at me. Our knees were touching. He set my backpack at my feet, and I bent down to pull out my book of poetry by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and make sure my own poem was still tucked inside.

He reached into the inner pocket of his jacket, and pulled out a small, thin book. He flipped through it, and I noticed the pages were filled with handwriting. *That must be a journal...* Tucking his index finger inside, he rested the little leather-bound volume on his knee, tapping it quietly as if there were music in his head.

It was nice sitting next to him, and I was so glad he didn't mind the quiet. I didn't have anything to say right then.

As people began filling the room, he made easy conversation with them, keeping them occupied. He was shielding me from conversation. *I'm so glad he's here.*

The meeting began right on time, and I struggled a bit to concentrate. All of the readings were a bit hazy. People read from their seats around the table today, rather than standing at the podium like we did often the year before. *Good. I don't want to stand up today.*

Suddenly, it was Edward's turn. He opened his book and began speaking.

"This particular piece is titled, *Song*. I find myself writing often, but this is a personal favorite.

Not background music

Nor even the soundtrack

It is the music that emanates from my soul

It is the essence of who I am

The theme repeating

Adjusting, adapting to the world

Sometimes deep and quiet

Sometimes strong and vibrant

Joined by other melodies as our paths cross for awhile

A gentle strain floats into the air—

Vulnerable

Waxing, waning in its beautiful minor melody

And my theme swells into a staccato fugue

Easing, releasing, my theme quiets as

The gentle theme floats in and out of my symphony

No one hears my song

No one adds their rich harmony

No one dances to my music

And so I wait

I was mesmerized. He wrote so beautifully. Edward was just a beautiful person. When everyone around the table clapped, he gave an humble smile, nodding his head. I was pulled out of my reverie, when I felt all their eyes on me.

It was my turn. I pulled my paper out and spread it gently on the table. Breathing deeply, I relaxed, sensing only Edward's eyes on me anymore. His knee touched mine under the table—his vote of confidence.

I began reading.

I lived in the summer...

Inhaling the warm air

Soaking in the sunshine

Glowing with hope and desire

Dancing through meadows

Smelling the wildflowers

Reveling in the freedom

Gazing at the vivid colors

Steeping in the strength

Until...

He brought the autumn...
To chill me with the breeze
To steal my daylight little by little
To sap the life out slowly
To wither me with decay
To blind me in a haze
To paralyze me slowly
To draw out of me all that was my own
To make me brittle
And now it's winter...
And I am frozen
I live in twilight
Neutralized by the shades of grey
Glazed over with ice
Stilled by weakness
Breathing in emptiness
Numbed by barrenness
Quieted by the calm
And I've given up on spring.

The clapping began a moment after I was finished, and I couldn't bring myself to look up. I closed and creased the description of my life, and placed it gently back in the book, folding my hands in my lap. The next person was beginning their reading, and I felt like I could look up safely. All eyes were elsewhere.

Oh, not all eyes. Edward's eyes were locked on my face, communicating volumes. The corners of his eyes were wet with tears, and he looked as though he wanted to scoop me up and take me

away somewhere to protect me from Josh, and even from my own hopelessness. The corner of his mouth lifted in encouragement, but his eyes remained cheerless. He leaned forward quietly, reaching under the table to gently take my hand. With one squeeze, he let me know that he was here. He'd heard. He knew how empty and broken I was, and he wasn't going anywhere. I looked back down and sighed.

I would make it. Edward was going to help me see to that.

A/N: I know that this chapter was a little slow moving at times, but the character and relationship development was very important. It's about to get moving a lot more. There'll be some serious happenings in the next few chapters. Emmett will be back, something will happen to Rosalie, and Edward...well...he'll just continue to be perfect as always.

Please review!

#####

Chapter: 11

Prosperity will have its seasons

Even when it's here, it's going by

And when it's gone we pretend we know the reasons

And all the roots grow deeper when it's dry

David Wilcox

Chapter 9: Kindness

The meeting went on for another hour, and finally, the student who had been directing things stood to adjourn it. "I'm sorry that we didn't have time to share both pieces this afternoon. Thank you all for your preparation, and for your attendance. I guess it's a good thing that we ran out of time—I wasn't expecting this many people. Next week, I'd like to suggest that you bring the piece you *didn't* read tonight, as well as one other, just in case. Have a great weekend. We'll hope to see all of you on the Green tomorrow for Dartmouth night. It will be exciting as always."

There were nods of assent all around the room, and the gradually building hum of voices as everyone left. I quietly placed my things in my backpack, but as I reached down to get a hold of a strap, Edward took the bag and slung it over his shoulder. I looked up at him awkwardly, and he said, "Do you mind if I carry this for you?"

“No...but I don’t mind carrying it either.”

“I’m sure you don’t,” he said, the left corner of his mouth lifting in that ridiculously handsome way. “But it’d be my pleasure to carry it for you.”

I nodded my assent, and turned to look at the door. The crowd was dwindling, and I suddenly felt his hand on the small of my back. “I am absolutely famished, Bella. How about you?” I dipped my head once, before I heard, “You know what I could really go for?”

I found myself turning to look at him, interested. He was grinning. “A messy cheeseburger and some home fries. This is a perfect night to go to Ellie’s. What do you think?”

I smiled as I thought about how good that sounded to me. Ellie’s was a hole in the wall over in Lebanon run by a sweet, little old lady. A 24-hour diner, specializing in all things greasy and cheap, frequented and adored by locals and late night studiers. “That sounds just right.”

Edward looked pleased. “Well, I’ve got a good bit of studying to do, too. I don’t know about you, but I’d love to go and stay for a few hours. Ellie makes such good coffee. Are you interested in just eating, or do you have something you could study, too?”

“I could run by my room and get my books and my laptop. I’ve got lots I could do...and I’d probably rather not be just sitting in my room alone right now. Sitting at the diner sounds good.” *Sitting with you sounds nice.* I loved that he wasn’t pressing me to open up about everything, yet understood I wasn’t ready to be alone.

“Okay, we’ll get my car, and then I’ll run you by your room.” We were walking down the steps. We crossed the library lobby, and he opened the door for me. The fresh air felt wonderful. It had cooled a good bit while we were inside. We were quiet as we walked to the student lot, but I took a sharp breath when I noticed Josh’s black Saab parked in the corner. Before I could say a word, Edward asked, “Which car is his?”

“The Turbo X...in the corner.” I swallowed.

“Hmm,” Edward said almost inaudibly. I looked up at him, and the muscles in his jaw were taut. He looked down at me and—when he saw me searching his face—smirked. Then his eyes softened, and he touched my back again, gently leading me away, toward his car...toward a different reality.

He opened my door, and stood aside to let me slide in. When he closed the door, I inhaled deeply, trying to clear my head. A moment later, Edward opened his door and pushed his seat forward, placing my backpack gently in the backseat. He pulled his keys out of his pocket and got into the car in one fluid motion. I noticed—once again—that I really liked watching him move.

As Edward turned the keys in the ignition, the stereo blared to life. Paramore. “Oops! I forgot I

had that cranked up.” He was grinning as he turned it down. It was nice to know he did normal human things once in a while.

I grinned back. “I love Paramore.”

“That doesn’t surprise me,” he replied as he put the car in reverse. His car moved fluidly through the lot, and it seemed like it only took ten seconds to get to my dorm. I started to get out of the car, but turned to ask for my backpack. He was standing up, getting it for me already. He walked around and handed it to me, his eyes bright.

“I’ll be right back,” I said. “Don’t go anywhere.” I was only half joking.

“I’ll be waiting right here, Bella.” He ran his fingers through his hair and leaned back against the passenger door, settling in.

I ran upstairs, and tossed my backpack on the bed. Checking myself in the mirror, I realized that I looked pretty shell-shocked. But there was a little spark of life in my eyes, too. I knew being with Edward was good for me. I brushed my teeth and my hair quickly, then got out of my nicer, professional looking clothes. Pulling on a pair of jeans, I scribbled a note to Rosalie. She had left me a note, too. At the library, it said. *Good*, I thought. I wondered if she was alone. I grabbed a big, green hooded sweatshirt and threw it on.

After emptying my backpack, I shoved in my laptop and an article for my Literary Criticism assignment. I grabbed my wallet and tossed that in, too. No assumptions. This was most definitely not a date. Still, I looked in the mirror before I ran back down the steps. This would have to do.

He was still leaning against the silver car, his arms crossed, watching the door. His leather jacket was tight around his broad shoulders and biceps, and his hair had fallen in his face, blown by the chilly breeze. He flashed a gorgeous smile at me as I approached, “Nice.”

“Thanks,” I said, a bit sarcastically. “Comfort was the goal.”

“I’m serious,” he said, grinning. “Comfort suits you. I like it.”

“Oh...” I didn’t know what else to say. I gave a half smile, and his eyes were suddenly very...kind.

“Let’s go, shall we?” He opened the door for me again, pushing my seat forward, so that I could put my pack in.

“Let’s,” I answered, scooting into the car.

He was beside me in moments, the car turned on, and the music playing. I watched as he easily shifted gears, maneuvering through the campus streets. He was a good driver.

I let my head fall back on the headrest, my eyes closing. I was so tired. I wanted some coffee...and grilled cheese. Ellie's grilled cheese was always *just right*. Crisp and buttery, with white American cheese melted to perfection, there was nothing better to me when I was studying.

Edward didn't interrupt my reverie. He drove in silence, Paramore the soundtrack to our trip.

Ten minutes later, the car slowed, and Edward pulled into the parking lot behind the diner. I opened my door and got out, trying to pull the seat forward. *Why can't I make this thing work?!*

"Need help, Bella?" Edward prompted. *He's here again...always close by when I need him.*

"Yeah, I guess I'm inept." I got out of his way, and within seconds he was standing up, backpack in hand.

"It's the little button on the back of the seat...at the bottom."

"Okay," I acknowledged, wondering if I'd ever have the opportunity to put that information to good use.

We walked into the back door, through the dim hallway past the bathrooms, and out into the diner. I blinked at the brightness of the fluorescent lights.

Edward extended his hand, indicating that I should choose our spot. I selected a booth near the back, wanting to avoid the windows. Ellie shouted over the voices of the other customers, "You two need some coffee?" Edward looked at me for an answer, and I smiled and nodded yes.

"Yes, ma'am. Two coffees...and some menus," he answered.

"Comin' right up," she hollered.

We got settled, and Ellie brought our coffees over. "Cream?"

"Please," I said. "Lots." Edward grinned at me.

I think she pulled out every cream in her pocket. Edward asked with a smirk, "Do you think that will be enough, Bella?"

"I hope so...if not, I'm sure Ellie's got more."

She smiled down at me, affectionately. "Sure do, Sweetie. You take all you want. Do you know what you'd like to eat, or do you need a minute?"

Edward looked at me, unaware that I'd planned my meal on the way. I answered quickly. "Grilled cheese and home fries. And would you bring over some malt vinegar, please?"

“Sure thing, Hon.” She turned to Edward.

“I’d love a bacon cheeseburger with mayo, lettuce, tomato, and onion, home fries on the side.”

“You got it, Darlin’.” And she was off.

“She’s sweet,” I said. Edward agreed. He pulled out his notebook, and then added a little sugar to his coffee.

I pulled out my article, a pencil and a highlighter. Then, I set to work on my coffee. Four creams and two packets of sugar later, I noticed Edward grinning as he watched me. I stirred, and then cleaned off the spoon, tasting. “Perfect.”

He chuckled and teased, “I’m sure she could *just* give you a cup for cream and sugar.”

“Mmm. That’d be good. You don’t think she’d mind?” I chided back. “Seriously, I think that coffee is supposed to taste like coffee ice cream...just hot. I only drink it when I need more caffeine than hot chocolate can give me.”

“I see,” he responded, his eyes light with humor.

I lost myself in those eyes for a moment...he noticed, and his eyes began searching mine for something. Suddenly totally self conscious, I stared down at my paper. I heard him inhale deeply, but pretended not to notice.

When I peeked up a few moments later, he was working diligently on his reading. I watched for a moment as his eyes scanned the words, back and forth. *His eyelashes are so thick.* His nose must’ve itched then, because he crinkled it and wiggled it. I couldn’t take my eyes off his lips. When he shifted in his seat after a minute or two, I forced my eyes down and began reading. It was a little hard to concentrate around him.

Who are you kidding, Bella? A little?

So, I forced myself to take the cap off of my highlighter and focus. The reading was fairly interesting, and I found myself deeply grateful. I made note of all those things which I’d need to reference or address in my critique. My work was progressing nicely, the essay forming itself in my head of its own accord, when a new waitress appeared with our food.

When she cleared her throat, we both looked up. “Where should I put these?” she asked, her eyes only on Edward. She was easily over forty, and she looked like life hadn’t been so kind to her. *I bet she’s hoping that Edward will be especially kind.* I wanted her to leave the food and go, but she decided to stay and chat for a minute.

“Whatcha studying?”

Edward answered politely, “Psychology.”

“I bet the girls’ll tell *you* anything! Am I right?”

I shifted uncomfortably in my seat, and Edward’s eyes locked on mine. “I’m not interested in what *all* the girls have to say.”

She began to say something else, but Edward interrupted, eyes still on me. “Do you need anything else, Bella?”

“No...I’m okay.” I couldn’t look away from him if I tried to.

“Then, I guess that’s all we need, ma’am. Thank you. I’ll get your attention if we need refills or something else.”

She began to turn away. “My name’s Joanne, if you need me, hon.”

“Thank you.” He still wasn’t looking at her, and I could tell she really wished he would. But she headed back to the kitchen after an awkward pause.

I was still just staring at Edward, unmoving, until he rolled his eyes and smirked. “That was more tedious than it should have been, hmm?”

I relaxed a little, answering, “You shouldn’t do that to people.”

“What did I do?” he asked, sincerely.

“You just *dazzled* her. You do that all the time.”

He considered something for a second. “Do I dazzle *you*?”

“Clearly. And it’s not fair.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t want to affect you in any way that makes you uncomfortable, Bella.” *Is it just my imagination, or does he look a little bit pleased with himself?*

“Don’t worry about it. You only have that effect on me because I’m so tired.”

Disappointment clouded his eyes for a fraction of a second, before he hid it. “Let’s eat. This burger looks *good*.”

We dug into the food, and I realized that I had been hungrier than I thought.

While we were eating, Edward said, “So, tell me about your hometown.”

“Well...it’s not amazing or anything, but I grew to like it. I moved there my junior year of high school—the first time I’d lived with my dad since my mom left him when I was four. I hated it at

first. It was constantly raining, and I missed the sunshine of Phoenix, but it was right for me to be there with Charlie. I didn't ever really fit in, but my relationship with my dad improved a lot. I don't think I'd ever really known him until I moved up there. And I'm not sure how he survived cooking for himself all those years."

Edward was smiling as he listened. "And you like to cook?"

"Yeah...I enjoy it. And I've always *had* to cook, because Renee—my mom—is *terrible* in the kitchen. She experiments...and it never turns out very well." I chuckled at the memory of an awful Mexican-*ish* dinner she'd tried to fix.

"Which parent did you like living with better?" he asked.

Tough question. "Hmm. Renee and I have a super close relationship, and for a long time, she really needed me around. She's a very free spirit, impulsive...a dreamer. We balanced each other out well." He was listening intently, evaluating my words. "Then she married Phil."

"And she said it was time for you to move in with Charlie again..."

"No. I left because *I* wanted to," I corrected quickly.

"It was uncomfortable for you?" He was leaning across the table, a bit, trying to figure all of this out.

"No...Phil's great. And my mom was very happy. But Phil traveled a lot. He plays baseball for a living."

"Should I know him?"

I smiled. "No, he's not *that* good."

"Your mom wanted to travel with him?"

"Well, I'm sure she did, but she didn't realize it. And she'd *never* have said anything. She just stayed with me while he traveled. I felt awful that she was missing out on that part of their new life together, just because of me. So I moved in with Charlie."

He sat back, surprised. He didn't make any guesses that time—just waited for me to keep going.

"And Forks was your average small town—with the exception of rain almost every day of the year. I hadn't grown up there exactly, but I wasn't completely an outsider either. Charlie's the chief of police, and I'd spent most summers with him. So, they put up with me."

"And you put up with them..."

"Yes. And I worked my tail off to get a scholarship, and here I am." *A product of an entirely*

different world than yours.

“I bet they’re all amazingly proud of you.”

“They are, I guess. They’ve always expected me to do something important, but I don’t think anyone saw Dartmouth coming.” I added quietly, “...but it’s always been my dream.”

“I think you’re brave, Bella...more than you know.”

“For what? Just coming to Dartmouth?” I didn’t understand.

“You’re just so...real. So genuine. And you’re up against some pretty difficult things, but you just keep going. I admire you.” I could tell he meant it, but it was confusing.

I’d better change the subject. “What about you? Where are you from?”

“My family is from the Ogunquit area, near Kennebunkport, Maine.”

“Oh, wow. I’ve always wanted to see the coast of Maine.”

“Mmm. It’s really something. Something about the rocks and the crashing waves. It’s unyielding, but beautiful. But *we* live on an inlet, and the water is calm and peaceful. It’s amazing that the scene changes so much within just a few miles.”

“Do you have any brothers or sisters?”

“Just one younger sister. Her name is Alice. She’s very different from me, but really an amazing person. I’d love for you to meet her someday.”

“She’s not going to attend Dartmouth?”

Edward smirked. “No. She doesn’t fit my parents’ mold well. They don’t always know what to do with that, but I guess they’ve learned that when she sets her mind to something, it’s better to get out of the way. She’s going to Pratt...studying design.” He was smiling at the thought of it.

“You’re proud of her,” I inferred.

“Definitely. She’s quite the little force to be reckoned with...and very gifted. I think she could probably do anything she wanted to.”

“She sounds really wonderful.”

“She is...” He was quiet.

“You miss her.”

“I miss her laughter. She’s like a pixie.” He had a far off look in his eyes.

I was finished eating, so I pushed my plate to the side. Edward finished his burger, and then picked up the plates, setting them on the next table and reclaiming our workspace.

“Was your sandwich good, Bella?”

“It was great. Yours?”

“Messy...but that’s what makes a good burger, right?”

This side of Edward is so...normal. It’s nice. “Yep.”

We smiled at each other and began studying again. After a few minutes, I was drumming on the table, a song in my head.

Edward looked up at me, with his perfectly crooked smile. “Would you like some music on the jukebox?”

“Yes! Would you mind?”

“Not a bit. I was just thinking that would be nice.”

He pulled out some ones and handed them to me. “You go pick. I trust you.”

“Are you sure?” I felt anxious. *What if he didn’t like the music I chose?*

“Absolutely. Choose whatever *you’re* in the mood for.”

“Okay.” I slid out of my seat and walked over to the old jukebox. I was familiar with their selection, so it didn’t take me too long. Five songs. I chose U2’s *With Or Without You*, *You Found Me* by the Fray, *Hang* by Matchbox 20, *No One Is To Blame* by Howard Jones, and...*Nobody’s Home* by Avril Lavigne.

When I came back to the table, Edward was writing something. He looked up briefly and smiled, but kept at his work. His thoughts seemed to be flowing. *I love it when my writing pours out like that.* I sat and kept working.

As each song came on, Edward looked up at me. He nodded at the first few, looking pleased. When he heard the piano of Howard Jones, he sat back, surprised. “Good choice, Bella.” His smile stopped my heart. I was too glad he was pleased.

By the time the song was over, I was working on my laptop, and the essay was coming to me quickly. I didn’t look up as *Nobody’s Home* began playing, but I could feel Edward’s eyes on me. I finished my thought, and then ventured a glance in his direction. He was writing again, but he looked sad.

I was warm, and so I twisted my hair up and shoved a pencil through it to secure it in place. When Edward noticed, he smiled at me. “Nice,” he said simply.

We worked quietly for the next two or three hours, getting refills a few times. Each time, he asked me one arbitrary question.

“What’s your favorite color?”

“Deep red. But I like amber, too.”

“Who is your favorite author?”

“Jane Austen.”

“Do you like the mountains, or the beach better?”

“Mountains, definitely. Ocean sand is too sticky. If I’m going to be in or around sand, it’s got to be in the desert.”

And then he’d go back to work. I never asked anything back. I’d ask later, if we got to spend more time together.

At about 10:30, Edward got up and walked over to the cashier. When he came back, he laid the tip on the table and began gathering his things. “We should probably head back now.”

I agreed, saving my assignment—almost finished—and began shutting down my laptop. “Before we leave, I’m just going to run to the bathroom.”

A strange look crossed Edward’s face. *Relief?* He looked pleased for some reason.

Whatever. I walked down the hall.

When I came back to the table, my laptop was closed and in my backpack. He’d loaded everything up for me. I didn’t know how to respond. “Thanks for getting my stuff together.” I wondered if everything was organized as I liked it. *Come on, Bella. It doesn’t matter.* “And thanks for buying my dinner...you didn’t have to.”

“It was my pleasure, Bella. I’m glad you came with me. It was nice sitting with you while I studied.” His gentle eyes were setting me more at ease.

I pulled my backpack off the table and we walked out toward the car. It was bitingly cold. Edward took off his jacket, and reached for my backpack, handing me the jacket. I said it was okay, but he insisted, reminding me that he had a sweater and was used to weather worse than this anyway.

So, I put it on. It smelled like him. *Delicious.*

When we were back in the car, I shivered. I couldn't get warm against the cold leather seat. Edward pulled a small, wool blanket out of the back seat, and offered it to me. I covered my legs with it, and watched as he pressed a small button in the console. "Seat warmers," he explained. Soon, the car was getting cozier, and we were on our way back to Hanover.

We didn't say much. I was thinking about the strange conversation we'd had...the seemingly pointless questions, his relief when I'd said I needed to be excused for a minute. *Don't overanalyze, Bella. It's late. You're both just tired. He's been a gentleman again. A complete gentleman.*

Norah Jones was playing quietly in the background now. "I like Norah Jones," I offered.

"I do, too. The piano has such soul...and her voice, too."

"Yeah. It does."

I closed my eyes again, for a moment. I just needed to rest my eyes. I pulled the blanket up over my shoulders.

The next thing I knew, someone was tenderly brushing my hair out of my face. Warm fingers were tracing my cheekbone, which was suddenly and inexplicably *cold*. I heard a whispered, "Bella?"

I opened my eyes, and Edward was squatting down beside me, outside of the car. "We're back, Bella."

I was so groggy, but the cold air was bringing me to my senses quickly. I wanted him to keep touching my face. *Maybe if I closed my eyes and pretended...*

"It's late, and we're at your dorm. Come on, and I'll walk you to your room."

I smiled sleepily, and realized he was holding a hand out to me. I took it, and he helped me out of the car, pulling the blanket off, and then wrapping it around me like a shawl as I stood. "Oh! Your jacket!"

"That's all right. I'll see you tomorrow morning. You just keep it on for now." He reached into the back and took my backpack, and then he offered me his arm for support. I slid my hand into the crook of his elbow, and he smiled down at me. We walked to the door, and up the steps to my room like that. He held my backpack out for me as I fished out my keys, and unlocked my door.

"I enjoyed our time together," he said again. "I hope you have pleasant dreams."

"Thanks. I had a nice time, too...and I got lots done. Did you?"

“Yes, not as much as I’d hoped, but I got something else done that I wanted to do, so it was worth it.”

I looked up at him questioningly, but he didn’t seem inclined to enlighten me. He did, however, open his arms and offer a hug again. I slid into it easily, savoring the strength and safety. I was engulfed by it, and hated to leave. He rested his chin on the top of my head, and I felt it when he whispered, “I’ll see you in class tomorrow, Bella. Good night.”

“Good night,” I whispered back.

He stepped back, and I opened my door, slipping in quietly, in case Rosalie was asleep. As the door clicked shut, I set my backpack down and hurried over to the window to watch him leave. He walked purposefully to his car, but he wasn’t hurried. As he turned to climb in, he looked up at my window. When he saw me standing there, he smiled brightly. I grinned back, unashamed that he’d caught me, and I was surprised with myself for that.

I waved. He nodded and got into his car.

I sneaked past Rosalie’s bed—she *was* asleep. I began to unpack my bag, and pulled out my laptop. I didn’t want to work anymore, but I always set it up when I got back from somewhere just in case I needed it quickly. When I opened it, I saw a piece of paper folded up...a letter?

It said:

Bella, I was touched—moved—by your poem. Thank you for sharing such a clear picture of the way you see yourself. I understand how empty and undone you must feel in your winter. Still, I wanted to share with you something I’ve noticed about you in just the short time I’ve known you.

There is a definite beauty in the winter.

You may not see it. You may not even realize there is the possibility of it, but I see it every time I look at you.

I hope that through our friendship, you’ll begin to recognize it, and that—maybe—your winter will begin to thaw. You are unique, a beautiful person, and I am confident that there is still life budding under all of that permafrost. You just need more sun.

I’d love to sit beside you in the sun again and share another warm muffin. Would you mind? Let me know.

Truly,

Edward

I closed the letter, holding it to my heart. I was absolutely undone by his thoughtfulness...by his words. How could I begin to deserve his friendship, his kindness?

I hung his jacket on the back of my chair, and undressed, putting on a big t-shirt. Before I slid under the covers, I pulled a piece of paper out of my desk and wrote just one sentence.

I'd love to, Edward.

I slid the note into the breast pocket of his jacket, and was asleep within moments.

#####

Chapter: 12

From the deep of your dreams, the height of your wishes

The length of your vision to see, the hope of your heart

Is much bigger than this, for it's made out of what might be.

David Wilcox

Chapter 10: A Decent Day

I woke up listening to Rosalie's singing—*can I really call it that?*—in the shower. I got my things together, so that I could jump in quickly after she was finished, and I noticed she'd left a note for me on the board. *Jacob called.*

Hmm. Would he be up yet? *I'll risk it.* I dialed his number and waited.

A groggy voice answered on the third ring, "Hello?" I wasn't sure who was speaking.

"Umm, it's Bella. Is Jake there?"

"Yeah...but he's in the shower."

"Oh. Okay, well, will you tell him to call me before he heads out for class?"

"Yup. Sure will."

"I'm sorry if I woke you, Seth."

"Agh...that's okay, Bella. I need to get up anyway. See ya."

“Bye.”

I hung up the phone and grabbed my clothes, just as Rosalie was coming out of the bathroom. She smiled at me and eyed Edward’s jacket hanging on the back of the chair. “It was cold, and my friend was a gentleman,” was all I said. She shrugged and stepped past me.

In the shower, I let my body just enjoy the steam and the heat. I felt like it was finally washing away all of the tension from yesterday. Today was going to be different. Good. I’d see Jacob in a few minutes, Edward an hour after that, and get some studying done this afternoon, so that I could truly relax all weekend. I’d need it before the homework club started next week.

When I got out, Rosalie was already gone, but she’d scribbled a few words on a sticky note and stuck it to Edward’s jacket. “This is a nice coat. I bet your friend is nice, too! ;) Have a good day. See you tonight on the Green?”

I still didn’t know. If Edward or Jake were going to go to Dartmouth night celebration, then that might change things. Otherwise, I didn’t really feel like being around a crowd tonight. I blew my hair dry, threw on some khaki pants and a snug, blue cotton top, grabbed my favorite brown sweater from the top of my wardrobe, and placed it gently in my backpack with my books. A little lip balm, and I was on my way. *Oh! Edward’s jacket. I guess I can’t really justify keeping it...besides then I wouldn’t get to look at him wearing it.*

I checked the clock and didn’t feel like I could wait for Jacob to call back. I wanted to get a bagel and some fruit this morning. So, I folded Edward’s jacket over my arm, dashed down the steps, out the door and began walking over to Thayer dining hall. I heard quick footsteps behind me, and immediately felt my stomach drop into my toes. *Josh?*

And then Jacob was there. He had jogged up behind me and was smiling. “Hey, Bells. Sorry I didn’t get to call you back. Glad I caught ya.” He noticed my discomfort. “Aw, man. Did I scare you running up behind you like that?”

I nodded my answer quietly, and smiled slightly. “But I can see now that it was just you, so I’m okay.”

“Well, I’ll get your attention *first* next time, so I can run up to you without making your skin crawl. I don’t ever want to cause *that* kind of a reaction again.” He was grinning now. I couldn’t imagine Jacob ever making me feel that way.

“What’d ya do yesterday? Did the Literary thing go well?”

I smiled over at him, “It was good, I guess. Edward’s poem was great.”

Jacob tossed his head to the side, looking up at the sky, and then stopped. I paused and turned to look at him. “Bells,” he said, more serious than I’d ever seen him, “I’m glad Edward was there when we got back. That *schmuck* needed to be reported pronto. But I want you to know that I didn’t like leaving you. I wanted to stay with you and make sure you were okay.” His eyes were

searching mine for assurance that I really *was* all right...and that I understood.

“I know, Jake. Thanks for taking care of me, and driving back and all. Edward was really sweet, and I was really okay after a while.”

“Did you just go back to your room and study after your meeting?” he asked, sincerely.

“No. Edward ran me by the room, and I got my stuff to go study at Ellie’s.”

Jacob was quiet for a few seconds and then spoke up with fervor. “I love to study there...that lady really knows how to make a mean breakfast at ten o’clock at night. You guys should’ve called me.” He watched for my reaction.

I shrugged, “We didn’t really *plan*...and since Edward invited me, I don’t think that would’ve been right.

“So, it was like...a *date*?” He actually looked concerned.

“No...it was like the natural next step for two hungry people who needed to study, but I wasn’t the *inviter*.” On one hand, I hoped I was making him feel better, on the other, I didn’t want Jacob to be thinking about taking me on a date, either. *Where’s all this coming from?*

“Okay,” he said and shrugged his shoulders easily. He didn’t seem too bothered, but I sure didn’t want to have to deal with this kind of relationship stuff right now.

“Jacob, listen. I’m not ready for any kind of relationship—other than friendship—with *anybody* right now. My heart is so messed up from all this crap with Josh. The last thing I need is to add emotional weirdness in my life from another direction. I’m just looking for friends. I’ll hang out with anybody nice, go see movies, eat at the diner, study together...but I’m not going to date anybody. Are you still interested in hanging around me even if I can only be a friend?”

“Sure, sure. Yeah, Bells, seriously.” He seemed to be walking a little easier somehow. “I know that’s the last thing you need...I guess...maybe, that’s *why* I was asking. I don’t want *anyone* taking advantage of your heart while you’re dealing with all this. I...I don’t really know Edward.”

Is he looking at Edward’s jacket?

Jacob continued, “He *seems* like a nice guy, but I’m just looking out for you. And *I’m* glad to hang out with you, too, when you don’t want to be alone.”

Why had I been worried? Jacob was so...sweet. Of course that was all he was thinking. “I’m gonna grab a bagel and some coffee before we head to class. You want anything?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said. “I’m gonna get a cuppa cereal and a cuppa milk...one for each hand.” He grinned at me.

“Okay, I’ll meet you back at the door in five minutes.”

When we got back to the door, I laughed at how he looked with a cup in each hand. He’d get a mouthful of cereal, then wash it down with a swig of milk from the other cup. *He’s crazy.*

He shrugged at me, and I saw his eyes laughing. We walked outside together, and moved in the direction of our class. Sanborn House wasn’t very far away, so we didn’t talk much. We were shoveling our food into our mouths as we walked. Right before we got to the building, I went over to the trashcan and threw my napkin and empty cup away. As Jake got there with his cups, he looked over at me and—without thinking—wiped away a little bit of cream cheese from beside my mouth with his thumb.

Awkwardly, I looked down, and heard him say, “You missed a little. Sorry.”

“It’s okay...really. Just surprising.” I stepped ahead into the building and went into class.

Jake slid into the seat next to me, and it wasn’t but a moment before the professor came in and started passing out the quizzes on our reading. Class flew by, with several passing glances and a few grins thrown in, but soon it was time to head off into different directions. Jacob would be going to Anatomy and Physiology, and I’d be going to British Lit...to see Edward.

We walked out of the lecture hall together, and toward my next class. As the room came into view around the corner, I saw him there. Edward, leaning easily against the wall beside the doorframe. He looked so comfortable there, his left heel propped up on the wall behind him, hands in his pockets. He was wearing dark green khaki pants, a tight grey t-shirt underneath a light blue oxford button down...unbuttoned. His sleeves were rolled up to just below his elbows, and his hair looked adorably messy.

As soon as he saw me, his eyes lit up, and he straightened, stepping out from the wall. His face held a tentative expression, accompanied by a sweet smile. He was waiting to see my reaction to him before he did anything to make me feel...like there were expectations. I smiled back easily, thinking of the amazingly understanding note he’d slipped in my laptop when I left the table last night.

Jacob was apparently taking all this in. He just turned amiably to me and gave me a head nod. “See ya later, Bells.”

“Bye, Jake,” I answered.

I walked right up to Edward and stood in front of him, looking up. I don’t know where the self-confidence came from, but there it was. “Good morning, Edward” I smiled. I held out his jacket, and he took it in his hand.

His eyes seemed to be looking right into me, and the corner of his perfect, beautiful lips curved into a devastating crooked smile. I wished I could capture that look and keep going back to it

over and over. “Bella,” he said softly. “Sleep well?”

“I *did*. Thanks. You?” I was still looking up into his eyes.

He leaned in toward me just a little, “Yes. I think it had to do with my relaxing yet productive evening. Shall we?” He gestured toward the door.

I walked in and headed straight back to my regular seat. Edward followed and sat down behind me again. *Please don't let there be any papers to pass back.* I heard him moving around quite a bit and looked back casually. *He's checking his jacket pockets!* I turned back around quickly and slid down in my chair a little bit, feeling awkward that I would be *present* when he discovered my reply.

Only for a moment, though. I felt a gentle tug on my hair from behind, followed by warm breath on my neck. “I’m looking forward to the muffin, Bella,” he whispered. *Oh. Me, too, Edward.* I involuntarily shivered, and heard Edward sigh as he shifted back in his seat.

After that, class flew by again, the discussion lively. I felt much more sure of myself than I had recently, and was glad for it. The professor reminded us of our assignment schedule, and then announced—as if anyone could possibly have missed all the posters and preparations—that the Dartmouth night festivities would begin at six. He urged us all to participate.

When we stood up a few moments later, Edward asked if I was planning on going.

“I’m undecided, actually. Though it sounds fun, I don’t know if I’m up to the whole crowd thing.”

“I understand. Let me just offer, if you decide to go, to accompany you. You don’t need to be alone in the crowd for sure, and I’d feel better if I could be near you to watch out for...*unsavory* characters.”

“Thank you.” I was nervous about getting lost in a crowd that size...and I knew that the darkness wouldn’t help matters. Still, I knew that as long as I was with Edward, I’d be all right.

“And, of course, you shouldn’t feel like you’d have to stay the whole time. I’ll just follow your lead if you’d like to try it for a while.”

Perfect. “Okay...well, I’m going to go study in my room all afternoon, get a head start on some of my papers and critiques. So, do you want to set a time?”

“No...I don’t want to put you on any type of schedule at all. Why don’t I just check in with you about six, by phone? You can tell me whether you’re ready or need more time.”

“All right, that sounds good.”

“You’re planning on eating after the bonfire, right?”

“Well, I thought I’d get something light before the bonfire...?”

“Excellent.” He grinned. “My roommate and I have a sort of tradition, and I’d love for you to join us. We go to Molly’s on Main Street in Hanover for wings and potato skins. They’re heart attacks waiting to happen, but even the most careful of us need to clog our arteries *once* in awhile...though I did that last night, didn’t I?” he smirked awkwardly.

“You did...but I won’t tell anyone.”

An eyebrow lifted, and changed his entire countenance. He chuckled quietly. “Good, good. I like to know that my secret’s safe. What are you doing for lunch, now?”

“I thought I’d run by Collis Center and get my mail...then I can just pick up a salad and smoothie to go. I’ll eat in my room while I study, maybe get Angela to join me.”

“Mmm. Salad and a smoothie. What a good girl,” he teased.

“Well, if I’m having a heart attack later tonight, I’ve got to get real nourishment from somewhere. Besides, MaryAnne can bake some delicious bread.”

“You go and enjoy it, then. Shall I walk you that far? Or...”

I hesitated for a moment. “Would you mind? From there to my room, I’m sure I’ll be just fine, but, you know how those *unsavory characters* can be.” I tried to keep it light, but I was so glad he’d offered. I was just uncomfortable walking alone.

“My pleasure, Bella.”

As we walked, we talked about our other classes. What we enjoyed, didn’t enjoy, found challenging, and so on. It was nice...nice and arbitrary...but we *were* getting to know each other a little more all the time. I liked that. I wondered about his music composition. He said he played the piano. *Ah, that explains his reaction to Howard Jones and what he said about Norah Jones. I wish I could hear him play.*

Passing the Green, we saw the pyre being set up for the annual bonfire. The stage was already up, but there were crews doing sound checks and running back and forth on various errands. Nowhere for Jake and his friends to play Ultimate Frisbee today.

The Collis Center was in front of us, teeming with students. As was becoming expected, I paused when we got to the door, and Edward opened it for me. I couldn’t believe I was becoming used to this chivalry. It was amazing to me how very, very differently Edward treated me than...well, than *anyone* had ever treated me.

Collis Café was surprisingly desolate. Not empty, but nowhere near the crowd I expected. We walked through the line, and I fixed myself a salad in a to-go box, snagging a yummy-smelling

crusty roll on the way past the bakery cart. At the counter, I ordered a raspberry-banana smoothie and paid. Edward was behind me...*close* behind me, with a deli sandwich and an apple. I stepped back to wait for my smoothie and to allow him access to the counter. After he paid, he turned to face me and wait with me. We moved out of the way a bit.

He looked as though he wanted to ask me something, but he hesitated.

I took the opportunity to say something about his note. "Edward?" I said quietly. I looked up at him for a moment, but when he leaned close to hear me over the noise, I turned my eyes away, embarrassed.

"Bella?" he prompted gently.

I whispered, "Thank you for your... letter."

"Oh," he answered. I turned to look back up at him, and saw realization and hope in his eyes. "You're very welcome."

I could only muster half a smile. "...I don't understand what you see, but I'm glad that you found something in me that keeps you around a little."

He chuckled sweetly. "It's more than just one thing, Bella...and you don't have to understand it for me to be mesmerized by it."

I'm sorry. Did he just say mesmerized??

A nasal shout sliced through the air, tearing me away from our conversation. "Raspberry-banana smoothie!"

Edward smiled ironically, and then leaned over to take the smoothie. He handed it to me, pausing as our fingers touched. His eyes were liquid amber at the moment, and I thought I would sink into them if I weren't careful.

I'm sure both of us would have loved to continue the conversation we were having prior to the fingernails on the chalkboard, but there was no way back. He sighed and offered me a crooked smile, as I took my drink from his hand. I looked up awkwardly, trying to think of something appropriate to say. Edward gently tucked a piece of hair behind my ear and then slid his fingers down the unruly lock, tugging it playfully down to the top of my shoulder. "Have a good afternoon, Bella...I'll give you a call at six."

My afternoon was pleasantly uneventful. I did all of my reading for my Monday classes, finished the critical piece on Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and got a head start on my short paper on rhetoric, which was due the following Thursday. Jacko Pierce played in the background, and I was very pleased with how smoothly I was able to wrap everything up.

It was half past five, and I called Angela. She'd been working all afternoon in her room after our

lunch together. She was planning to go down to the Green around 7:30, for the bonfire, but nothing else. We chatted for awhile, and when we hung up, I flopped back on my pillow, willing the phone to ring. Six o'clock wasn't coming fast enough.

I went to the bathroom and freshened myself up. I decided on jeans instead of khakis, because—inevitably—a wing smothered in hot sauce would find its way onto my lap. I was such a klutz when it came to eating messy things. I was so glad I'd stuck to grilled cheese last night. And I knew that Edward was bound to run as all my flaws were revealed.

Finally, the phone rang. I walked casually over to the pick it up as if I *hadn't* been staring at it, and I willed my voice to sound normal.

"Hello?" I answered.

"Hey, Bella. It's me. How has your afternoon been?"

"Fruitful...very fruitful. I got *lots* done, so I can just relax this weekend. I think I need it, you know?"

"I *do* know...and I'm glad your day was so productive. So, you don't need more time?"

"Nope. I'm declaring myself free of responsibility for a while."

"Excellent. Are you ready for wings?"

"Ten minutes?"

"Sure...I'll still be here."

"What? Where are you?"

"I'm down at the curb, looking up at your window." He was on his cell phone.

I ran over to peer out. "And *what* would you have done if I had wanted to study for another hour?"

He laughed. "I'd have gone to play the piano and wait...patiently, I might add."

Who am I kidding? I love that he's out there. "Well, I finished about thirty minutes ago, so I'm basically ready. Let me grab my coat, and I'll come on down."

"I'll be here," he said, and I could hear the smile in his voice.

Only a few moments later, I was walking toward his car. He met me at the passenger side, letting me in.

He closed the door, and I breathed in the scent of him, the car was full of a very light, but definitively masculine cologne. Not overpowering...just right. The car was idling quietly, no music. He climbed in.

“Emmett’s waiting for us at Molly’s. He went a little early to get a table.”

“Okay,” I said. “No music?”

“I didn’t know if you liked George Winston...so I thought I’d ask what you’d like to hear.”

“George Winston is fine. I like the way he plays.”

“Mmm. Me, too.” There was the crooked smile again. I absolutely loved that I got to make that happen sometimes.

We listened to the music without much conversation as he drove into Hanover. Nearing Molly’s, Edward cleared his throat and said, “Bella...there are no words to...”

“To what?” *I was suddenly anxious.*

“To describe...or to excuse...my roommate. Emmett is definitely one of a kind.”

Whew. Talk about relief. “I’m not intruding on your tradition?”

“No! Absolutely not. Emmett has brought someone with him a few times. We just like the wings.”

And you? Have you never brought someone with you? “Okay...good. So, I’m forewarned about Emmett. Is he obnoxious?”

“No,” he answered, grinning. “Not *obnoxious*...just boisterous, and...pretty full of himself. But he’s my best friend. He’s a good guy, really.”

“Well, if he’s your best friend, then I’m sure I’ll like him.”

He looked at me sideways, pleased with my response. Then he chuckled, “I sure hope so.”

He parked the car, and asked me to wait until he could walk around and let me out. I sat there, wondering about the formality this time and was suddenly remembering the night before...when he’d had to wake me. *Quick, Bella. Pretend you’re asleep again!* I smirked at my pathetically funny idea. The door opened.

Edward looked down at me and looked intrigued. “I’d love to know what put that look on your face.”

Not a chance. “Just wondering if Emmett will think *I’m* obnoxious.”

“I hardly think so,” he said. His smile was so dazzling at the moment, I almost missed the fact that he was holding out his hand to help me out of the car and up onto the curb.

I placed my hand in his, and he pulled me up and out gently, supporting my elbow with his hand once I was standing beside him. He gave my hand a gentle squeeze before letting go, and then I promptly lost my balance. He reached out immediately, steadying me by pulling me into him, my face against his chest. “Careful!” he teased. “I can’t let you get hurt on my watch.” I hugged him tightly all of a sudden. I was *so* thankful for his protectiveness. I was a clumsy, wobbly, awkward psycho ex-boyfriend magnet. Why he was still around, I wasn’t sure, but I was realizing, I’d better not take it for granted.

He gasped quietly when I squeezed impulsively, but his arms tightened around me as well. I felt him bury his face in my hair, and he inhaled deeply. When I turned my face up to him a moment later, his eyes locked on mine, trying to read the emotions behind the sudden embrace. All that was there, at the moment was thankfulness, and I hoped that would be enough. He seemed content, as he turned us toward the restaurant.

As soon as he opened the door, we heard, “Edward and Bella, what’s AAHHP?!” Emmett.

#####

Chapter: 13

In this scene set in shadows,

Like the night is here to stay

It is evil cast around us,

But it’s love that wrote the play

For in this darkness love can show the way

David Wilcox

Chapter Eleven: Dangerous

Emmett was HUGE. He stood up to greet me when we got to the table and just towered over me. Kind, exuberant eyes were set in the face of...well, he was like a bear. I knew instinctively that he could be the strongest, cuddliest teddy bear or the most ferocious enemy. And yet I *immediately* liked him. He extended his hand and grinned at me. “Bella Swan, I’m delighted to

make your acquaintance.”

I shook his hand and could do nothing but grin back. “Nice to meet you, too, Emmett.”

He smacked Edward *hard* in the shoulder and said conspiratorially, “How was *that*, bro? I didn’t overwhelm her *too* much, eh?”

Edward wore the most wonderful combination of chagrin and laughter. He pulled out my chair and motioned for me to sit down. I did, and then they both joined me.

Emmett leaned in, “I’ve got to tell you, Bella, that I’ve been *so* lookin’ forward to meetin’ you for several days now. You’ve caused quite a stir in our little circle.”

“Oh?” I asked, surprised. I looked over at Edward. His eyes were opened just a little too wide as he looked at Emmett, *perhaps willing him to say no more?*

“Oh, *yeah*. Absolutely. See, as long as I’ve known him, Edward’s been a one man show. He’s great, but he’s so *serious* all the time. Can’t get him to go to parties, can’t get him to cut loose and just be *loud* for no reason. He’s always studyin’, writin’ music, bein’ all intense. I can’t get him to loosen up!”

I smiled at that picture of Edward. I wasn’t surprised. I bet Rosalie felt the same way about me...but we hadn’t been roommates for three years. I could tell these guys had built a strong friendship.

“Then he came back to the room...what was it, Monday night, right? Yeah, Monday night. First night of classes. I didn’t know what it was, but *somethin’* had gotten to him. I tried getting’ him to lay it all out on the table for me, you know, but he just said, It’s just wrong...”

Edward cut him off abruptly, clearing his throat uncomfortably and jumping in with, “Emmett, I’m sure she doesn’t want to hear about all that.” Looking at me, he added, “Bella, if you ever want to know what I think, all you have to do is ask. But *don’t* listen to Emmett’s version. He’s insane.” He rolled his eyes at his friend.

Emmett laughed and said, “Well, *that’s* true. I do embellish a little.”

“Why don’t you tell us how *your* afternoon was, Em?” Edward prodded.

“Gah! I can hardly believe I didn’t hit you with this as soon as you walked in, man. I must have been distracted by your illustrious Miss Bella here. Edward, I met the girl of my dreams this afternoon!”

“Seriously? Isn’t that a little cliché?” he chided good naturedly.

“Aww, man. There’s no other way to describe her. She’s my match in every way...not to mention that she’s flippin’ *gorgeous!*”

The waiter came over at that moment, and took our orders...water, hot wings and potato skins. I'd just share Edward's order of skins. Emmett ordered another beer from the tap, too.

When the waiter was gone, Emmett's face was still completely lit up. If Edward couldn't take him seriously, I sure could. "What do you mean she's your match? Give me specifics." *Bella Swan, listen to yourself. You're talking to this guy like you've known him for years...* And yet, I realized right then, that with Emmett, there was no middle ground. You were either completely his friend, or not. I decided I *was*.

He kind of settled in his chair and turned to me, because I was being a better audience. Edward noticed, though, and began to take Emmett more seriously. "Yes. Tell us *that*. How is she *your* match?"

"She's confident, funny, not afraid of anything. She walked into 8 Ball Hall while I was practicing my game, stood right next to me—and I mean *right* next to me—and whispered in my ear, 'Don't miss this one, or you won't get to take me out later.' I called the shot, *nailed it*, and turned to look at this girl. She cocked her head to the side and said, 'Not bad. We should play sometime.' I stepped back and handed her the cue, and—*get this*—with one shot, she knocked a ball in the side pocket, a ball in a corner pocket, and lined up another good one. Then..." he looked back at Edward, "she blew me a kiss and walked off. It was the *sexiest* thing I've ever seen." He was practically bouncing in his chair.

Edward was shaking his head in disbelief. "She does sound like you, Em. I wouldn't have thought it possible...so, you obviously went after her..."

"Heck *yeah*, I did. I bought her a drink and we played a game. She's so funny, and she's seriously smart, too. Not your typical flirt-with-me-in-a-bar-and-I'll-go-home-with-you type...Though I was *really* thinkin' about takin' her home." He looked over at me and added quickly, "To carry on our conversation, of course, Bella."

I laughed. "Right. I'm sure, Emmett."

He went on, "She's tough, actually likes working on cars, loves loud music, didn't come here *just* for the education. The girl is after *life*, man, and it's *hot*. I actually wanna be the one to go after it with her. I don't...I don't even know what to do with myself."

Chuckling at Emmett as he'd clearly never seen him before, Edward asked, "So, you're obviously going to see her again, right?"

"Gah, are you serious? I couldn't even play it cool 'til tomorrow. We're gonna meet up at the bonfire. I'm just...I can't wait to hear what she's gonna say. Everything that comes out of her mouth, I could just eat up! I've never met anybody like her."

How nice it would be to have someone unable to wait for what I was going to say next. Just look at him!

Our food came out then, and we carried on bits and pieces of normal conversation while we ate. Emmett was too keyed up to think about much besides meeting this amazing girl at the bonfire, but he was still funny. I liked watching him with Edward. They were so completely different, but I could tell they really understood and respected each other. And they definitely made each other laugh. *I like how Edward is around Emmett. I get to see that smile, over and over.*

At that moment, lost in my thoughts, Emmett had apparently said something hilarious, and Edward started laughing so hard he almost choked. In his mirth, he took my hand and squeezed it, as if our connecting at such a moment were the most natural thing in the world. I looked down at our hands, linked together, and felt...seriously fine with it. Maybe...*maybe*...even a little more than fine. That surprised me. When I looked back up at Edward, his mouth was still closed tightly, mercifully holding his food in, but he was smiling at me. And his *eyes*. They were locked on my face with most wonderful look. Shining out of the depths of them, I thought I could read clearly, “I’m *so* glad to be sharing this moment with you.” I couldn’t look away. My face must’ve echoed his somehow, because Emmett was suddenly uncomfortable.

“Umm...do you guys want me to give you some alone time?” he chided.

Edward seemed totally at ease. He said, “Your *pool* girl’s got nothing on Bella Swan.”

Now, *Emmett* almost choked.

And I don’t think I was breathing.

What? I don’t...what is he saying? Does he...?

I looked across the table at Emmett right as he decided this moment needed a tension breaker. “You’re crazy, man. I mean, Bella does have nice hair, and she cleans her wings off better than most guys I know, but she doesn’t seem like she’d be that good at pool. And that—after all—was the biggest draw.”

Thank you, Emmett. He smiled back at me, understanding.

Edward conceded. “You have a point there. I’m not sure Bella could safely handle a pool cue.”

We all laughed, and then Emmett said, “Well, I’m just about finished. And I can’t be late to see my girl.” He tossed a twenty on the table and stood. “Bella, it was seriously a pleasure finally getting the chance to talk with you. You’re every bit as cool as Edward says.”

I smiled, wishing I could have been a fly on the wall so many times. *What does Edward say about me?* “Yeah, and you’re only half as bad as he says...so far.”

Emmett laughed hard and punched Edward on his shoulder again as he grabbed his jacket and turned toward the door. “You’re right man, see ya. Later, Bella.”

And Edward and I were alone.

If I had expected any awkwardness because of the myriad inferences made about me in the last five minutes, I would have been disappointed. Sitting by Edward and finishing my wings was as easy as being with him always was. I was dumbfounded by that. Maybe it was because I had no expectations, and I didn't think he did either. I always just felt like he was content to be with me...to accept the little that I had to offer.

“What did you think of Emmett, really?” he asked after we'd taken a few more bites.

“He's really great. I can see why you're best friends...and that girl is lucky.”

“Now, don't go falling under Emmett's spell, Bella,” he teased. “What do you mean she's lucky?”

“Well, the way he *talks* about her...I mean, were you *watching*? He's serious about her, isn't he?”

“Yeah, I've never seen him like this before...about *anybody*. I hope she doesn't break his heart.” He looked like he wanted to say something more, but thought better of it. “Are you about ready to go?”

“Yes...and thanks again for letting me in on your tradition. It was really fun. I haven't had *fun* in a long time.”

“Well, it's about time we changed that,” he said sweetly. “And I'm glad you had fun here...with us.”

He waited until I stood, and then he held out my coat, and helped me put it on. I didn't know if I'd ever get used to Edward and all his gentlemanly ways, but I was starting to want to.

The Green was crowded when we arrived. All kinds of people were there...students, uberfans painted in school colors, faculty and staff, alumni. It was a very big deal, as always. The pyre towered in the center of the field, and throngs of people milled around a good distance from it. The freshman class would run around it after it was lit—some only a couple of times, and the crazed few, 112 laps this year because they were class of 2012. A tradition that *clearly* got more impossible each year. I hoped they paced themselves. It would stink to peter out at 105.

Faces, faces everywhere. I was keeping an eye out for Angela, and—of course, I wanted to catch a glimpse of Emmett's girl, too. There was only one face I *didn't* want to see.

Edward stayed close by my side and was telling me a little more about his family, when Jacob came running up. “Bells! I'm so glad you came out! Hey, Edward.”

Edward nodded, “Jacob.”

I smiled at Jacob, enjoying his enthusiasm. How could I not? “Yeah, I’m glad to be out, too. I don’t want to stay tucked inside too much. But I don’t think I’m going to stay *too* late.”

“Well, that’s cool. I’m just glad you’re doing something. You deserve to be in the middle of things if you want.” Edward’s head turned swiftly to Jacob, evaluating him. Jacob continued, “I hear it’s gonna be awesome this year. I’d have hated for you to miss it.”

“How many times did you run around your freshman year, Jake?” I asked.

“All 111, Bells! I don’t do anything halfway.” He pressed my arm playfully.

“That doesn’t surprise me,” I said, thinking Jacob was crazy enough to do just that.

“It doesn’t surprise me either,” Edward added.

Jacob looked over at him and grinned. “Hey, there’s Seth! I’m gonna go catch up with him, but I’ll talk to you again later. See you guys!” He jogged off.

“Tell me more about your mom, Edward.” He seemed a little relieved I hadn’t wanted to discuss Jacob’s crazy accomplishment, and dove right back into the conversation.

I was facing Edward, and he was scanning the crowd for me, as he talked. When I shivered and bundled my hands into my pockets, he reached out and rubbed my arms for a moment. “Do you want to stand a little closer once they get the fire going?”

Before I could answer, the corner of his beautiful mouth lifted and he and backed up a little. “Angela found us.”

She came up beside me, throwing her arm around my shoulders and smiling at Edward, “Hey, Edward. Thanks again for the hot chocolate the other night. It was a good idea.”

“My pleasure, Angela.”

The PA system came on, and they announced the starting of the fire. It was always breathtaking. Everyone was quiet as they made the final preparations. All at once, the huge pile of flammable material came to life in a rush, sparks and heat pouring off of it like a volcanic mountain. The crowd screamed and cheered as if we were at the biggest football game of the season. Then, the freshman were called out, and they started circling the bonfire. Around and around, shouting, catcalls...it was wild. Little by little, the running mob started diminishing in size and slowing down. People went back to their conversations.

We chatted with Angela for a bit, when I noticed that Edward was still scanning the crowd. I assumed he was looking for Emmett, to get a glimpse of this amazing girl. But his brow was a tad furrowed, and he looked...a little *concerned*. “You’re not looking for Emmett, *are* you?”

He looked down at me, his face clearing of any worry, and he smiled sweetly. “I’d just rather know for sure whether Josh is here tonight or not. I’d like to keep an eye on him. But it appears he’s not in attendance.”

I felt relief wash over me. Edward noticed. He smiled at me as he leaned down and whispered in my ear, “So, would you like some hot chocolate now? To warm you up a bit?”

I nodded. “Actually, I’d love a regular coffee...with way too much cream and sugar.”

He laughed. “Angela, I’m going to take a minute since you’re here and go get Bella a coffee. Would you like something while I’m there?”

“Hmm. I think I’ll do hot chocolate again. But no whipped cream this time.”

“Hot chocolate it is. I’ll see you ladies in a few minutes.” He looked around once more, scanning the crowd. Then, satisfied Josh wasn’t around, he walked in the direction of Novack Café.

Angela grinned at me with wide eyes as he strode away. “He’s pretty great, Bella. I like the way he watches out for you.”

“He’s being a wonderful friend, and that’s more than I can ask for right now. I feel like I have such a long way to go...but he seems to want to help. I have no idea why...maybe he wants to use me as a psych project...and yet...”

“What’s the *yet*, Bella?” she asked.

“I don’t know...he just makes me feel so...*different, so special*. I can’t imagine why someone like *him* would find someone like me special at all, but I love the way he treats me... And—*most of all*—I feel safe.”

Just then, I looked up and Jacob was walking toward me, smiling. He looked around, probably for Edward, and decided that I must be on my own. Angela smiled at him, and I introduced her to him. “Jake, this is my best friend Angela.” I was glad they were finally meeting.

He said, “Hey. Any friend of Bella’s...”

“Thanks for the way you’ve been looking out for her, Jacob. It’s good knowing she’ll be with somebody who can look out for her over at the homework club every afternoon.”

“Sure, sure. Yeah, I’m really excited about that, too. And not *just* because I get to see Bella Swan in action.”

“Bella told me you’d done something like this before? Back home?”

They were getting into a real conversation, and I’d heard all of it before. I leaned back to Ang

and told her that I was just going to step a little closer to the fire. I was cold, and the crowd was sparse by now...most of those still making laps just *strolling* around the bonfire.

“Okay...” she said. Right back into easy conversation with Jacob.

I moved a little nearer to the heat, and watched as the shadows and light from the flames danced across the faces of the people around the fire. Taking a deep breath, trying to rid my mind of anything but this new sense of contentment, I closed my eyes.

WHAM! Something crashed into the side of my neck, the impact dizzying me. I wobbled on my feet for a moment, then my eyes locked on his. Josh. I watched as his hand fell limply beside him...and then I sank to the ground.

“Bells! Bella! Are you okay? What happened?!” Jacob’s voice was insistent beside me.

Angela’s voice was there, too. “Bella, open your eyes if you can, hon.”

Stinging. Throbbing. What hit me?

I couldn’t open my eyes, but I whispered a weak, “My neck...something...hit me.”

Angela very, very gently pushed my hair back from where it had piled against my neck when I fell. “Oh, my goodness...Jacob, look.”

I heard an angry grunt, “What the—?”

“It’s bruising...and bleeding a little.”

“Bella, did somebody hit you?”

Everything was still black, and I had no desire to open my eyes...at all. “*Something. Somebody,*” I eked out.

Jacob said, “I’ll go call security...first aid or somebody...You’ll stay with her?” He sounded kind of panicky.

“Of course.,” Angela answered. Then, to me again, “Bella? Sweetie, can you look at me? Can you *try* to open your eyes?” A crowd was gathering now. I could hear all of the murmuring.

I willed my eyes to open. Everything was foggy, but I could make out shapes and colors. Angela said, “That’s good. Can you see all right?” There was no mistaking the concern in her voice.

“Mmm” was all I could say.

Jacob led some medics over, running, and they dropped their bags and checked my vitals. I guess everything was sufficiently normal, because one of them helped me sit up after a few moments.

They were beginning to clean and bandage my neck when Edward pressed his way through the crowd, alarm on his face. “No...” his voice was ragged with fear. “Bella. Angela? What happened?” He practically shoved the drink carrier at a bystander. The concern turned to ire in seconds flat. “Where did he come from? Did anybody see him?!”

The security guard who’d ambled over after the medics looked up sharply at his question. “You know something about how this happened?”

Edward ignored the question and looked at me, squatting down and leaning in as far as the medics would allow. “Bella, did you see him?”

I looked at him, staring blankly, and I nodded yes. I pointed where Josh had been standing. Then quietly, “Right before I fell. It hit me, and then I saw him.”

Edward was wroth now. “*What* hit you?”

“I don’t know...slammed into my neck.”

He searched the ground frantically all around me. Nothing but grass and medical supplies. Then one of the medics picked up his bag. A rock the size of Edward’s fist was laying under it. Edward swore under his breath. He grabbed it fiercely and shoved it toward the security officer. “This. This is what hit her. She saw him. She’s filed a different report on him almost every day this week and all that’s happened is *probation*.” He was speaking through clenched teeth now. “I. Want. Him. Gone.”

Jacob stepped up to verify Edward’s accusations. “We—Edward and I—have been going everywhere with her this week. She’s not safe alone. He said he’d find her. She was by herself for one *second*...”

Edward paled and stepped backward, pinching the bridge of his nose. He looked like someone had punched him in the stomach.

The security officer said, “I’m going to need someone to come and file a report immediately. I’d like two witnesses at least. Who saw it?” To the medics, he asked, “Can she come, too?”

“No. She doesn’t need to go anywhere but back to her room to rest tonight. We can tell from the bruising that it’s superficial, but she really shouldn’t push herself.” To Angela, he added, “And don’t let her go to sleep for a few hours. Just in case. If she dozes, wake her every 20 minutes. Talk to her.”

Angela nodded seriously.

The security officer again, more emphatic this time. “Who saw it? Who’s going with me over to the station?” It suddenly dawned on everyone that the crowd had gathered afterwards. The only two who’d seen me fall were Angela and Jacob. They spoke up, and the officer said, “Let’s go. Right now. We need to get this documented.”

Angela turned to Edward before she left, touching his arm, pulling him out of his angst.
“Edward, you’ve got to take her back to her room. Will you stay...?”

“I won’t leave her again.”

“Thanks,” she whispered, tears in her eyes. She and Jacob walked away, Jacob watching me over his shoulder for a few steps.

The medics helped me to my feet, and Edward was immediately at my side, an arm around my waist. “Are you sure she doesn’t need to go to the hospital?” he asked.

“She’ll be fine if she stays still...as long as she makes it through the night with no signs of a concussion. Watch for those, man.”

“Absolutely. I will.”

The medics told the crowd to back off now, and give us some room. We began walking, and I leaned on Edward for support. I didn’t say anything for a while, and he didn’t press me. He was just...beside me.

Then, finally, I said, “He *hurt* me. Josh...actually *hurt* me.” It was almost like it hadn’t registered before. I couldn’t believe it.

Edward stopped walking, turning me gingerly to face him. He cupped my face in his hands and tilted it up so I was looking directly into his eyes. They were glistening in the firelight. “I am *so sorry*, Bella. I’m sorry I left you. I should’ve...I wish I’d taken you with me. I...hate...that this happened. But I promise you...I will stay with you for as long as you need me.”

I gave him half a smile, wishing I could say more, but feeling empty and numb again.

He pulled me into a hug, inhaling deeply, and said, “I’m here, Bella. I’m here, and I’m not going anywhere.” He kissed the top of my head and then said, “Let’s get you back to your room.”

Before I realized what was happening, Edward had scooped me up and was carrying me back in his arms. I looked up at him surprised, and he leaned his forehead down to touch mine. “I’m going to take care of you, Bella Swan,” he whispered, with the most tender smile I imagined possible.

Completely at ease, I rested my head against his shoulder and closed my eyes.

I believed him.

Back at my room, he set me down gently and asked for the keys. I pulled them out of my jacket

pocket, and handed them to him. He opened the door, and let himself in, holding the door open for me. He flicked on the light, and asked what I'd like to do.

"You could lay down, we could play cards, talk...hey," he bent his knees to get on my level. "How would you like it if I read to you?"

"I'd like that. Would you please read *Persuasion*? It's my favorite Jane Austen."

"I'd be happy to, Miss Swan. Do you want to change into something more comfortable? I'll step outside if you need a minute."

No! Stay. Don't leave me...even just to go into the hall. "Umm...I could just go into the bathroom. I'll change in there. You find a comfortable spot."

I pulled some clean sweats and a t-shirt out of my top drawer, and went in to change. When I came out, Edward was sitting on the edge of my bed, holding the book in his hands. And he'd looked through my CDs, too, because Vivaldi's Four Seasons was playing very quietly. "Is this okay?" he asked. He gestured to a pile of pillows beside him, and I thought it looked perfect. I climbed up onto the bed, got situated just right, and then he covered me with my favorite blanket that had been folded at the foot of my mattress. Then, he scooted in next to me, both our backs against the wall, propped his feet up on the bed, and started reading.

It was so soothing listening to him. His voice had a musical lilt, and he read the dialogues with perfect British accents. I was completely distracted...no. More than that. I found myself absolutely entertained. I actually laughed when he read anything that the whiny, self-absorbed hypochondriac sister Mary said. His voice sounded nasal and...awful. He was so *good* at this. He looked over at me with that incredible crooked smile, and I smiled back, resting my head on his shoulder.

He read to me for over an hour, and then we heard a knock at the door. Angela peeked in. "How are ya?" she asked quietly.

"I'm okay," I answered, meaning it. "Did you file a report?"

"Yes...we each filed a separate one, and the head officer said that the reports would go immediately to the judicial committee. Because he not only threatened you, but physically harmed you, he'll probably get suspended."

"Does it matter if no one saw him but Bella?" Edward asked.

We were all quiet for a moment. Angela finally answered, "Bella. If you can write a report now, right here, I'll take it down to them. They said they'd include it in the official file for the committee. They told me what they'd need. Are you up to it?" She handed me a short list.

Edward looked into my eyes, encouraging me with *his* determination. "Yes," I said firmly. "I want him out of here. I'm sick of this."

Angela got me some paper from my desk, and I recorded everything that had happened at the bonfire, exactly as I remembered it. Edward stroked my hair gently as I wrote.

When it was finally done, I felt one burden lifted. Angela hugged me and left. Edward stood up to catch the door, making sure it closed quietly. Then he turned to face me on the bed. Leaning over me, placing a hand on either side, he looked directly into my eyes. "I'm proud of you, Bella. I know that was tough, but I like to see you fighting back. One corner of his mouth lifted, and I was literally swimming in the adoration in his eyes. With one hand, he tucked a piece of hair behind my ear and whispered, "You are a beautiful person. I'm so glad to be the one here with you right now."

"I'm glad you're here, too, Edward. I..." *Do I tell him?* Yes. "I feel safe with you. Completely safe. I like when you're with me."

From the look on his face, you'd have thought I just told him he'd won a grand piano. *Why in the world? I don't think I'll ever understand him.*

"You have no idea how glad I am to hear you say that..." He sat down next to me again, on the edge of the bed. "Shall I read some more?"

"Yes, please. But I'm going to lay down now."

"You do that. I'll read from right here." He grabbed the book again, and picked up where he left off. I dozed off a few minutes into the reading.

I don't know how long it had been. My eyes still closed, I heard a one-sided conversation. "...right. And she stayed awake for three hours easily... Yes...Exactly...They said every twenty minutes...very peacefully, but she stirs when I touch her face...okay. Just for one hour, every twenty minutes? Okay...Yes...I'll call you if anything changes...Thanks, Dad. Yeah...Yes sir, she is *very* special to me...I know...Thank you. Give Mom my love... Bye, Dad. You, too."

I opened my eyes groggily.

"Good news, Bella. I just got off the phone with my dad. He's a surgeon. He said that based on how you've been doing already, I only need to wake you every twenty minutes for the next hour...then you can really sleep."

"Sounds nice..." he was brushing my cheek tenderly with the back of his fingers.

"Rest, Bella."

And I did.

He woke me twice more, just as sweetly, and I could see he'd never moved from my side. He was just sitting in the chair by my bed, watching me sleep. I felt so *protected*. Edward was my

guardian angel.

In what must've been the middle of the night, I was awakened by a harsh knock at my door. An insistent banging. I was disoriented. Edward wasn't in the chair anymore. I started to get up, and then I noticed that he had curled up with another blanket on the floor by my bed. He was resting with my favorite sweater under his head. After another bang on the door, Edward sat up, too.

He stood and said quietly, "Let *me* get it...just in case."

Opening the door, we saw the last thing we'd expected to see. A security guard was

standing there supporting a disheveled and battered Rosalie Hale. "You her roommate?" he asked me brusquely.

"Yes sir. What happened?" I reached out to take her hand, guiding her into the room to sit down while I listened.

"We found her on one of our rounds near the Collis Center. She was behind a bush...don't know if she crawled there, or somebody put her there. But there's evidence of...well, she needs to go right to the hospital, if you know what I mean. We started calling an ambulance, but she said she wouldn't go with anybody but her roommate. So, I guess you better get going. They say the sooner the better with these situations."

I hardly knew what to say or do. "Y-y-yes sir," I stammered.

He closed the door with a bang, and Rosalie jumped. I tried to get her to talk to me, but she just stared emptily ahead.

Edward was on his cell phone. "Hey, it's me. Yeah, I know it's late...no, listen. Bella was hurt tonight at the bonfire...yeah, by the schmuck...Right, so I've been here with her...no, it's actually her roommate...yeah, they found her outside the Collis Center. Apparently somebody...right. He said we're to take her directly to the hospital for examination...yeah, she looks pretty bad, and I think she's in shock...thanks. I just wouldn't be able to handle both of them...Okay, see you in a few."

He folded his phone shut and looked at me. Em's coming to help. Bending down in front of Rosalie, he asked gently, "Would you like some water? Or a blanket?"

She shook her head no. I was thankful for a response.

We sat in silence, waiting. Finally, a quiet knock. Edward opened the door and Emmett came into the room. Edward said, "Why don't you *carry* her if she'll let you. She's pretty unresponsive."

Emmett came around beside the chair to face Rosalie, and then he saw her. He swore under his breath as he fell to his knees in front of her. "Oh, *no*. Not *you*, Rosie. Rosalie? Rosalie? It's Em!"

Edward and I stared at each other, dumbfounded.

#####

Chapter: 14

Look, if someone wrote a play

Just to glorify what's stronger than hate

Would they not arrange the stage

To look as if the hero came too late?

David Wilcox

Chapter Twelve: Explanations

Emmett wasn't sure what to do. I could tell that he was desperate to take care of her, but none of us were sure how she'd handle being carried...especially right *now*...by a big, muscular guy. "And, I *can't* drive her in my Jeep...I wasn't thinking about that when I jumped in and came over here."

Edward tossed his keys to Emmett. "I'm parked in my usual area...just a couple of spaces away."

Emmett gratefully pocketed the keys and darted out of the room.

Edward leaned in and said to me quietly, "I know you're probably thinking Emmett should've been the one to stay here with Rosalie, but I could tell—he's not coping well with nothing to do. He's a hands-on guy, and he needed to feel like he was doing something meaningful."

I nodded in understanding. We sat in silence, Edward on the edge of my bed, and me at Rosalie's feet, holding her hand. She was shivering. As soon as Edward noticed, he took her fleece blanket from the foot of her bed and handed it to me. I gingerly wrapped it around Rosalie's shoulders, hoping it would help.

Emmett was back in less than ten minutes, breathing heavily. After only a little debating, we decided it'd be best just let her walk beside me. I picked up her purse, and then slipped my arm around her to support her, and she stood up with me but kept her head down, saying nothing. Emmett went first, wanting to be in front of her on the steps in case she stumbled. Edward

followed behind us, watching and ready to do anything that would be needed.

When we got down to the car, Edward opened the back door closest to the curb, and I crawled in and scooted across to the other side, patting the seat beside me. Rosalie climbed in, and laid her head on my lap without a word. The guys got in up front, and within a moment, Edward was pulling away from the curb.

No one said a word on the way to Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center. It was about ten minutes from campus, and the ride was *tense*, to say the least. That there was *much* to be said, no one had any doubt. And yet, everyone kept their mouths shut. Emmett's jaw was clenched tightly, and I could see him balling his hands into fists again and again as he sat rigid in the front seat, arms crossed. I gently stroked Rosalie's hair, wishing that it could all just be a dream.

When we pulled up to the emergency room, Emmett jumped out and opened the door, asking Rosalie to take his hand so he could help her out. She looked at me uncertainly, and I nodded, adding in a whisper, "I'm coming, too...*right* behind you." She placed her hand in his giant one, and he gently pulled her to her feet. As soon as I was standing, he carefully placed her hand in mine, smiling at her kindly and then stepping aside for us to go in.

Rosalie took a deep breath and shuddered, and looked over at me. I squeezed her hand and said, "Let's go. It'll be okay." We walked in together. I couldn't imagine what must be going through her head.

The ladies at the triage desk took her license and insurance cards from me as I explained what had happened. They assured me they'd get her to the doctors as quickly as possible, and—surprising me—they were good on their promise. Rosalie had a bed within 10 minutes. They allowed me to accompany her and help to get her into a gown. She was terribly bruised. It was awful. A nurse came by a few moments later and asked if Rosalie would like her parents to be notified.

"No!" she almost barked. It was the most response I'd seen out of her, and I wondered why she was so adamant. I'd sure have wanted Charlie and Renee there.

When the nurse explained that Rosalie would have to make a statement for the police, she nodded gravely.

They asked me to step out for a few moments while they examined her. I went quietly, hoping Rosalie was all right in there by herself. As I walked in to the waiting room, I saw Edward with his hand on Emmett's shoulder. Emmett had his face in his hands, and his knees were bouncing up and down. Edward must've whispered that I had come in, because Emmett jumped up and looked at me expectantly.

"I don't really have any news yet. They're examining her now, and so I had to leave. They told her she'd have to give a statement to a police officer, and she seemed to understand."

Emmett thumped back down in his chair. Then he looked up at me, his eyes anxious. "Was

it...was it real bad?"

"She's pretty bruised...but I didn't see any cuts or anything," I offered.

"I'd like to see what the son of a— the guy who *did* this to her looks like. I bet *he's* the one who's bloody. I bet Rosie's a fighter."

I nodded. We were all quiet again, having nothing to say that should be said at the moment.

Edward stood and walked over to me. He bent over my shoulder and whispered in my ear, "and how are *you* holding up, Bella? Do you need anything? Are *you* hurting?"

He stood up straight again and looked down into my eyes. I answered honestly, "I don't feel like I have any right to complain at all. I guess I've feel like I've got it pretty good."

Something flickered in his eyes for a moment. I couldn't read it. His brow creased, and he said, "I'm thankful this didn't happen to you, but it doesn't make what you've gone through any less traumatic..." he exhaled sharply through his nose, "... You just, you don't have it *good*, Bella." Then more softly, "...but I understand your heart. What happened to Rosalie is terrible. I hope she'll be okay."

The nurse called out just then, "Miss? She's in her room again, asking for you. You can go on back now."

"Tell her I'm here," Emmett said to my back. Then he added, "If you think she'll want to know."

I smiled an okay on my way through the double doors.

Rosalie was in the room with a doctor and a nurse. She looked relieved when I came in.

The doctor said, "Miss Swan? Miss Hale didn't want us to discuss anything until you were here. It's good that you hear this all as well." I went over and stood beside Rosalie, taking her hand.

He proceeded to explain that it was clear that Rosalie had been sexually assaulted, and that they'd been able to take fairly decent samples that would be given to the police for DNA testing. She'd also been hit on the head with some type of blunt object, but the CT scan had shown all swelling *outside* of the skull. The good news, he said, was that other than the head injury and bruising, no other *serious* physical damage had been done. There was no internal bleeding, no lacerations. The emotional trauma and mental images were probably going to be the most difficult things to heal.

He looked at Rosalie for a moment, and this time he wasn't giving a report. His eyes were cheering for her, full of admiration. "Miss Hale, we also found the perpetrator's hair and some skin tissue under your fingernails. That should really be helpful to the police."

The nurse leaned in and said, "Good girl!" She patted Rosalie gingerly on the shoulder.

Rosalie looked at me, and I thought I saw the corner of her mouth lift in acknowledgement.

“We’d like to keep you here tonight, just to observe in case of complications from the head injury, but we can discharge you first thing in the morning, all right?”

Rosalie nodded.

He paused to write something on her clipboard, and then turned to her once more. “I’m very sorry this happened to you, Miss Hale.”

She looked down again.

“The nurse will just explain a few things, and then the police will need to come in and take your statement.”

Rosalie didn’t respond, but I thanked the doctor. The nurse told us that she’d be moved to another room as soon as the police were done, and that they’d like to give Rosalie something to help her sleep.

She took all of this information in silently, and I wondered how she’d do when it was time to talk to the police.

I wouldn’t have to wait long, I realized. I heard them right outside the door.

They came in, and began with an apology, trying to set Rosalie at ease, but I could see it wasn’t helping much. The woman introduced herself, “I’m Officer Putnam. This is my partner, Cleveland. We’re here to help.” Officer Cleveland nodded.

I squeezed Rosalie’s hand. “If you can talk about this, maybe they’ll be able to get the guy and put him away.”

The woman, probably in her late 30s, said kindly to Rosalie, “Could you please just tell us everything you remember? Start with where you were before you came back to the dorm, and who was with you.”

She nodded and began quietly. “We were at the bonfire—Emmett and I. We went for a walk afterwards and ended up at 8 Ball Hall again, to play pool. Probably around 11:30, we decided it was time to say goodnight. We left the Collis Center...”

“Is 8 Ball Hall one of the businesses in the Collis Center?” an officer interrupted, clarifying.

“Yes. In the basement. We headed up toward Mass Row, where most of the student housing is. Emmett walked me to my door, and I went in. He left. Then, before I got back to my room, I realized I needed my backpack from my car. I ran back outside, to go the student parking lot. I saw Emmett not far ahead of me up the path, but I didn’t want to bother him. I went the other

way, because I always park just behind South Fairbanks.”

“You didn’t use the back door that opens onto the parking lot?”

“I don’t know why I didn’t go that way. Maybe I wanted to see if Emmett was still out there. But no, I ran out the front.”

“And what happened next?”

“As I turned the corner, I just remember seeing somebody fly at me out of nowhere—from the left. Beside the dining hall.”

She was quiet for a moment. “Miss?” an officer prompted.

“He grabbed me, and I started kicking and screaming. He knocked my legs out from under me, and pressed his hand over my mouth. He tore my shirt. I...I just kept trying to claw him off me, kept kicking him. He hit me a few times in the face, and I started trying to scream again. Then, I...I guess he knocked me out with something, because I don’t remember anymore.”

How terrifying. I wish someone had heard you.

“Could you describe him to us?”

“He was taller than me. Wearing dark clothes. He had a hooded sweatshirt on, I think, because I couldn’t see his face well at all. I really...I don’t know *what* he looked like.”

“You didn’t see his eyes? His face? Do you remember if he had facial hair?”

“No. I don’t know any of that. I think he had a ring on, because it cut my lip when he pressed against my mouth...pressed on my teeth.”

“How tall would you say he was?”

“No idea. Taller than me, and I’m 5’9”. Not *seven* feet. So, somewhere in there.” She was getting frustrated.

“Have any idea about his weight?”

“Well, he wasn’t fat, and he sure wasn’t scrawny...but I can’t tell you any more than that.” *Really* frustrated.

“No distinguishing marks or features?”

“I *told* you it was dark and I couldn’t see his face well! He had a big hoodie on. *Believe* me, I’d like to tell you I saw him. I’d like to be able to draw you a freakin’ picture! But... I don’t know.”

“Okay, Miss Hale. We’re sorry to press you. We’ve just got to get as much information as we can.” The officer really did sound apologetic.

“You know what? There *is* one more thing. I know I scratched him up pretty good. Try lookin’ for somebody who looks like he’s been in a cat fight.”

“All right, Miss Hale. If we have any other questions, we’ll contact you. Once we get the official report from the doctor, we should have some good leads.”

The other officer added, “Thank you for your time. We’ll do all we can to find this man.”

“Yeah, I hope you do.” Rosalie said.

They left quietly.

“I’m so sorry, Rosalie,” I said. I didn’t know what else *to* say.

“I know.” She was staring at her hands, looking at her fingernails. When she looked up at me a moment later, she finally *saw* me. “Hey, what happened to your neck?”

“Josh threw a rock at me at the bonfire.”

“Some pair *we* are, huh?” she laughed without humor.

“Yeah. I was supposed to take it easy tonight in case I have a concussion. You wanna share whatever good stuff they’re gonna give *you* to help you sleep?”

“I bet they have all kinds of rules about that, you know?”

“Yeah. Probably.” We sat for a few moments without saying anything.

“Hey, Emmett’s out there. Did you see him?” I didn’t know if she’d been coherent. “He wanted you to know.”

“Huh. I kind of thought that was a dream...How do *you* know Emmett?” she asked.

“Interesting story. My “nice friend with the nice jacket” is his roommate. I went to dinner with them, and Emmett kept talking about this amazing girl he’d. Apparently, she was unlike anybody he’d ever met. Edward had never seen Emmett like this about a girl before.” I quirked an eyebrow at her.

“So much for *that*.”

“What do you mean?”

“Like he’s gonna want anything to do with me *now*. I don’t want him to see me like this.”

“Rosalie...he’s sitting out there, wringing his hands, dying to know how you are...and probably wanting to find the *dead* man who hurt you.”

“I guess.” She didn’t sound convinced. *At all.* “But that doesn’t explain how Emmett’s *out* there.”

“Well, Edward came back to sit with me, watching for signs of a concussion. He fell asleep on the floor, and that’s why he was there when the security guard brought you to the room. He called his roommate for help, not realizing you were the “amazing girl,” and Emmett came. Do you remember seeing Emmett when he came in?”

“No...I don’t remember much at all between the attack and hearing the doctor’s report.”

“Well, he...I’ve never *seen* anyone hurt like that for somebody else. It’s something *I’ll* remember for a long time. He saw you looking worse than you do now, and his only thought was to take care of you.”

“Yeah...*I bet* he wants to play nurse to some broken and beat up chick.”

I could see I’d have to let Emmett do the convincing. *And it might not be easy.* Right now, Rosalie just needed to rest.

“Well, I think he’ll be patient and understanding...so don’t worry about him. I’ll tell him to just hang back for a while, okay?”

“All right,” she said.

Two nurses wheeled another bed into the room. They moved her into the new one, and told me to get her stuff and come on up to room 307. I said I needed to run into the waiting room and let our friends know.

The guys both stood up as soon as I appeared. They’d been watching the doors. I explained that they were moving her to a different room, and that I was going to run up with her. Edward said they’d move to *that* waiting room.

“Listen, you guys don’t have to stay. Go and get some sleep. I’ll stay in the room with Rosalie...there’s probably a chair or something. I’ll just call you later in the morning when they’re ready to release her.”

Emmett was shaking his head in disbelief. “You think we can sleep? With you two *here*?”

“Well...I don’t know what you can *do* here, but if you want to wait, it’s okay with me.”

Edward gently pushed my hair out of my face. “We’ll stay, Bella. It’s important to us.”

“All right,” I answered, not comprehending.

“Bella, will you do me a favor?” Edward asked. “If they give Rosalie something to help her sleep, and she is resting soundly, will you come and sit with me in the waiting room for just a little bit? Please?”

“Okay...as long as she’s really *out*. I don’t want her to wake up alone.”

“Thank you,” he said, his eyes full of concern.

We rode the elevator up to the third floor, and the guys made themselves comfortable in the waiting room.

I found room 307 and went in. Rosalie looked more comfortable in this bed...and in this room. As I was setting her things down, a nurse came in and offered her something to drink. She was getting a picc line ready for an IV. I had to walk out of the room, because I knew I’d faint if I were in there when she punctured Rosalie’s skin. I can’t handle the smell of blood. *Uggh*. In a minute flat, she had the needle in and Rosalie’s arm taped up. She left, and another nurse came in a moment later with the medicine. She injected it into Rosalie’s IV, and I stayed by her side until she fell asleep. It took less than five minutes before she was out *cold*.

“How long will that last?” I asked. “I don’t want her to wake up alone.”

“Oh, honey, that’ll keep her knocked out until about nine o’clock in the morning. And that’s when you’ll have to come back in anyway. Only relatives are allowed to room in with the patients. You’ll need to stay in the waiting room unless you’re going home. She’ll be fine.”

I felt like I was betraying her by leaving, but I knew I didn’t have a choice. So, I found my way to the waiting room. Edward’s head came up and his eyes met mine. He motioned to the seat beside him, and I sat down there. “Emmett went to the restroom. Can you tell us what happened when he comes back? The waiting is killing him, I think.”

“Umm,” I nodded. “Yeah. I guess I have to, huh?” I bent over, resting my elbows on my knees, my head in my hands. I was exhausted and I didn’t want to be the one to tell Emmett all of this.

As soon as Emmett came back in, I shared what Rosalie had described for the police report.

Emmett’s rage was palpable. “I’m gonna find him, and I’m gonna kill him.”

“Do they have any idea whether or not he was a student? There were so many people on campus tonight,” suggested Edward.

“I don’t know,” I answered. “But Rosalie got ‘em some good skin and hair samples under her fingernails.”

“That’s my girl,” Emmett crowed. “I wish she’d gotten his eyes...then he wouldn’t see me

comin'."

"Well, I hope that helps," Edward added. "And will they let you stay in the room with her tonight?"

"No. I'm not family. You guys don't mind me sticking around out here, do you?"

Edward just smiled invitingly. "I'm glad you'll get to stay with me."

Emmett was quiet, lost in his thoughts for now. Edward turned in his seat, offering me a spot to get comfortable against him. I put my head on his shoulder, but that made my neck ache, and my neck didn't need any extra help hurting tonight. I felt strange asking, but my sleep deprivation gave me the nerve. "Edward? May I... Could I just lay my head in your lap?"

"I think that would be perfect. I want you to be able to rest well. Give me just a second, though, Bella. I'll be right back."

He left for a moment, and returned with a perfect smile and an armload of goodness. Edward was carrying a pillow and a blanket from the nurses' station.

He sat down and put the pillow in his lap, patting it. I slid down onto my side, and snuggled into the pillow until I got it just right. He flung the blanket out to the side a few times until he got it all unfolded, and gently covered me with it. It took some adjustment, but after two minutes or so, I felt comfortable. When I looked up at him, his eyes were full of amusement. "Are you all settled now, Bella?"

I looked up and smiled, so grateful for his presence I couldn't even begin to express it. "Yes, thank you."

Sliding down a few more inches in his chair, he placed one hand on my shoulder, and with the other hand played with my hair tenderly. "Is this okay? Do you mind?"

"Hmm. I'm pretty sure I don't mind. That makes me feel *so* relaxed."

"Good." He sounded extremely pleased. "That's what I want. You should just go to sleep if you can."

"Mmkay, I'll try." My speech was already beginning to slur a bit.

That was the last thing I said.

But not the last thing I heard.

Edward whispered to his best friend, "You okay, Em?"

"No, man. I'm not. I can't stop thinking about how—if I hadn't left her, this wouldn't have

happened. I should've been able to stop it somehow...and I'm just really, *really* angry at myself. I know that sounds stupid, but..."

"No, it doesn't, Em. Honestly, I understand *exactly* how you feel. I shouldn't have left Bella's side tonight at the bonfire. She wouldn't have gotten hurt either."

"So what do we do?"

"Well, we can't turn into stalkers *ourselves*, but I'm thinking—as much as possible—we've got to take care of these girls. We just have to be whatever they need, whenever they need it until they can get over all they've been through. Until they're safe."

"I'll do anything, bro. I'm not gonna let this break Rosalie. She's amazing. I'm gonna help her be a fighter again...get back to normal." Emmett sounded broken himself.

"I know, man. When I was bringing Bella back from the bonfire after that low-life threw a rock at her, she wasn't saying much. And then, all of a sudden, she just looked up at me with these perfect, chocolate eyes and said, 'He hurt me. Josh actually...*hurt* me.' I can't even *tell* you what that did to my heart. To realize she actually believes this is the first time he hurt her. I need her to understand he's hurt her in so many other ways, so many other times..."

"I wish she could see herself the way I see her. I've never met anyone like her, Em. She's absolutely amazing...and thoughtful, and caring, and beautiful, and intelligent, and determined...I love to listen to her. I love to sit next to her when she doesn't say *anything*. It's like goodness just flows out of her and affects everyone around her—but she's clueless about it."

"And the fact that she doesn't realize how badly and deeply she's been hurt? *That* reminds me of Alice...after Wes. I never thought I'd go through all this again...and—it's a little different this time. I mean, I sure don't see Bella as my *sister*, but I want to help her heal. I want her to be whole again, able to hope and dream...and love again."

Emmett answered with a soft chuckle. "Can you *believe* us, man? Two weeks ago, we didn't know these girls existed. And now look at us. They've changed everything."

Edward responded even more quietly...perhaps while looking down at my *unsleeping* face, "I knew she existed *somewhere*. I've just been waiting to find her."

A slight contented sigh escaped my lips then, and Edward stroked my hair one last time before I drifted off to a deep, peaceful sleep.

#####

I try so hard to please you,

To be the love that fills you up

I try to pour on sweet affection,

But I think you got a broken cup

David Wilcox

Chapter 13: Broken

A steadily growing hum began to fill my ears, becoming more insistent, changing, developing into different strains, a cacophony of noise. Beeping, voices, shuffling feet, plastic squeaking and creaking. The waiting room and nurses' station were awake.

I shifted as I began to wake up, and I realized I was pretty stiff. I felt a gentle squeeze on my shoulder, and I opened my eyes. Edward. He was looking down at me, the tenderness in his eyes too much for me to grasp. Softly, he said, "Morning, Bella. Sleep okay?"

"Better than I expected...have we heard...?"

"Nothing yet," Edward answered, anticipating my question. "It's 8:15. You said the nurse told you she'd wake up around nine, right?"

"Yeah..." I sat up then, stretching. He pulled the blanket off of me smoothly, so that it didn't fall onto the floor. Then he stood and folded it, placing it in the chair with the pillow.

"Would you like it if I went and tried to find out anyway?" he asked, understanding my need to know how Rosalie had fared.

"I'd *really* like it. I'll run to the restroom while you ask. That way, if she *is* awake..."

"Okay, Bella. Before I go, though, how are *you* feeling?" he asked, eyeing my neck. He reached down and gently brushed my hair over my shoulder, so he could see the bandage.

"I'm okay, I guess. It's sore, but I'll live."

"And your head? It's feeling all right?"

"I'm a little groggy, but I'm sure *that's* from a lack of sleep."

"I'm sure you're right. It hasn't been a very restful night for any of us after all."

“Did you sleep at all, Edward?”

“A bit...I talked with Emmett a lot...and kept an eye on you while *you* slept.”

I hope I didn't talk in my sleep. “Did I snore or anything?”

He chuckled at me, “No, Bella. You were able to sleep surprisingly peacefully...and you looked very sweet while you were sleeping.”

I blushed. “Where’s Emmett *now*?” I was hoping to change the subject.

“He went down to the gift shop for a minute.”

“Is he...is he doing okay?”

“This is really hard for him...he’s feeling a lot of different things right now. Anger, sadness, guilt...”

“I don’t understand the guilt.” I said, hoping for some insight into what made these two feel this way. It had bothered me when I’d overheard their conversation last night.

“Don’t you?” he asked, surprised.

“No, I mean, Emmett didn’t *do* this to her.”

“But it happened *minutes* after he left her, Bella. I know you’re right. He did all he could’ve done under the circumstances. He saw her to the door, but...he...guys just...*we* are just having a hard time letting go of the fact that we left your sides *once* last night and you were hurt. It’s like it happened on our watch or something. I...”

“Edward, do *you* feel guilty about what Josh did to me?” I asked gently.

“I...I do, Bella, yes. I shouldn’t have left you. I should’ve taken you with me, or...I should’ve waited on the coffee...I don’t know. But I do know I won’t let it happen again. I’m so sorry that I walked away for that moment, and he got to you.

“Edward, you couldn’t have done anything to stop him...”

“Bella? He wouldn’t have dared to try anything if I were standing beside you. I think he must’ve been watching, hidden somewhere. He waited for the one moment you were vulnerable...the one moment I *left you vulnerable*.” He hung his head down, looking beaten.

I stood and walked over to him, leaning in to hug him. He wrapped his arms around me, and I said, “You made me feel safe. Because of what you do for my self-confidence, I felt sure enough of myself to step away from Angela and Jacob for a minute and move closer to the fire. It’s *my* fault. I left myself wide open for it.”

I felt him tense up immediately, and he stepped backward a few inches, causing me to look up at him. “Bella Swan. It is *not* your fault that you got hit with a rock. Josh planned this. *He* wanted this. It is *his* fault. He *chose* to hurt you.”

“Then you’ve got to see that it’s not *your* fault either, Edward.”

He looked pensive. Finally, he conceded a little, but with a *very* serious look in his eyes. “All right, Bella. But I’m not ever going to give him an opportunity to hurt you like this again. I’m going to do everything within my power to see him expelled from school, and to see you...to help you...” He paused, intending to say more, but he seemed to be struggling for words. I watched him shift uneasily.

And I waited. I could tell this was hard for him to say, but I *so* wanted to hear it.

“I want to help you find the spring, Bella. I *know* there’s still something in you that wants to ‘glow and dance and revel in the warmth’ again. I need to help you reach it.”

Now I was the one who was studying the patterns in the waiting room floor.

He softly cupped my chin and tilted my head up to meet his eyes. I saw so much sadness there...and so much hope. “Will you let me, Bella?”

I was staring back, unbelieving. *Why is this so important to you?* “Edward...I’ve only known you for a week. What could you *possibly* see in me that would make you want to help me? Why do you care so much?”

“Does it feel like just a week to you?”

“No, but...”

“To me, either, Bella. I have learned so *much* about you in the last few days, and everything I’ve learned makes me crave more. Every time you speak, you surprise me. Every time you laugh, I want to make you laugh again. Every time I see a piece of who you are, learn about the way you care for others, I want to know you more. And every time you hug me, I don’t want to let go.”

He pulled me back into a hug, and I stood there in confusion. How could he say such things? How could I matter so much? I wanted to cling to him.

And—equally as much—I wanted to run. This was too much. He was going to get to the bottom of his “Who Is Bella Swan?” mystery, and find out he didn’t want anything to do with me. My heart couldn’t take that kind of betrayal again.

Don’t get me wrong. I could see that Edward believed his own words...for now. I just knew that I didn’t have *nearly* as much to offer as he thought. And I couldn’t stand to disappoint him. Because that would hurt too much.

I had to shove these thoughts to the side for the moment, though, because Emmett came around the corner just then with some coffees. Edward and I stepped away from the hug.

“Mornin’, Bella,” he greeted. “Gotcha some coffee with way too much cream and sugar. Here, man, yours...tall and black.” Edward thanked him as he took his cup of coffee. Emmett pulled a couple of packs of sugar out of his pocket and tossed them to Edward, who caught them easily. This was obviously a familiar routine.

He and Edward were making eye contact, and *something* was being communicated there, but I wasn’t in on it. “Good morning, Emmett.” I said, trying to figure out what I was missing. He looked over at me, reading me as well, and smiled. “Did you get any sleep?” I asked him.

“Not a whole lot, but I’m okay. I can’t wait to see Rosie, though. You guys hear anything?” The hope in his eyes was endearing.

“Not yet. I was just going to go out and ask, Em. I’ll do it now.” Edward headed over to the nurses’ station.

Emmett held out my coffee and I took it gratefully, sitting down in my chair. He asked nervously, “Do you think she’ll want to see me today?”

“I don’t know...I hope so. I guess we’ll all have to play this by ear.”

“Absolutely. I’m gonna be whatever Rosie needs. I can be patient, Bella. For Rosie, I can be anything.”

“I believe you, Emmett. And I’m pretty sure Rose will, too...after a while. She said last night, though, that she didn’t want you to see her like this. And that she thought she’d blown her chances with you, so you should be prepared. It’s not gonna be easy convincing her that you’re still around no matter what.”

Emmett didn’t know how to handle that news. His brow creased with concern, and I saw him swallow as he bowed his head for a moment. Suddenly, he looked up at me intensely, “Should I...do I need to just leave her alone for awhile?” I could tell that was the last thing he wanted to do.

“Umm...I don’t think so. I’ve never done any of this before either, but I think the best way to convince her you’re gonna be around is to just be around...quietly and patiently...let her get used to the idea, you know? Eventually, she’ll *have* to believe you. Just prove it to her.”

“That’s some good advice, Emmett,” Edward said from behind me. I hadn’t seen him come in. He sat down next to me, and shared what he’d learned from the nurse. Rose was awake, but groggy, and they wanted us to wait for ten more minutes to let them finish their morning vital checks and whatnot.

Emmett looked relieved, “Bella, you should probably go in alone first. But I really want to see her as soon as she’s feeling up for it. I got something for her.”

Edward nodded his agreement. “Okay...I’m gonna just run to the bathroom first,” I said.

I stood to my feet and walked over to the restroom. Pushing the heavy wooden door open, I stepped inside. The fluorescent lights hurt my eyes, so I kind of squinted as I walked in.

Before I left, I stood in front of the mirror for a moment. *Bella, you look terrible.* I was totally washed out, my face a sickly sallow color, the rings under my eyes like neon signs advertising I’d had a rough night. *Rough? Is that what it was?*

I pulled a few paper towels out of the dispenser and set them by the sink. Pulling my hair back in one hand, I used the other to splash some water on my face. I patted the paper towels on my cheeks and neck. *Ow!* I guess I hadn’t realized it hurt to touch it so much.

Needing to see what had been done to me, now that I was alone for a moment, I gently eased the bandage from my neck and threw it in the trash. *Oh, my.* It looked awful, all dark purple and red. The bleeding hadn’t been much of an issue. The rock had only scraped me, apparently.

Suddenly, something occurred to me. Had Josh *tried* to hit my neck, or had he aimed somewhere else and missed? He couldn’t have wanted...no. He was *low*, but he was only trying to scare me. My ignoring him and having new guys look out for me had just made him mad. ...*right?*

I carefully arranged my hair so that it would cover the bruise as much as possible. *I wish I had a turtleneck, or a scarf or something.* Suddenly, I didn’t want to go back out there. I didn’t want to deal with everything that had happened. I didn’t want to keep trying to figure out why Edward cared so much. I didn’t want to deal with gawks and stares. I didn’t want to address this gnawing feeling in my stomach that Edward was right—that Josh *had* hurt me before. I didn’t want to do anything except curl up in my bed and pretend there was nothing except me and my pillow left in the world.

But I bet Rosalie feels that way even more than you do, Bella.

That got me moving. She’d need me to help get her home without a lot of conversation. I understood now why she hadn’t wanted to see Emmett.

Resolved, I took a deep breath and stepped out of the door, back into the real world.

Without pausing for anyone to say anything, I moved purposefully across the waiting room, out to the nurses’ station. I could hear the guys’ voices, calling after me, surprised, but I kept moving. Down the hall, pausing outside Rosalie’s door for just a moment, I listened. Quiet. I tapped on the door and gently pushed it open, entering.

Rosalie stared out the window, unmoving.

“You’re awake,” I stated. I could hardly say “Good morning.”

She nodded and turned to look at me. “I guess I slept pretty well. Whatever they gave me was good.”

“Yeah. Thanks for sharing...oh wait. That’s where I got these nasty circles under my eyes. You *didn’t* share.”

Rosalie smirked at me. Then she noticed my bruise. “Gah, Bella! Your neck looks like he tried to kill you!”

“Who knows?” My words trailed off quietly. A change in subject was definitely in order. “Did they bring you breakfast?”

“Not yet, but the nurse said it should be up soon. I’m glad, ‘cause I’m hungry, but I’m sure it’ll taste like crud.”

I shuffled over to the window and sat down in the uncomfortable hospital chair, sipping my coffee.

“Is that...are you drinking coffee?”

“Yeah. Emmett got some for us. You want one?”

“Oh. He’s still here? You couldn’t get him to go back to school?”

“Nope. They both stayed...and they’re our ride home, so you’re gonna have to see them, too, when they release you. But, if you want a coffee now, I’m sure Emmett would run downstairs and get you one.”

“I don’t want to ask for any help.”

“It’s coffee, Rosalie, not help. I didn’t even ask. He just brought me one...but if you don’t need some...”

“Well, whatever. If you go back out there in a minute, you could tell him I’d like one, I guess.”

“Do you get to leave right after you eat?” I asked.

“Whenever the doctor comes in on his rounds. He’ll let me go. I hope it’s soon, though. I just want to be back in the room, you know?”

“Yeah...I know *exactly* what you mean. It’s too bad we didn’t get the chance to go shopping. We don’t really have much food. We could’ve stayed in for the rest of the weekend.”

She smirked up at me. “You got the right idea, girl.” Then she went back to looking out the

window, unblinking.

I sat quietly, studying everything in the room as if there were going to be a quiz.

Finally, a nurse wheeled in a tray of food. “There you go, sweetie. Hope you enjoy it,” she said cheerily and then was on her way.

Rosalie lifted the lid on her plate and swore under her breath. “I can’t eat this! These eggs don’t even look *real*, and they’re all wet and goopy.” She picked up a piece of bacon, took a bite and choked it down, tossing the rest back on her tray. “Yum. Rubber bacon.” She peeled the silver foil top from her orange juice and drank it, commenting on how she loved watery orange juice from concentrate. Exasperated, she looked up at me and said, “Emmett *really* wouldn’t mind getting me a coffee?”

“Nope...I’ll go tell him right now. Be right back, Rose.”

A few moments later I returned, grinning at her. “He was *so* glad you let him do something for you...” I waited a moment before continuing. “He’s a good guy, huh?”

“He is...I really liked him. There was something different about him.”

I decided it would be better not to point out the fact that she was using the past tense when he was a very present person. “What was different?” I asked.

“He was the first guy to really see *me*. He wasn’t just after one-time thing. He noticed who I was and really liked me...and I liked him. He made me laugh...”

“So...that sounds pretty awful...sure don’t want *him* around anymore,” I tested.

“Right...*he’s* the one that won’t want to be around anymore. He’s not gonna want to deal with all *this* crap.”

But shouldn’t that be his decision? “I think you’d be surprised.”

“Whatever. I’m just glad he’s bringing me coffee, at least. Why don’t you tell me about his roommate?”

“Hmm. Edward is...great. I know I could probably think of a better word, but...I don’t really know what to say about him. I love to be around him...he makes me feel special, but not in a weird, romantic way. It’s like there’s no pressure...ever. I can just be relaxed and comfortable. He sees how I’m dealing with Josh, and he’s strangely determined to help me...I don’t know for how long, but he’s really adamant about it. Sometimes I like it, and sometimes it’s so beyond my understanding that I just think I’d better run before he sees too much of how...undone I am. Like he’ll figure out I’m not worth the trouble, you know?”

“Mmm. Yeah, I know,” she identified with me.

And then we heard a tapping at the door. She looked up.

Emmett came in bearing coffee in one hand and a daisy in the other. “Mornin’ Beautiful. I heard a rumor the breakfast here wasn’t fit for the dogs. Can I interest you in a real coffee?”

The corner of Rosalie’s mouth lifted slightly, and she reached out for the coffee. Emmett set the daisy on the table beside her and whisked away the despicable food tray.

“It’s a honey latte, Emmett. You remembered.”

“I did, Rosie. I’m just glad to be the one bringing you coffee this morning...any morning.”

She looked like she didn’t know what to say in response. Sipping her latte, she closed her eyes and leaned her head back on the pillow for a moment. Then, she opened her eyes and spoke, “So, Bella told me you stayed out in the waiting room all night.”

“Yup. They wheeled in a king-sized bed for me.” He smirked at her and then said, with sympathy, “Aww. And *you* only got this one. I bet all those levers and buttons were fun, though.”

“Shutup, Emmett. You’re such a butthead. You should’ve gone back to school.”

“And miss the opportunity to bring you your honey latte? Not a chance. Besides, we’re your ride.”

“Whatever. Thanks.” She looked out the window again. I was enjoying their banter. She was acting more like herself with Emmett around, even though she didn’t seem to want him there. I could tell he was good for her.

He scooted over by her bed and said conspiratorially, “I gotcha something else, too. I saw it and I *had* to get it for you.”

“What?” she asked unaffectedly.

“A card. It’s perfect for you.” He handed her an envelope and winked over at me when she started to open it.

She pulled the card out of the envelope and smirked. When she opened it, she actually laughed, her face remaining in a lopsided grin for a while. “Emmett, you did *not* find this in the gift shop. This is *too* funny.”

“I knew you’d like it, Rosie. Because you have awesome taste.”

She punched him in the shoulder. “You’re so weird.”

The doctor came in then and asked how she was feeling. Emmett quietly excused himself, and went back out to the waiting room.

After reminding her to take it easy for a while and handing her a prescription for some pain meds, the doctor signed her release papers. A nurse came in to review everything with her, and then we were free to go. As she got up out of the bed to change, we both realized we hadn't brought her a change of clothes. I told her to sit down on the bed, and ran out to talk to the guys.

Within minutes, Emmett came into her room with a bag. There were cute little New Hampshire pajama bottoms and socks, and a baseball cap. He also handed her the big, gray sweater he'd been wearing. He was left with a tight, white t-shirt that made him look really tough. "I hope these are okay, Rosalie." He shrugged sweetly.

When he left, she got dressed and looked amazingly cute. She grabbed her blanket and threw it around her shoulders, took the bud vase in one hand and her coffee in the other. "Will you grab the card, Bella?" She sat and waited for the nurse to come and wheel her out.

"Sure thing," I answered, taking it from the table.

I looked down and giggled out loud. On the front was a picture of a greasy guy with big, gold chains sitting in the front of his pimped out Chevy Nova. He was grinning from ear to ear, with a remote control in his hand, the hydraulic system underneath the car lifting its back end several feet off the ground.

On the inside of the card, the front end was in the air, and a pair of hot pink fuzzy dice were swinging out from the rearview mirror. The guy was flashing a cheesy thumbs up, and the card said, "What up, G? Hope you bounce back soon!"

The boys took us back to campus without a whole lot of conversation. When we got back to the dorm, they stood up to walk us to our apartment, and Edward pulled me aside for a minute. Rosalie and Emmett went on up.

"I won't keep you long, but we want to know what else you need from us. Would you just like to stay in for a while? Do you want us to walk with you to meals?"

"Edward, I honestly don't think we'll leave the room for the rest of the weekend. We'll probably just order pizza and eat granola bars." Emmett was already back outside. I was glad he hadn't stayed and made Rosalie feel like she had to talk. He got into the car to wait for Edward.

"Hmm," he pondered quietly. "How about this? We'll be your room service, then. Whenever you get hungry, you give us a call and tell us what you want. We'll run out, pick it up for you, and deliver it to your door. Thirty minutes or a hot chocolate gets thrown in the deal. What do you say?"

“I have to admit, the idea has distinct possibilities...but I don’t have your phone number.”

“You’re right. But I can just give it to you when we deliver your breakfast in a few minutes. What would you like?”

“Anything?” I pressed.

“Anything, Bella.”

“French toast and some fresh fruit, with crispy—most definitely non-rubbery—bacon on the side...for both of us.”

“You’ve got it. We’ll go get it now.” As he answered, he gently pushed my hair back over my shoulder. His eyes suddenly locked on my bruise, his jaw clenched. “Bella...” he whispered.

“It looks pretty bad, doesn’t it?” I wasn’t making eye contact with him anymore.

“It...makes me angry. I’m so sorry that you’re hurt. I wish I could...”

I tried to lighten the mood and change the subject. I needed to do some good for Rosalie when I got upstairs. I didn’t need to be sulky and quiet. “You could make my day by bringing me that French toast...and making sure it has an extra sprinkling of powdered sugar.” My voice held a question.

Edward’s eyes softened, and he traced his thumb along my cheekbone. “It would be my pleasure, ma’am. We’ll be back soon.”

He smiled and waved as he jogged back to the car.

When I got up to the room, Rosalie was already in the shower. I imagined how dirty she must’ve felt.

Twenty-five minutes later, there was a knock at our door. I opened it to see Edward and Emmett standing there with trays from the dining hall. The food, though, was clearly not dining hall material. The golden French toast was still steaming, the fresh cantaloupe and strawberries looked luscious, and the pile of crispy bacon on each tray made my stomach growl. They also had a bag with drinks in it—cartons of chocolate milk, regular milk, and some freshly squeezed orange juice from Collis Café. *Good boys.*

There was a small card on Rosalie’s tray that said, “Courtesy of your personal assistant, Emmett Croft. At your beck and call, 603-555-4775.” He’d scrawled underneath, “Peace out...Enjoy.” There was a goofy smiley face in the corner.

My tray had a similar card. “Edward Cullen, at your service. Call anytime, day or night, 603-555-4775. Cell phone 603-555-3023.” Underneath the print was written in perfect script, “May your day be restful and free from unwelcome interruptions. Miss you.”

Miss me?

I let Rosalie know that breakfast had been delivered, and that she'd better eat the bacon before it got all rubbery—or before I ate it.

She came out a few minutes later, in a t-shirt and flannel pants...with Emmett's sweater on. She looked warm and comfortable. She looked at her tray and picked up the card. She smiled ever so slightly and brought one of the entirely-too-big sleeves to her face, inhaling deeply.

We ate our breakfast quietly, and then we each climbed into our beds and fell asleep.

#####

Chapter: 16

If I feel hollow, that's just my proof that there's more

I need to follow...that's what the lonely is for.

David Wilcox

Chapter 14: Hiding

It was only 11:30 in the morning when the phone rang, jarring me from my pleasant slumber. Rosalie groaned and buried her head under the pillow. I reached over and answered the phone, *not* happy to be speaking to someone when I was trying so hard to hide.

“Hello?” I said curtly...and quietly. I didn't want to wake Rosalie completely.

“Bells? I was just calling to see how you were feeling this morning. I thought I'd let you sleep in after your rough time at the bonfire...but I couldn't wait anymore. I was worried about you.”
Jacob.

“Uh...I'm doing okay, just not *done* sleeping in,” I said, my voice having a bit more of a smile in it. “I ended up being awake most of the night after all.”

“Why? Were you just too upset to relax?”

“No, I...I relaxed a good bit once I got back to my room,” I said, remembering Edward reading to me and sitting beside my bed attentively while I dozed. “My roommate had...kind of a situation...last night, and she needed me. We just got to sleep about an hour and a half ago.”

“Aww, Jeez, Bells! I’m sorry. And here I thought I was being so patient waiting until 11:30 to call.” He was laughing a little, but I could tell he felt awful.

“It’s okay, Jacob. I knew you’d need to know how I was doing...thanks for taking care of filing the report and all...just for being there.”

“You know I was glad to, Bells. I sure hope they get rid of him for this. I bet they will...and in the mean time, I’ll be glad to keep walking you to class and stuff. Hey! Is there anything I need to bring for the homework club on Monday?”

“No...just yourself. Thanks again for helping there, too. I’ll feel better with you around.”

“Well, hey. I like to be around. You’re pretty good company...weird sometimes, but good company anyway.” He chuckled at me.

“Thanks again, Jacob. I really appreciate you calling to check on me. I’m...I’m gonna rest today and tomorrow. Not do anything but stay in my room. I need to just have some peace and quiet, you know? So, I guess I’ll see you Monday morning. Can we still walk to class together?”

“You bet, Bells. I wouldn’t have it any other way. I’ll see ya then. Hope you get some good rest.”

“I hope so, too. Bye, Jacob.”

When I hung up the phone, I realized Angela had probably also tried to call. There were no messages on our voicemail, but I thought I’d better check my cell phone.

Yep. There she was. “Bella, I called your room at 9:30 this morning to see how you were doing...maybe get some breakfast. You didn’t answer, and I...I just need to know you’re okay. I’ll come down around noon and check on you. I hope you’re all right. Call me if you get this message before then. Love ya.”

I dialed her number quickly. She picked up after one ring. “Hello?” her voice filled with expectation.

“Hey, Ang. It’s me.”

“Bella! Are you okay? Were you just sleeping hard?”

“No...I was at the hospital.” I quickly added, “I’m okay,” at the same time as she asked, “Are you all right? Is it your head?”

“It was....Rosalie needed to go,” I whispered. “Something happened.”

“What? Is *she* all right?” Her voice was overwhelmingly concerned.

“She’s...okay. She’s back here now, sleeping. I don’t want to wake her. It’d probably be better for you to wait to come down. Honestly, we were up for most of the night, so, I could use a couple more hours’ sleep, too.”

“Sure, no problem. Should I come around dinner time?”

“Umm...why don’t you let me come up there for a few minutes. I don’t know if Rosalie’s going to feel like having company in the room. I really don’t want to risk making her uncomfortable. I’m just planning to stay in here for the rest of the weekend with her...it’ll be good for me, too, I’m sure.”

“Yeah, I think you could use the rest, too...but what about eating? Do you need me to bring you something back?”

“Actually,” I smiled, “Edward and Emmett are taking care of that for us. We’re just supposed to call and place an order for whatever we want, and they’re supposed to deliver it in thirty minutes or less.”

“Or...”she giggled.

“Hot chocolate, of course.”

“Sounds good...Emmett’s helping, too, huh?”

“Yeah. He is completely smitten with Rosalie.”

“*Really.*”

“Yep. Can’t stop talking about her...and wanting to take care of her now that...*this* happened.”

“So...two big, strong guys acting not *only* as body guards, but personal assistants? They *are* taking care of you. That’s...nice.”

“Yes, it is. Very, very *nice*. So, should I come up...maybe around five?”

“Sure. I’ll be here.”

“Okay...I’ll see you then—unless something comes up with Rosalie. Then I’ll call you.”

“All right. I hope I’ll see you then. Bye.”

“Bye, Ang.”

As soon as we hung up, I turned off the ringer on the room phone and set my cell to vibrate. Time to go back to sleep.

About four hours later, I heard Rosalie moving around the room quietly. I rolled over and asked how she was doing.

“As decent as can be expected, I guess.”

“Sleep okay?”

“Yeah...but I kept having dreams.”

“About...last night?”

“Yeah,” she whispered. “I can’t get the images out of my mind. It still seems so surreal, though. Like it’s all really just a bad dream and I’ll wake up from it sometime.”

“I wish it were.”

“You and me both, chica.” She flopped down on her bed, and looked over at me. “Thanks for taking me to the hospital and all.”

“I’m so thankful I was here...glad I could. I’m sorry it happened, though.”

“Hey. Whatever. At least I don’t think it was somebody I knew. I honestly *hope* it was a stranger, you know? It’s bad enough when I run into a one night stand...or somebody I hooked up with and can’t remember their name. I don’t want last night to have been some guy I’ll see over and over...somebody that will make me remember this every time I pass them.”

I answered very quietly. “Yeah...I *guess*.” I didn’t know what to say. Because I *did* have a flashback of some *seriously* uncomfortable sex with someone every time I saw him. And he made a point of verbally reminding me of it every time he got a chance.

But that hadn’t been rape. I had been an *idiot*. I was too weak to stand my ground. I gave in *way* more easily than I should’ve. But I *hadn’t* been raped.

I feel sick.

Rosalie was holding her knees to her chest now, blank-faced. “I know one thing . . . sex is never gonna be a casual thing for me anymore. I...*hate* that that sick *freak* took it from me. I hope they find him and he *rots* in jail...and I hope that some giant, hairy biker dude makes him his *girlfriend*.”

She was angry...and I was kind of glad for her. At least this was an appropriate, realistic response. I’d been nervous last night when she just wasn’t talking...or even looking at anybody. It had been like she wasn’t really in there.

“I hope they find him, too.”

Without really saying so, we mutually decided that the conversation was best left alone for a while. We busied ourselves doing little things—reading, listening to music, whatever we thought would distract us. I emailed Renee, and I let her know that I was having a hard time with Josh, but I didn’t go into all the details. I mentioned Edward and Jacob, too, just so she wouldn’t be surprised if their names came up in conversation later.

And then I wrote some more poetry.

About five o’clock, when Rosalie and I still weren’t really having a conversation, I told her that I was going to run up to Angela’s room for a few minutes, and asked if she’d want to “order” some dinner when I got back.

“Yeah, I could go for something,” she said absently.

“Okay,” I said, looking over at her. She was just lying flat on her back and staring up at the ceiling. I could see the bruise on the side of her forehead really well. I felt so terrible for her. “Back in a few minutes.” I left quietly.

I jogged up the steps and down the hall, pausing in front of Angela’s door to tap as I opened it.

She looked up and smiled, and came over to give me a quick hug. We sat down on her bed to talk.

“I’m glad to see you, Bella. I was so scared last night. Jacob was, too...and angry. He kind of picked up where he and Edward had left off, explaining to the security guards that this was becoming too serious to ignore. They really listened to him, Bella. He did a great job handling that for you.” She seemed really pleased with him.

“I’ll be sure to thank him again. Seriously.”

She smiled at me, ...”and you looked really comfortable with Edward. I think he’s good for you. He had a hard time last night, too, huh?”

“He did...he feels like it was his fault somehow. Like it ‘happened on his watch,’ he said. I don’t get that. He said some other things, too...but I wasn’t supposed to hear those.”

“Why not? Who was he talking to?”

“Emmett...at the hospital.”

“Oh, yeah, tell me about *that*, too.”

“When Edward finally let me fall asleep for the night, I guess he was pretty tired, too. He curled

up on the floor next to my bed. At about four in the morning, there was a loud knock. I think he thought it might have been Josh, because he wouldn't let me answer it. But it wasn't. It was a security guard standing there with Rosalie...they'd *found* her behind a bush next to Collis Center. Somebody attacked her...and she was raped."

Angela could only gasp. There were no words.

"He said she wouldn't go to the hospital without me...well, Edward wasn't gonna just let *me* take her by myself, so he called Emmett to come and get us all, to help out. When Emmett got there, he was ready to help however he could, but when he saw Rosalie...It was the most heartwrenching thing I've ever seen, Ang. He just crashed to his knees in front of her and kept saying, 'Not you...not you, Rosie.'"

"Oh my gosh...who knew?"

"Yeah, it hasn't been going on long...they only met yesterday afternoon, but it was head over heels. You should've seen him talking about her at dinner yesterday. I had no idea it was her...until he saw her in our room."

Her mouth formed a silent "wow."

"I know...so, after the doctors examined Rose and got the samples they needed—she had hair and skin tissue under her nails—"

"Good for her!"

"Yeah, I know...after they gave her something to sleep, they sent me back out to the waiting room. Edward got me a pillow and blanket, and I started to drift off with my head in his lap..."

"Sweet."

"It was." I smiled as I thought about it...and then my brow creased in frustration. "...but his conversation with Emmett bothered me."

"Why?" She was giving me the classic "Angela eye," carefully analyzing my facial expressions, body language, and tone of voice. She could read me better than almost anyone, and could often help me understand *myself* even better.

"Because they *both* feel guilty! Emmett said the same stupid thing!"

"Because they were trying so hard to look out for you and they couldn't stop it."

"I guess...but then, Edward went on talking about how he hated so much that I felt like this was the first time Josh had hurt me...I think I'd said that to him on the way back to the room..."

"What did you say exactly?"

“Well, on the way back, it was all kind of surreal...and I was still sort of in shock about the whole thing. While we were walking, I said, ‘*He hurt me...Josh actually hurt me.*’ And I guess it really bothered him that I’d said that. But those other times *weren’t* violent. He’s never physically hit me before last night. He’s threatened me, stalked me...treated me like his property, but he didn’t do *damage* like he did last night, you know?”

She just sat there and stared at me.

Waiting.

“What?” I asked, getting annoyed.

“He did damage, Bella. You’ve said yourself that you’re not the same person you used to be. I don’t know how far reaching his lies and manipulation *were*, but he changed you.” She was speaking so softly, her words meant not to shock me, but just to get me to hear. To wake me up. “What about that poem you wrote...about the seasons? You know what he did to you...you don’t think that’s *hurtful*?”

Now I was the one sitting and staring.

“I just...he didn’t...I’m not...” My shoulders slumped.

“Bella? I just think that, before you can move on, you’ve got to realize that this relationship was wounding. You’ve got to acknowledge how manipulative and insensitive Josh really *was*. If you can look back on it objectively, then maybe you’ll see what changed and then...maybe you can get the old Bella back.”

“Maybe,” I whispered. “But I don’t *want* to think about Josh. I just want to get on with my life.”

“Okay...that’s your call, Bella. Only you can make that decision. I was just trying to help you see what I think Edward meant, because I think he’s *right*.”

“I don’t get why he’s so intent on helping me.”

“Who’s to say? He’s a deep well, remember?” she smirked at me. “All I know is that if I had a guy who was as sensitive and caring as Edward is, who wanted to help me get past all the hurt I’d been through, who wanted to be there to listen and hug me when I needed it...well, I wouldn’t walk away from that. I’d be thinking *really* seriously about taking him up on that. You feel me?” She punched me gently in the arm, trying to bring a little humor back into the conversation.

“I feel ya.” I smiled over at her.

“Especially if he was as gorgeous as Edward Cullen. *Am. I. Right?*”

Oh, she was most definitely right. “Ha. Yeah,” I grinned. “But I’m not gonna get caught up in all *that*,” I assured her.

“Okay, Bella. We’ll see.”

It annoyed me a little that I could see her point, but I wasn’t surprised. She was my rational, extremely insightful best friend. This was how she balanced me out. And, as usual, she’d done a good job of making me smile again before the conversation was over.

“I’ve got to get back to Rosalie...we’re going to order dinner in a minute.”

“Nice,” Angela grinned. “What are you gonna get?”

“No idea,” I said. “I’m gonna let Rosalie pick.”

We hugged, and I told her I probably wouldn’t see her until Monday. She had a lot going on, too. She was going to go study with a guy she’d met in one of her classes...Ben something or other.

I went back to my room, and found Rosalie in the same position she’d been in when I’d left her.

“Hey, girl. Let’s order some food,” I suggested.

She sat up. “What do you want?”

“Why don’t you pick? I chose breakfast. If you pick the place, then I can order whatever I want from their menu.”

“Mmkay,” she said. “I think comfort food is in order. I could use a smoked turkey sandwich from Novack...”

“Hmm...sounds good. I’ll get a roast beef sandwich...and a brownie...and some hot chocolate.”

“I’m gonna get a cookie...maybe two.”

This was starting to sound nice to us both.

She grabbed her cellphone and dialed Emmett’s number, while she straightened his sweater out a little, getting it *just* right.

I called Edward.

“Hello?” he answered.

“Hi, Edward. It’s me.”

“Bella Swan, just the person I was hoping to hear from. I didn’t recognize this number.”

“It’s my cell,” I explained.

“Then, I’ll make sure to save the number. How’s your afternoon been? Did you sleep?”

“I did...and I slept *well*. How about you? Did you get some rest?”

“I took a little nap, but I went down to the arts center and played the piano a little, too...I needed that.”

“Well, then I’m glad you got to...I’d love to hear you play sometime.”

“I’d love that, too.” He was quiet for a moment. “How did you like your breakfast?”

“It was *yummy*.”

“I’m very glad to hear that...and the bacon? Was it non-rubbery enough for you?” Edward laughed...a nice, easy laugh.

“It was perfect. Thanks. Cute card, too. Can I use it *after* this weekend?” *What? Bella Swan, are you flirting?*

There was a sharp intake of breath on the other line. “Miss Swan, you may call on me any time at all.” He was *definitely* smiling.

“Well, then, I’m calling you now, because I’m ready for dinner. Would you be so kind as to pick me up a roast beef sandwich from Novack?”

“Absolutely...and would you like a muffin and hot chocolate with your order this evening?”

“A *brownie* and hot chocolate, please.”

“Are you sure that’s not too much chocolate?”

“Edward Cullen, learn this about me right now. I can *never* have too much chocolate.”

He chuckled into the phone. “Do you know if Rosalie’s ordering from the same place, or should I just head out on my own?”

We’d talked about it, but I listened across the room for a second just to be sure. Rosalie was smiling, and she laughed every once in a while. “I think so. Novack was her idea.”

“Okay, then. I’ll wait on Em for a bit if you don’t mind.”

“No...that’s fine.”

“Bella, listen. I know you and Rosalie need time to just relax, but Em and I were thinking that—*maybe*—if you two felt up to it, you could join us over here for dinner and a movie tomorrow night. Just pizza and a DVD in our apartment. Nothing big. What do you think?”

“Well, I can’t answer for Rosalie,” I said, watching her again as she talked to Emmett. I thought she’d probably say yes. “.but I think I could go for that. Are we talking a comedy? I think we could use something to make us just forget everything.

“Whatever you two agree on, of course.”

“Okay...I’ll talk to her about it, and we’ll let you know.”

“Sounds good,” he said. I heard Rosalie say bye. “Em’s off the phone, so we’re going to grab your dinner now.”

“Great. Thanks again.”

“It’s *really* my pleasure, Bella. *Really*. See you soon.”

“Bye.”

They brought our food up about twenty minutes later, and didn’t stay. They said they wanted to let us have the whole day to ourselves, but they’d be waiting for our call in the morning. They even remembered to get the breakfast trays when they left to take them back.

These boys were surprising. And we liked it. Rosalie and I were both smiling as we ate our sandwiches and listened to Gavin DeGraw a few minutes later.

After dinner, the conversation was minimal, but we did put in a movie, so that our minds were occupied with *something*. We watched Ghost Town, because that. movie. is. hilarious.

When it was over, we just turned it off and got ready for bed quietly. Neither of us said anything to the other at all until it was time to turn off the lights. I stood by the door and said, “Ready?”

“Yup,” she said. “Night, Bella.”

“Night, Rosalie.”

#####

It's the choice of a lifetime, I'm almost sure

I will not live my life in between anymore

If I can't be certain of all that's in store

This far it feels so right

I will hold it up to the light

David Wilcox

Chapter 15: Memories

I felt a sense of unrest flood my heart as I tried to go to sleep. Something wasn't right. I could feel snippets of conversations from earlier in the day creeping into my mind like vines, twisting, stretching, pulling at something. It was like they were searching for something, trying to pull down a wall. *What were they after?*

I couldn't let go of the idea that there was something important for me to see—just below the surface. But, if I'd pushed it down to keep it away, then the question was: *did I really want to know?*

I tossed and turned for almost an hour, unable to figure out exactly what was causing this sense of dread. But finally, I drifted off into a restless sleep.

I was on the stone balcony, looking out at the rolling hills behind Josh's house. It was my first visit.

I'd been so nervous about meeting his parents, but they'd been wonderful. They seemed to like me. We'd just finished dinner, a delicious filet mignon with twice baked potatoes and crisp green beans, sautéed in garlic and butter. They'd served a glass of red wine with dinner. I'd been surprised, but—when I'd asked for water—they'd said, "Bella. Surely you can appreciate the flavor of red wine with your meal."

Ridiculing myself for making them think I was a total prude, I drank the wine. I knew Charlie would be angry—probably more with them than with me—but I kept rationalizing, saying it was just one glass...with his parents. Still, never having drunk any alcohol before, my body wasn't really prepared to handle it. I felt warm and dizzy.

After dinner, Josh had taken my hand and led me up to his den. It was quiet, and there was a fire crackling softly in the corner of the room. Josh had opened the French doors and walked me out onto the balcony.

He stood behind me now, snaking his arms around my waist and resting his chin on my shoulder. He whispered into my ear, "That wasn't so bad, was it?"

“No,” I smiled, shivering at the way his breath felt on my neck. “Your parents are nice. I like them.”

“I’m glad, Bella. I can tell they think you’re good for me. They know I need a good girl.” He pressed his lips in the hollow beneath my ear seductively.

“Mmm...that feels nice,” I said, lacing my fingers with his across my stomach.

His hands squeezed mine, and he pulled one hand away, lifting my hair up and piling it on my head. His lips ran all over my neck now, and he pulled me back against his body. He spun me around to face him, and I was surprised by his dark eyes. They were so different, so filled with...lust. He ran his fingers along my collarbone, pulling the thick strap of my dress aside, covering my shoulder with strong, firm kisses. “Bella,” he rasped, “Do you know how much I love you? Do you know that I ache for you?”

No one had ever spoken to me like that before. I felt a strange, warm feeling in the pit of my stomach. I wanted him to say something more, something that made me feel right about this...I wanted to know how much he loved me. How much he needed me. I realized the wine was still affecting me. I felt lightheaded, like I needed to sit down. “I love you, too, Josh. Would you mind if we sat inside...on the couch?”

His eyes were smoldering. “That’s a perfect idea, Bella.” He kept my hand in one of his while we walked in, and the other hand was tickling circles down the length of my arm. My head was fuzzy, but my body felt very...awake. He settled me onto the couch, and said, “I’ll be right back, Bell.”

I sat there thinking, “I love this boy. This last year has been so amazing. And it’s getting serious now. I’m spending the weekend at his house...meeting his parents. And he’s being so romantic.

When Josh came back, he had our wine glasses in his hands, refilled. I didn’t want any more. I already felt the wine too much. His brows creased when he noticed my disappointment with his effort. “Bella, I want to propose a toast.”

Oh. Well, this is important, then. One more glass won’t hurt, I rationalized.

“To my Bell. My oak. You’re so strong, and I admire that, but I love that you are willing to make exceptions for me. I love the effect I have on you. I love the way I make you smile, the way you shiver when I touch you, and the way you let me know what you want without words. Here’s to much, much more of that. More of us.”

He clinked his glass to mine, and we sipped a mouthful of the warm liquid. “Now, you toast me.”

I didn’t know what to say, “To Josh,” I said, feeling ridiculous. “You won me over, and I hope I make you as happy as you make me.” Another swallow. Josh finished off his glass.

Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, he said huskily, "Oh, you'll make me happy."

Suddenly, he was on me. He fisted his hand in my hair and covered my mouth with his, making me gasp for breath. "Josh!" I smiled, surprised. "Kind of fierce, don't you..." I didn't get a chance to say the rest. My stomach was in knots.

He kissed me like he'd never kissed me before, and though I liked it at first, I tensed up as his hand found the hem of my dress. My skin tingled as he traced a circle around my knee, and I relaxed a little, enjoying the feel of it. When his hand moved higher, though, I sat up straight. "What are you doing?" I asked, breathless.

"Oh, don't act like you haven't been telling me all day you wanted me to touch you like this. You know you have—with your eyes, with your sweet, little mouth." His hand kept moving.

"Josh, stop. I didn't tell you I wanted this. You're going too fast. I'm just..." My head was spinning.

"Bella, we've been together for a year. You love me, you said so. And you said you want to make me happy. Well, this," he pushed me back into the couch, "will make me happy. This is what you do when you love someone. You show them. Let me show you how much I love you, Bella. Show me how much you love me...right now."

I was so confused. Part of me definitely wanted to show him I loved him. I didn't want to lose him, and I did want to make him happy. But this was not how I'd pictured my first time. I felt hot, and the lights were going around my head in a circle. Everything was fuzzy...

He continued his desperate kisses, hands roaming all over the place. When I tried pulling his hands to my face, to kiss them and turn this back into a sweet, romantic moment, he looked at me angrily. "Bella, this is so happening tonight. You are mine. We belong together. You belong to me."

His strength overpowered me. I let him do things I wasn't ready for, hoping that they'd satisfy him, and that he'd stop and just hold me. When it became clear he was going to take everything from me, my willpower fought its way to the surface. "Josh, not like this. Not now."

He turned his face to me, his eyes dark with the intensity of his passion and his need for control. "Bella, yes!" he hissed. "I need you and I am going to have you just like this. Right now."

With one hand, he shoved my face to the side, so that I couldn't look him in the eyes anymore. Probably so he couldn't see my eyes pleading with him to stop. He finished what he'd started, and I just stared into the dancing flames of his fireplace, a single tear running down my cheek.

He got up, wiped his mouth, pulled up his pants, and said, "That's what I thought."

And he walked out of the room.

I woke up in a cold sweat.

Oh. How had I not remembered *that*? I ran to the bathroom and threw up, curling up in a ball beside the toilet when I was done.

Oh, God, why did I have to remember it now? *I think I liked it better before...when I was oblivious.*

Of course, I knew why it had come to me so suddenly, if I was being honest with myself. Rosalie said she hoped the rapist wasn't someone she knew...and I immediately thought of Josh.

Edward and Angela were right. He *had* hurt me before.

I wanted to die.

I lay there, whimpering on the cold floor for...who knows how long.

After what felt like hours, I heard a click and the bathroom was flooded with light. I shielded my eyes with my forearm, and groaned.

I heard soft footfalls as bare feet approached. Someone knelt down next to me.

“Bella? Are you all right?” I felt Rosalie’s hand on my calf.

I couldn’t answer her.

“Are you sick?” she pressed. Her hand moved to my forehead.

“No...I...” I was whispering. “I...I had no idea.”

“No idea? About *what*? What happened, Bella?”

“Josh...he...” I couldn’t gather my thoughts. Couldn’t form the sentence.

“Did he call you? What did he do now?!” She sounded furious.

“It was...it was a long time ago. I...I just remembered.”

She spoke softly now, “What did you remember?”

I can’t make myself say it. But I had to try. “The first time...we...he...*I was...*” *Oh, God, please no.* I pulled myself up and dry heaved. There was nothing left.

She pulled my hair back out of my face and held it, whispering, “Bella? What happened? Can

you tell me? You said something about the first time. ‘The first time’ what?”

I could barely speak, my words came out breathlessly. “You said you hoped it wasn’t someone you knew...you didn’t want to have to *look at them*. I...I remembered that the first time, Josh...he...”

“Did he rape you, Bella? Is that what you remembered?” Her voice sounded so sad.

I nodded a weak yes, and my let my head crash into her shoulder. “How could I not have remembered that before now? Rosalie? How did I not see that?”

She wrapped an arm around my shoulder. “I don’t know, Bella. I don’t know...but I’m so sorry.”

We sat there quietly for a few minutes, and then she asked, “Was it me? Did watching me and listening to me make it come back to you?”

I shrugged. “I guess.”

After a moment, I groaned, “My knees hurt...this floor.”

We stood up and walked back into our room. I climbed onto my bed and sat there, hugging my knees to my chest. “Rose? What do I do now?”

“You’re asking the wrong girl, chica...but I can at least say that it’s been good for me...to talk about it. I doesn’t make it go away, but it...it hurts a little less, I guess. I at least feel like I’m acknowledging it...dealing with it.”

“You don’t mind me talking about it then?”

“No...it’s the least I can do, Bella. If you need to talk about it, I’ll listen.”

So I told her what I had remembered.

She didn’t say anything when I finished, except, “I’m so sorry, Bella. I’m so sorry you got tangled up with that psycho.”

I sat there quietly. “Me, too.”

After sitting in silence for a few minutes, Rosalie got up and quietly started getting ready. I didn’t have the strength. I felt numb again.

Thirty minutes later, when she came out of the bathroom, dressed, and I was still in the same position, she sat down next to me on the bed. “Do you think you could eat something? It might be a good thing...help with your stomach.”

“Sure,” I said. I had no appetite whatsoever.

“Anything in particular?”

I whispered, “No.”

“Well, how about I call Emmett, and order something for us both. He can give Edward a message. Does toast sound okay? Maybe some hot tea?” *She’s being so nice to me. What am I doing? Rose has been through enough...she shouldn’t be taking care of me.*

I nodded yes, feeling guilty.

“Want some jam? Or honey?”

“Honey.”

“Okay...what should I tell Emmett to say to Edward?” She asked gently, the look on her face telling me she was completely prepared to lie and cover for me.

“I don’t care.” It was true. I didn’t care about anything. The numbness had completely taken over. I may as well have been made of granite.

“Kay.” She picked up the phone and dialed Emmett, stepping outside the door of our room for a moment.

I couldn’t hear her, but I forced myself up off the bed to get ready. There wouldn’t be a lot of effort this morning. I brushed my teeth first, because I couldn’t stand the taste in my mouth any longer. I pulled on a big, oversized sweatshirt and jeans and brushed my hair. That’s all I was going to do.

She came in a few minutes later and sat beside me again. “Breakfast will be here soon,” she said. “Edward wants to know if he can sit with you and eat...he said you didn’t have to talk at all. He just wants to be here...if it’s okay with you.”

“Whatever.” *I’m not going to be very good company this morning.*

“Well, we can tell him when he gets here.”

“Fine.”

Rosalie seemed to know I wasn’t going to be good for anything more than one-word answers for a while, and so she decided to finish getting ready. She put on some socks and running shoes and pulled her jacket out of the closet. She sat on her bed, then, watching the clock.

I scooted myself up to the top of my bed, so I was nestled in the corner. Pulling my knees inside my sweatshirt, I wrapped my arms around them and put my head down.

When the loud knock sounded, I jumped. Rosalie smiled over at me kindly, and got up to answer the door. She whispered something I couldn't hear, and then walked across the room to grab her jacket and keys. I put my head back down, and listened as the door closed, a chair scooted out, and someone sat down. *Must be Edward.*

A rich, sweet voice said softly, "I brought your hot tea and toast...butter and honey, too."

I looked up at him blankly.

"Do you want the toast buttered?"

"Sure," I whispered.

"Okay." He got to work on my breakfast and set my plate on the desk next to me a few moments later. "Here you go, Bella."

I nodded my thanks, and picked up a piece of toast. Honey was drizzled on it, just the way I liked it. I ate it quietly, pulling off little pieces of the bread, one bite at a time. When I was done, I reached for the tea, cupping it in both my hands, glad to hold something so warm. I sipped it slowly, still not saying a word. My eyes continued to follow the patterns in my bedspread.

Edward ventured quietly after a while, "Would you like me to put some music on? I'd be glad to find something for you."

I shook my head and began tracing the pattern with my finger.

"Feel like walking?"

I looked up. *Some fresh air would be great...and he's obviously okay with not talking.*

He cocked an eyebrow sweetly and I watched as one corner of his mouth lifted as he waited for my answer.

"Okay." I got up without another word, slid on my mules and pulled my jacket off of its hanger. Pulling it on, I turned to face him, waiting to follow his lead. He moved to the door, opened it, and gestured for me to lead the way.

I walked out into the hall, and noticed that he grabbed my keys and turned off the lights before he closed the door and locked it.

We walked for a long time without breaking the silence, just ambling across campus. Though we hadn't intended to, after about 25 minutes, we ended up on the hill overlooking the valley at the back edge of the campus. *My hill.*

Sensing that I needed a moment, Edward stopped walking and paused wordlessly as I walked to the lone tree that stood like a sentinel, the watchman of the valley. I leaned back against the tree

and stared out at the same treetops that had weathered the storm I had watched roll in so many months ago. I took a deep breath, and closed my eyes, breathing through my nose. My arms hung limply at my sides.

I don't know how long I stood there, but I was drawn back to reality by a touch. Edward had joined me sometime in the silence, and had reached over and taken my hand. He still said nothing, but offered a gentle squeeze. I looked over at him, and the kindness and understanding I saw in his face warmed my heart.

"Edward?" I tested, my voice faint.

"Yes?" he whispered.

"I heard you talking to Emmett at the hospital the other night..."

"Hmm," he said with a smile. "Did you?"

"I didn't understand why you were so upset that I said I couldn't believe Josh had actually hurt me." I was watching for his reaction

"No?" He was studying my face, waiting to hear what I was going to say.

"I understand now." My eyes dropped to the ground, unable to hold his gaze.

"Why, Bella? What made you understand?" he asked softly. He moved to stand and face me, so that I was sheltered between him and the tree.

"I...I remembered something while I was asleep last night. The memory came in my dream." My eyes were intensely focused on the grass at our feet, my hand still in his. His fingers traced my knuckles.

"Was it bad? You don't have to give me any details...I just..."

"Yes."

He sighed deeply and I could hear the sadness in his voice. "I'm so sorry, Bella."

"You were right, Edward. He *did* hurt me . . . a long, long time ago."

"I wish I'd been wrong..."

My head came up slightly, but couldn't make myself look at him. Instead, I found a patch of grass about three feet away that I began to examine closely.

He lifted my hand and held it between us. "If you ever need to talk, you know I'll listen, right? I'll never push you...never pressure you. But...I'm here if you need me."

“I know,” I whispered. “I don’t understand, but I know.”

He stood there, just letting me be silent.

“He raped me, Edward.” *Blurting it out is better than tiptoeing around it.*

A deep rumble—almost a growl—came from Edward’s direction, but I still couldn’t make myself look at him. He shifted his weight to his other leg, and I could sense the tension. He didn’t speak, but I knew he had something to say. I pressed on.

“I remembered my first visit to his house. We’d been ‘together’ for about a year, only seeing each other every few weekends when he’d come to Dartmouth to visit...and we talked by phone often. I guess I didn’t know him as well as I thought.”

The hand that wasn’t locked in Edward’s reached up and began twirling a piece of my hair. “We ate dinner with his parents, and they served a little wine. Not much, but I’d never had any before...I guess I don’t have much tolerance.” I laughed awkwardly.

Edward didn’t laugh. The thumb that had been tracing my knuckles stilled.

Barreling ahead, I added, “After dinner, he took me up to his den...not his bedroom, but I don’t think his parents ever went in there. It seemed *distinctly* his. We started kissing, and I felt excited and strange. The alcohol was really going to my head. It was going too fast, and he was too rough.”

I realized that the fingers that had been twirling the lock of my hair had stopped, the circulation cut off, when Edward reached up with both hands and unwound the hair, releasing the blood flow. He took both my hands in his then, gently, and stood still, saying nothing.

I continued, staring off into the grass beyond us, “I told him that I wasn’t ready for this, but he got angry. He said we’d been together for a year, and that I needed to show him that I loved him. He said I was going to make him happy.”

Edward cleared his throat, and out of the corner of my eye, I saw his head snap to the side. I ventured a look at him, knowing that our eyes wouldn’t meet. His jaw was clenched tightly. I looked away again and went on with the story.

“He slid his hands up my leg, to the edge of my dress, and I told him to stop. I said I didn’t want to do any more. He kept going. I let him do more than I wanted, hoping it would be enough, but when I realized he was going to...finish...I begged him to stop. He practically yelled at me, ‘I need you and I am going to have you just like this. Right now.’...and then he shoved my head to the side with his hand...so he couldn’t see my face.

I heard a deep sigh, and Edward squeezed my hands gently, letting me know it was okay to finish the story. “When he was done, he just stood up, pulled up his pants and said, ‘That’s what I

thought. I woke up then. I don't remember any more." *I can't believe I told him all that. He's going to think I'm filthy, dirty, and weak. I'm going to lose him..*

But when I finally looked at him, Edward was most definitely not running. He was looking down at me, eyes brimming with tears. One spilt over and ran down his cheek. He lifted my hand to his face, and wiped the tear away with our hands still laced together.

"I don't understand this," I said, dumbfounded. I was uncomfortable with this emotion. I still felt nothing. "Why are *you* crying?"

He spoke so quietly, I barely heard him. "Because you're *not*."

I looked at him, completely confused.

"Bella, I'm sad that you can stand here and tell me about all of this, like it happened to somebody else. Like it doesn't affect you. Like your heart is stone. *Somebody* needs to cry, and until you can, I guess it'll have to be me."

"I wish I hadn't remembered," I whispered.

He leaned in and pressed his forehead to mine, saying in a low voice, "I understand, Bella. But now that you did, you can deal with it and move on...it can be a good thing."

"What if I...what if I remember more? What if there are other things I've buried, so that I didn't have to deal with them?"

"There might be...but they won't all come back at once. That's the way our mind helps us cope with trauma. We just get a little bit to handle at a time. Then, when we deal with that, we might remember some more."

"I'm scared, Edward. I don't want to remember anything else. I don't even want to deal with *this*. It was so easy before—when I had no idea this had happened."

"I'm sure it *was* easier, Bella." He lifted his head and freed one of his hands, gently tracing underneath my eye, and down my jawline. "But you don't want to live that way forever, do you? Stuck, frozen 'in your winter'? Don't you want to get to spring?" His fingers remained under my chin, tipping my face up to his. His eyes looked deeply into mine.

"Maybe it's lonely and numb, but it's comfortable. Thinking about all of this again is just . . . too hard."

"Bella, have you ever broken a bone?" he asked. *Why was he changing the subject all of a sudden?*

"Ha! Yeah...several. You should see my file at the emergency room. It takes up three binders."

He offered me a lopsided grin, and proceeded to explain his question. “Every time, they reset the bone, right?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Well, imagine that you broke your leg... a terrible injury. And there was no one around to help you reset the bone. What would happen?”

“Well... I *guess* that—if there were no complications—the bone would just heal itself.”

“In the wrong position, though, right?” He asked, searching my eyes for understanding. *Where are you going with this, Edward?*

“Right. It would heal all bent up like it was when I broke it.”

“And it might even be comfortable eventually... you’d be able to do all the things you used to do, but with a limp.”

“Yes... I think I see. That’s what my heart has done, right? You’re telling me that if I don’t deal with this, I can keep going, but I’ll be living with a heart that’s healed wrong.”

“Exactly. You have to make a choice, Bella. In order to allow it to heal correctly, the injury will have to be *rebroken*, and it’ll probably hurt even worse the second time around. But if you can handle it—deal with it once and for all, and let it go—you won’t have to walk with a limp for the rest of your life... You’ll be able to *dance* again.”

Something inside of me awoke at those words... but it was immediately accompanied by fear.

“I’m... I’m afraid to dance, Edward.”

He softly ran both his hands through my hair, brushing the stray tendrils off my face and keeping one hand on my cheek. “I know, Bella. But you *deserve* to dance...” He whispered soothingly, “...and I’ll be whatever you need.”

He pressed his lips to my forehead tenderly, and I felt my heart begin to melt.

“You’ll help me?” *You’ll listen... and you won’t think less of me when I admit what a fool I was? What stupid choices I made?*

“I’m not going anywhere. If you wake up and need to talk at three in the morning, I’ll listen. If you get angry, I’ll take whatever punches you need to throw. When you’re finally ready to cry, I’ll be here to hold you. And when you’re ready to dance, I’ll lead.”

I leaned in and wrapped my arms around his waist, squeezing him tightly. Edward hugged me close and buried his face in my hair, kissing the top of my head. We stood like that for a long time, but I was pretty sure neither of us wanted to be anywhere else.

When we finally stepped back, Edward turned my face to his again, and we just looked into each others' eyes—saying nothing, but communicating volumes. I smiled up at him, and he winked at me sweetly.

Then, he took my hand in his and we began walking back toward campus.

The last time I'd been up on this hill, I'd been scared to death knowing that I needed to end what I didn't realize was the worst relationship of my life. This time, I was scared, too, but it was because of a new beginning. I knew that I had a long way to go, but I was confident I wouldn't be alone.

I thought of Angela saying that I might not understand Edward's persistence, but I'd be crazy to walk away...and she was right. I was going to take him up on that crazy offer of his, whether I could comprehend his need to help or not.

My heart felt lighter somehow. And suddenly I realized why that was. For the first time in over two years, I felt hope.

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Chapter: 18

The search for my future has brought me here

This is more than I'd hoped for , but sometimes I fear

David Wilcox

Chapter Sixteen: Starting Over

We walked back toward the center of campus in comfortable silence. As we approached Thayer Hall, Edward asked very tentatively if I was up to walking through the Sunday Brunch buffet line at Home Plate. "We can get it to go, if you want."

"Umm...okay." We made our way over then, and I was relieved to see that the small diner wasn't crowded. I picked up a to-go box, and was glad to find my appetite had returned. Fixing a perfectly golden Belgian waffle, I piled on butter and drizzled the syrup on, licking my lips. I also took a good-sized portion of fresh fruit, and then my stomach growled loudly. I looked over at Edward, blushing.

He smiled at me and said, "I'm glad you're hungry. I'm famished."

Grabbing two chocolate milks and looking at me with an “Is this okay?” face, Edward moved toward the cashier. I nodded, and brought my box over.

He paid and reached for a bag, placing everything inside it. Taking the bag, he asked, “Where to?”

“My room, I think...I’m ready to be shut in with my music.”

He nodded with a smirk, understanding. Stepping outside, we turned and headed toward Mass Row. Still, neither of us felt the need to complicate the silence.

A few minutes later, at my door, Edward pulled out my keys and unlocked the door, letting me in first. He set the bag down on my desk, and pulled out my box and one of the chocolate milks. I got out some money and tried to pay him back.

“That’s okay, Bella. I got it,” he said, brow creased.

“You can’t feed me for an entire weekend, Edward.” I felt really awkward. “It’s not right. There’s no reason...”

He must’ve realized how uncomfortable I was as he studied me, because something in his face shifted. He stated reluctantly. “All right, Bella. I’ll let you pay for your lunch today, but Emmett and I really want to handle things this evening. The pizza...drinks. So, you won’t offer to chip in *then*, right?”

“I guess that’d be okay,” I shrugged, relieved when he took the money from my extended hand. I noticed that he hadn’t unpacked his lunch. “Are you going?”

“Yes, unless you need me to stay. I have a few things still to get in order before you two join us.” He looked happy about our evening plans.

“Sure...I’m going to just relax...maybe read a little.” I was looking around the room, thinking of my options.

“Bella?” My eyes turned to him suddenly, aware of the tension in his voice.

“Yeah?” I looked at him, concerned.

“I...” His fingers were drumming on the corner of my desk as he searched for his words. He must’ve found them, because his fingers suddenly formed a fist, and he rested the weight of his body on those knuckles as he looked at me intently. “I just want you to know that...I have no expectations.”

“What do you mean? What are you talking about?” I was really confused.

“I don’t expect you to tell me everything. I don’t expect to be the only person in your life that

matters. And I don't expect you to fall in love with me."

Super. Because even hearing those words come out of your mouth makes a knot the size of a watermelon in my stomach.

I managed to say, "That's good, because everything my heart feels is really inconsistent right now. Sometimes I might want to be around, and sometimes I'm going to want to just hide. I just...half the time I feel so hollow, that I don't think there's anything in me to give...or anything worth sharing. My heart isn't capable of...I don't think I'm going to be a good friend for you."

His eyes looked sad, but his face showed me that he understood. He sighed as he began speaking. "While I don't expect anything, you also need to know that I'm not going anywhere. I'll be okay when you don't want to be around people...around *me*. I just want to *be* whatever kind of friend you need. And I'll never pressure you to share more of yourself than you want."

I let out a breath in relief. This was almost too good to be true. "I don't know what to say...Thanks, Edward. Really."

"My pleasure, Bella...and listen. How about we come and get you two at around 5:30 tonight? We want to eat and watch the movie, but we know you two need rest before the week starts...don't want to keep you out late."

"That sounds good. I'll let Rosalie know." I smiled at him.

"Okay, then," he sighed. He looked as if a huge burden had been lifted from his shoulders. "See you later. Have a good afternoon, Bella."

"You, too, Edward. Bye."

He picked up his bag and waved, quietly backing into the hall, closing the door behind him.

When Rose came in about an hour later, I was listening to Alice In Chains, doodling in my notebook. I'd been unable to read, but found myself surprisingly able to draw several pairs of haunting eyes all over the margin of my pages.

We said hi to each other quietly, and went on occupying ourselves in silence.

I began to write.

I am so scared. I look ahead, and though I see a healing, a long, painful process is imminent.

I don't want to see things I've hidden in the dark. I don't want to tear down my comfortable walls.

Yet, I do want them down...I want to live with my whole heart. I don't want to keep my heart in

this safe box.

I want the courage to experience every part of life: the bad and the good, the empty and the full, the mourning and the dancing.

When I start to shake with my fear, when my feet are unsure, when my mind is clouded and cluttered, I will trust you.

Sometimes I hesitate, because I feel like this process will be too much a burden on your shoulders and too much a strain on your heart.

I convince myself that you will hate what you see and you will put up your own walls.

But I hope, with everything I have, that you will be patient. Patient and strong. I hope that your strength will inspire me to be strong.

I've always thought that the way you care about me couldn't be real. It seems too full—too complete—to be true.

Part of my heart is so afraid that when I pull my barriers down and let out the darkness, I'll find that I'm right.

Part of my heart is so blindly sure of everything you say. Most of my heart.

I don't know why you care about me so much. I don't know why Fate brought you into my life. I don't even know how long you'll be here.

I do know that—even if our paths cross for only a brief time—I need you right now. Help me.

Please?

My pencil fell out of my hand as I drifted to sleep.

I woke up at about five...and decided that I could do a *little* better at looking presentable for our pizza and movie night. It wasn't a date, and for that I was thankful. I was so glad Edward let me know there'd be no pressure of any kind. I hadn't been coherent enough to worry about that before he mentioned it, but it was just the kind of thing that would have started to stress me out subconsciously. I was glad he'd recognized that.

Still, I wanted to look nice for tonight. To show him I was making an effort...like I was *trying* to live and not just exist.

The jeans would be fine, but I decided to wear my midnight blue scoop-necked long-sleeved t-shirt. Flattering but comfortable. I pulled the sides of my hair back into a clip, and ran my fingers through the long, straight hair in the back. A little chapstick was my finishing touch.

Rosalie looked like she was somewhat looking forward to spending the evening with the boys, too. She obviously wasn't smiling and giddy, but she seemed content and expectant. She had on a pink baby tee underneath her tan hooded jacket and jeans. The outfit was more modest than she had worn...before. But still very becoming. *She'd probably look beautiful in a paper bag.*

While we waited, I carefully tore the page from my notebook and folded it, sliding it into my pocket. I needed to find a way to give that to Edward. Rose and I agreed on *Gone In 60 Seconds* as our movie for the night. Action and excitement, no romance, no creeps. I always love a good heist. Rosalie loves the cars. It was actually pretty easy to decide.

At 5:30, there was a knock at our door, and we looked up at each other and smiled. Rosalie walked calmly over, and opened it. She actually looked...sweet. This was a new Rose, and I was glad time with Emmett was having a good effect on her. He leaned in to give her a hug, and said, "You ladies ready to relax? 'Cause we gotta get our chill on."

She answered, "Yeah," and picked up her jacket along with the movie.

I nodded and pulled my big, maroon sweater out of the top of my closet. I needed cozy and safe. I thought of the last time I'd worn it. The afternoon Edward had rescued me for the first time. The day of the warm muffin...*I look forward to having more of those days.*

When I stepped out into the hall, Emmett put his arm around me and whispered conspiratorially, "You okay, little sis? 'Cause I can open up a can, if I need to."

Emmett made me grin. "I'm okay for now, but I'll let you know about the can...you never know."

"All right, then," he said, tugging on my hair.

I closed the door and locked it, slipping my keys in my pocket as Emmett and Rosalie walked down the hall. Edward was leaning against the wall opposite me, quiet.

He smiled at me sweetly when I looked over at him. Standing up, he asked how my afternoon was.

"Pretty good," I answered as we started down the hall after Rose and Em. "I wrote a little, and slept a *lot*. A Sunday afternoon nap is always a good thing, don't you think?"

"It is that."

"What did *you* do?"

He looked over at me, his eyes full of something I couldn't quite put my finger on. "Well, after Em and I straightened up the apartment, I went to the Hopkins Center to play the piano."

"Were you working on your composition?"

“Um, actually no. I *was* composing something, but not for school...just for *me*. It’s how I express myself sometimes. A way to get things out when I don’t have any other way to let them go. I...needed that today.”

I know what you mean. “I’m glad you could do that...”

The guys didn’t live too far from us. They were in another building, but still in Mass Row, so we were there in no time. They lived in the apartments behind the engineering department. “Do you guys have roommates?” I asked.

Edward smiled. “We *did*, but they were a little...boisterous...and decided to move off campus not too long after they moved in. We don’t mind though, it gives us two extra rooms to use however we want until the housing department decides someone else should be there...right now, the rooms are a study and Emmett’s ‘gym.’”

“*That’s* nice, I bet...and so you’re secretly hoping that housing will never assign anyone to room with you.” I glanced up at him with a smirk.

He grinned back, “..or *not* so secretly.”

We got to the building, and Edward jogged up to the door, holding it open for me. “Straight up to the third floor.”

“You like it up there?”

“Yeah,” he said as we climbed the steps slowly. “No obnoxious upstairs neighbors.”

“And *you’re* certainly not that for someone else...” I chided.

“Me? Not at all! Now *Emmett*, on the other hand, can be a *very* obnoxious upstairs neighbor.”

“Hmm. That doesn’t completely surprise me.”

When we got to the top of the steps, we went all the way down the hall...last door on the right. “No obnoxious neighbors on that side of you either, eh?”

“Nope...and *my* room is on that side. It’s nice.”

Emmett had left the door cracked open for us. Edward gestured that I should head in, and he held the door open for me with his arm stretched out, allowing me to walk past.

I stepped inside, and saw Rosalie leaning against the wall by the window, looking out. I wanted to look around, but felt like I’d better check on her first. I walked over and quietly stood beside her.

“You okay?” I asked in a whisper.

“I...I guess. I do feel mostly comfortable with Emmett, but I don’t feel up to a lot of conversation...and I don’t want to seem rude.”

“No, Rosalie. They understand. Nobody’s expecting a lot out of you right now. They just wanted to offer us some distraction...so we don’t sit in our room and think about...everything.”

“I hope you’re right...I can handle pizza, and watching a movie—if it interests me. But I’m pretty sure that’s all I’ve got in me tonight.”

“I’m positive that’ll be fine.” I looked over my shoulder as I spoke. The guys were talking quietly in the kitchen, putting ice in glasses and getting out paper plates and stuff. Emmett looked over, concerned, and I saw Edward say something to him, his hand on Emmett’s shoulder.

“Was your walk over here okay? Sorry if we walked too slowly...” I said, suddenly feeling awful for leaving her alone with Emmett if she wasn’t feeling up to it.

“Oh, it was fine...he’s being really good about understanding when I don’t have much to say. It was the same this afternoon...we just went on a walk.”

“I’m glad they’re around, though...aren’t you?”

“Yeah,” she said definitively. “Who knows for how long, but I’m glad they’re sticking it out for a while. And the meals were pretty great this weekend...”

Edward’s voice interrupted our discussion. “Why don’t you ladies have a seat wherever you’d like and we’ll bring over some drinks. We’ve got soda, coffee, and water...”

“Or beer!” Emmett chimed in.

“Soda, for me, thanks,” I decided.

“Umm...I think I’ll take soda, too.” Rosalie nodded toward the couches.

We moved in that direction to pick a comfortable spot, and I took a few moments to actually look around. The boys’ apartment was decorated in a modern style...not *quite* the quintessential bachelor pad...but almost. Two large black leather sofas formed an “L” in front of the flat screen TV and the game system. It was clear we’d be watching the movie tonight in surround sound...apparently these boys loved their technology. Rosalie and I sat on the same couch...neither of us feeling like snuggling up to the boys—even accidentally.

The only artwork on the wall was a large print of Van Gogh’s *Night Café*. The colors were awful, which I knew even Van Gogh thought, but I supposed anything went with the gray walls and black furniture. I smiled to myself as I analyzed everything. That print actually suited the

guys rather well...and Rosalie seemed to like it, too. *At least it's Van Gogh, and not dogs playing poker.*

There weren't very many personal touches out in the main room...and I found myself wondering what Edward's room was like. I imagined a similar masculine motif, but with photos of family—especially Alice. *I want to see a picture of her.* There'd be lots of music, and an excellent sound system. *More artwork?* It just made sense to me that Edward's room would reflect his personality and interests.

Edward brought over my drink a moment later, and Emmett offered Rosalie her coke with a flourish, smiling at her.

“We ordered one half cheese/half pepperoni and one with the works. That okay?” Emmett asked as he sat down on the other couch, propping up his feet.

“Mmhm,” I offered.

Rosalie just said, “Yup.”

Edward brought his drink over and a pillow, asking me with only his eyes if I would mind him sitting on the floor in front of me. I nodded my assent, and reached out for his drink. He handed it to me, the corner of his mouth lifting in that amazing way, and then took the back when he was settled.

“Kay. The pizza should be here in about 10 minutes. You ladies want to get the movie started?” Emmett suggested.

“Sure,” we answered at the same time.

“Whadja pick?” his face was alight with curiosity. Edward snickered at him quietly.

Reaching under her jacket that she'd set beside her on the couch, Rosalie pulled out the movie and said uncertainly, “Is *Gone In 60 Seconds* okay?”

“Dude! I LOVE that movie!” Emmett shouted. He jumped out of his seat to get it, landing with an enormous thud on the floor. “You guys are AWESOME!”

Edward was shaking his head and smiling, and I heard him say something under his breath. I leaned forward and asked him to repeat it, and he whispered, “Obnoxious upstairs neighbor.”

I smiled and watch Emmett bounce over to the DVD player to put in the movie. He seemed to settle down a bit once the previews started, and we all got more comfortable. Before the movie began, the pizza arrived. The boys jumped up to pay for it and to serve us, handing us our pizza and a few napkins on a tray. Then, Edward asked before he sat down, “Lights on or off?”

Both Rosalie and I hesitated, and Emmett suggested we leave them on...we needed to see our

pizza, after all. *Thank you again, Emmett.*

Emmett was more entertaining than the movie. He sang along with the music at the top of his lungs as the movie began, his hands drumming the beat on the couch. I couldn't help but smile...Rose was smiling, too.

The next time I looked over at Rosalie was about 20 minutes into the movie. She had her feet pulled up beside her on the couch, her elbow propped on the armrest. She looked genuinely relaxed. I hoped she was. I was sitting Indian style on the other end of the couch, my arms wrapped around me tightly, shivering a little. I wasn't going to say anything, but Edward must've noticed a few minutes later when he stood up to take our trays. He disappeared down the hall and came back with a huge, unbelievably soft emerald green micro-fleece blanket, smiling down at me.

I looked up at him gratefully, and he leaned in a little, "Do you need anything else, Bella?"

Shaking my head no, I turned back to the movie, thinking about how great a friend he was being. I could see that he really meant no pressure. Edward Cullen was probably just the best person I'd ever met. "Does anybody need anything while I'm up?" he called out. Nobody did.

When he sat down this time, I noticed that his head was right next to my knee. *I wonder if he'd mind if I just ran my fingers through that bronze mop one time. What?! Did I just think that? Bella Swan!*

I argued with myself for a minute. *It wouldn't mean anything. I just want to see what it feels like.* I finally decided that I'd better concentrate on the movie. I wrapped up tightly with his blanket and shifted my position a little, settling in.

Thankfully, the movie began distracting me well. Emmett, too, if I was honest. He wasn't one of those annoying people who make a comment about every little thing, but he did laugh loudly and heckle from time to time...and he sang along with *everything*. He even stood up and danced to Low Rider, making us all laugh. When Rosie said, "Em, you're *obnoxious*," Edward turned to look up at me, grinning, one eyebrow cocked.

About fifteen minutes before the movie was over, the phone rang, and Edward jumped up to get it. He took it down the hall, but not before I heard, "*Alice!* I was just thinking about you. How's life at Pratt?" He went into his room and closed the door.

He came out several minutes later, perplexed. He was pinching the bridge of his nose, but when he noticed me looking at him, cleared his face of any evidence that the conversation had been trying, and smirked at me. I figured it was probably best not to pry at the moment, but to let him process everything. He sat down and leaned his head back on the couch, staring up at the ceiling. *Okay. Now I've just got to touch his hair.* Very tentatively, I eased my hand over toward his head. Not noticing my movement, Edward closed his eyes, and I noticed his jaw muscles tighten. *Easy, Bella. You do not want to communicate anything but comfort to this boy.* My fingers found their way to the spot I most loved to look at, an unkempt mess right on top of his head, and I very

gently stroked toward the back of his head, just once, allowing my fingernails to graze his scalp. *Hmm. I may have enjoyed that just a little too much.*

Edward's eyes shot open, and his head turned to me quickly, though it remained flat against the couch. His eyes seemed full of questions, but I just smiled down tenderly and whispered to him, "Is everything okay?"

He smiled very slightly, the inquisitiveness remaining in his face, and offered, "I think so...that was Alice. She just shared some...unexpected news."

Not wanting to push, I just said, "Oh. Okay," and turned back toward the screen. I could feel Edward's eyes remaining on me for a few moments, before he slowly turned his head around, too, but I pretended not to notice.

When the movie was over, he stood up slowly, stretching and perched himself beside me on the arm of the couch. He looked like he was about to say something when Emmett laughed heartily and said, "I'm so glad you guys picked that freakin' movie! It's been too long since I've seen it. Good choice. Good choice, ladies." He was nodding in approval. "Anybody want a tour of our little place?"

"Sure," we answered. And so Emmett led the way, Edward bringing up the rear. First, we saw Emmett's room, to the right of the entrance. *Next to the neighbors*, I remembered. I wasn't surprised by his décor—street signs, the trophy from a pool tournament standing on his desk, and a neon Guinness sign glowing in the corner. His bed was simply made, just a navy blue comforter and lots of pillows. The laundry was piled in the corner, next to an overflowing hamper. "This is my crib," he said proudly. And then added, "I'm...umm...I'm gonna catch up on my laundry this week." He laughed at himself.

Next, Emmett took us back into the living room proclaiming, "Now we'll go to the quieter side of the apartment." We moved into the hallway, and were shown a mini-gym of sorts, directly behind the wall where the TV was located. There was a housing-supplied bed, shoved into the corner of the spartanly furnished room, a small portable CD player plugged in and resting on the end of the mattress. Other than that, the room only held a modified weight bench with a squat rack, and a good selection of free weights. "And that's why I'm built like a grizzly..."

Edward snorted and chided from the hallway, "Ask him how all that equipment got up the steps!"

"Oh, whatever, man! You should be thanking me. Your arms looked huge for a week!" Emmett boomed.

"And that's always been my goal..." Edward responded, smirking at me. I grinned back.

Going across the hall, we saw a study, one wall lined with books. The room was well-organized, a pair of reading glasses resting on a thick book which lay open on the desk. There was a large Roland keyboard in the corner, next to the simply covered Dartmouth bed. Notes, pencils and

lined music composition paper were slightly scattered on the bed, lit by a glowing floor lamp. Our tour guide informed us that this room belonged to Edward the Prodigy. Edward just shrugged, saying quietly, “I like a nice, cozy spot to think.” *This room is perfect.*

I shoved my hand into the front pocket of my jeans, fingering the poem I’d written for Edward, wondering where the best place would be to leave it.

Emmett took us further, leading us across the hallway to the last bedroom. *Edward’s room.* For some reason, I took a deep breath as I entered. I felt like this was incredibly personal, his allowing us to see the one place that was distinctly, uniquely his own on campus. *Seeing Emmett’s room didn’t have this effect on you. No...that’s true. But Emmett doesn’t have the same effect on me as the deep well that is Edward. And I’m getting the chance to take a glimpse into the well...*

Emmett ushered Rosalie and me in, while Edward hung back in the hall a bit. The room was exactly as I’d expected. Everything in its place. Two windows allowed light in from the streetlamps outside, and I imagined what a great room this would be during the day. His bed was in the corner next to his dresser. A large open book case held a few books, though they were classics, unrelated to Edward’s studies. *These must just be his personal favorites.* There were a handful of pictures scattered around, too. The predominant feature, though, was a large, *serious* stereo system. The rest of the bookcase was filled with CDs. More than I’d ever seen before. I wanted to wander over and spend several minutes poring over his collection, but Rosalie suddenly asked, “Could I use the bathroom?”

“Oh! Uh, yeah!” Emmett said quickly, pointing her back toward the hall and the one door we’d passed by. Edward made sure she knew where the light was. With no eyes on me for the moment, I quickly set the note on one of his pillows, and headed toward the hall to join the others. Edward stepped into the doorway, effectively blocking me, though I was sure he hadn’t meant to make me feel awkward.

“Would you like to see a picture of Alice?” he asked me.

“Yeah...I’d love to.” *Please don’t notice the note. Please don’t notice the note.*

He glided across the room to his dresser and picked up a beautiful wooden frame, handing it to me. “This is my little sister,” he said, his voice full of adoration and...something else.

“She’s...beautiful.” An absolutely glowing face looked out at me from the frame, her head tilted to the side with an inquisitive smile. I knew I’d like her, if I ever got a chance to meet her. She looked so sweet and spirited...and I could see why he’d said she was like a pixie, her delicate features causing me to imagine someone innocent and delicate—and yet there was a fire in her eyes. She seemed sort of complicated, too. *Like her big brother.*

“Did you have a good talk with her?” I ventured. *You are pushing your luck, Bella.*

“I...*did.* It’s just...she’s met somebody at Pratt. She was just gushing about him, thrilled. And

I...I'm happy for her, but I so much want her to be a little guarded. She just...puts her whole heart out there. I don't want her to get hurt." He was looking down at the floor, and I was watching him closely remembering what I'd overheard at the hospital when he'd thought I was asleep. *Something had happened to Alice before.*

"Well, if she's really serious about him, maybe you should try to meet him sometime soon...check him out for yourself?" I suggested.

"Yeah, that's what I thought, too. So, she and Jasper are coming up to Dartmouth for a visit next weekend. I'd...love for her to meet *you*, too."

I was a little shocked, but mostly excited. "I'd love to...she looks fun."

"She's wonderful, Bella..." He tucked a piece of stray hair behind my ear. "You two have a lot in common."

"Well, I look forward to spending some time with her then." He smiled at me sweetly.

I moved toward the door, a little anxious to get us out of his room...and away from the note on his pillow.

He followed me quietly, and we made it to the living room in time to see Emmett giving Rosalie a playful nudge. She was smirking over at him, rolling her eyes. I was glad to see it, and I guess Edward was, too. He just reached over and squeezed my fingers gently, sharing an encouraging smile. "Are you two ladies ready to head back? We'll walk you now if you are..."

I nodded, and Rosalie stood up, putting on her jacket. Emmett grabbed the movie and handed it to her. "You're just like Sway," I heard him whisper quietly. "I think that's freakin' hot."

She rolled her eyes and punched him in the arm, smirking. "And so who are you? Let's see...you *wish* you were as bad as Sphinx..." she thought out loud.

"You *know* I'm that bad, Rosie. I could *totally* take him," he laughed.

"Whatever you say, Em," she answered. As they walked to the door and headed out, Emmett started mimicking Sphinx's soundtrack...the music that was playing every time he kicked somebody's tail. Edward and I were only a few steps behind, laughing quietly.

The walk back was peaceful. *This has been a good evening.* Nothing much was said until we were approaching our dorm. Emmett and Rosalie had just walked in the door and were climbing the steps.

"I'm...um...I'm looking forward to reading that note that someone left on my bed. Do you know who it might be from?"

I felt blood rush to my face and wanted to crawl under a rock. "I...uh..."

“I’m sorry, Bella. I didn’t mean to embarrass you.” He sounded genuinely apologetic. I was just surprised and...*pleased* to see it there.”

I looked up at him then, and the tenderness I saw there melted me a little. I whispered, “I had some things I needed to say...and I didn’t know how else to say them.”

“Okay, well, I always look forward to anything you want to say to me...however you choose to say it.” He was looking at me intently, his expression saying more than I was able to understand at the moment. “Can I give you a good night hug?”

I was so glad he’d asked. I wanted to hug him, to thank him for the relaxing, fun evening they’d given us...thank him for letting me see more of who he is, but I didn’t want to hug in front of Emmett and Rosalie. “Of course you can,” I said softly.

He wrapped me in his arms once again, and I felt a warmth flood my body. *This is becoming my favorite spot.* My arms squeezed tightly around his waist, and he chuckled. “You’re pretty great, Bella Swan. Do you know that?”

“Nope.” I knew I was blushing and hoped he wouldn’t see my face for a few seconds.

“Too bad. Maybe one day I’ll convince you.” He let his words hang in the air as he squeezed me to him. A moment later—*too soon*—he released me and walked over to hold the door for me.

We went inside and climbed the steps to my hallway. Emmett was coming out of our room, smiling. “Good night, Miss Bella,” he grinned at me.

“Night, Emmett.”

Edward stuck his head in the door when I got there and told Rosalie to have a good week. When I stepped up to the door, he grabbed my fingers and gave them another sweet squeeze. “And I’ll see *you* tomorrow. Sleep well, Bella.”

“You too, Edward,” I said, stepping into my room.

“I certainly will,” he whispered softly.

And then the door closed quietly.

“Not a bad way to spend the evening, eh?” I heard Rosalie ask.

“Sure wasn’t,” I agreed. “I hope we get to do that more.”

“Me, too.”

We both smiled very slightly the entire time we were getting ready for bed.

When we were ready to turn off the lights a little while later, Rosalie sat on her bed, looking over at me where I stood by the switch. “Those are some quality guys...you know?”

“They are.” I was quiet a moment before I said, “Do you think our hearts will ever be...okay again?”

“I hope so,” she answered, flopping back on her bed. And then she whispered, “I really hope so.”

I clicked the lights off and climbed into bed, hoping the same thing myself.

#####

Chapter: 19

Won't you please waltz with me,

The turns of our steps are untangling me

Free from some dragged around memories

And the rusty old remnants of fears...

David Wilcox

Chapter 17: First Steps

Monday morning arrived, and I actually awoke with a sense of anticipation. This was an important day. The homework club would be opening today—my first day to spend getting to know these kids from the struggling part of town. My first day to let them see and feel that I believed they were important. My first day of building mentoring relationships that, I hoped, would challenge them to rise above their difficult circumstances and make wise choices.

And maybe they'd help *me* to rise above *my* difficult circumstances and make wise choices.

I chose my clothing carefully, knowing that I needed to project professionalism. Simple black dress pants with my crimson button down shirt that flared at the hips a bit...*should I just cover the bruise with makeup?* “Umm, Rosalie?”

She looked over sideways from the mirror while she finished putting on some concealer over her purple and green temple, facing the same difficulty I was. “Yeah?”

“I’ve got that homework club today, and I need to look pretty sharp. I guess I’m wondering what to do with the bruise...”

She turned to face me and cocked her head sideways. I could see the moment she made the decision. “I’ve got just the thing, come here.”

“We walked over to her dresser, and she rifled around in the top drawer for a moment, finally pulling out a black scarf, with dark red flowers adding a dash of color. “Let’s just tie this around your neck and see how it looks,” she offered. She fiddled around with it for a moment and then stepped back to appraise her work. “Nice. You can’t see it at all, and you look very sassy.”

“Sassy. That’s what I was going for.” We finished getting ready and were starting to head out at about the same time.

“You going to breakfast?” she asked as we were walking out the door.

“I’m just gonna run in and get a bagel and cream cheese...I need to be fast this morning.”

“Oh...I was going to get some cereal and eggs.”

I thought about suggesting Jacob’s “cuppa” trick, and it made me smile. But I knew she probably wouldn’t care for the idea.

“That’s okay, Bella...I’ll be fine. I’ve...done it before.” She appeared to be steeling herself for the ordeal. *Too bad going to the dining hall is an ordeal.*

I knew Jacob would be waiting for me at the bottom of the steps, and so I told her I was meeting someone, so that we could walk to class together. When we stepped outside, sure enough, Jacob hopped up off of the bench and walked over, grinning.

“Bells!” he exclaimed like he hadn’t seen me in weeks. *Well, the last time he’d seen me was...at the bonfire.*

I smiled up at him, and he leaned in for a sideways hug. “Nice scarf...it does a good job of covering up the evidence of that *piece of...*” He stopped short, reconsidering his words. “You look...*pretty*. You okay?”

“Yeah...I’m makin’ it.” I said, glad he didn’t know everything I was making it through.

Rosalie just stood there, silently watching our easy camaraderie. I wondered what she was thinking. Finally, she stepped up and introduced herself.

“Hey,” he laughed. “We’ve talked on the phone. I’m Jacob Black.”

“Oh, yeah...and you were at the bonfire.” She watched for his reaction.

“Yeah. I was.” Jacob was really tense...I could tell he didn’t know what to say.

Rosalie shrugged at us both. “That night *sucked*, didn’t it?”

“Yep,” I answered...and Jacob said nothing. He just looked at me, trying to read my reaction. *We need a subject change. Today needs to be a positive day.*

Suddenly, Jacob’s face lit up. “I have *just* the thing to make your day better! I was out with Seth this weekend...we drove up to Concord. Found a little music store, and they had some great stuff. And I got you...this.”

He held out a CD for me and my jaw dropped. It was Sting. *Nada Como el Sol...the Nothing Like the Sun* album, but in Portuguese. “What??! Are you serious? I love this album!” I impulsively reached over and threw my arms around him. “No way, Jacob Black!”

His smile was so huge I thought his face would break. “And you don’t *have* that one already?” he asked a little hesitantly.

“Well, I have it in English obviously, but I’ve heard this one...I wanted it, but had never gotten around to pick it up. Thank you *so* much!”

“Sure, sure, Bells. I just wanted to make you smile...” he shrugged at me, sheepishly.

Rosalie said a little awkwardly, “I’m...gonna head on to breakfast. I’ll catch you later, Bella.” She looked at us over her shoulder as she walked off.

Jacob asked then if I was in the mood for a bagel and cream cheese again.

“Umm...actually, yeah. I want to just run in there real quick.” I started turning in that direction.

“Well, wait,” he laughed, tugging me back gently by my wrist. “I picked one up for you while I was at breakfast.” He reached over and picked up a little, white paper bag from the bench where he’d been sitting, and offered it to me.

“Jake, what were you going to do if I wanted something else?” I asked, surprised.

“C’mon, Bells! You know me better than *that*, right? I was gonna eat it while you ran in to get something else!”

I smacked him in the arm, taking the bagel and smiling. *My day is going to be okay after all.*

We walked to class, talking about what else he’d done over the weekend, and then he asked if I was ready for the club to start up.

“Definitely,” I said. “It’s going to be really good for me, and I hope for the kids as well.”

“Good, good. I’m glad to hear that. I’m lookin’ forward to starting today, too. Do I need to ‘dress up?’” He scowled as he made little airquotes around the words.

I laughed a little. “*Nice* jeans or khakis are okay...just don’t wear a t-shirt. Do you have a polo shirt, or a button down?” I suggested.

“I can find somethin’...I won’t make you look bad, Bells. Promise.”

“I know, Jake.” We were walking into the English building. The lobby wasn’t crowded, because class didn’t start for about ten more minutes, but we went ahead into the lecture hall and slid into some seats over by the far wall. We talked easily for the next few minutes, and then class began.

The lecture flew by, and we listened as the professor elaborated a bit on what he expected from us concerning our major term paper. It didn’t sound difficult. I actually felt like I’d enjoy the challenge. We were to choose an early American author and write about the impact they had, not only on the literary world, but on culture and society. I knew I’d write on Emerson and his work as an abolitionist. I jotted down several ideas that were already running through my head as he was speaking, having to scribble my final thought sloppily when he dismissed us.

Jacob was already standing at the front of the room waiting for me. I jammed my notebook in my backpack and stood up, slinging the bag over my shoulder. Jacob stood aside to allow me out of the aisle first, and followed me out into the lobby. We walked toward my next class talking about the paper for a moment, and then—just as we approached the lobby outside my British Lit class, Jacob reached over and tugged on my fingers, smiling. “Do you wanna meet for lunch, or should I just meet you outside your dorm before we leave campus?”

“Uh...why don’t you just meet me outside my dorm at about 2:30? Nobody will even be there until after 3 o’clock. That’ll give us plenty of time, I think.” I said.

“Okay, Bells. I’ll see you then...and don’t worry,” he smirked. “I’ll look so good you won’t be able to keep your eyes off me.” He pulled his hand away and waltzed out the door, like that was the most natural thing to say in the world.

I watched him go, wondering why he was flirting so unabashedly, and then turned toward the door of my lecture hall. Edward was standing there watching me tacitly. A brief—very brief—look of disappointment flashed in his eyes, before he removed any trace of it. Smiling mildly, he said, “Good morning, Bella...date with Jacob this afternoon?”

“Umm, no. Just the homework club. Jacob’s volunteered to help, so he’ll be going with me every afternoon.” *Not a date. Not a date. Please don’t think it’s a date.*

“Ah, that’s right. I thought he only went with you last week...but, honestly, I’m glad you won’t be there alone.” He actually looked relieved. *Whew! Hey, Bella? Why are you so concerned about that?*

“Actually, he’s not going to be able to go on Tuesdays...he has a lab or something.” *Dare I?*

“There’s...no chance...*you’d* be available to go with me just that one day a week, is there?” I waited, more anxious than I expected I’d be, for his answer.

“Well, I have plans tomorrow afternoon, but...I think I could probably arrange to go with you every Tuesday after that. What will we be doing?”

Oh yeah...I’d never really explained all this to him. “We’ll be helping kids in the Romano Circle housing complex...mostly with homework, but the goal is to build relationships with them and be a positive influence. It’s...really important to me.”

“I can see that,” he said, his eyes filled with admiration. “Well, I’d love to do that with you. But...” he added hesitantly, “will you be able to find someone to go with you tomorrow?”

He looks so concerned for me. I like that. “I’ll try. I don’t really know many people. I mean, I’ve been here for a while, but...all of my old friends were,” I paused, then added with a sigh, “...*his* friends.”

“Hmm...” he said sadly, “and I suppose Angela is working?”

“Yes...”

“I’ll give Em a call after lunch and see if he’s free, okay?”

You’re wonderful, Edward Cullen. Did anyone ever tell you that? “Okay, thanks.”

The professor entered the lobby just then, so we ducked into the lecture hall quickly and took two seats in the back.

Throughout class, Edward and I exchanged a few meaningful looks, and it always made me feel...*warm*. I don’t mean that we only looked at each other a few times, though. On the contrary, I kept sneaking furtive peeks as often as I could. He was wearing these really amazing tortoise shell reading glasses. I couldn’t quit looking at the way they framed his gorgeous eyes. And how there were flecks in them that matched his oh-so-touchable bronze hair.

I suddenly felt sad that he hadn’t worn them the night we went to Ellie’s. I’d have to ask him about that later.

Yeah, I couldn’t get enough of Edward Cullen in those glasses. The few *meaningful* glances happened on the rare occasion that he caught me looking. *Oops*. Well, at least he gave me that perfect crooked smile when he noticed. He didn’t seem to mind *too* much.

After class, when we were outside, Edward pulled out his cell phone and called Emmett. “Hey, Em...yeah. I have a question for you. What are you doing tomorrow afternoon? What? Yeah, she’s with me...hang on. I’ll ask.”

He held his hand over the phone for a moment and said, “Emmett and Rosalie are having lunch

at Home Plate. Would you like to meet them for lunch with me?"

"Yeah, sure. Definitely." I said. *Yea!*

Putting the phone back up to his ear, he answered, "Yes...we'll be there in about ten minutes...Oh. Sure...I can just ask you then. Mhm. See ya, man."

He turned to me and smiled, "Well, this is a good surprise, don't you think?"

"Yes, I do...we had fun last night. Thanks for having us over, Edward. And...really, for everything. For the whole weekend. It was like you never quit...from Friday afternoon to Sunday night, you were so...attentive. I needed that, and I couldn't have asked for it...so, just know I appreciate it, okay?"

"You, ah...I think you expressed it pretty well in the poem you wrote for me, Bella." He stopped walking and waited until I turned toward him. I was uncomfortable meeting his eyes. *Did he hate the poem? Was it too needy?*

He tucked my hair behind my ear, a gesture I was really beginning to like, and looked deeply into my eyes. "I'm so glad you shared your heart with me like that. I know...I know things will be tough, but I *am* here to help...and I wouldn't have it any other way. So, thank you...*for letting me in.*" He squeezed my shoulder.

We were silent for a moment, neither of us feeling like we needed to fill the void with words. Placing his hand on the small of my back, gently, Edward turned me back toward our destination, and we began walking again.

Almost there, I gathered my courage and said, "Hey. I like your glasses. They um...they look really great on you...I mean, they *suit you.*" I blushed, turning my head away, hoping he wouldn't see it.

"Thanks...I only wear them for reading, obviously...and then, only on days when I'm doing a *lot* of reading. I really have pretty good vision, but my eyes get tired when I'm composing all day, reading small type, or working at the computer for hours."

"Oh. Well that explains why I haven't seen them before. You didn't wear them when we studied at Ellie's."

"Well," he grinned. "Actually, that night, I just forgot them...but I ended up writing you anyway, and so I didn't need them very much. I kind of wish *now* that I'd had them." He smirked at me and watched for my reaction.

What? He is not trying to make me blush again. I'm not saying anything. We're here anyway.

He held the door open for me, and as soon as our eyes adjusted, we saw Emmett standing up and waving in the back. We made our way through the maze of tables, Edward's hand on the small of

my back, and Emmett greeted us with a monster grin. “What is UP, you two? Bella, is Edward behaving himself?”

“He *is*, Emmett. Thanks for asking.” I sat down in the chair Edward had pulled out for me, and Rosalie gave me a small smile.

So far, they had only gotten drinks, so I guessed they hadn’t been here that long when Edward called. I was glad they’d waited. The guys decided to take our orders and our student IDs, and go get our food for us. We took the moment to chat about our mornings. Rosalie’s hadn’t been very eventful, and she was thankful for that.

“Jacob’s a pretty decent looking guy,” she said, observing me. I could tell it was leading to a round of questions...but I didn’t mind talking about him at all. We were just friends.

“Yeah...he’s got a good smile.”

“And you *know* he likes you, right?” *Well, she’s not pulling any punches.*

“Um...I know he likes being around me. We’ve talked about all that already. I explained that I’m not dating *anyone* right now. I’ve got too much going on. He was okay with that.”

“He *said* he was okay with that...but he’s clearly trying to convince you otherwise.”

“I don’t know, Rose. I think he’s just being...Jacob.”

“Well, you know him better than I do, but—if you’re serious about not dating at *all*—I’d be really careful to not give him the wrong idea.”

Hmm. I thought about his flirting today...in front of Edward. “Okay...I will, thanks.” Jacob, please don’t make things awkward.

A moment later, Edward and Emmett were back at the table, and Jacob Black was far from my mind. I loved the atmosphere that surrounded us whenever we were with them. I felt completely at ease, like I could say absolutely anything I wanted—or needed to—and it would be heard and understood. The conversation flowed freely, and we all laughed a lot. *It’s hard not to laugh around Emmett.* A few times during lunch, I actually caught myself wishing that there were nothing else. That we could always just be together and so comfortable. That I wouldn’t have to deal with all of the garbage that was piling up and waiting to be dealt with.

It was so...*restful*. I guess I’d lost myself in my thoughts for a while, because I felt Edward reach over and begin to trace a circle on the back of my hand that had been resting on the booth beside me. “Are you okay, Bella?” he asked gently.

When I looked at him, I felt so content that it was difficult for me to speak. I let out a deep sigh, and felt the corner of my mouth lift. “I am. I was just thinking.”

“Good things?” His eyes were light.

“Yes...” and I leaned in and whispered, “I wish I always felt like this. Like I never had to deal with anything awful again.” When I leaned back into my seat, I knew my face clearly communicated my uncertainty, because his brow creased in response.

But then he leaned over and whispered in *my* ear. “I’d love for you to be content and happy, too...*never. forget. I’m. here. Okay?*” He was squeezing my fingers gently as he sat back just a bit.

I turned and looked at him, and his eyes were so filled with tenderness. *I’ll get lost in those eyes if I’m not careful.* He laced his fingers with mine, our hands remaining on the booth beside me.

I was pulled back into reality a moment later when Emmett said quietly, “So, Edward, you...um...had a question for me?”

Edward turned to Emmett as if everything happening at the table were completely natural and right. I liked it. “Yes...Bella is running a homework club over in the Romano area every day. Jacob Black—you remember the one who took care of Josh in the caf that day—has agreed to help her every afternoon except Tuesdays. He’s got a prior commitment. I told Bella I’d love to help her,” and he squeezed my hand, “but I’m not available tomorrow. I was wondering if you’d be able to go in my place. Just to offer help and...anything else she might need.”

“Yeah, man. Bella, I’d love to help you out. Ah! But I’m not free until 4:00...that’s a problem, isn’t it?” Emmett looked genuinely sorry.

Edward turned and looked at me. I said, “Any help is better than no help...I’ll take ya at four or so...”

Rosalie spoke up then. “Well, why don’t *I* go with you the whole time, just so *somebody’s* there. Then Em can meet us as soon as he can get there.”

Everyone was waiting for my response. Edward’s eyes seemed encouraging. “Well, um...yeah. That sounds really good. I’d love all the help.”

Rosalie smiled. “I think it’ll be pretty cool, too.”

Emmett said, “Hate to run out on everybody, but I gotta get goin’. Anybody have any plans later?” He may have asked all of us, but his eyes were locked on Rosalie’s.

She said, “I’ve got a lot of studying to do...”

“Me, too...” *though I’m not opposed to studying with you guys.* “I’ve got to get some research done, and then it’s just a lot of sitting and highlighting...reading and thinking.”

Edward scratched his chin, pondering his plans. “I’ve got a class this afternoon, and then I was

going to work on my composition...but...what were you thinking, Em?"

"Just studying together or something. But it's cool if everyone's got somewhere different to be. We can do that later."

"Well," Edward continued, "I could do something for a little while just to relax...later tonight."

"Hot chocolate's always a good idea," I suggested. "I could use that for sure after a lot of studying."

Emmett and Edward looked at each other, and then Em said, "How about we come by and get you ladies for a break at about 7:30?"

Now Rosalie and I were the ones exchanging glances...and shrugs. "Sounds okay to me," she said. "But it's our treat."

"Me, too. And I agree about us paying. It's about time we did something nice for *you two*."

Hesitating for only a moment, Edward said, "Okay then. We'll be looking forward to that." He pulled his fingers out of mine slowly, as we began gathering our things to leave, and I felt the loss. *Strange how much I like holding his hand. Too much. Be careful, Bella. No room for any of that. And he didn't mean he'd be there for you like that, anyway. He's just helping. Just a friend.*

I slung my backpack over my shoulder, and was already preparing my mind for homework club today. Edward stopped me before I actually walked away though.

"You're concentrating pretty hard on something."

"Yeah. I'm thinking about the club today."

"Well, I hope it goes well. I'm sure it will be excellent."

"I just worry that something will go wrong, or I won't be prepared to handle something the right way."

"Bella. You don't see yourself clearly, you know that?"

I just looked at him, confused.

"You are so intelligent and capable that I have absolutely no doubt that you'll be just what those kids need. You will rise to the occasion and handle anything that comes your way. You really stand out, and I wish you realized that." He stroked my hair with an open hand, cupping my head. "In fact, I can't wait until *I* get to be the one going with you. I'll be counting the days."

I leaned in and hugged him, breathing him in. He always smelled *so good*. Like the woods, but sweeter. "Thank you, Edward."

“Always, Bella.”

I smiled at him as he released me, and I saw Rose waiting for me a little further up the sidewalk. He nodded and turned to go toward the Psych building. Rosalie and I walked back to the room together.

I had a little bit of time to spare, so I got some reading done and finished up a critique for my Lit Crit class tomorrow. *Nice. One less thing to do tonight.*

At 2:25, I said bye to Rosalie and grabbed my things for the homework club. When I stepped outside of my building, Jacob was there. He looked...*great*. He was wearing flat front khaki pants, and a mint green knit polo shirt. I didn't know many guys who could pull off that color, but Jacob sure did. Next to his russet-colored skin, it was a really great contrast. His hair was pulled back in a ponytail, and I noticed for the first time just how well-built he was.

I think he caught me taking all this in, because when our eyes met, he was *beaming*. *Nice, Bella. That's just the kind of crap Rosalie was talking about. Be careful.*

“So,” he smirked, “do I clean up okay?”

“Yeah,” I answered, as nonchalantly as possible. “You look professional enough. I didn't know you *had* khaki pants. You don't seem like the type.”

“There's a lot about me you still don't know, Bells.” He was grinning at me, enjoying my discomfort.

“Hmm,” I said, feeling awkward. “Let's get going...I want to have a few minutes before the kids arrive.”

“Whatever you say, Bells.” He laughed easily as we walked towards the parking lot.

As we walked, any remaining awkwardness and flirtaciousness disappeared. I don't know if he could tell he was making me *too* uncomfortable or what, but he just slipped back into my-friend-Jacob mode again. *That's better.*

The drive was pleasant, too, as we talked about music and small-town life. Ten minutes flew by, and we were pulling into the housing complex.

We went into the clubhouse area of the building, and Mrs. Anderson stepped out of her personal office to welcome us. “Bella. Jacob. Everyone's excited. You should have a good group, today.” She was smiling at us genuinely. “The middle school students will be here first, in about fifteen minutes, and then the elementary students get out of school and should arrive around four. Is that all right?”

“Yes, ma'am. Exactly what I've planned for.” I answered confidently.

“Well, then, I’ll leave you to set up. We’ve put out several tables for you over in this area. All you need to do at the end is straighten up. We’ll leave the tables out unless there’s an evening event planned. I’ll let you know in advance if that’s the case...and I’ll come out to introduce you when the students arrive, okay?”

“Okay,” and “We’ll be ready,” Jacob and I answered at the same time.

She smiled again and turned back to her work.

We made quick work of setting out markers and nametags, and Jacob got a “Treasure Chest” of treats ready for a little incentive if we needed it.

When the kids came in, they moved as a herd, shuffling this way and that, unwilling to separate from their buddies. Mrs. Anderson came in and introduced Jacob and me, and reminded the kids that we were here to help, but that she expected them to be the neighborhood’s shining stars.

A few moments later, we had them all seated at the table, and Jake passed out the nametags while I explained how things would go. I made sure they understood that we would be walking around helping with homework as they each worked quietly. They needed to raise their hands when they had questions rather than just calling out, and one of us would get to them as quickly as possible. I assured them that when we were helping them one-on-one, they’d get to enjoy the individual attention, so patience would pay off. They seemed to understand, and didn’t grumble *too* much, so then I told them the rest of the good news.

We’d end every afternoon with a snack, and every week with a story. I absolutely loved sharing my children’s books with kids, so I promised them they’d get to hear a cool new story every Friday afternoon. They looked around at each other, seeming pleased.

Everything went really well. For the most part, the kids were patient, and worked quietly. They loved the snack. Mrs. Anderson and I had worked together with the Tucker Foundation to get local businesses to donate healthy snacks like granola bars, apples, oatmeal cookies, and popcorn balls. These kids had a lot to look forward to.

When the elementary school children came in later, it couldn’t have gotten any better. Several of the kids remembered me from the year prior, and ran to hug me as soon as they spotted me. One little girl in particular, stole over quietly and tugged on my shirt. Her big, brown eyes pulled me in just like they had before. “Zakiyah! I’m so glad to see you again! Look how much you’ve *grown!*”

She was grinning from ear to ear. “Watch dis!” she said, turning her head back and forth quickly, so that the beaded ends of her precious little cornrows clicked against each other. “I like ‘*dese* beads.”

“I like ‘em, too, Ki-ki. You’re starting to look just like your big sister. How is she, by the way?”

“She good. She say she miss you.” I picked her up and carried her over to a nearby table.

“Well, you tell her to come by and see me sometime, okay? I’ll be here every afternoon.”

“Kay. I weel.” I smiled at her as I set her in a chair and scooted her in.

As I stood to introduce myself, even though most everyone knew who I was, I looked over at Jacob. He was surrounded by an adoring crowd. Two little girls in particular clung to his hands, looking as if they didn’t ever want to let go. *Now that is precious.* He grinned at me.

I explained the procedures, knowing that this was going to be my favorite part of each day, and then they got to work quietly. I walked over to Jacob and asked, “Who are your little friends?”

“This,” he said, turning to a sweet little blonde girl with the biggest blue eyes I’d ever seen, “is Katelyn...and *this* is Maria.” Maria, a little Latina girl with doe eyes and curly, curly black hair that fell to her waist, was busy trying to climb up on Jacob’s lap.

I smiled over and suggested we help them get started on their homework. Katelyn willingly enough took my hand as I led her to a chair. Maria, seemed a little reticent to let go of Jacob, but when he offered to help her personally for a while, she showed him her backpack. “It’s got *wheels*,” she whispered.

“That’s pretty awesome,” I heard Jacob say quietly.

The children were just delightful. One little boy kept staring at Jake, and I had a hard time getting him to concentrate. “Is everything okay, Dominic?” I asked him as I sat beside him.

“Yeah, Miss Bella...my daddy has a ponytail, too...but I don’t get to see him much. I...” and then he whispered, “I *like* his ponytail.”

I gave him a hug and said, “I’m sure Mr. Jacob would love to hear that you think his hair is cool. You should tell him.”

He shrugged and smiled up at me.

These sweet conversations peppered all of our time with the little kids, and before I knew it, it was time to go. Both Jacob and I were almost knocked over by the hugs, high fives and fist bumps, but it was so much fun. I saw Mrs. Anderson smiling at us from her office.

I stopped in on our way out to let her know about how Tuesdays would work, and she said that would be fine.

As Jacob and I drove home, we talked and laughed about the kids. I was so glad he’d enjoyed it, and that he was willing to work with them all semester.

As we came back into Hanover, I looked in my rearview mirror and my heart stopped. About

two blocks back, coming down the road we'd just traveled was the black Saab Turbo X. I gulped and sat quietly as Jacob continued talking. He hadn't noticed my reaction, too busy laughing and talking about little Maria.

Back in the parking lot, I didn't know what to do. I hadn't seen Josh pull in behind us, but I didn't want to go back toward the dorms with Jacob and then be stuck in my room. Better to go straight to the library I decided. "Will you...walk me to the library, Jacob? I've got a little research to do, and I just don't want to walk alone right now."

"Sure, sure, Bells," he said. "No problem." We climbed out of my truck and headed in that direction.

He dropped me off at the door, saying, "Now, I'm gonna get out of these crazy *teacher* clothes and put on some *jeans*." He waved goodbye as he left me there.

It took me a good fifteen minutes to settle, my heart racing from the drive home. I finally got started on my research, and the library gods must've decided to bestow their favor on me. I found everything I needed within about an hour. It was six o'clock, and I knew I needed to grab something to eat on the way to my room. But as I headed to the door...

I froze. Josh was sitting outside the library on a bench, watching the door. *Had he seen me?* I knew I could go out the other side of the building, but...*what if he saw me on my way around? He was so determined.*

I backtracked and went to the table where I'd been working. *What do I do?* My brain was so muddled, I couldn't make a good decision. *Where do I go?* I felt clammy and sick to my stomach. I slumped down in a chair, feeling truly, seriously *afraid*.

I want Edward. I can't get out of here without him.

Did he mean what he said? Will he be here whenever I need him?

He'll think I'm freaking ridiculous for not being able to walk from the stupid library to my room on my own. Who needs help with that?!

But then I knew. I knew myself at least well enough to know that *that* was the only way I was going to walk out of here.

Time to see if Edward's all he promised he'd be.

I pulled my cell phone out of my bag and found his number. Pushing the call button, I took a deep breath.

A moment later, I heard, "Bella?"

"Edward..." I choked out. My voice cracked.

“Where are you? Are you okay?”

“I’m in Berry library. I can’t...I’m...”

“What’s the matter?” he asked, tense.

“Josh is...Josh is outside by the door. I just...I don’t know what to do. I’m afraid to leave the library...and he followed us back from the club this afternoon.”

“I’m on my way.” I heard a slam, and then the jingle of his keys. “Stay right where you are, Bella. Are you on the first floor?”

“Yeah,” I whispered. “The back corner by the journals.”

“I’ll be there in five minutes...just breathe, Bella. I’ll be there soon.”

I hung up the phone, and I flopped my head onto my forearms, crossed on the table...and I shut down.

#####

Chapter: 20

I used to pray for rescue by burning up my pain

That’s the only kind of prayer I knew back then

It was a fire of desperation for any wings in flight

Like a beacon from my lifeboat late at night

David Wilcox

Chapter Eighteen: Fist

I don’t know when Edward got to me. I heard his voice, but only as if I were dreaming it. *Maybe I am dreaming it.*

“Bella? Bella, Love?”

“I’m here, Bella.” The voice was clearer, and I felt someone stroking my hair gently. “Bella? It’s

Edward. I'm here now...it's all right. Will you...can you look at me?"

I wanted to. I felt like I was coming back to the surface. Things were still hazy, but I *so* wanted to look at whoever was calling me. *I know somehow that his eyes will help me.*

And then I could focus. The beautiful, rich, amber-colored eyes were looking into mine intensely, willing me to look back. I saw disheveled hair, the color of a penny, strong features, a scruffy five o'clock shadow, and the mouth...it looked perfect. And it kept saying my name. Over and over.

"Bella? Bella?"

Edward.

He was beside me, on his knees, one hand in my hair, the other on my knee. Begging me to look at him.

I lifted my head slightly, focusing on his eyes. The eyes that had been present in my every thought for the last week.

"Bella," he sighed. The relief in his voice was tangible.

Weakly, I muttered, "Thanks for coming, Edward."

"I told you I would be here, Bella Swan. And I meant it."

I reached for him, and he pulled me out of the chair and down onto his lap, shifting so he was sitting Indian style. He just held me there...I don't know for how long. We were back in the corner of the library. Nobody ever came back to where I liked to sit and study.

He continued to run his fingers through my hair, quietly humming a song I'd never heard before. It was *beautiful*. I never wanted to move.

At some point, Edward spoke into my ear, "I want to take you away from here."

Please. Take me somewhere far, far away. I don't want to feel like this ever again.

"Bella," he whispered. His breath on my ear made me shiver. "Let's go. Can I take you to my apartment?"

I could only manage a weak nod of my head. He placed one hand on the table, for support and—somehow—managed to pull us both up into a standing position. "Can you walk?"

I nodded again, saying, "Just hold my hand."

He pulled me close and kissed my forehead. "I would *love* to hold your hand."

He scooped my backpack up and threw it over his shoulder, and reached out with his other hand. Guiding me slowly, he walked with me back through the stacks of books, and out toward the lobby. I looked outside. Josh was nowhere to be seen. “Is he...?”

“Josh is gone, Bella. I called security on my way here and asked them to have him removed. I...I just needed to get to *you*.”

I let out a shallow breath, and clenched his hand tightly. He led me outside. When the cold air hit me, it took my breath for a moment, washing over me, waking me up. I felt my head clear, and it truly hit me for the first time.

Edward had come for me.

He had gotten me out of there.

And he was still with me...holding my hand.

We walked down the steps and out toward the Green. There weren't many people out. *They're probably studying...the semester is getting busy now.* We strolled slowly down the street, heading over to the boys' building, behind the engineering department. Arriving at the building, Edward silently moved to open the door, and I walked in and started climbing the steps. Before I realized it, I was standing in front of his door. He fished his keys out of his pocket, and let us in, setting my bag down on the floor inside the door.

Gently closing the door behind us, he jogged over to the kitchen and turned on the light in there. It shined softly into the living room...giving us enough light to see, but without the harsh effect of the overhead light. “Can I get you anything to drink?”

“No thanks.” I walked over and sat on the couch, trembling.

“Okay... I'll be right back.”

A few moments later, I heard Debussy playing softly. Edward came walking down the hall with that big, green blanket. “Why don't you just lie down, and I'll...would you like me to play with your hair?”

A short, breathy laugh escaped my lips. “That'd be great,” I told him.

He sat down, pulling his cell phone out of his pocket and setting it next to him on the arm of the couch. I crawled over toward him, lying down and resting my head on his lap. He gently pulled my hair out of the way, so that all of it was loose, and began running his fingers through it slowly. All the way from my face to the very ends—it was perfect. I let the feeling of peace wash over me and soon felt completely relaxed.

I must've fallen asleep, because it startled me when I heard the door open and close, whispered

voices behind me. I looked up, and Edward was smiling, pointing and directing the voices silently. He looked down at me. “Did you sleep well?”

“Mhmm,” I sighed. “What time is it?”

“Eight...Rosalie and Emmett just got here with your hot chocolate...and a grilled cheese sandwich. You need to eat something.” He pointed to the kitchen where they were setting the drinks down and taking off their jackets. “Would you like it now?”

I sat up and stretched, uncurling from my fingertips to my toes, and I nodded vigorously. Edward was chuckling to himself.

Rosalie brought over my drink, and I found a comfortable sitting position—still right next to Edward. Emmett brought Edward’s over and said, “There ya go, hero.”

I smiled around my cup as I kept sipping the perfect hot chocolate. “You guys even got whipped cream,” I praised.

“Sir Edward insisted, my lady,” Emmett crooned. “He sent a crazy text message letting us know what was going on and asked us to bring it all back here.”

“Well, thanks...all of you.”

“Sure...no problem...” they said.

Emmett launched into a funny story about something that had happened in one of his classes today, and the atmosphere in the room lightened up a good bit. After he finished that story, obviously enjoying the attention, he decided to regale us with tales from his and Edward’s freshman and sophomore years. We laughed and enjoyed the stories for about an hour, neither Rosalie nor I having to do anything but laugh at the right time.

As the stories wound down, the boys suggested walking us back. Edward picked up my backpack as we headed out.

Outside, Edward leaned in a bit while we walked and asked, “Are you feeling better? Okay to be on your own?”

“Yeah...I don’t think I’m going to study anymore tonight, but I’m okay. Thanks a *lot* for getting Emmett to help tomorrow.”

“Bella...all I did was relay the need. Em and Rosalie are helping you because they want to. I think it’ll be good, don’t you?”

“Yeah...I’m sure it will.”

We were quiet for a while, and then I asked, “Hey, Edward. What was that beautiful song you

were humming tonight in the library?”

He looked at me, weighing his words carefully. “It’s one of the songs I’ve composed recently. You liked it, then?” He actually looked anxious.

“I *did*. It was absolutely amazing. I’ve never heard anything like it before. The melody was so unique...I never knew what to expect from the next note. It was kind of...unpredictable.”

“Hmm. Good description. I never know what to expect either with this one.” He chuckled to himself, but the joke was totally lost on me.

Outside Mass Row, Emmett and Rosalie were standing and waiting for us. We ironed out plans for the club the following afternoon, and then Em pulled Rose into his big, strong arms. It was sweet to watch, and I was a little taken in...until I heard a voice whisper in my ear, “Can I have one of those?”

“You definitely can,” I said softly, leaning in as Edward wrapped his arms around me once more. *I love this spot. Love it.*

Moments later, the guys said, “Okay ladies, we’ll see you later. Have a good night.”

They watched as we went in the door and walked up the steps. When we got to our room, Rose said, don’t turn on the light. I want to see something. She walked over to the window and looked out. “They’re still there, Bella. They’re sitting on a bench.”

Emmett. He’s remembering the last time he left you and you ran back outside for a minute.

“They’re so protective...it’s nice,” I thought out loud.

“It is. It’s different than anything...I’m not used to it.”

“Me either, but I like it better than the crap I had to deal with before...”

“Yeah, me too.” She started getting ready for bed, turning on the light.

“I’m not going to study...are you?” I asked. “I’m beat...just want to go to sleep.”

“Nah...I’m going to bed, too.”

We didn’t rush to get into our pjs and wash our faces, but within ten minutes, we were ready to turn the lights out and hit the hay. I flipped the switch, and Rosalie gasped quietly. “Bella. Come here.”

I walked over to the window beside her, and the boys were *still there*, standing now. *Had they been waiting for the light to turn off??* They looked up and seemed surprised to see us watching them, but waved sweetly and headed off down the sidewalk.

“Yeah,” Rosalie whispered. “I could get used to this.”

* * *

We met in the student parking lot, because I was studying in the library. Rosalie looked great. She’d chosen a nice pair of fitted khaki pants that hugged her curves but not too tight to be professional. A black turtleneck sweater and high-heeled black boots finished out the ensemble. She thumped my fender on the way around my truck, smiling.

“Bella, you should let me pimp your ride. I could do all kind of things to this truck...really Rosafy it.”

“You think?” I laughed.

“Oh, *yeah*. It’d be saaaweeet!”

“I’ll think about it,” I said, only to pacify her. I didn’t plan on making any changes to my truck. I liked it just the way it was...unless she could get the engine quieter and get rid of those backfires. Now *that*, I could get behind.

Since she hadn’t known what we’d be doing exactly, we’d decided to leave a good bit earlier. On the way there, I explained how the club worked, as far as the age groups, our responsibilities, and what not. She seemed to look forward to our afternoon. We got there at 2:30, forty-five minutes before the kids would arrive. I popped in the office and let Mrs. Anderson know we were there, and she said that was great. She had to leave for a brief meeting with a tenant and would back around 3:30, she said. “Oh, and Bella? The other young man who came to help you has already arrived, too. He’s over in the kitchen.”

What? Em’s not supposed to get here ‘til four! That dork just wanted to surprise us. I was grinning as I walked over to the kitchen, Rosalie just coming in. I motioned for her to follow me quietly.

But when I got there, my heart stopped. Josh stood there, a drink in his hand, looking all kinds of smug. “Bella,” he said smoothly. “I thought you might need some help with all these kids. And I’m so *glad* to have the opportunity to do something with you. I miss you.”

“Get. Out. Of. Here.” I was seething. “I don’t want you anywhere near me *or* these kids. I will call...”

“Oh, I’ve met Mrs. Anderson. She’s delighted to have me.”

“Josh, I am so *not*...” I didn’t have time to get the rest out.

Josh slammed his drink down on the counter and stepped over, grabbing my hair in his fist. “You don’t ever even listen to me, Bella!” he screamed. He raised his hand, and Rosalie quickly maneuvered her body between ours, putting her hand on my shoulder.

“Josh,” she said, in a sickeningly sweet and cool voice. “I’ve heard *too* much about you. It’s so nice to finally get to see your face...*before I knock your teeth out.*”

“I’m sorry, *what did you say?*” He was trying to act tough, but I saw his hand tremble. He was totally afraid of her. This had come out of nowhere, and I have to admit I was enjoying the show.

“Are you scared, Josh? You oughtta be, cos I’m about to...Knock. Your. Teeth. Into. Next. Week.”

Josh gulped, letting go of my hair, his eyes going from Rosalie, then to me, then back to her. They flicked once to the office, where the light was off, door closed. *That’s right. Nobody’s around to save your sorry butt now.*

Josh pulled the last little bit of nerve he had left out of his pocket and stepped up. “You lay a finger on me, and you will regret it...” He let loose a string of profanities.

“Speaking of regret,” she purred. “They’s a bunch of us that already regret not messin’ you up earlier, *you sick dog.*” And she did it.

Her right arm came back and slammed, *hard*, into the side of his mouth. I watched as if it were in slow motion as his head jerked back, spit and blood flying out all over the wall and the refrigerator. Stunned, he turned, slowly, his hand to his jaw.

Two things happened at once. Josh started spewing venom, screaming, swearing, spitting threats out, and a gentle, clueless voice intoned from over by the doorway, “I just forgot my...” *Mrs. Anderson.*

“*Bella? What is going on in there?*” Hurried footsteps clicked as she came closer. At this moment, I saw Mrs. Anderson in a new light. I’d always seen her as a strong, professional woman, but I saw something in her eyes right then. Something that told me that I never wanted to get on her bad side.

Josh stood silent, rubbing his mouth, and glaring at Rosalie. Suddenly, something in his eyes clicked, “Call the police. That girl just attacked me out of nowhere. I didn’t do *anything*. I was just...”

“Save. It. Mr. Hamilton. I *am* going to call the police, but not until I hear from Ms. Swan.” She pointed one, lethal finger at Josh and said, “You. My office. Now. Don’t move once you get there.”

Surprisingly calm, I explained everything as clearly as I could, reiterating again and again that he wasn’t supposed to be here, and that he’d had multiple complaints filed against him in the last two weeks. Rosalie apologized, though Mrs. Anderson and I both saw that there was *zero* regret in her eyes.

Our supervisor simply shook her head and looked Rose in the eyes, “You are a good friend for Bella to have around right now. That must’ve been somethin’ to see...why don’t you girls clean up the kitchen before the kids come. I’ll go take care of Mr. Hamilton.” She reached into the freezer and got an icepack before she went to her office.

We got cleaning supplies out from under the sink, and began working quietly. This had all been so surreal for me. I had just sprayed disinfectant on the refrigerator, when Mrs. Anderson said, “He’s gone, ladies. He left while we were talking.”

Rosalie swore under her breath, looking up quickly at Mrs. Anderson. “I’m sorry. I haven’t behaved very professionally this afternoon. It’s just...*what a coward.*”

I stood there silently, my paper towel hanging limply in my hand.

“Okay, girls. This is what we’re going to do.” She handed Rosalie the icepack, “Put that on your hand, hon.”

Mrs. Anderson had a determined look on her face. “We are not, absolutely not, going to let this affect our time with the kids today. Can you handle that, Bella?”

“Yes, ma’am. I can.” *I could do this for those kids. I could pretend none of this ever happened.*

“I’m going to call the police at about 4:30, so they’ll get here just as everyone is clearing out. We’ll file a report together, all of us. And I’m going to write a letter to the president of Dartmouth *and* to director of the LEAD program at the Tucker Foundation, informing them how completely displeased I am with Mr. Anderson. And how *poorly* he reflects what Dartmouth stands for. I’m going to recommend immediate action. Hopefully, that, combined with the other offenses will get everything taken care of.” She put her hand on my shoulder and looked into my eyes. “You are a strong young woman, Bella Swan. This boy is not worth your future.”

How well I know that now... “Yes, ma’am. Thank you. We’ll finish cleaning up in here.”

“You let *me* take care of it now, ladies. The kids will be here soon.”

“But...your appointment,” I questioned.

“That can wait. My tenants will be glad to get a little reprieve, I suppose.” She smiled at me, and took the paper towel from my hand. “Go on, ladies. Get ready for the students.”

We walked out of the kitchen and began to get out the nametags and snacks.

“Thanks Rosalie,” I whispered. “That was freaking. amazing.”

Kids were shuffling in about fifteen minutes later, and I acted as if everything were perfectly normal. Just another day. I was here to focus on them, after all. Of course, most of the middle school boys wanted help from Miss Rosalie, and I smiled as they kept vying for her attention.

Our time with the middle schoolers was excellent. They were diligent about their work, and my focus never wavered. *I'm proud of myself.* We relaxed and just chatted at the end while they had their snacks, and several of them gave me fist bumps on the way out. Rosalie just gave high fives...*I bet her knuckles need to be wrapped.*

In the brief interlude when the clubhouse was empty of kids, I asked Mrs. Anderson for some gauze. She said to send Rosalie in, and she'd take care of it. So, while the little ones came in, I welcomed them on my own, giving hugs and helping them get started.

Sweet Maria wasted no time in coming over and asking where her friend Mr. Jacob was. I let her know he'd be back tomorrow, and her face flooded with relief. "Another friend of mine, Mr. Emmett is coming in just a few minutes. He's *great* at math. You'll like him, too, Maria." She smiled adorably and climbed up into her chair, waiting.

And a moment later Mr. Emmett *did* walk in, charcoal grey cargo pants, and black oxford button down over a gray t-shirt, sleeves rolled up. *Would you look at those forearms. He's built like Popeye.* His eyes met mine as he scanned the room, and his face lit up. "How goes it, Bella Bella?" He gave me a sideways hug as his eyes kept scanning the room. "Where's my girl?"

"In the office...she'll be out in a minute. Could you help this table get started in the mean time?"

"Absolutely. That's why I'm here." He squatted down at the table and I heard him say, "Why, good afternoon lovely ladies. How may I help you?" They all giggled. Katelyn actually blushed and hid her face. *Uh-oh. Jacob Black may have some competition.*

Ki-ki ran up and jumped into my arms. *This is why I'm here.* "Hey there, little girl! Do I know you?" She threw her head back and giggled. "Seriously, I've seen you somewhere before, right?"

"You *crazy*, Miss Bella. 'N dat's why I love you!"

"I love you, too, Ki-ki." I nuzzled her precious cheek and said, "So, what do you have to work on today?" I felt someone watching me and looked up as she reached into her backpack. Emmett was beaming. He gave me a silent head nod filled with respect, and knelt back down to work with the girls.

As I helped Ki-ki and Dominic get started, Rosalie walked out of Mrs. Anderson's office. I pointed to a table full of kids who were trying to get started on their own, and she headed right over. Emmett's head came up quickly as she walked past, and he smiled in satisfaction. A second later, I saw the concern on his face as he noticed her hand.

He looked over at me, since her back was to him, and I mouthed silently, "Later. She's okay." *In fact, she's amazing, and you're gonna think what she did was hot.* I honestly couldn't wait to see and hear his reaction. It was gonna be like wing night at Molly's all over again, Emmett bouncing in his chair.

If I may brag, we all did a jam up job of staying focused and helping the kids. There were a lot of smiles, laughs and sweet conversations. During snack time, Emmett and I both noticed a little black-haired boy giving Rosalie the once over. Emmett smirked and crossed his arms, watching the show. But then the boy walked over and leaned in, putting his arm on the back of her chair. “Hey,” he said with confidence. “My name’s Taylor, but you can call me T-Dawg.”

“Well, hello there, T-Dawg,” Rosalie answered with a smirk. “How old are you? Nine?”

“Ten,” he said proudly. “I haven’t seen you around here before.”

“Well, sweetie, that’s because I’m in college. And I’m usually busy studying very hard hanging around with these two.” She pointed to the two of us, and Emmett cleared his throat, stepping up to offer his hand to Taylor.

“Excuse me for just a second,” she said, scooting over to a table full of little girls. Emmett took that opportunity to have a little talk with Taylor. I didn’t hear the whole conversation, but I could make the auspicious beginning out clearly, “You must have a pretty smooth-talkin’ big brother, T-Dawg.” Taylor nodded affirmatively. “Well, let me give you a hint about older ladies...especially this one.”

I don’t know what Emmett said, but when he stood up, the little man and the big man each eyed the other with respect, and then they gave each other a fist bump. Emmett tousled Taylor’s hair then, and Taylor asked if he could just grab a snack on his way out. “Sure thing,” I said, letting him walk away, dignity in tact. *Nice job, Em.*

A few minutes later, after all of the hugs and “See you tomorrows,” only the three of us remained. Emmett immediately walked over and gently took Rosalie’s bandaged hand in his own. “What happened?” he asked, his face etched with anxiety.

She shrugged coolly and said, “Punched Bella’s stalker boy in the face. He had it comin’...and it felt good to hit somebody.”

Emmett threw his head back and laughed. “That’s my Rosie! Bella, was it as awesome as I’m imagining?!”

“Even more than you’re imagining, Em. He was shaking...and the police will be here soon to take the report, so...”

“You guys called the police?” he laughed.

“I did,” Mrs. Anderson announced from her office door which was now wide open. “You are...?”

“Emmett McCarty, ma’am. I’m a friend of Bella’s and glad to be helping today.”

“Well, then, I’m glad you’re here. Ladies,” she said, turning to us. “I just want to tell you how

impressed I am with the job you've done today. In spite of an awful beginning, you both performed beautifully. Those children had no idea anything was out of the ordinary. I applaud your professionalism, and Rosalie?"

"Yes, ma'am?" she looked a little nervous.

"I'd say overall, your conduct was more than professional. I'd like to write a letter to the Tucker Foundation thanking them for sending over two such quality young women. Would that be all right with you two?"

"Of course," and "Yes, ma'am," we answered together, smiling.

The police walked in just then, and Mrs. Anderson encouraged Emmett to stay and give us moral support if he had time.

"Oh, you couldn't *tear* me away from this," he said. "I always have time to offer my moral support to *these* ladies." She smiled at him before walking over to introduce herself to the police officers.

Seeing them made Rosalie a little antsy. "This is too fresh. Too much like before," she said quietly.

Emmett reached out and placed his hand gently on the small of her back. "You can do this, Rosalie. And *this* time you get to nail the guy. You know who it was, and you're doin' this to make sure he gets what he deserves," Emmett reminded her. She looked up and offered a tentative smile in response.

Mrs. Anderson suggested that the officers start with me. We sat down at one of the tables, and Rosalie and Emmett moved out of the way, to the lobby to sit in the bigger, more comfortable chairs. They talked quietly while I gave my report. Mrs. Anderson gave her description of the events next, corroborating everything I said, adding a character reference on my behalf. "And I called to verify that several reports are pending judgment at Dartmouth. Everything is just as the young lady has informed you. Mr. Hamilton is on probation and would have been up only for suspension, but I think more serious measures are in order."

"Well, we don't have any authority over that, ma'am, but we'll make sure to send a copy of the police report over to campus security. Unfortunately, based on what you've told us, I don't think there will be anything you can actually charge him with."

"Not the threats and rage? Or that he was on our property under false pretenses?"

"No, ma'am," he said sincerely, "But we will file all this and send it over to the school. I'm sure that this will help the rest of the case..."

Turning to me, he added, "And at this point, Miss Swan, I think there's reasonable cause to file for a restraining order."

“Can I do that now?”

“No, ma’am. You’ll have to come down to the station and fill out some paperwork...If there aren’t any *further* questions, we’d like to hear from the other young woman now.”

Rosalie came over and gave her statement. She was honest, and told them everything exactly as it had occurred, emphasizing that he had tried to physically harm me.

The officers looked at each other, concerned. “You understand that he *could* press charges against *you*, for assault.” He waited for a moment to let that sink in, then continued, “But you would be able to argue in self-defense.”

“Yes sir,” she said quietly, her eyes downcast.

“Of course, knowing what else is going on with him makes that unlikely. He probably won’t call and file a report that he was assaulted by a young lady...so, unless we hear from him...” he let his words trail off.

Mrs. Anderson spoke up. “I feel very certain you won’t be hearing from Mr. Hamilton...are there any other questions?”

The officers shook their heads no. “Then, I’d like to inform you that, as manager of this housing complex, I am declaring that. Joshua Hamilton is not permitted on this property from today on. I’ll be putting that in writing, but this is private property, and I have the right to decide that.”

“Yes, ma’am. We understand.”

“Well then,” she concluded, “you gentlemen have a good evening.”

“We’ll try...you, too,” one said as they stood to leave.

Mrs. Anderson turned to us. “I hope you ladies can enjoy the rest of your evening in safety. I’ll leave that in Mr. McCarty’s capable hands...but please let me tell you once more how impressed I’ve been. I was glad to see that the drama of your life in no way affected your work, Bella. I know that his presence here was not your fault, and I hope that you don’t feel bad about this. I’m glad to help handle it.”

Breathing a sigh of relief, I thanked her profusely. We all shook hands, and then she went back to her office as we went out to the parking lot.

Emmett suggested, “Rosie, will you and Bella ride together? I’ll follow you all the way back...I just think it’d be good for both of you to have company right now.”

“Okay, Em,” she said. I nodded my thanks.

We climbed into the cab of the truck, and I cranked my crazy noisy engine to life. As we pulled out onto the road, I thanked her not just for taking care of Josh for me, but for the great job she did with the kids, too.

“I liked it, Bella...I can’t come all the time, but I’d love to come at least once or twice a week, if I can.”

“That sounds great,” I said, glad to have even more help.

“Good,” she said.

The rest of the ride back was pretty quiet, neither of us finding much to say out loud. The air was thick with our thoughts, though...each of us evaluating all that had happened today. *Not the day I’d expected.*

I looked back in the rearview mirror to see Emmett behind us, talking animatedly on his cell phone. *I bet I know who he’s talking to.*

Sure enough, when we pulled into the student parking lot, Edward was leaning against his Volvo, waiting for us.

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Chapter: 21

Chapter Notes:

Just wanted to let everyone know—thanks to my incredible validation beta, Twilightzoner—that I’ve made some necessary changes. Josh is being charged with assault (the threat) and battery (the hair grabbing). Rosalie will be able to contest a charge against her battery with “defense of another”. Thank you everyone for your patience, while I learn more about the legal world...and my enduring, “WOOHOO!” to Twilightzoner who blows me away with her knowledge of the system.

This rage I blaze inside me into the empty sky out there

When I feel that sorrow burning like a rescue flare

I fear there’s nothing to believe in, nothing that would care

And the fire of desperation, that’s my silent prayer

David Wilcox

Chapter Nineteen: Fury

He stood there, his leather jacket hanging open, his hands in his pockets. He was leaning back against his trunk, watching the entrance of the parking lot intently. His eyes followed my truck as I parked, but his body remained fixed in that position.

I climbed down out of the cab, grabbing my backpack from the middle of the seat and closing the door. Walking around the back of the truck, I looked over at him. He was wearing loose-fitting khaki cargo pants that slung low on his hips and a dark gray turtleneck sweater that fit him...well, snugly. As our eyes met, he ran his fingers through his beautifully disheveled hair, and stood up, moving just a few feet from his car.

I walked toward him, our eyes locked on one another's. Neither of us smiled, we were just sort of observing each other. I didn't know how to react, or what to say. I can only assume he was watching me carefully to see what I'd need from him. As I approached him, he took a step toward me and reached one hand toward my hair. He gently caught a stray lock and slid it through his fingers sweetly, tugging as he got to the end. His eyes were probing mine, searching for a hint. I looked up at him, still not knowing what to say, but glad he was beside me.

"Quite a day, Bella," Edward said, his eyes squinting a bit while he studied my face, as if that would help him discern how to help me.

"It was definitely *something*," I said back. "I don't even know what to say about it..." I was truly at a loss for words, and today, that frustrated me. I wanted to talk about it, *needed* to I think, but I couldn't sort through everything and say what was on my mind. Not even when Edward was right there, needing to hear. And there was a knot in my stomach that I couldn't explain.

"That's all right, Bella. Emmett told me the basics..." He paused as if he were about to say more on the subject, then decided against it. "I haven't had dinner yet. Would you like to ride over to Ellie's with me?"

"Umm, yeah. That'd be great. I also, um...I know it's late, but the police told me that it'd be a good idea to come by and see about getting a restraining order. Would you go with me?"

"I'd be glad to go with you, Bella. Would you like to get that out of the way before dinner, or after?"

"After, I think. I didn't have a big lunch. I probably need something in my system."

"Sounds good. I'll just let Em and Rosalie know what we're doing. Do you want me to invite them to come along?"

"Either way...I don't care." I wasn't sure if Rosalie wanted to be with all of us right now, or if she just needed time to process things. Edward nodded tacitly and walked over to them. While he

was gone, I kicked an acorn around by his car, glad for a distraction, however small.

He was back surprisingly quickly. “They’re going to have a quiet dinner at our place. Do you need anything from your room?”

“No, I have...well, I’d love to throw on some jeans...if you really don’t mind.”

He chuckled lightly. “Of course I don’t mind, Bella.” I liked his smile. It made me want to smile back, so I did...a little.

He opened the door of his car for me, and I got in, holding my backpack on my lap.

“Much work to do tonight?” he asked as he slid into the driver’s seat.

“Only a little reading,” I said. “Are you bringing something to study?”

“I have my books with me...but I can study later if I need to. Whatever you need to do, we’ll do.” He said it so light-heartedly and matter-of-factly, I couldn’t argue. I just smiled and nodded.

We were in front of my dorm before I had time to realize it. He jumped out, and came around to open my door, his hand reaching down to pull me up on the curb. As soon as I was standing up straight, I said, “I’ll be right back,” and dashed into the building.

I heard him say, “Mmkay,” as I sped off. *Why the hurry, Bella?* But I couldn’t answer. I didn’t know. I just felt like I didn’t want to be away from him any longer than necessary.

Letting myself in my room, I flipped on the light and undressed in a flash, tossing the clothes on my bed. I yanked my most comfy pair of jeans out of my bottom drawer and pulled them on. Warm fuzzy socks were next. They wouldn’t match anything, but my toes would be toasty, and—oddly—that mattered to me. Lastly, I put on my black turtleneck sweater, and I piled my hair up in a bun. Grabbing my jean jacket, I slid my feet into my black mules and was out the door.

He laughed as I barreled out of the door, looking down at his watch. “That’s got to be some kind of a record, Bella. My sister could *never* have pulled that off.”

“Well, comfort and speed were worth the effort. I need that grilled cheese,” I laughed back, bending down and scooting into the passenger seat.

“Then grilled cheese you shall have,” he was already in his seat and starting the car. Pulling out, he reached over to turn on his music. I took in a sharp breath, turning to study him even more carefully. “This is beautiful. Do you listen to a lot of performances by the London Symphony Orchestra?”

He turned slowly to me, appraising me again as well, it seemed. “I do...but this is one of my favorites.”

“I can certainly understand why. Sting is a very gifted musician...Do you like his solo work?”
Please pass this test, Edward Cullen.

“Most of it. I never really liked his brief stint into the world of reggae. Dream of the Blue Turtles was his low point, I think.”

“Hmm,” was all I could say.

“You disagree?” he asked, quirking his eyebrow at me.

“Well, no. But there are three songs on there that most definitely shouldn’t be considered low point material. If You Love Somebody, Set Them Free,” I said.

“Fortress Around Your Heart,” he added, and then we both said, “Moon Over Bourbon Street.” He was nodding quietly, looking pleased. “I have to say I’m a little surprised. Are you a fan of vampires?” He was quirking his eyebrow at me and giving me that unbelievable crooked smile.

Grinning back, I answered, “Are you nuts? I love vampires!” But then I thought about why they drew me in so much and added quickly, “...not all the blood, but the symbolism definitely. It’s the giving yourself over to something so completely, the loss of your self because of the obsession. I think I can just kind of understand the hopelessness—losing control and becoming something you hate.”

He was pensive, looking at me sideways as he drove. Not for the first time, I wondered what he must be thinking. Then, quietly, “That’s very interesting...” After a deep sigh, he changed the subject back to our pleasant discussion of Sting. “I’m glad the LSO didn’t feel the need to add Love is the Seventh Wave to their playlist, though.”

“Yeah, me, too,” I giggled quietly. The corner of his mouth tipped up, and I slid deeper into my seat, feeling warm.

At Ellie’s, we ordered and continued our easy conversation. The coffee, sandwiches, and homefries hit the spot perfectly. I could always count on Ellie. Neither of us seemed to feel like studying there tonight, though. “Do you want to bring your stuff and study over at our place after we stop at the police department?” Edward asked tentatively.

“Sure, yeah. That sounds nice, actually.” So we paid and drove to the other side of town. I was nervous, and I knew Edward could tell. He said I was difficult to read, but he never failed to do or say exactly what I needed most. I think, somehow, he must’ve read me pretty well.

Doing the paperwork for the restraining order didn’t take very long, and I was thankful for that, but I knew there’d be more to come. Court dates and all, I guessed. Thinking about all of this, I felt that *knot* return to my stomach as I rehashed all the crap he’d done in the last two weeks. It wasn’t nerves...it was...I don’t know. It was like a ball of pure tension. I felt like something needed to happen—and *fast*—or I would snap. I swallowed as we went out to the car. *Get a grip,*

Bella.

Edward opened my door, but stopped me from getting in with a gentle hand on my shoulder. He bent down just a little to look right into my eyes. “Are you all right, Bella?”

“Yeah...I just...I don’t know. A lot on my mind, I guess,” I said, noticing I sounded a little robotic.

“Well, I’ll listen, if you decide you want to...let any of it out.” He stood quietly for a moment, and I didn’t know whether to get in the car or just keep standing there. Finally, he placed his lips softly on my forehead, leaving them there for a moment. As he exhaled, I felt his warm breath wash over my face.

I pulled back and looked up at him. “Thanks...but, I think I’d prefer to talk about anything else right now.” I climbed in the car, thinking briefly—*very* briefly—that I hoped I hadn’t hurt his feelings just then. But too soon, my mind was busy trying to unravel that ball of tension again.

He got in and began driving back toward campus. After a deep breath, he said, “Tell me about the kids at your homework club. Emmett said they’re pretty great...and that you’re a natural with them.”

I smiled as I thought about each one of the kids. *Thank you, Edward. Thank you for the distraction.* I started with the story of T-Dawg and Rosalie, and that made Edward laugh. “We’ll have to ask Em what he said later.”

“Yeah, definitely. Then there are these two precious little girls, Maria and Katelyn,” I talked about their eyes full of adoration for Emmett and Jacob. I mentioned Dominic, and a few of the others that I was just getting to know. “But my favorite is Ki-ki.” I leaned my head back and smiled.

“You’re not supposed to have a favorite,” he chided, one eyebrow cocked handsomely.

“Hmm,” I laughed quietly. “But I do...I met Ki-ki and her sister last year. She and her sister Zhikayah were both in our mentoring group. They had a really rough time...Their dad had been in prison for several years, and their mom had done a great job of...just moving on with life. But, about halfway through the year, he got out on parole...and he just wouldn’t leave them alone.” I felt that knot even stronger. Tension.

When I glanced over for a fleeting second, his brow had creased with concern.

“So, once the police had him in custody again—for breaking parole, and assaulting their mom, I stayed with them for a few days. Shea—their mom—was in the hospital, and...they don’t really have anybody else around here. No one that wanted to get involved anyway.”

“That was a really kind thing to do, Bella. And, I suppose it’s a satisfactory reason to play favorites,” he joked, but I saw admiration in his eyes.

I gave him a half-smile. “They’re really good girls...and Shea has worked hard to make something of her life. It’s tough being a single mom, and...I respect her.”

“And I guess you kind of understand some of what she’s been through, right?”

Huh. “Yeah...I didn’t then, though. Still, it really made me *mad*. You know? They didn’t start out ideally, but she worked so *hard* while he was in prison, putting herself through school online, working crazy hours, redeeming herself, *becoming* somebody she could be proud of...and this low-life just waltzed in and took whatever he wanted from her. It’s not right!”

“No. It’s not,” he whispered. He was pulling in to the student parking lot, looking at me kindly, waiting for me to say more.

“It’s just...*where does he get off?*” I yelled, not noticing my volume. “Who the...why did he feel entitled to do whatever he *freakin’* wanted without stopping to think about how it would affect her? She walked with her head held high until he came skulking into her life. I mean, just...Freaking. Leave. Me. Alone.” *I’m not talking about Shea anymore, am I?*

Edward had silently turned in his seat to face me in the car, and—from the look on his face, tender but sad—I could tell he was thinking the same thing I was. I recognized the tense knot in my gut now. It was pure ire. I was furious. My fists were clenched, knuckles white, shoulders tense. I was seething. “I *hate* him.” I was practically hissing through my teeth. “I want to hurt him. I want to take back everything he took from me. I want to...”

And then I saw him.

Josh had just gotten in his car and was pulling out of his own parking space, clueless to the fact that I was plotting his insanely painful death at the moment, only a few feet away. I reacted before I had time to think. I saw Edward shift out of the corner of my eye, but was too consumed to care.

Jumping out of the car, I hurled myself at Josh’s Saab, with no idea what I would do or say when he got out of the car—except I knew the goal was to inflict as much pain as possible.

But I missed. Somehow, in the dark, with my black sweater on, he hadn’t seen me. I watched as his tail lights glowed for a split second at the exit, and then he was gone.

WHAT?! No freakin’ outlet? No chance to smash his face with my *own* fist?

No way. I was doing this. I started sprinting after him, no clue where he was headed. I ran in total desperation. In those moments, it was as if no one even existed but me...and my enemy. I *had* to find him...

My breath and my racing heartbeat were so loud in my ears that I didn’t hear the footsteps thundering behind me. Suddenly, my feet were off the ground, someone’s arms tightly around

my waist.

Whoever you are, you do not want to get in my way right now.

Do NOT try to stop me.

The unseen thwarter of my fulfillment walked calmly over to the shadows of a tree several yards off the road, setting my feet on the ground.

I stood where I'd been placed, crouching slightly, my legs ready to launch me at this...intruder. And then he walked around and stood in front of me.

Edward.

“What are you *doing??!*” I yelled at him.

“Bella,” he said, his voice smooth. He was trying to calm me.

“I want to HURT him! I hate everything he did to me! I HATE how he made me...what he took from me!”

“I know,” he whispered.

“No you *don't*. You *stopped* me. You had no right!”

“You can't just chase him down and attack him, Bella.”

“Don't you *dare* tell me what I can't do. I'm so sick of people trying to force me to do things. I *hate* it!”

Still speaking calmly, he said, “I know. I'm sorry...and I'll never force you to do anything. I just want you to think about the situation...”

I stepped up to him, my eyes like ice. “I don't want to think about the *situation*, Edward!” I spun around, turning completely away from him. And then he stepped in front of me again, still, just watching me, his eyes still filled with tenderness.

And I hated him for it.

“Bella? Just listen. You've put this in the hands of the police now. They're going to arrest him...and you've requested a restraining order. If you went after *him...*” he let his words trail off.

“THEN WHAT DO I DO?” I screamed. “I want to hit something! I want to kick him. I want to make him crumple to the ground in pain. WHAT DO I DO WITH THAT?!”

“You can hit me, Bella.”

“What?!”

“Hit. *Me.*”

He was being so freaking ridiculous that I *wanted* to hit him. What a *stupid* thing to say.

“Get it out, Bella. Anger is a good thing. You’re actually feeling something. Let it take over for a minute. Let it go.”

“*Save the psychology crap, Edward! You can’t fix me!*” Jerk. “Want me to lay down on a couch so you can ask about my freaking childhood?”

“No, Bella.” His eyes looked so *sad*. “I just want you to...”

I couldn’t take anymore. I did it. “Shut *up*, Edward.” I shoved him, my hand hitting his shoulder with all the force of my anger. He staggered backwards for a moment, then I saw him sort of brace himself. He knew there was more to come.

I swung at him with everything I had. My fists were pounding into his chest and his stomach, over and over. I couldn’t reach his face as easily, and...I didn’t want to look at him.

My mind took over, and I saw Josh standing in front of me. I growled the words. “You are a worthless piece of...I *hate* you! You just showed up in my life and acted like you cared! You said you were *drawn* to me! You pretended I was *special* to you. That I was *different*.” My mind barely registered the gasp that escaped his lips.

I was spitting out the words as if they were poison. “And you stole everything from me that mattered! You *used* me. *Manipulated* me. Chewed me up and spit me out, and now you think you *freaking* own me! Get over yourself, *Josh!* I. Wish. You. Were. Dead.” Every word was punctuated with a punch or a slap.

I turned away. Angry at myself for ever believing in Josh. I kicked the trunk of the tree, cursing under my breath. “Way to go, Bella,” I hissed, turning on myself now. “You totally fell for every bit of it. You deserve it, for trusting him.” I slammed my fists into the rough bark again and again, unable to stop.

Finally, two strong hands wrapped themselves around my wrists, and pulled me away from the tree. From behind, the voice whispered in my ear, “It’s not your fault, Bella.”

“I should’ve seen it!” I sobbed.

“But it’s not your fault.” He said again, insistent.

“How could I be so blind?” I was whimpering now.

“It was all an act, Bella. He was a liar. And it’s. Not. Your. Fault.” His arms were wrapped tightly around me now, holding my arms against my stomach, his head resting on my shoulder.

“He...took everything...He was so horrible...so heartless. I was a fool.” My eyes were burning, and suddenly I couldn’t see.

“*He* was the fool, Bella. To not see you as you are.”

“I’m nothing anymore.” My body was shaking now, uncontrollably.

And he turned me around and held me close to him, not letting go as sobs began to rack my body. He whispered so softly I almost missed it, “No. You’re wrong. You’re...you’re *everything*.”

I stood there in his arms until I was completely spent, and then I just stayed, motionless, letting him hold me until my breathing evened out.

After a few moments, my cheek felt cold. *Oh*. I leaned back and looked at him, “Your shirt is soaked...I’m...so sorry.”

“It’s okay, Bella.” There it was again. That tenderness that I couldn’t fathom. And then he chuckled and added, “It actually feels good...against all the *bruises* you gave me.”

“Oh my gosh, Edward.” Everything that I’d said and done for the last twenty minutes or so began to dawn on me. “I’m so sorry, I just...kind of lost it. It wasn’t too awful, was it? Did I hurt you?”

He smiled down at me, “You’ve actually got a pretty mean right hook...but I’m all right.” He laughed darkly for a moment, “I’m halfway sorry you *didn’t* catch up with Josh. But...it’s better this way.”

“Yeah,” I said quietly. “I guess so.”

Tracing my cheek with the back of one finger, he leaned in and whispered, “You *cried*, Bella. You cried tonight.”

I thought back a few days before when I’d seen Edward crying and had asked him about it. “I’m crying because you’re *not*.” He’d said. Everything had been so mechanical for me then.

And honestly, this was only a few days later. I was only just starting the healing process. I knew it wasn’t the end all be all event, but...it was still momentous. It was important.

It meant that the numbness was beginning to go away.

“I *did*, didn’t I?”

“You did,” he smirked at me.

“You know what started all this for me today, I think?”

“What?” he said, expectantly.

“The fact that he came to the club. I handled everything as best I could, doing what needed to be done for the kids...but, I felt something today that was new. In the pit of my stomach. When I saw him standing in the kitchen, being all smug.

“How *dare* he, you know? I mean, it’s one thing to mess with me personally. It’s a whole other ballgame to bring those sweet kids into the line of fire. And this is not my personal life...this is my future. This is me doing something for *others*...something outside of me. It’s part of my life *without* him. I...I’m not doing a very good job explaining this, am I?”

“No, I understand, Bella. I do. It was another violation. Another way to step in and try to take something of yours that doesn’t belong to him.”

“Right.” *He really does get it.* “And when I saw him there...*that’s* when I first felt something today. Everything else, I think has just built up. It had to burst. I’m sorry I took it all out on you, though, Edward.”

“Bella, I told you I was willing to be a punching bag if need be.” He laughed again, “I don’t think I was expecting it so *soon*, but...I asked for it.”

“Well, thanks....*I do* feel better. I feel sort of clear headed for once.”

“I’m glad,” he said, sliding a hand down my arm until it found my fingers. “Shall we?”

I took a deep breath and sighed. “Yes. Let’s.”

We walked back toward his car, my hand resting in his. *I have a hard time believing Edward is for real, but I think I’ll stick around to find out.*

He brought my hand to his face and carefully inspected my knuckles. "We need to take care of these when we get back, all right?" he asked kindly.

"Oh. Okay." I'd forgotten about them, but they did look awful...torn up and bleeding. And I was pretty sure there was bark in there.

We made it back fairly quickly to the boys’ place, and I was somehow actually in a good frame of mind for studying. But when we walked in, we could both sense the tension—so thick we could’ve cut it with a knife.

Rosalie was sitting on the floor, hugging her knees to her chest, her cell phone to her ear;

Emmett paced back and forth beside her, flexing his fingers, cracking his neck, swinging his arms.

“I understand... Thank you for letting me know,” she said. After she snapped her phone shut, she leaned her head back on the wall and closed her eyes.

“Emmett?” Edward spoke hesitantly.

“That was the police,” he informed us. “They know who it was.”

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Chapter: 22

Chapter Notes: Deep down, you all know you love a cliffie. If you were holding a book in your hand, it would be considered an page-turner. I enjoy them myself. Still, as a reader of fanfic, I understand what it is to have to hang on indefinitely for some small semblance of resolution. So, I will not make you wait all week. Show me if you love me for that by REVIEWING!!

Also, several of you have some guesses about who raped Rosalie. It's time to see if you're right!

Do you believe in signs that whisper inside your mind

'till you have to follow through,

Leading you home again to someplace you've never been

Well I feel that way for you.

David Wilcox

Chapter Twenty: Introspection

Edward and I immediately made our way to the couch closest to Rosalie, and waited for someone to say more. I sat tensely, my hands in my lap, chewing on my bottom lip. Edward was leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, and then he reached a hand out and rested it on mine.

There was silence.

Finally, after what seemed like several minutes had passed, Rosalie opened her eyes and looked at me. Emmett cracked his knuckles again. I could tell he was trying to hold still, but he was still bouncing slightly, waiting for the news.

“It was a guy they’ve been after for a while, Alonzo Calderas Wallace. Goes by Lonnie. He’s been all over New Hampshire...done this to a lot of girls. They think he was drawn by the crowd that weekend. The DNA under my nails matched the other samples that they have exactly...*and* they got him on the security camera. So...evidence is stacking up, but they still haven’t caught him.”

“Well, who are we looking for? Did they give you a description when you asked?” Emmett said, bouncing on the balls of his feet. I think he was ready to run out the door and hunt the guy down.

“She said—if I want—I can come by the station and they’ll show me the mugshots they have on file.”

“Let’s do it,” Edward suggested to Em. “Then, we can at the *very* least be on the lookout for him.”

“Yeah. *Yeah*,” he answered emphatically.

“He’ll also be on the local news...so, hopefully, everybody will be looking for him,” Rosalie added.

“Did you say mugshots?” I asked. “He’s been charged before?”

“Yeah. For several counts of rape—and a murder.”

I inhaled sharply, worrying my lip even more, and Emmett swore under his breath. “Dude. This guy needs to be put away...for good.”

Edward wanted the description before they went to the station, just in case.

“He’s a little taller than me,” she said, “about 6’2”, 200 pounds, brown hair, graying around the temples.”

“So he’s an old guy?” Emmett asked, surprised.

“He’s in his late 30s.”

No one had anything else to say, so we all just sat silently for a moment. Then, Emmett squatted down in front of her and put his hands on her knees. “So, how are *you* doing with all this? Are you okay?” he asked quietly.

She nodded, then said, “I guess it’s good to have a real person...a face, a name. Gives me somebody concrete to hate. I just...I want them to find him, you know?” She sounded so

vulnerable.

Emmett leaned over and kissed her cheek, “I hate him, too, Rosie. They’ll get him, though. I *know* it.”

She looked up at him, her eyes full of trust. “Thanks, Em,” she said softly. I felt like I shouldn’t be intruding on what was so clearly an intimate moment.

Edward must’ve felt the same way, because he stood up extending his hand to me silently and nodded toward the hallway. “Let’s go take care of your hands, Bella,” he said with a hushed voice.

“Kay,” I whispered back, following him down the hall, into the bathroom.

He got out their first aid kit and washed his hands. Then, he gently wiped off the dried blood, and cleaned out the wounds as much as possible. The stuff he used stung like crazy, and my eyes filled with traitor tears. I tried to turn my head away, but Edward saw me in the mirror.

“I’m so sorry, Bella,” he said, turning my face to his and wiping the tears away with his thumbs.

“Hey, no big deal. I did it to myself. And now, I’m apparently gonna be crying about *everything*.” I shrugged and tried to laugh at myself, but it sounded hollow.

“It’s okay if you cry about a lot of things, Bella. When Ali—” he stopped, working his jaw tensely. After an awkward silence, he continued, “As your heart begins to really feel again, everything will probably feel a lot more intense...just go with it. Be patient with yourself.” He got out a tube of some ointment and spread it on *very* gently with his finger. Then, he bandaged my knuckles, winding gauze slowly around each hand. I looked like I’d been in a fight. *I wish I had some cool excuse like Rosalie. She knocked the spit out of a stalker. I just pummeled a tree trunk.*

Maybe I shouldn’t have said anything, but I just wanted to know. “Were you going to say something about Alice?”

He looked down at the bathroom counter, saying nothing.

Finally, he turned his face to me and said, “Let’s go sit in my study. It’ll be quiet in there.”

We went in, and I sat on the edge of the bed. “I’ll get you a chair in a second. Do you want something hot to drink while we study?”

Study? I thought we were going to...oh. He’s not going to answer my question. Huh. “Do you have any hot tea?”

“Absolutely. Would you prefer Earl Grey or English Breakfast?” His eyes told me his mind was far away.

“English Breakfast...got any lemon juice?”

“I do. That’s how my mom takes her tea as well.” He offered a pained smile, and I felt a *little* better about his avoiding my question—but *tried* is the operative word.

“Oh, nice. Well, thanks.” I stood to go grab my backpack, but Edward anticipated my move.

“I’ll get your bag.” He looked at the floor for a moment, pinching the bridge of his nose. “You just...*stay*.”

I didn’t like this. My question had clearly bothered him, but he was acting like I hadn’t even asked it. He didn’t seem to be handling his stress very well. He’d lost his usual calm collectedness. “*Stay*”?! *What was I—a puppy? Where’s Chivalward now? Relax, Bella.*

He came in just a moment later and, jaw clenched tightly, set my backpack on the bed. He didn’t even make eye contact. Then, he just turned around and walked out. *What?*

The whole time he was gone, I felt weird—sick. I got my book out and opened it to my reading assignment, but couldn’t concentrate. The uneasiness between us was *really* bothering me.

I thought *I’d* be the only one whose emotions flip-flopped over something little. This wasn’t supposed to happen to *Edward*...

I hugged my knees to my chest and tried to figure out what I needed to do to get things back to normal between us. *What’s normal anyway?* We’d only known each other for...less than two weeks. The fact that so much had happened between us—and that the events were such a big deal—was just...strange. Maybe we didn’t have a normal. I didn’t understand how we’d progressed to the stage of comfortable friendship we had in this short amount of time, but up until I’d asked this apparently forbidden question, I *had* felt comfortable.

I had thought I could say anything to him.

Several minutes later, Emmett brought in a chair and set it down. He gave me a sort of embarrassed smile, and I asked haltingly, “Did I do something wrong, Em?”

He squeezed my shoulder and squatted in front of me, looking in to my eyes. “Bella Bella, you did nothing of the sort. Edward just...he needs a few minutes to figure out what he can and can’t say, all right? You asked about a touchy subject, something really close to his heart. I’m sure he’d have no problem telling you if it were...just up to *him*. You’re gonna have to trust him on this, okay?”

“Sure, yeah. Okay. I just...I feel like he’s mad at me.”

“No way, Li’l Sis. Just smile at him with your big, chocolate eyes when he comes back in, and I’m sure everything will be okay. He tells me all the time he could get lost in your eyes.”

He does? “Thanks Em,” I said, feeling hopeful.

“Sure thing, Bellaluna. You know you gots da love, right?”

“I know,” I chuckled. I couldn’t help myself. He squeezed my shoulder again and stepped out of the room.

I took several deep breaths, thinking about what he’d said. It hadn’t occurred to me that he *couldn’t* tell me. *Is that what Emmett meant by, “...if it were just up to him?”*

So, when Edward came in a few minutes later with my tea, I smiled at him as I took it. He went back and closed the door, and then—even though there were now two chairs in the room—he sat on the floor in front of me.

We both started speaking at the same time. “I’m sorry. It was none of my...” and “I didn’t think you caught...”

We laughed awkwardly, for a second, and then I just plunged ahead.

“I’m sorry if I brought up something you’d rather not talk about. I just...I didn’t know. Please...please forgive me?”

He looked down, his brow furrowed in frustration and then look back at me, eyes filled with remorse. “No, Bella. *I’m* sorry. You shouldn’t have to apologize for asking a question. There’s nothing to forgive, really. Forgive *me*.”

“Edward, I...” I hesitated.

“Bella? It was my fault. I shouldn’t have let her name slip when we were...discussing...all of the crying.”

I inhaled quickly to interject again, and he held his hand up, his other finding its way back to the bridge of his nose.

“Alice was sixteen,” he began slowly. “Naïve. None of us realized what was happening until it was too late. When we did...we obviously got her out of the situation...but my family agreed that we needed to protect her *integrity*. Her *reputation*. My parents have done everything they could to keep the entire thing quiet, and we’ve all done our best to help and encourage Alice to just move on. It’s just not my story to tell. So, it’s...not something I *can* talk about with you.”

“Okay...I understand.”

He sighed and looked into my eyes, sad. “Do you, Bella? Because I’m not trying to keep anything from you at all. *Please* know that.” He took my hands in his, and squeezed my fingertips gently. “In fact, I’m sure that you’d be encouraged by how Alice has dealt with

everything...how she's doing now. But...if this is something you are going to hear, I need to let Alice be the one to tell you."

"Is she still coming this weekend?" *And would it still be okay for us to meet?*

"Yes. I spoke with her this afternoon right before Emmett called. She's *really* excited to meet you. I'd really like it if...will you make sure you save us some time?"

I laughed. "I don't have any plans. I'm just going to classes, studying and doing the homework club. Otherwise, my time is unclaimed."

"Well, then. I'd like to claim whatever you're willing to share." The depths of his eyes at that moment pulled me in. When the corner of his lip quirked up, I melted a little. *Oh, I'm willing.*

"I think I could arrange that," I said coyly.

He chuckled deeply, and his voice sounded a little husky when he responded, "I'd love it if you would."

Swoon.

Wait. Why am I swooning? I don't swoon anymore.

But I knew...I totally was swooning.

He leaned in and touched his forehead to mine and whispered, "I'm so glad you forgave me, Bella. I was worried that my silence might...push you away."

"I was scared that I'd done something wrong, but I know—and Emmett reminded me too—that I just have to trust you."

"I'll have to thank Emmett for that." He was still whispering, and my stomach was doing flips.

"Me, too." *I could just inhale this boy...hmm. No. He's definitely a man.* As his breath washed over me I felt almost...dizzy. *Breathe, Bella. Don't forget to breathe.*

He smiled, and the skin around his eyes crinkled perfectly.

As I smiled back, I felt his hand come up and cup my chin. He slowly, gently turned my head to the side slightly and pressed his lips to my cheek—just beside my lips. It was so soft, so tender...but so unexpected. I must've gasped, because he turned me back so that we were eye to eye and asked, smiling, "Was that okay?"

What?! YES! Do it again! Only, don't miss my lips next time! "Yes," I whispered. "It was nice." I felt so shy at the moment, and...I knew he would be able to see it as my cheeks flushed. It was hard for me to keep looking him in the eyes.

One side of his perfect grin dropped, leaving me staring at the more than perfect crooked smile. “Maybe we should...study now?”

What? Study? Oh yeah. I'm at school here. “That’s probably wise.”

And so we did...he climbed up in his chair, put on his reading glasses, and began to work.

I stood up and settled myself in the chair Emmett had brought in and spread my notebook and reading material out at the foot of the bed that he used for a table. Edward’s desk was in the corner by the window, and he had his chair turned to face me, slightly. An ankle rested on his opposite knee, and he held his book in his lap, propped up on his thigh. The other hand was entangled in his hair, his elbow on his desk.

I couldn’t help a furtive glance every now and again, but I took comfort—no, delight—in the fact that he was doing the same thing. We didn’t catch each other often, but when we did, we both grinned and just went back to our work as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Around ten o’clock, I said I thought I should probably be getting back. I wanted to call Angela before she went to bed. He nodded and got up to get his jacket, walking into the living room to talk to Emmett, I suppose. He came back just as I was zipping up my pack, and told me that Em and Rose must’ve already left. He picked up my backpack, carrying it as we walked outside, neither of us feeling the need to fill the silence.

When we got close to Mass Row, though, there were flashing blue lights everywhere. I felt my heart being squeezed tight with anxiety, and it was hard for me to breathe. Edward reached for my hand and led me closer. *Did they get the guy who attacked Rosalie? Was he still hanging around?*

As we made it to the edge of the crowd, I saw a lot of faces that I recognized. The police were trying to keep everyone back, and there was a wide swath cleared from the door of one dorm to the cruiser. As I looked toward the door, I saw an officer leading someone down the stairs with his head down. It looked like...oh. *Josh*. As they reached the bottom of the steps, two more guys came out and stood at the top, watching. Travis and Chad.

I was relieved he was finally being arrested, and felt some of my tension ebb away. I watched in silence, staring as he walked, dejected, toward the parking lot and the back of the police car. I don’t know what it was, but just as he was passing me, something made his head come up. He was searching the crowd, scanning the faces. When his eyes landed on me, he didn’t say a word, but it wouldn’t have been necessary anyway. His facial expression held all the threat I needed to hear. Edward tensed and I heard almost a growl come from deep within him as he pulled me in and wrapped me in a tight, safe hug. He was literally putting his body between us—shielding me from Josh’s stare, and he whispered in my ear, “They’ve got him now, Bella. He can’t do anything more to you.”

I just hugged him back as fiercely as I could, my fingers gripping the back of his sweater

unyieldingly. He held my head to his chest and buried his face in my hair.

When the cruiser pulled out, the noise began to escalate as the mob started murmuring. Edward turned me toward my building and guided me as we walked, keeping his hand on the small of my back. We walked into the parking lot entrance, and through the building to another set of steps, and then headed up toward my room.

The door was locked, but I heard music playing inside. *Rosalie must be here already.* I let myself in, and we heard the shower running in the bathroom, so Edward waited in the hall. I yanked my hair out of the loose, sloppy bun, because it was all over the place, and smoothing it a little, stepped back out of my room. He said with a smirk, “At the risk of sounding redundant, this has been *quite* a day.”

“It sure has,” I answered, wrapping my arms around him again.

“A *big* day. And a good one, overall. You handled everything that came up, and that’s all you can do. I’m proud of you, Bella.” He squeezed me as we stood there.

“Thanks...you were...a big help.” I knew that was the understatement of the century, but I didn’t have the words.

“Well,” he said, stroking my hair as he spoke, “I was certainly more than glad to help. I’ll always be glad to help you, but you handled the most important part without me. You’re still strong, Bella, and you’ll get through all of this. I have every confidence in you.”

“But you’ll still be around when I need you?” I was nervous about his answer, for some reason.

“I’ll be around as long as you’ll have me.” His fingers threaded through my hair, and then he released me and stepped back slightly. “Good night, Bella.”

I smiled up at him, feeling genuinely content, and answered, “Good night, Edward.”

* * *

I had a catch-up talk with Angela that night. Once I had filled her in on the events of the day, she was just kind of quiet on the other end of the phone.

“Angela? Are you still there?” I tested.

I heard a weak, “Yes. I’m here,” in response.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, but...is it okay if I just come down there and hug you? I think I need to.”

I laughed lightly. “Yeah. You can if you *really* need to,” I joked.

“Kay. I’ll be there in just a sec.” And she hung up.

A few moments later I heard quick, light footsteps echoing in the hall. “Knock, knock,” she whispered.

I opened the door, and she hurried in, surrounding me as much as possible with her arms. “I’m sorry, and I know it was rough, and I’m proud of you...and I’m glad you have friends like Emmett and Rosalie whose schedules are more free than mine...and *especially* friends like Edward Cullen.”

I pulled back from the hug and smiled at her. “Thanks for all of that, and I’m glad, too...we didn’t get to talk about how *you* ’ve been, Ang.”

“Oh,” she blushed. “Well, I’ve been staying busy . . . studying and working.” Clearly leaving something out.

“Studying alone?” I pressed, remembering her mentioning a certain study partner previously.

“Nope, definitely *not* alone,” she grinned. “And Ben is a really good guy. You’d like him. But...I’m not rushing or hoping. Just studying, okay? I’ll just enjoy watching romance bloom between you and Edward.”

“Oh, there’s nothing like *that* going on, Angela. Edward is just an amazing, really supportive friend. I don’t know what I’d do without him.” I guess I was trying to talk myself out of the swooning. It was just too complicated.

“An amazing, really supportive friend who holds your hand sometimes...”

“Well, yeah.”

“And kisses you on the forehead occasionally.”

“True...and once right *beside* my lips.”

“WHAT?! When were you planning to give up *that* little nugget?!” she said as she smacked my arm.

“Right now, Ang! I’m giving you the nugget now! He did it right after we talked about...*not talking about* what happened with Alice. I’m sure he was just trying to make sure I understood that things were still good.”

“Oh, I’m *sure* that’s all it was...and you? Did you feel *nothing*? You *have* to realize that you knight in shining armor is insanely hot, right? I mean. . . Bella.”

“Well...I might have wanted him to do it again.” Then I added under my breath, “...a little to the

right.”

“HA! I *knew* it!” she grinned knowingly. “Well, I don’t think you have anything to worry about from him, though. I know you probably feel weird about it all, but just enjoy him, please. He’s a gentleman, and I really believe he’s good for you...plus, for the rest of the world, this kind of stuff only happens in the movies, you know?”

I giggled, “He is pretty incredible...” But I needed to be rational, too. “I just...I know that my heart isn’t capable of much right now.”

“My sweet clueless Bella. I don’t think Edward is going to ask more of your heart than it can handle. He just seems interested in giving. He must be like...one in a google! He’s better than one in a trillion. That’s for sure.”

“Somehow, I think you’re right.” *He was so incredibly wonderful, I didn’t know what to do with him. I wonder if his family is as great.* “Hey! His sister Alice is actually coming in this weekend, and she wants to meet me.”

“I think that’ll be great. From what you’ve told me *he* thinks of her, I’m sure she’ll be wonderful. You’ll have to let me know how it goes.”

“I will,” I grinned.

“Okay, Bella. I need to sleep, and I’m sure you do, too. Are we still meeting for lunch tomorrow?”

“You bet,” I said, hugging her once more.

“Good. See you then.” She opened the door as she said, ‘Night!’”

“Good night, Ang!”

And she was gone.

I ducked into the bathroom and brushed my teeth, saying good night to Rose while I was in there. Then, a quick change into pajamas, and I plopped down on my bed and touched my cheek, right where Edward had kissed me. *That was just what I needed.*

Sliding under my covers, I threw my head back on my pillow and ran through my day mentally:

Class—good.

Lunch—quick but fine.

Josh at homework club—insane...and disturbing.

Rosalie smashing Josh's face—freaking awesome.

My professionalism and success at homework club in spite of crazy beginning—totally encouraging.

The police report—umm, detailed. *Yeah. That's all I can say about that.*

Edward waiting for me in the parking lot—perfect.

Dinner with Edward—superbly comfortable. The kind of comfort I've always dreamt about sharing with someone.

Paperwork at police station—very serious and thought provoking.

My going ballistic on Edward while I imagined Josh standing there—alarming, sad, and painful...for both Edward and me.

My crying after said insanity—an auspicious beginning.

Rosalie's news—good, but hard. *At least I hope they'll catch the guy.*

Edward “doctoring” my knuckles—tender.

The misunderstanding about Alice—uncomfortable...and scary for my heart.

The understanding about the Cullens' need for privacy—a major relief.

The kiss following that understanding—*huh? What? Can I has another one?*

Edward and I sneaking peeks at each other—all I can say is: I. Love. Those. Glasses.

Josh's arrest—huge. *I wonder what his Papa Hamilton will have to say about that!*

Overall, yeah. I'd say it was a big, day. A big, important, life-altering day. And I knew that things were going to be different for me.

I smiled to myself as I fell asleep. I slept better that night than I think I'd slept in about two years.

End Notes: Sorry to everybody who thought it was Josh...I wonder if you recognize the name from anywhere. Hmmm.

To explain...Josh is not evil. He is totally, psychotically obsessed with Bella Swan. He didn't know Rosalie was her new roommate, though I'm sure he could've found out if he'd bothered. It always worked best for him to stalk her and be creepy while she was out and about.

If it had been Josh, I feel sure that Rosalie and/or Bella would have noticed the deep scratchmarks on his face at the homework club, and he would've gotten more than just one hit from Rosalie...

Let me hear what you think! I love those reviews!

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Chapter: 23

Chapter Notes: Loves, I am SO sorry it's taken me so long to get this chapter up. I was sick and downtrodden...but here it is at long last. I'll try not to make you wait that long again. Forgive me, forgive me!

Also, this chapter is different from my usual in this: Up until this point, I've needed to slowly play out all that's happened in such a brief timespan. But now that the foundation is established, I didn't want to spend so long. Who DOESN'T want me to hurry up and get to Alice and Jasper's visit???

This chapter moves along at a quicker pace, lessening the dialogue a bit, but still giving insight when you need it. I am SUPER nervous about that (dare I be so honest and transparent???) but I'm anxious to hear your thoughts.

To me, reviews are like a cup of hot chocolate. They can make me feel better when I'm angsty. Please let me know what you think.

Enjoy the read...I did.

Just hold me close. A few words will do.

We don't have to find the answers now,

It's enough to be with you.

David Wilcox

Chapter Twenty-one: Cover Me

Wednesday morning was fairly routine. Jacob walked me to class, as usual. He was obviously really excited that Josh had gotten arrested, though he didn't like the fact that the homework club had been "invaded" the one day he couldn't make it. I assured him I was just glad that Josh was in jail, and I was ready to move on, knowing that there'd be some tense follow-up, but eager to have done with it all. He just shrugged and said that he was glad I was able to look ahead with a smile. When I teased him about only being upset that he missed out on all the "action," he smirked over at me and messed up my hair. It bothers me when he does that.

Classes were nothing worth noting, but then Edward walked me to my lunch with Angela. I was beginning to enjoy even the briefest moments with him a little more than I should, and that made me feel a bit confused...maybe even a slightly anxious. Still, there were so many things going on in my life that were stress-filled, that I figured the best thing was just to take advantage of the peace that engulfed me when he was beside me. I could figure everything else out later.

It was great to sit down with Angela for lunch, because she's the other person that just lets me...*be*. I don't ever have to pretend with her, and that's a good feeling. Ben had actually asked her to go to a movie with him on Friday night, and she seemed to glow as she told me about it. I was happy for her...she deserved the best. I needed to meet this Ben fellow and grill him a little.

When I got back to my room after lunch, there was a message from the county clerk's office. The clerk said that I needed to meet with a judge to discuss my request for a restraining order, and a meeting had been scheduled for Thursday morning at 11:30. Relieved, I mentally ran through my schedule for the day. My second class would be over at 11, so I could go straight there. I'd probably have to grab lunch out before I went to the homework club. Hopefully, Jake would be free to do all of that with me.

I mentioned all this to him as we drove out of Hanover that afternoon on the way to the club. I might have only imagined him sitting up a little straighter as I listed the tentative schedule, but he did seem to be very pleased.

"Sure, sure," he grinned. "I'm really glad you asked, Bells. I guess I thought you'd probably want Edward to go with you..." He cocked his head to the side slightly as his inquiring eyes tried to read mine.

"Well, I'm certain he'd go, but I haven't asked. It just made sense, since I'll practically have to go straight to the club from the hearing. You know?"

"Oh, yeah...well, glad to go with you anyway. I'll back you up if they want to hear from anybody else, too. We could go to Ellie's, for lunch, then. Sound good?"

Hmm. I did *not* want to go to Ellie's with Jacob. Not sure why, I suggested the best pizza place around, in my opinion. "How about Ramunto's? I could really go for some wood-fired pizza."

"Yeah, sure. Wherever you want, Bells. I like Ramunto's, too." He really didn't seem to mind, and I found myself sighing in relief. Why I was so grateful for this, I had no idea.

We got to the club almost before I realized it, and got everything set up. The afternoon went beautifully, no behavior problems, good conversations...time well spent. Dominic and Jacob's little girls were thrilled to have him back, and I chuckled to myself as he explained that he'd have to be out every Tuesday, but that my friends would be there to help me. When Katelyn blushed as she told him Mr. Emmett hadn't been so bad, Jacob almost looked sad. I'd have to remind him later that most of these kids are starved for male attention all around. Especially the little ones who miss their daddies.

When we got back to campus, I ran to my dorm to get dressed comfortably for my evening class, and ate half a grilled chicken wrap that I had left in my fridge. I don't know if Jacob ate, but he was waiting downstairs for me like last week to walk me to my evening class. Seth was with him. We walked to the science building, and the guys had me genuinely laughing by the time we arrived. They were fun together...even more fun than Jacob by himself. I could see why they'd hit it off and become roommates. They said they'd see me after class and headed off together.

I'd gotten the notes from the previous week and caught up on my reading. Things were going rather smoothly so far, although I did notice a good number of them staring at me and whispering...at least until the professor came in.

Though it was difficult, I steeled myself against all of the questions and guesses being silently hurled in my direction and concentrated on the lecture. My notetaking became my obsession for the hour and a half until break. When the professor dismissed us for fifteen minutes, I slammed my pencil down and made it through the door before most of my classmates were even out of their seats.

Edward's eyes met mine the moment I stepped into the hall. He smirked at me and shrugged before he set his laptop on the small table beside him.

"Um...I...I guess I didn't think you'd be here, since..." My words trailed off, because I didn't want to mention the name of the Loser-who-was-the-bane-of-my-existence.

Edward tilted his head to the side, as he stood, motioning for me to sit in his chair. He picked up his laptop and sat down on the table beside me as I took a seat. He leaned in then, and whispered, "I...I know you don't want to think about this, but..." His voice was somehow at once both tense and reassuring. "You haven't had the hearing yet, so the restraining order isn't quite official. And, I really doubt his parents and their old money lawyers will just let him sit in jail without posting bail, so...I..." He hesitated for what seemed like a whole minute, then with sudden resolve, he added, "I'm not willing to take any chances, Bella. I hope that's all right."

I hadn't yet turned to look at him, but I whispered back, "You're right. I don't want to think about that..." He was quiet, waiting to see if I would go on. "Thanks, though," I added.

"Well, I hate that I even said all of that, but I don't think it's a good idea for any of us to let our guards down yet, *completely*. And besides," he added, sounding more pleasant, "there's no where else I'd rather be. I'm studying in perfect peace and quiet while classes are in session...getting lots done actually. And I don't have to listen to Emmett's loud hip-hop music while he's working

out. So, I am, *in fact*, getting quite the deal.” I looked up at him with half a smile, and he was grinning at me. I chuckled at the mental image I got of Emmett working out and singing along way to boisterously to the hip-hop. *Obnoxious upstairs neighbor*. He stroked my hair for a moment before asking how my class was going.

“Going well, I guess...zoology isn’t my greatest love, but the professor’s actually very animated and well-organized. It’s easy to take notes and stay interested.” I shrugged, turning toward him a bit more in the chair.

“Oh!” he laughed. “I almost forgot. I brought you something.” He bent down and reached underneath the table, pulling out a thermos and a small Novack Café bag.

“You’re kidding me,” I said, shaking my head in total shock.

“I’m *not* actually. They’re perfectly willing to put the hot chocolate in a thermos if you provide it...just no whipped cream this time.”

“Hmm. Well, I’ll have to deduct some points for that...” I quipped, grinning. I held out the two cups he’d handed to me after putting on the cardboard Bella-finger-protector. He carefully poured the drinks into the cups, and smiled at me.

“Edward?” I asked. “Aren’t you a little too good to be true?” I wondered if he knew my question was serious.

“I am most definitely not, Bella. I am far too moody, guarded, and overprotective. Not only that, but I didn’t even think of a way to keep your muffin warm.” The corner of his mouth lifted into that devastatingly handsome half-smile, and I found myself looking at the lines of his cheek where his eyes creased. *I could stare at you all day long, Edward Cullen. Could you please hold that expression?*

“Huh. Well, we must be a good match then, because I’m borderline bi-polar, nosy, and vulnerable...not to mention insanely clumsy.” I sipped my hot chocolate as I listened to him chuckle. He reached over and tucked a few loose strands of hair behind my ear. I shivered and looked down at my arms—now covered with goosebumps.

“Sorry,” he said quietly, quirking his eyebrow at me. “I didn’t realize I have that effect on you.” The laughter in his eyes told me he was just kidding, but I was frustrated with myself, because I knew that he was unknowingly right on the nose. He *did* have all *kinds* of the goosebump-slash-swoon effect on me. I scooted away a little, trying to laugh it off. *I bet he can see right through me.*

He handed me the muffin then, with a napkin, and asked how homework club went today. We talked about my afternoon for a few minutes, enjoying the easy conversation. When I mentioned that I’d gotten a call about meeting with a judge, he sat up straighter. “This isn’t the actual hearing, is it?” he asked.

“No...just the initial meeting. They’ll schedule the hearing after this, I understand.” I put the last bite of muffin in my mouth, and chased it down with the rest of my hot chocolate. “Thanks for this, Edward. It was a good surprise.”

“My pleasure as always, Bella. I like to see you smile.” He traced my jawline with the back of his index finger.

I smiled at him as I stood up, looking at the clock on the wall. I needed to get back into the lecture hall. “Are you going to...”

He anticipated my question and answered, “I’m going to stay until class is over...just in case.”

“Okay. I’ll see you then.” I walked back to my seat wondering if he’d still be there when Jacob and Seth came back. *Oh well. It’s not like there’s a competition. They’re all just really good guys.*

The professor began right on time, and the lecture seemed to fly by. Thankfully, by the end, I wasn’t such a hot discussion topic anymore. Everyone packed up and drifted out into the hallway. I was one of the last to leave, because the professor called me up to the front and discussed what I’d missed. Apparently, he was satisfied that I was keeping up well.

When I stepped out of the room, Edward was standing there, and standing next to him, smirking at me were Jacob and Seth. I smiled at them all, and said a silent prayer that this wouldn’t be awkward.

It wasn’t too bad. Edward had his laptop in his messenger bag, slung over his shoulder and he was holding the thermos at his side. He stepped forward and said sweetly, “Jacob and Seth are here to walk you back, so...will I see you tomorrow at the Literary Society meeting?”

“I think so...it depends how the hearing goes and how worn out I am, honestly. I’ll be really late if I do come. Homework club doesn’t get finished until about five.”

“Okay...well, I’ll sit close to the door and save you a seat just in case.” He smiled at me warmly, and whispered, “Good night, Bella Swan.”

“Good night, Edward,” I grinned. And then he was gone.

The other two boys greeted me loudly, then, and as we walked out into the darkness, Jacob put his arm around my shoulder playfully. They asked how class was, and Seth said, “It was pretty cool of Edward to sit out there and study.”

I felt Jacob’s eyes on me as I nodded. “Yeah, it was nice,” I said.

“I’d be there if I didn’t have to be somewhere else, Bells. You know that, right?” Jacob pulled me more tightly to his side.

“HA! What a lame excuse, man!” Seth mocked. Jacob dropped his arm from my shoulder a little dejectedly.

“Jacob, it’s nice that you walk me there and back. I don’t expect more than that,” I offered, trying to make him feel better.

He smiled at me, and said, “I’d walk you anywhere, though. I like...walking with you.”

Seth cleared his throat, but it sounded more like he was trying unsuccessfully to hide his quiet laughter.

I decided to change the subject and asked Seth to tell me about himself. We spent most of the rest of the walk back to the dorm listening to him and cracking up about their crazy stories, the three of us enjoying the easy conversation. It was much better that way.

When we got to my dorm, the guys said goodnight, and Jacob said, “I’ll meet you at your truck? Looking all presentable and stuff?”

I grinned at him. “Yeah...as soon as you can after class...all presentable and whatnot.”

He laughed and said, “See ya then, Bells.”

Seth chimed in with a “Good night,” just as I got to the door.

“Good night guys.”

* * *

The next morning, everything went quickly and smoothly. I ran by Dick’s House early to pick up copies of the reports that had been filed in the last two weeks, and put them in the big manila envelope where I was keeping all of the pertinent information I had about—and against—Josh. I hustled to class, and then hurried afterwards to meet Jacob at my truck.

There was a yellow rose with perfect red tips on each petal resting on the hood of my truck, and I saw a note tucked under one of my windshield wipers. I jogged over and picked up the rose, inhaling the scent of it. *It’s perfect.* Reaching for the note, I pulled it out of its little envelope, and saw the same beautiful script I’d recognize anywhere

I know you’ll be strong today, Love. I wish I could be there with you to witness it and hold your hand. Waiting to hear how it goes...

—Edward

Wow. Just...wow. *How perfect is THAT? And, did I read “Love”?* Did he really call me that? I tucked the note in the pocket of my khaki wrap-around skirt and stood there smiling, breathing in the scent of the rose over and over. I didn’t even notice when Jacob approached.

“A *rose*, huh?” he said over my shoulder.

Spinning around, I didn’t have time to wipe the huge grin off my face before I said, “Hey, Jacob.”

“Bet I know who *that’s* from,” he goaded.

“He just wanted to encourage me today,” I said, still smiling.

“Well, does he know how bad he makes the rest of the guys in the world look?” he laughed, though his eyes told me he was asking in earnest.

I thought about that for a minute, not sure how to respond, because Jacob had really hit the nail on the head. Edward made every other guy in the world just pale in comparison. I finally decided that it was probably best not to answer at all, and just shrugged as I changed the subject. I climbed into the cab as I asked, “How was your morning, Jacob?”

“Pretty good, I guess. I was looking forward to having lunch with you and all.” He grinned at me, seeming to feel more at ease. I noticed him stiffen just slightly as I gingerly placed the rose on the dashboard in front of us. Its reflection shone in the windshield as we traveled, so it was hard to ignore. But ignore it we did—at least as far as conversation was concerned.

We got into another easy conversation about music and small town life. It was good to talk about something arbitrary on the way to the courthouse. When we got there, he just let me know he’d stay in the background unless I needed him to vouch for me or anything.

Jacob and I sat down in the waiting room after I’d given the clerk my envelope and explained the situation. It was a little difficult to wait, but Jacob did a *decent* job of distracting me. A few minutes later, the clerk said that the judge had a few questions for me and asked me to follow him back to the judge’s chambers.

The judge was very gracious, but professional. He asked me a bit about our history, and a few questions concerning the incidents that were on file at Dartmouth. I informed him of Josh’s subsequent arrest that I didn’t have record of, and he pointed the police reports out, already on his desk.

After our discussion, which hadn’t been terribly uncomfortable, the judge said that he felt I was in enough immediate danger that he would grant me a temporary protective order. Sighing with relief, I asked the question that had been most on my mind since I’d looked up the process on the internet. I knew that if I were granted a temporary order, I could ask for a hearing within 3-5 days. The judge didn’t smile, but his expression told me that he was pleased with my knowledge of the process and my preparedness.

The hearing was granted and scheduled for Monday afternoon. I was glad things seemed to be moving along quickly. I thanked him for his careful consideration, and he smiled at me. Before I

left, he asked if I had an attorney to represent me at the hearing. Suddenly, I realized that Josh most definitely *would* have an attorney, and I'd be a fool to think I could represent myself. The last thing I wanted was to be made to look like an idiot, and I knew that's what would happen. *What would I do?* I told the judge I'd try to find someone, and he nodded, dismissing me.

The clerk asked me to have a seat while he made me a copy of the temporary order. He also gave me a document listing all of the things that would have to be proven at the hearing on Monday. Suddenly, I was overcome with anxiety. My hands were trembling as I tried to put all of the documents in my bag.

Jacob joined me at the counter and asked, "You okay, Bells?" He took the documents from my hand and put them in my bag, zipping it up and putting it over his shoulder.

"Yeah...I guess so. I just have a lot to think about...but I do *not* want to think about it all now, okay?"

"Okay," he said earnestly. "Let's go get some pizza. How's that?"

"Good, Jacob. That'd be super right about now."

I did tell him over lunch that I had gotten a temporary order, and that I needed to think about getting a lawyer somehow. I didn't know what to do...I couldn't afford one, and neither could Charlie or Renee. Jacob offered to call his uncle. "I mean, he mostly handles car accidents and injuries and stuff, but maybe he could help." We both laughed a little at that suggestion.

"Hey, it's the thought that counts, right?" He was still grinning.

"Yeah, Jacob. And it's not an awful suggestion. It may be my only option, you know?" I shrugged. *So what if this isn't his specialty? ...He'd be better than nothing.*

We moved on to other topics, and had a nice lunch together. When the bill came, Jacob put his hand up as I started to get out my wallet. "I got this, Bella. Let me buy you lunch."

"Jacob, I...you *really* don't need to..." I stuttered, feeling helpless and awkward.

"I know, Bells. But I *want* to. Let me take care of this, *please*. You don't have to think of it as a date," he offered.

At those words, I visibly relaxed. Jacob noticed, and I saw a flash of disappointment cross his face before he masked it with a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. "Let's go laugh with those kids for a while, huh?"

I smiled back at his effort, genuinely. "Let's do it. I need some little hugs today."

We didn't talk very much the rest of the way to the club, but the silence was pretty comfortable. When we arrived, setting up took us no time at all, so we just sat at one of the tables talking

about the kids. I shared as much as I knew about a few of their histories, before we heard the voices and laughter of the middle schoolers drifting in.

The afternoon didn't slow down once.

We both let out a big sigh as we settled into the truck for the drive back to campus, and laughed at our common response. The club had been busy...hectic even, but not chaotic. There were a lot of sweet or funny stories to tell. We regaled one another with the happenings until we pulled back into the student parking lot.

Jacob started to ask if I wanted to get dinner, but I quickly reminded him that I was running up to the Literary Society meeting. He nodded okay and smiled, but I could still see a little discouragement in his eyes. "Jacob, thanks for everything today. I really appreciate your being around. You know that, right?"

"Sure, sure, Bells. I know."

"Okay," I grinned at him. "I'll see you tomorrow." I could see the Berry Library from my truck, so I just planned to make a dash for it.

"Bye, Bella," he said quietly as I picked up my rose and slid out of the cab. Before I'd shut and locked my door, he was gone.

I practically jogged to the Berry Library and up the steps, stopping briefly to catch my breath before I walked in. I knew my cheeks were flushed from the run, but I smoothed my hair and tried to look as "together" as possible. I waited a moment until the mumbling that I could hear through the door stopped. I didn't want to interrupt someone in their reading.

When I heard a pause, I opened the door and slipped into the room quietly. A few heads turned, but others were looking at their notes or talking in whispers to those near them. I made an apologetic face and took my seat quietly in the chair next to him, just setting my things down. Edward cleared his throat, and when I looked over at him, he was smiling at me, his eyes buoyant. I was so glad I'd made it in time to hear him. He looked around to see if someone else had decided to read just then, and when all was quiet, he stood up.

After a few seconds, he began: "These lyrics were written by Steve Hindalong for The Choir. The song is called, *To Cover You*.

Set my guitar on fire

With a long-stemmed match

Dance while it burns

And laugh when it turns to ash

I would torch everything to keep you warm

I would do anything to keep you from harm

I would do anything

To cover you body and soul, girl

I would give everything in the world

To cover you, to cover you

Walk down a dark street

Naked on a winter night

Run from the law

Like the Sunday I saw the light

To defend your spirit I would go to war

I would chase the devil to Jehovah's door

I would do anything

To cover you body and soul, girl

I would give everything in the world

To cover you, to cover you

I would do anything

To wrap you up tight on a cold night

I would give everything that I have

To cover you, to cover you.”

As Edward took his seat again, there were quiet exclamations all around the table. Most people clearly hadn't heard the song before, but really seemed to appreciate the lyrics.

I was simply stunned. *Had he chosen that song for me?* The look on his face as he turned to me spoke volumes. His eyes shone with strength and purpose, searching my eyes, delving into me, trusting that I'd see the truth of his need to watch over me.

I couldn't doubt it. Not for all the fear in the world.

Suddenly, I realized, glancing around the room, that every other eye was on me as well. It was my turn. I guess everyone else had already gone. I whispered to Edward, "We're reading someone else's work, right? Does it matter?"

"I don't think it does, since you arrived just now...we read our own earlier, but we've all done someone else's this last time around. Whatever you'd like, Bella." His eyes were filled with kindness now.

As I looked around, everyone was watching patiently. No one was rushing me. They'd all seen me just come in. Still, I felt a bit out of sorts to read my own. Toad the Wet Sprocket was safer.

I stood, CD jacket in hand, and read quietly at first, then my emotion built to an extreme.

"Dam Would Break, by Glen Phillips.

It is this place that makes me fall from you
Forget the words that once rang so true
Did we expect that life was ever fair, my god...
I sowed a field of rose and reaped a whipping rod
And everything I've held too tight inside
Could make a part of me die
And if my lips could only speak the name
The dam would break
What is this ice that gathers round my heart
To stop the flood of warmth before it even starts
It would make me blind to what I thought would always be
The only constant in the world for me
And every hour of every day
I need to fight from pulling away
And if my mind could only loose the chain
The dam would break
For all the things I hid away
And all the words I could not say
The dam would break

I flopped into my seat, filled with so much emotion that everyone and everything was out of focus. I felt my eyes brimming with tears, when the student leader stood up and said, "Thank you so much. Well *read.*"

Edward reached over and placed his hand on mine. When I was able to look over at him, the devotion I saw in his eyes made me want to just tuck myself in and hide in the friendship we shared...to just get away from everyone else. We sat there quietly as the group wrapped up and people began making their way to the door. The last to leave, Edward stood up, pulling me to my

feet as well. I reached down to pick up my backpack and...my rose.

"I'm glad you got that before you left," he said.

"It was perfect...and *so* thoughtful. I love it, Edward." I smelled it again, deeply. "I've never seen a yellow rose with red tips before."

"No?" He sounded surprised.

"Well...no one has ever given me flowers before, honestly." I wasn't about to mention the yellow rose that Skeezehead brought me during break last week. "The tips make it even more beautiful."

He squinted at me slightly, as he lifted a corner of his lips. "They certainly change the meaning from the simple yellow rose...it needed to say something a little more, I thought."

"Well, *thank you*. Really."

"You're more than welcome, Bella."

I decided it would be too much right now to ask him about the song. I'd have to make of that what I could, but...I thought I could just ask him to play it for me later. Maybe he'd talk about it then.

As we started to head out the door, he reached for my hand again. "Would you like to study with us tonight? Em and I were just planning on making sandwiches at our apartment."

"Yeah...but I want to get out of this skirt first. Can we swing by my place?"

"Absolutely." He gently squeezed my hand as we walked toward the stairs, and we took our time climbing down. He paused as he opened the front door for me. It was deliciously chilly, and I heard a quiet sigh of satisfaction as we stepped out into the evening air.

We were strolling, Edward and I, no rush. And I loved it. I realized that—for the moment, I was completely satisfied—my hand in his, enjoying the breeze and the twilight as we made our way slowly, casually across campus.

I discreetly brought the rose to my face again, marveling at the red tips and inhaling the fragrance. When I peeked over at Edward out of the corner of my eye, he was watching me, with a beautiful, perfect smile lighting his entire face.

I dipped my head shyly. "It's just so beautiful, Edward. I don't even know what to say...can I just hug you?" I whispered.

"Bella, Love, you never have to ask." He wrapped me in his arms, tenderly, but with incredible strength. I laid my head against his chest and heard him say so softly the words were almost lost

in the wind, “*You’re beautiful.*”

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Chapter: 24

I know it’s strange to say

When we just met this way,

But I look into your eyes

And suddenly I knew you all my life.

David Wilcox

Chapter Twenty-two: Loved

When we got to my dorm, Edward sat down on one of the benches just outside and encouraged me to take my time. He was going to make a phone call while he waited. I meandered slowly up the steps, thinking about how wonderfully he treated me, how good he made me feel, and I was smiling and humming to myself the whole way.

I ducked inside my room and flipped on the light. Rosalie had left me a note that she’d already eaten and would be in the library for a while, and then Emmett was going to pick her up and take her out to play pool. She’d be back late. Pleased that she was trying to live as normally as possible—and that Emmett was SO right for her—I grinned as I erased the white board and left my own message for her. Who knew when I’d get back? Something in me wanted to spend as much time with Edward Cullen as possible. Of course, I shouldn’t assume anything...I didn’t know what his plans were for later. Surely he didn’t want to be with me *constantly*.

I untied my skirt and slipped it off, folding it and placing it carefully over the hanger I’d left on my bed. Since we’d just be studying, I grabbed a pair of well broken-in jeans and pulled a big, gray Dartmouth hoodie over my fitted t-shirt. Throwing my hair up into a ponytail, I checked myself in the mirror. I brushed my teeth and then got all my stuff together for studying. When I was just about set, I grabbed the hanger off my bed and moved over toward the closet—and the window. As I hung my skirt up, I peeked out the window toward the bench.

Edward was sitting there, with his ankle resting on his knee, talking on the phone. I watched as he ran his fingers through his messy, amazing hair, and I remembered how soft it had felt. It scared me a little that I was so attracted to him, if I was being honest with myself. If there was one thing I had learned over the last two years, it was that attraction was dangerous. It made me

vulnerable.

And yet, I'd been at my most broken and vulnerable with Edward, and he'd proven—several times, really—that he would take care of me. Surely, it wasn't a bad thing to want to be around him so often. Maybe it was the way I felt about myself when I was with him. I felt...worth something again...sure of myself, purposeful, and appreciated. Of course, it wasn't *only* the way I felt about myself. The way I felt about him was changing, too.

He was so strong, and yet so gentle. So confident, yet humble. He was unfathomably gorgeous, and the way he *looked* at me...The way he *touched* me! It was so tender, so full of care and compassion, and sometimes I thought I saw...love. *But who am I kidding?*

That wasn't even possible. We'd only known each other for two weeks. He didn't—couldn't—love me. He surely wanted me to be happy, enjoyed making me smile, hurt when I hurt, but *love* wasn't even a feasible *thought*. *Was it?*

So, what could I call the way I felt toward him?

He was a friend, for sure. A friend that I was beginning to trust with some very real, scary things about myself and what I'd been through. He was the one that I wanted to talk to when something—*anything*—happened, good or bad. His was the face I waited impatiently to see, all day long, sometimes. Edward's voice was the music that soothed me when I was upset, that laughed with me and joked with me, that spoke to my heart, communicating my worth and my uniqueness to him. His arms were the ones I wanted to run to, to hide in, to feel wrapped around me. And his eyes...I couldn't even find the words when it came to his eyes.

But there wasn't a label I could slap on all of that...nor did I want to even *try* to label our relationship. I only wanted to revel in it. To *steep* in it, and let it infuse me with the strength and beauty that was so much a part of Edward.

As I stood there watching him, letting my mind wander to all of these wonderful and confusing places, Edward stood up suddenly, and began pacing as he talked on the phone. He held his fingers to the bridge of his nose and then ran them restlessly through his hair again. He walked behind the bench and leaned over it, one hand gripping its back tightly, the other still holding the phone. And finally, he stood up straight and nodded adamantly as he talked. His free hand reached its way up to the nape of his neck, and I watched as he kneaded the muscles there. He nodded again, and then clicked the phone shut, sliding it into his jacket pocket.

He swung his arms, obviously stretching, probably trying to rid himself of the tension caused by the conversation. I wanted to go to him, to help him relax, to encourage him the way he so often encouraged me. And yet, he clearly needed a little time and space to de-stress. *I'll just go slowly. I'll amble my way down there.*

I grabbed my pack, but before I could flip off the light, the phone rang. I answered quickly, hoping I could just take a message for Rosalie.

“Hello?”

“Hey, kid. How’s my girl doing?” a familiar voice met my ears.

Charlie.

“Not too bad, Dad. I was just getting ready to go study with a friend.”

“Studying and school are goin’ well then?” he asked hopefully.

“Yeah. And the homework club is, too. The kids are great. I missed them over the summer.” *I don’t want to tell you any more about what’s happening.* “How’re Frank and Sue?” They were my dad’s best friends...and since I’d left, I knew that Sue was keeping Charlie well-fed. They had him over for dinner at least a few nights a week.

“Well, Frank hasn’t been feeling too well, but I don’t think it’s anything too serious. You been keepin’ in touch with Renee?”

“Umm...I’m usually not in the room too much, so we haven’t talked a lot, but I’ve been emailing her some.”

“Okay, well...make a point to call her sometime. Otherwise, she’ll worry about ya.”

“All right, Dad. I will.” *Good. It sounds like we’re wrapping up our talk.* Charlie never has been one for long conversations. But that’s honestly one of the things I love most about him. He gets to the point quickly.

“Just one more thing, Bells...you haven’t had any trouble with Josh since you’ve been back to school, have you? He’s not giving you a hard time or anything?”

Crap.

“...”

“Bella? Are you there?”

“He’s...umm...he’s having a hard time letting go, but I’ve got some good friends here who are looking out for me.”

He cleared his throat and his voice dropped several notches. *We are now entering angry dad territory.* “What do you *mean*, ‘he’s having a hard time letting go’?”

How do I do this? “Well...umm...he’s been following me and...uh...he’s sort of...threatened me a time or two, but it’s really okay now.”

“Isabella Swan! *How* is that okay? Has he *touched* you? I swear if that boy’s laid a hand on

you... ”

I don't want to have to lie...what can I say? “Char—Dad!” *Deep breath. Here we go.* “I guess he’s tried, but, I’m *telling* you, my friends are watching out for me—*closely*. They don’t let me go anywhere alone. And I even filed for a restraining order, Dad...we’re doing all the right things to get him to leave me alone. I don’t think he’ll be around much longer.”

“What friends? Little Angela?”

“She’s not *little* Dad...but,”

He cut me off. “She’s not a big guy with a gun either. I think I’m gonna take some time off and...”

It was my turn to cut *him* off. “No. No way, Dad. You’re needed in Forks. Besides, I’ve got more than ‘Little Angela.’ I’ve got four guys who watch out for me constantly. Big, tough guys. My own personal fleet of body guards. You’d like ‘em. One is like a grizzly bear. And one...one I think would do anything to keep me safe.”

“They’d *better*. I’m serious, Bells. If those boys *don’t* take care of you, when I come up there, *they’ll* be hearing from me as well.”

“Okay, Dad. I’ll be sure to let ‘em know...but I seriously think Emmett could take you.”

He chuckled half-heartedly. “Good, Bells. That’s the kind of guy I want to hear is watching out for you...Emmett, huh?”

“Yeah. He’s best friends and roommates with the one who’s ... so *careful* about me.”

“Sounds like you’ll do all right, I guess. But, I want to hear from you every few days, now, okay?”

“Okay.” I sighed in relief. He was relaxing. I could hear it.

“I’m *serious*, Bella.” Okay, not as relaxed as I thought.

“I promise, Dad...Listen, maybe it’s best if Renee doesn’t know. You know how she is. I don’t want her freaking out on me.”

“I’ll tell you what, Bells. I won’t *call* her. But if she calls me, because you *haven’t* been in touch and wants to know if *I’ve* heard anything, I’m tellin’ her everything. She’s your mom.”

It was the best offer I was going to get. “Thanks, Dad...listen, umm, my friend is waiting outside.”

“Is it the big one?”

“No, it’s his roommate, Edward...but I’m going over there to study tonight. I’ll tell Emmett you said, ‘Hey.’”

He laughed this time. *That’s good to hear.* “You do that, Sweetie. Tell ‘em both how much I appreciate them lookin’ out for my girl.”

“I will, Dad. Love you! Bye.”

“Love you, too, Bells. I’ll talk to you soon.”

I hung up the phone and took a deep breath. At least I hadn’t had to talk about the hearing...or finding a lawyer. *What am I going to do? I don’t really want Jake’s uncle to represent me...*

Oh, well. I could swing by the Judicial Affairs Office and ask what they might suggest—and see if they’d be willing to shed a little light on the status of Josh’s probation/suspension.

Hitting the light switch, I stepped out into the hall and locked the door. *No time to amble now.* I jogged down the steps and out to meet Edward. He was finishing up another phone call. “...I’m really excited for you to meet her, too...You think? It’s possible, but I’d say that’s up to Bella...No, I can’t wait either...Okay, I love you, too...Be safe, Alice...I will...Bye.”

He turned and smiled at me as he put the phone away. “Alice is absolutely *beside* herself with anticipation. She was calling to find out exactly what we’ll all be doing together, so she knows what *clothes* to pack.” He shook his head and chuckled at his sister’s exuberance.

I loved the look in his eyes when he talked about her. She must’ve done a good job of relieving his tension, because there was no evidence on his face or in his eyes of the stress from his first telephone call. And I wasn’t going to pry. I’d learned that lesson on Tuesday. “I’m excited to meet her, too,” I said. “Ready to go?”

“I am...I’ve gotten really hungry all of a sudden.” He stood up, and we left for their apartment.

On the way there, we didn’t talk about anything of great significance...just excellent, comfortable conversation. A little about growing up, a lot about music...I liked that we could talk about anything. When we got to the top floor of their building, I heard thumping bass coming from the end of the hall. “That’s not...Emmett, is it?”

“I’m afraid, so, Love. He assumes everyone enjoys it,” he smirked. *There was that word again.* I can’t imagine why he calls me that...but I have to admit I like it.

I tried to just joke back, “Ah...well, if everyone’s invited to the dance party, then I could see that.”

Edward laughed as he opened the door, his face full of mirth. He let me go in first, and I started to set my bag down. Edward leaned in and said directly into my ear, so that I could hear over the

music, "I'll take that to my study." I shivered as he disappeared down the hall a moment later. Then, I shouted over the booming hip-hop toward the kitchen, "Where's the crowd, Em?"

"WHAT?!" he hollered back, grinning.

I raised my hands over my head and danced my way over to the kitchen, enjoying his face. He quirked his eyebrow at me, and gave me a few catcalls. "Where's the party, Em?"

He nodded in understanding and grabbed the remote from the counter, turning down the music. "You got some sweet moves, little Bella."

I snorted, "Yeah, when I don't trip. You and I are both lucky I made it over here in one piece."

He laughed heartily and gave me a monstrous hug, lifting my feet off the ground for a moment.

I heard the refrigerator open behind me, and then Edward's voice said, "What would you like to drink, Bella?"

While I thought for a second, Emmett, who was still holding me up above the floor, said, "E. C., have you noticed that Bellaluna always smells amazing? What *is* that? Strawberry?"

I felt my cheeks flush as he finally set me down, and I suddenly found myself studying the linoleum of their kitchen floor.

Edward chuckled and said, "Why, yes, Em. I *have* noticed...the very first time I met her, in fact. Right before she slammed her lovely strawberry-scented head into my chin in British Lit."

I want to crawl under a rock and die...but he did say he thought I smelled good. Even then.
"Yeah, well, I..."

Still laughing, he added, "Don't be embarrassed, Bella. You made quite an impression on me."

"Right. That's what I was going for, after all," I smirked. *Time to change the topic.* "Do you have any caffeine free soda?"

"Sure," said Edward. "We have Pepsi and Sprite." He was grinning at me as he asked if I'd like ice in my glass.

Then I heard Emmett singing Jason Mraz's song behind me, "Bellaluna-a-a ah-ah, My beautiful, beautiful, moon...How you swoo-oo-oon me like no other." Before I could spin around to look at Emmett, I noticed Edward stiffen a little bit. His face was a little difficult to read. An eyebrow was cocked, and his mouth was halfway between smirking and smiling. Wait. Was *he* blushing slightly?

He noticed me looking and shrugged at me, shifting the smirk into that amazing crooked smile, and turned quickly to pour my drink. Emmett guffawed and began to tell me about all the

sandwich stuff laid out on the bar behind me. “And plates are here,” he pointed to the left, “so just help yourself little lady.”

“Gotcha. Thanks, Em.” I looked down at all of the deli meats and condiments, and noticed that Emmett had even sliced tomatoes, lettuce and red onions. “Hey, this is quite a spread, you’ve got here,” I said with emphatic approval.

“Well, you know us. We don’t do anything halfway, my brutha and I.”

“You’re not kidding.” And I certainly *had* noticed. But not in the sandwich-making realm...until today. How good it was to know these two. I fixed a plate and went to sit down at the table. The boys joined me soon after, and we dug in. The room was silent except for the background music and the crunching of chips until I spoke up.

“Have you guys gone to the station to look at that guy’s mugshot yet?” I asked, not really wanting the discussion to get serious, but needing to know.

Emmett’s jaw clenched and he stopped chewing for a moment. Edward took that as his cue and answered, “Yes...and we’ve seen him on the news quite a few times. They’re really trying to make people aware that he’s around.”

Emmett finally finished chewing and swallowed gruffly, adding, “I almost wish it weren’t quite so public...that scum has probably watched the news and is hiding. I just wanna hit him blindsided, you know?”

Edward nodded in quiet understanding, and I said, “How do *you* think Rosalie’s doing? We haven’t seen each other as much as I like this week. It’s been busy.”

His whole face changed as he thought of Rosalie. With a glow in his eyes, Emmett said, “She’s doing okay. My Rosie’s a fighter, and we’re gonna get through this...together. Whatever it takes. She kind of needs for things to be as normal as possible right now, so...I’m tryin’ to just help her have fun...to feel comfortable in her own skin again.”

He was silent for a moment, but neither of us spoke, because we knew Emmett wasn’t finished. He finally spoke quietly, “I freakin’ love that girl, you guys. I know it’s weird, but she walked into my world and changed everything.”

I looked over at Edward, and he was just staring across the table at Emmett, his brow creased slightly. Is he concerned for Emmett? I assumed it might be because Em was making himself so vulnerable. Then, when Edward turned and looked at me, I think my heart might’ve ceased beating. I watched as his gaze seemed to travel over my every feature, and when his eyes finally settled on mine, they seemed to be pleading with me. He smiled slightly and blushed again, acknowledging that he’d been caught. When I smiled back, his eyes lightened visibly, and he turned back toward Emmett while running his fingers through his mop of hair and letting out a sigh.

Em dipped his head once and smirked in silent communication with Edward, and then said, “Hey, I’m gonna finish eating in my room and get a few things done. I’m takin’ Rosalie to play pool tonight. I just want her to relax and have fun. I’ll see ya later, Bella.”

Surprised by his quick exit, I answered hastily, “Bye, Em.”

“Have fun studying,” he said loudly over his shoulder.

As Edward and I continued eating, he asked how the meeting with the judge had gone today. I explained everything to him, and added that the hearing was scheduled for Monday.

He gulped down the food in his mouth and asked in surprise, “So soon?”

“Well, because I was granted an emergency protective order, I could ask for a fast hearing. I thought it would be best not to wait.” His response made me nervous. What was he thinking?

“Do you have someone to represent you at the hearing already?” he queried.

“Well...no, but I’ve been thinking about it. I definitely need someone. I thought I’d probably go and ask the Dartmouth Judicial Committee what they could suggest.”

Edward’s eyes were intense, and he seemed almost anxious. He cleared his throat and then swallowed. Then he said quietly, “I’d really like it if you’d let my family’s attorney represent you.”

“Oh! I couldn’t possibly...” *How much would that cost?!* “That’s just too...”

“Bella. Please let us do this for you. My dad has already spoken with her, and this type of case is something she’s had...plenty of experience with. She’s always done well for our family, and we’d *all* like for her to help you.”

“But, Charlie...we can’t...afford...” *How humiliating to have to say all this!*

“No, Love. You misunderstand. My family would like to support you in this by taking care of this for you. It wouldn’t cost you anything. Please. Please let us...”

I couldn’t speak. What was he saying? The Cullen Family was going to pay for the their attorney to travel from Maine to New Hampshire to represent the poor, scholarship-girl, Bella Swan—as a charity case?

“Edward, I...I don’t *know*. That’s just so *huge*. Why in the world would your family want to do this for me? They’ve never even *met* me! Who am I to *them*?”

He was quiet, his eyes downcast. “Do you remember the poem I read at our first L. S. meeting last week?”

“Umm, yes...what does that have to do...” I stopped asking as he reached for my hand.

Taking it tenderly, and wrapping it in his much larger, stronger hands, he answered, “You’re the one who’s finally heard my *song*. I know...I know it’s hard for you to understand. I hardly understand it all myself, but—the very, very first moment I saw you, walking to class with Jacob on the first day—you *awoke* something in me. I assumed you two were together, and did my best to...well, to avoid you. But, it was impossible. There is something in you that has been drawing me in, more and more deeply, and I can’t fight it. I don’t *want* to fight it.

“And,” he continued, the emotion raw in his voice now, “the more I share with you...the more I hear your thoughts, your passion, your ideals...the stronger the connection. Add to that the way I understand your hurt—because of Alice—and, I can’t...”

Silence.

He was struggling so deeply with his words. His forehead was creased almost as if his thoughts caused him pain, and he seemed to be furiously concentrating on his fingers as they delicately danced on my small open palm while he cradled my hand in his other. It was almost like he was playing music on my skin. I shivered and pressed him to continue softly, “You can’t...what?”

His voice was a whisper. “I can’t be without you.”

My eyes widened, and my lips parted in surprise. That was not what I was expecting him to say.

When he looked up at me, his eyes searched mine with an intensity I’d never seen. I was completely undone by his probing eyes, and my heart faltered again. I had no idea what to say to him. He was feeling the same way I was, apparently. The desire to be together was immense, but confusing...although *Edward* certainly didn’t seem confused. He seemed to know exactly what he wanted.

As I sat there, all of these thoughts converging in my head, Edward continued softly, “My family...they know that. They’ve all heard it in my voice when we’ve spoken. We’re all very close, and...I’ve just...I’ve never felt like this before. Never known anyone like you. And because they can tell how important you are to *me*, you have become important to *them*. Does that make sense?”

I stuttered my answer, “I...I...I *think* so.”

He seemed determined to set my heart at ease. “Please, Bella. Don’t be afraid of anything I’ve said. I know you’re not ready to give someone your heart. I know you have a lot of healing to go through first. I said I’d never pressure you, and I meant that. But that doesn’t mean that I can keep myself from falling in love with *you* in the meantime. If you need me to, I’ll keep it quiet. I’ll never bother you. I’ll never ask for any more than you can give...but I want you to understand that everything I do for you is because you’re more important to me than I ever imagined possible. I want you to be whole again, but...somehow, I want it to be *my love* that makes you whole. I see and hear about the way you give yourself to others—your family, the

kids at the club, Rosalie—the way *you* love so selflessly. And I believe you deserve to be loved like that, too. I...I want you to dance through life...with *me*.” He looked down at the floor and I may have only imagined him whispering breathlessly, “...and never let go.”

I nodded, still unable to find words to respond. He had answered all of my questions...everything I’d wondered about from the very beginning. The deep well that was Edward was...*love*. *He loved me*. It was still hard for me to understand. Especially when I had learned to believe that love was selfish, cruel, and merciless. But what Edward was showing me was undeniably, categorically different. It was selfless, patient, tender and kind.

And I think I’d recognized it, and even *welcomed* it as long as I didn’t label it, simply because the *label*—“love”—had been so twisted and perverted by Josh. But I knew—I knew in the depths of my wounded and terrified heart—that this was different somehow. As much as I knew my heart wasn’t capable of giving the love back yet, I knew that I wanted the love that Edward was offering me. I wanted it more than anything I’d ever known.

If he said he wouldn’t pressure me, could I believe that completely? I knew I needed to say something to him, but I was sort of drowning in the shock of hearing Edward express all this, while his hands guarded and warmed my own. I turned my hand over in his and took hold of one of his hands, squeezing it gently. “Thank you, Edward...that’s all I can say right now. It’s...it’s a lot to take in.”

He covered my hand with his other. “I know it is...and I’m sorry for that. I wasn’t planning on sharing all of this with you, but I need you to be able to let my family help you through this...and it seemed like the only way. You can just forget what I said, and we’ll leave things as they’ve been, if you want.” He offered me that crooked smile of his at those ridiculous words.

I smirked at him and cocked my head to the side. “Those aren’t the kind of words that can really be forgotten...but, for now... I think I’d like... I think I *need* to keep things as much like they’ve been as we can. Not because...well, *just* because it feels so perfect and safe...just like it is.”

“I understand. I like that you said it feels perfect and safe, at least. I think it feels perfect, too, and I always want you to feel safe. So we’ll keep it like this as long as you need it to be like this. I just want to be with you...and I’ll be satisfied in your company any way I can get it.” He chuckled, “That sounds awful, doesn’t it?”

“No, Edward. It sounds just right. Thank you.” I smiled at him, and my heart felt warmed by the emerald fire in his eyes.

He kissed my forehead and said, “Let’s clean up and—as Emmett would say—get our study on.”

I snorted slightly as I stood up and picked up my plate, feeling the blood rush to my face. “Umm, maybe you should just let Emmett say it.”

He smirked at me and kicked my backside as he walked toward the kitchen.

I liked this boy...a lot.

#####

Chapter: 25

I love your sense of humor

I love to see you smile

I love your sense of balance

I love your sense of time...

But it's your kindness that shines so bright.

David Wilcox

Chapter Twenty-three: Comfortable

Edward and I studied together in companionable silence all evening while we listened to his iPod playing a fabulous variety of music. It was so easy to be with him, and I was so thankful that he said he'd be willing to let things remain the same. I wasn't sure *how* that would work exactly, but, with Edward, I felt safe enough to try. If things got complicated or confusing, I'd just talk to him. He seemed to understand me well enough.

His family wanted to *help* me, he said, just because I was important to him. Wow. That kind of family relationship might be hard to penetrate. What if they met me and someone—or all of them—decided they *didn't* like me? I wouldn't have to wait long, I guessed. Alice would be my first test...in less than 24 hours. I would hate to be a disappointment, but I felt like that was an inevitability. I couldn't possibly be what they expected and hoped for their son. Still, they were supportive, for now, because—for some reason I couldn't fathom—I made Edward happy.

I looked over at him every once in a while, and he really *did* look content as he sat and studied just a few feet away from me. Every time he got up, he paused to see if I needed anything, and found some way to touch me tenderly before he left the room, silently communicating his feelings. Once he tucked a loose strand of hair behind my ear, once, he touched my knee softly, and once he squeezed my foot. I think that was my favorite. Playful, but the tenderness still spoke what words would've only complicated.

I'd been there, sitting in the chair near him, my feet propped lazily on the bed in his study for a

little over two hours when he stood to leave again. His bare feet brought him to stand quietly beside me, but I couldn't look up just yet. My fingers were typing furiously on my laptop, needing to complete the thought that was pouring onto the screen through them before it was gone. I'd never be able to put it so well again. I bit my lip, eager to look up and see what he wanted, and anxious that he'd think I was irritated by his interruption.

"Sorry," I breathed out as I stuck out my lower lip and blew some of my unruly hair back up off of my face. I turned my face up to him then, and saw that lopsided half-smile that created a whirling dervish in my stomach every time I saw it. His eyes were a darker green than I'd seen before, and they took me by surprise.

"I..." he paused and cleared his throat, and then sat down by my feet on the bed. He looked down for a moment, studying his long, nimble fingers, and sighed quietly before he made eye contact with me again. When he did, though, it was with a lighter expression. "I was just going to get myself some water and make a quick phone call. Would you like something?"

"Umm, yes, actually. Water sounds good to me, too...with ice, please." I smiled at his thoughtfulness.

"Okay...I'll be back in a few minutes...sorry to interrupt you. You looked like the words were really flowing."

I chuckled, "They were, but don't worry. I finished my thought before I let you interrupt."

He leaned in a little as he began to stand and said, "You know, you are simply adorable when you're concentrating."

I immediately felt the warmth as the deep pink coloring washed over my cheeks. I tried to play it off. "Well, *that's* annoying, because I want to be taken seriously as a writer, Edward."

He laughed playfully at my effort and said as he walked out of the door, "Well, then don't ever let anyone see you concentrate. It blows your cover."

He thinks I looked adorable just now. I wondered briefly if he knew how often I stole glances in his direction to see his face with those unbelievably sexy dark frames. He looked so intelligent and studious. With his rugged features and unkempt hair all over the place, it was almost too much. I caught myself imagining once—*imagining* being the operative word there—that he looked at me sideways through the glasses and bit his lip seductively. My heart had raced at the thought, before I'd been able to get serious about my work again. *Why had I let my mind go that direction? We weren't talking about that kind of love anyway...were we?*

His voice in the other room pulled my attention back as he spoke to someone on the phone, but then my mind drifted back to the earlier conversation I'd witnessed through my window. Had he been getting bad news? Was there some sort of problem that he hadn't shared with me? I knew I shouldn't be listening, and I silently chastised myself, but he wasn't talking very quietly...so it was hard not to hear.

“Hey, Mom... Yes... Oh, I know... And thank you *both*... Yeah, your support and your help are a real blessing right now... I *was*, Mom. Dad’s always been good at hearing that in my voice... It’s not easy for me to talk about... Just, so *much*... Too much for *anyone* to have to go through, but if you knew *her!* ... Right, and it makes me really...” His words trailed off momentarily. His mom had a lot to say, and I heard him agreeing and chuckling quietly from time to time. “... Yes, and so I’m that much *more protective*... Right. And I just feel like I need to be involved in any way that I can... *Well*, that’s what I wanted to talk with him about... Is he available?... Yes, I hope you’ll get to meet her someday, too... You’ll really like her, Mom.”

A few moments passed before I heard him again, more reserved in his tone. “Hi, Dad... Yes, thanks, much better... Well, thank you for understanding... Yes. I asked her if she’d be comfortable with that a little while after you and I spoke.” I could hear the smile in his voice as he added, “It took some convincing, but she said it would be all right... Yes... and they’re understandable concerns. I don’t want her to be uncomfortable at all... I agree. It *is* important... I’m just really thankful for the support, Dad... *Very* different... Oh, I hope so.”

I heard a smile in his voice, but then a deep, tense sigh cut into the pleasant conversation. “Well, that’s the difficulty. Apparently she’s been granted an emergency order, and the hearing will take place on Monday... Yes, sir. *This* Monday... Well, you’re right. That *is* good, and we should take advantage of that if she’s able to... All right. Yes, Dad... Okay. We’ll be waiting to hear from you then... I know... And thanks, Dad. You, too... Bye.”

So it had been his dad on the phone... and talking about *me* had been what had caused him so much tension. I felt awful. It hadn’t occurred to me that he was dealing with his own hurt and anger on my behalf—other than the one time he’d cried for me. Since then, he’d just been sweet and encouraging. But in that moment, I understood that I had been a fool to think that he just let everything roll off.

My mind flashed back to the conversation I’d overheard him having with Emmett that night in the hospital. They had shared their anger and dealt with those things together, I realized. And... I guess I’d known it must be that way all along, but I hadn’t thought about how it *really* affected them. I was suddenly *intensely* thankful that they had each other, because I knew that for *me*, talking through things made all the difference in the world. It was crucial to have someone to listen. And Emmett made it possible for me to have Edward. I’d have to *hug* that boy next time I saw him.

Edward came in with our water just then, and I snapped out of my wandering thoughts. I knew I wasn’t supposed to have heard any of that, so I decided to just let Edward do the talking. As I reached for the water, I smiled my thanks.

Edward sat down next to my feet on the bed again, after he set his own cup down on his desk. He picked my feet up and set them in his lap with a quiet, “May I?” I could only blush and nod my assent. He began kneading the soles of my feet with his strong fingers as he spoke. “I just spoke with my parents,” he began. “I hated to do it tonight, but... if you need Ms. Johannsen, our attorney, on Monday, it couldn’t wait.”

He paused, waiting for me to communicate that this was okay to talk about. I dipped my head again, and looked at him expectantly. “Well, I think your entire weekend is now going to be monopolized by the Cullen family...I *seriously* hope that’s all right with you. My father is contacting Sarah...Ms. Johannsen now, but she had already warned us that this was a possibility, so she won’t be surprised. Dad said that she’d probably arrive on Saturday morning, and want to take a few hours of your time that afternoon, as well as Sunday afternoon, possibly. I’m afraid between that and Alice’s visit, you won’t have any time...” He looked uncertain for a moment. Furrowing his brow and biting his lip, he pressed on, “Of course, the meetings are very important, and I’m sure Alice would understand if you just needed to rest...”

Silly Edward. I held my hand up to tell him not to say another word. “I told you I don’t have any plans, Edward. And I’m sure, that if I’ve got to sit and discuss all of this...*trash*, then I’ll welcome the distraction that your “feisty and exuberant” sister will provide. And besides, I’m fairly certain I’ll need a little hand-holding, and definitely several of your hugs before it’s all over, so—if it’s okay with *you*, I’d like to be near you as much as possible.” *Did I just say all of that—out loud? Was that too much?*

The look on Edward’s face at the moment convinced me that—in fact—what I had said was apparently *exactly right*. His eyes widened and then scrunched with those insanely beautiful laugh lines as his face broke into the widest smile I’d ever seen. Seriously, the glow could’ve rivaled the sun at that moment, and it was contagious. I couldn’t help but grin back as he replied, “Well then, I’m confident that we can work that out.”

His fingers continued massaging my feet, spending careful time on each of my toes as we discussed plans for the weekend. We wanted Alice to enjoy the area, but the main goal was spending time together...getting to know each other. And allowing Edward a chance to get to know Jasper.

After another twenty minutes or so, I regretfully informed him that I needed to be heading back and getting to bed. He walked me to my room as we talked about how things might have gone with Emmett and Rosalie.

As we approached my door, we heard laughter coming from the room. Smiling at each other, we silently agreed that it would be best to just say good night in the hall, so that this didn’t turn into another lengthy visit. He pulled me into a hug, and I nestled myself in for a few moments. Quietly, I ventured, “I like this spot...I like that my head fits right *here*.” I pressed my head into the spot where his chest and shoulder met.

I felt Edward’s body stiffen briefly as he sucked in a breath. Then, sweetly, his velvety voice answered, “I *so* like when you’re *in* that spot, Bella. You’re welcome to stand here *just like this* anytime you like.”

I turned my head up to smile up at him, and saw a bit of amusement in his eyes accompanied by something I had learned earlier tonight might actually be love. Suddenly overwhelmed by his friendship, his presence, his constancy, and his...*nearness*, I squeezed him as hard as I could. He

shook silently as he laughed, “Bella, Love. Need...to...breathe.”

I reluctantly released my iron grip, and he smiled at me with complete devotion. His hand cupped the side of my face as his thumb traced a line along my cheekbone, and he stepped back just enough to be able to bend his lips to my forehead.

This kiss was different than the others, though. Each time he’d pecked the top of my head, it had been just that. A peck. Communicating that he cared about me, and that he was a sweet guy.

This? This spoke volumes more. It wasn’t tentative, but it was gentle. His lips found my skin and warmly, tenderly, they pressed against it and remained there. His thumb continued stroking my cheek, and then he tipped my chin up to look deeply into my eyes as he pulled his mouth away. His emerald eyes bore into mine intently, and he whispered, “Good night, Love.”

I shivered as I stood there looking into his eyes, and the corner of his mouth lifted when he noticed. “Are you cold?” he asked.

I was sure he knew the answer. “No.”

His smile spread across his entire face then, “Well, I hope you have a restful night, Bella. You’ll need it.”

“I don’t doubt it...You rest well, too,” I whispered.

His hand found my fingers and squeezed them gently as he looked into my eyes meaningfully and said, “Sweet dreams...and tell Em I’ll wait for him a few minutes if he wants to walk back with me.”

And then he left.

I knocked on the door before I entered, and found the two of them standing in each others’ arms beside Rosalie’s bed. She was smiling with her eyes closed, her head resting on Emmett’s shoulder. He whispered something to her and her smile grew even more pronounced. She stepped back and mouthed yes silently.

I gave Emmett the message from Edward, and he nodded. He kissed Rosalie on the cheek and then stepped over to me. “Bellaluna!” Wrapping me in his mammoth arms, he lifted my feet off the ground briefly. “How’d my boy do?” he asked.

“Just fine,” I grinned. “He’s pretty wonderful, Em...and I’m glad you guys have each other.”

“Hey,” he quoted. “A brutha’s love is...a brutha’s love.” Then he added, “I’m pretty glad he found *you*, Little Bella.”

Emmett walked to the door with a spring in his step and paused before he opened it. “Good night, ladies. We love ya both. You know that right?”

“Yeah,” I answered. “Yep,” Rose said at the same time.

“Well, good night then. My work is done.” He backed out of the door and closed it quietly, grinning at us.

We turned and looked at each other, smiling from ear to ear and shrugged.

* * *

Friday just flew by. The best part of the day (until I connected with the Cullens) was actually being with Jacob, believe it or not. I don’t know whether it was because he’d decided to stop making things awkward, or because I just felt so relieved to not have to mention my weekend plans to him. He’d informed me on the way to homework club that he was heading home for the weekend, to meet up with two of his old buddies, Quil and Embry. He was excited about seeing them again, because they each went to a different school, and had actually moved there off campus. Quil now lived in Philly, and Embry in State College, PA. They were rarely all “back home” at the same time.

He went on and on about his weekend plans, talking and laughing about memories that resurfaced, and he didn’t stop talking until we reached the housing complex. The time with the kids was great as usual, and after all of our hugs and high fives, we were out the door by 5:05. Jacob was eager to get back to campus.

I was, too, but I didn’t say anything about it. I just cranked up the radio and we sang at the top of our lungs. It was fun. I didn’t even hear the phone ringing as it lay on the seat beside me. In fact, if it hadn’t vibrated its way over to my thigh, I might have missed the call entirely. But I grabbed it suddenly and flipped it open without looking to see who it was. “Hold on a sec!” I shouted, giggling at Jake as he continued serenading the neighborhood dogs. I smacked him on the shoulder and nodded toward the phone as he laughed loudly and took the cue to shut up.

Turning down the music, I began again. “Sorry about that. Hello?”

“Bella?” Edward was laughing into the phone.

“Hey, Edward!” My emotions were soaring. Jacob turned and began staring out the window.

Snickering quietly, Edward continued, “Are you...traveling with a hound dog?”

I totally guffawed as I answered. “No...though I’m sure the neighborhood dogs were joining in with us. The hound dog *you* heard was actually Jacob.”

Edward snorted and said, “What I wouldn’t give to have been a fly on the...huh. Can I just say on the window? That was absolutely...*terrible*.”

I laughed at his need to adjust the idiom to suit the cab of my truck. “Well, it was probably worse

when I was singing with him.” My passenger turned and looked directly at me, nodding yes emphatically, and grinning. “Are Alice and Jasper there yet?”

“They arrived about half an hour ago, actually. I thought maybe you’d like to walk back to the dorms with Jacob, and get changed. They’ll be getting settled here. I can pick you up in about 20 minutes and walk you back over to our place. Once we meet everyone, we’d like to grab something to eat. Does that sound okay?”

“I think so, but I’m not sure if Jacob is heading back to the dorms or if he’s just jumping in his car and heading home. He’s got a long way to go.” I turned my head toward Jacob with the question in my eyes.

“Get real, Bells. You thought I’d want to travel in *this* get up? I’m going back to my room first.” He smirked at me as he turned back to the window, watching the scenery pass.

“Okay then. I’ll walk back with Jake and see you later.”

“I can’t wait, Bella.” Edward’s voice very nearly melted me.

“Me either. Bye.”

“Bye.”

I clicked the phone shut and tossed it back on the seat.

Jacob continued looking out the window but said, “Going somewhere with Cullen, huh?” He didn’t sound sad or jealous, just kind of...resigned.

“Yeah. His little sister is in town, so we’re going to go out to eat and stuff. You know.” I tried my best not to make him feel uncomfortable.

“Well, I hope you have a really good time,” he shrugged. I smiled over at him.

“Hey, Bells, have you found a lawyer or somethin’ for Monday? ‘Cause I can talk to my uncle while I’m home...”

“Umm, actually, yeah. I have. I’m supposed to meet with her tomorrow and Sunday afternoon to prepare.” *Don’t ask how I found her. Don’t ask don’t ask don’t ask.*

“Cool. Glad you got somebody...can, umm...can we turn the music up again?” he asked.

“Sure.” I turned the radio back on, and we heard “*Time keeps on slippin’, slippin’, slippin’ ...into the future...*” At first, neither of us sang along. We just smiled at each other. Jacob’s hands started drumming on the dashboard. By the time we got to the chorus, we were both—again—singing so loudly I figured my ears would be ringing all weekend. But The Steve Miller Band was worth it.

We jumped out of the cab quickly when we got back, both eager to get started on our weekend. It was getting *cold*. As we hurried up to Mass Row, I impulsively reached over and gave Jacob a hug. “Thanks for everything, Jake. I couldn’t do homework club or sing classic rock too loudly without you.”

He squeezed me back, saying cheerfully, “I love it, Bells. Wouldn’t have it any other way.” He was smiling when I pulled back and looked up at him.

But only a few seconds later, after we said our goodbyes, his shoulders sagged as he walked away.

What was I going to do about that? I didn’t want him being all kinds of sad. He was one of my very favorite people to be around. Sure, sure—I *smiled at myself for even picking up on his relaxed manner of speaking*—he was completely different than Edward Cullen, but he was still important to me. Well, I wouldn’t have time to worry about that *this* weekend.

I changed clothes relatively quickly, and pulled the sides of my hair back into a barrette, letting my hair fall down over my shoulders in loose curls. I knew it would be chilly that evening, but figured that we’d be inside most of the time, and my coat and scarf should take care of the rest. So, my thin blue silk peasant blouse was what I decided to wear with my khakis. Rosalie had said one day last week that the blouse was super flattering. That’s what I wanted for tonight.

As I was coming out of the bathroom to peek down out of my window and see if Edward had arrived, Rosalie came in rubbing her hands together and breathing on them. “Ugh...I can’t seem to get warm.”

“Yeah, it’s getting cold fast for sure. Why don’t you run your hands under the hot water?”

“Ooh, good idea,” she smirked. “Are you on your way over to the boys’?”

“Yeah, in just a minute or two. Just waiting for Edward to come and get me. He’s walking with me.” I had just finished putting on my clear lip gloss and was sticking it into my pocket.

“Emmett said you guys’ll pick me up in about 30 minutes.” Her face was suddenly etched with concern. “Bella?” she asked hesitantly. “Are these guys for real? I mean, they seem to think of *everything*. I just...I enjoy it, and Em makes me feel...like I’m worth something again, but...” her voice trailed off. She bit her lip slightly as she focused her eyes on mine. “I don’t want to start to depend on it and then have it...disappear. Surely they’ll get tired of this—of us” she studied her feet for a moment before looking back up to meet my eyes. “Don’t you think?”

She had voiced my own fears. But then I had to remember that time and time again, as soon as the fears began to surface, Edward would do something to prove to me that they were founded on nothing. He wanted me to know he was here...and that wasn’t going to change. I’d truly begun to believe him. “I think that their goal isn’t to comfort us indefinitely, but to help us while we heal...I know Edward says he’ll be here as long as it takes, but...something he said last night

makes me think that—eventually—he’s hoping for something more.” I shrugged.

“And you’re okay with that?” she asked, surprised.

“Well, I’m more than okay with the fact that he’s not going anywhere now, and...I’m even okay with how his feelings are changing and growing...as long as I don’t feel pressured. If—if one day I *could* love again—I can’t see it being anyone but Edward that I would love.”

She nodded in agreement and understanding. “I can see that. Emmett is so different from anybody I’ve ever been with...If things had been different, I know he would’ve been the one that stopped me in my tracks.”

“But don’t you think it’ll get better?” My heart felt like it would break at the hopelessness I saw on her face. “You don’t think you’ll ever get there?” I asked.

“I don’t know...if this Lonnie scum isn’t put away for life...I just don’t know. But in the meantime, I do want to be around Emmett every second I can. You know?” She looked at me like she was expecting me to tell her she was crazy.

“I know *exactly* what you mean. I always hate to leave Edward...I just feel so safe with him...and so much better about myself.”

“Yeah! And that’s got to be worth something!” Rosalie said, smirking. She looked more than relieved that I’d actually agreed. Something had shifted. It was as if she suddenly knew she wasn’t alone, and she was daring to hope that spending time with Emmett would really help her heal.

Then her facial expression changed. She was on a mission. “Can I help you with your eyes? I wanna make them stand out...it’ll look awesome with that blouse. Promise.”

“I guess...” I said. Five minutes later, I was ready to go, and Edward was outside waiting.

Stepping out of the warm building, I was hit with a gust of icy wind. I pulled my coat around my body tightly, and watched as Edward turned toward me at the sound of the door. His hair was whipping around, adding to his already almost inhuman beauty. I was absolutely stunned. He was too handsome for *my* own good. He had his hands in the pockets of his charcoal gray pea coat, and he was wearing a lighter gray turtleneck sweater with faded jeans. I stood still and just took it all in.

His eyes were wide as he walked toward me, arm outstretched to take my hand in his. When we were only a few feet apart, he said, “Bella. *Wow*. You look just *radiant*...amazing.”

I reached for his hand, but couldn’t speak. All I wanted to do was tangle my fingers in his wild hair and kiss him until I couldn’t see straight. *Where had that come from? Snap out of it, Bella...and say something.* “You look really nice, too, Edward.” I had just barely forced that out, and I wondered if he could sense how uncomfortable I was. I couldn’t stop staring at his mouth.

He wrapped his other hand around my small one as well and brought it to his lips for a chaste kiss. Smiling deeply at me, he said, "Let's get inside. Alice is about to burst at the seams waiting for your arrival." We started walking, our fingers interlaced sweetly.

"I hope I won't disappoint her," I ventured. *It may as well be out there.*

He stopped in his tracks momentarily. "Never," he breathed out forcefully. He turned me to face him and said again, with conviction, "You could never disappoint her...she'll love you!"

I shrugged and offered a small smile, "Okay. I guess I'll just have to take your word for it."

Pulling us along, playfully then, he added, "You do that. Trust me on this. The only one I think the jury's out on is this Jasper...though he seems genuine enough."

"But Alice seems to really like him, huh?" I was glad this conversation was moving away from *me*.

"Oh, she is positively glowing. I've never seen her like this."

"Well, what was your first impression?"

"He appears to be the perfect gentleman. He carries her bags, he opens doors for her, waits until she sits to join her, and seems to anticipate her every whim, actually. He really seems to be just what Alice needs." He chuckled and shrugged. "I'm *trying* to find something wrong with him, but...in the last hour, I've appreciated everything he's done for her. And the way he talks to her, too." Almost as an afterthought, he added, "Honestly, it's the way he talks with *all* of us. He's really easy to be around, and Emmett and I both really enjoy his sense of humor...You'll see what I mean."

"But the jury's still out..." I smirked.

"Well, of *course*. This is my baby sister we're talking about, and I've only been around him an hour. First impressions can be deceiving. But I'll try to give him the benefit of the doubt, I suppose."

"Hmm. I'm sure Alice would appreciate that," I said. He agreed sheepishly. In my head, though, his words were running over and over on repeat. *First impressions can be deceiving. First impressions can be deceiving.* How well I knew that. Quieting my thoughts, I squeezed his hand and said, "I'm looking forward to being...*distracted* tonight. I hope we'll all have fun."

"I'll see to it that you have a wonderful time, Bella. Don't worry about that." He flashed that crooked smile that always undid my composure. I wondered if he knew the dazzling effect it had on me. We were coming up to his building quickly, and he squeezed my hand in return, pulling me along as he began almost jogging to the door.

I giggled as we got there, and he led me inside. Breathless, I leaned back against the wall and he stood in front of me. He was close, his eyes fixed on mine intently. A leaf had found its way onto his peacoat in a gust of wind, and I reached up and plucked it off of his shoulder. “This leaf was trying to get into my *spot*,” I said teasingly.

“Well, we can’t have *that*,” he said, his voice low, and gravelly. “You’ve got a few hangers-on in your hair as well. May I?” I nodded quietly, and he slowly, carefully pulled the small pieces of autumn leaves from my hair. Then, he stepped forward, and whispered, “Turn around. I’ll check the back.”

Facing the wall, I tried to relax as his fingers ran through my hair several times. Each time they ghosted over my neck, I shivered slightly. “All finished,” I heard from behind me, his voice somewhat husky now, and deeper than I’d heard it before. When I spun back around, I was surprised by the dark green of his eyes. Gasping quietly, I looked down, away from the intensity.

I felt his fingers on my skin, as he tucked the last few strands of windblown mess in place, and then he tipped my chin up to his face. I couldn’t look away. His eyes bore into mine, and I stood there, speechless. My stomach was doing flipflops. *Is he about to kiss me??* Unable to help myself, I glanced at his lips, just as he licked them nervously and took the bottom one between his teeth. *I think I might actually want him to kiss me.* He leaned in, slowly, and I couldn’t breathe. I closed my eyes as his face inched toward mine, and suddenly I felt his breath on my ear, his chin against my cheek. He spoke slowly, emphasizing every word. “Bella, you are *lovely*.”

I shivered again as I stood there, totally mixed up about what I wanted to happen. . .*needed* to happen. I was frighteningly attracted to him, and yet I knew there was nothing frightening *about* him. It was myself I was afraid of. *Would I lose control? Compromise again? Give up too much of myself?* No, I knew Edward would see to it that I was safe. . .he wanted to take care of me.

Still, there was no denying the attraction—on either of our ends. I could hear him breathing next to me, motionless. Slowly, he took both my hands in his, and threaded his fingers through mine. I realized then, that he was simply overcome, and didn’t know what to do. His desires were conflicting with what he thought I needed. *It’s up to me.*

In that moment, I knew I wasn’t ready for too much, but I longed for him to understand that somewhere in me, the desire for him was just as strong. I turned my head slightly and pressed my lips to his cheek. I heard and felt him inhale sharply, and smiled as I pulled my lips away slowly. He stepped back and looked at me. Written all over his face as he smiled back at me, were surprise and joy. . .and love. There’d be no denying it anymore. . .and honestly, I didn’t want to. I wanted him to look at me like that again and again. *And I don’t think I want him to look at anyone else that way.*

Suddenly, my stomach growled. *Well that was an uninvited interruption!*

Edward chuckled as he released one of my hands and turned toward the stairs. “Bella Swan, I’ve been selfish. I’m keeping you from dinner. . .and from *Alice*.”

We climbed the stairs quickly, neither of us feeling the need or desire to speak. When we reached the door, we heard Emmett’s loud laughter. Edward leaned over conspiratorially and asked in a hushed voice, “Are you ready?”

“Ready or not, here goes!” I opened the door, and was met with a gasp. Then, everything happened at once.

Emmett stood up and said, “Aw, SNAP! Here it comes!”

A very tall and lean man with curly blonde hair joined him, watching with adoration on his handsome face.

I felt Edward press his hand to the small of my back, chuckling as he led me further inside.

And I heard a high-spirited *Squee!* while a dark-haired blur bounced over to me. Suddenly, I was being embraced by the most lively person I’d ever encountered. “Bella! You’re *here!*”

#####

Chapter: 26

And you say ‘Touch me, you can reach me...’

Aw, you can make me want to fly...

You make it seem so easy.

Catch me if I try.

David Wilcox

Chapter Twenty-Four: Music

Alice pulled back and looked me over, bouncing on her tiptoes, her black, spiky hair flipping out in every direction. She was positively glowing, and the energy was flowing off of her in waves.

I was instantly caught up in the excitement, but also a little overwhelmed. Unsure exactly how to respond or what to say, I thought it best to keep things simple. Offering a smile, I tried, “It’s nice to meet you, too, Alice.”

She beamed. Laughing musically, she directed, “Well? Take her coat, Edward! She needs to sit

down so we can talk!”

I heard a soft chuckle behind me as Edward approached and helped me to take my coat off. As he went past, he turned and looked at me with a huge, tight-lipped smile and *wide* eyes, as if to say, “See?? You were warned.” He was laughing quietly as he moved toward his room with my coat.

Alice pulled me over to the couch and sat me down. “You have no idea how much I’ve been looking forward to this,” she gushed. “Jazz has been so patient with me...I’m sure I made him a little crazy in the car.”

With a lazy southern accent, a voice to my right replied, “You know you did no such thing.”

She looked over at the tall curly-headed blond lounging on the sofa next to Emmett. “Bella, this is Jasper.” He was smiling at her like she was the only person in the whole world.

A second later, though, he turned his attention to me and grinned. “Bella. I’m very glad to meet you.”

“You, too, Jasper,” I said. He seemed really laidback, no pressure, just enjoying watching everything unfold. The atmosphere in the room was at once charged with excitement and totally comfortable.

Emmett stood up then, grinning at me. “Want somethin’ to drink, Bellaluna? Diet Coke?”

“Yeah, actually...that’d be great,” I said. He high-fived me as he walked past, waggling his eyebrows at me.

“So!” Alice began again. “Edward’s told me a little about you,” she paused and caught his disapproving eye. “Okay, a lot, but not nearly enough. He said we’ve got a few things in common...but I knew that we’d hit it off anyway. I just know we’ll be great friends. You’re just...right.” She leaned in, resting her hand sweetly on my knee for a second, and her eyes looked into mine with empathy. Pulling her legs up under her Indian-style then, she quirked an eyebrow and whispered, “Is he too protective? Because I can make him back off.”

I laughed quietly, completely believing her. She might be a little less than five feet tall, but she had a commanding presence. “No...he’s...he’s doing everything just right, actually.” I let my mind wander back to the lobby where just a few minutes ago, we’d almost kissed, but he’d held back and let me set the pace for us. *The perfect gentleman.*

Noticing the wistful smile spread across my face, she laughed her tinkling laugh beside me, pulling me out of my reverie, and whispered, “He *is* pretty amazing, isn’t he?”

I blushed, wishing that for once I was able to control that reflex, and she leaned back. “He’s a total gentleman...and I’m more thankful than I can express that we met.”

“I am, too,” she beamed. “I’ve been waiting for him to meet you for a long time.”

“Slow down, Baby girl,” Jasper chuckled beside us. “We don’t want to overwhelm her.”

“I know, Jazz,” she crooned. “But she’ll forgive me. Like I said, future BFF here.”

I couldn’t help but agree with a grin and a nod, only slightly perplexed about where my certainty came from. Meeting Alice was a little like how meeting Emmett had been for me. As a friend, you were either in or out, and this girl had me. I could tell she’d be a good friend, and I was eager to get to know her better. And to find out more about her history...especially what it was like growing up with Edward.

We all enjoyed a little small talk then, once we were joined by Edward, and Emmett brought me my drink. Alice and I talked about what we were studying, what we enjoyed doing to relax, and shared a bit about our families.

Edward had some of the same basic questions for Jasper, and we all learned that he had grown up in Texas, where both his parents still lived. A lover of lines and structures that “struck a chord or had the power to create a distinctive mood,” he was studying architecture. What I noticed Edward liked best, though, was that Jasper was a songwriter, who often played his guitar and sang at open mic nights around the Manhattan borough. As I watched Jasper share, I was struck by his ability to draw everyone in to the conversation and set everyone at ease. It was nice to just sit and listen, and I found myself wondering if his music might have the same effect on people—I suspected probably more so. It was easy to see why Alice thought so much of him.

As we wrapped up our thorough introductions, Emmett was rubbing his hands together excitedly, grinning, his dimples standing out adorably. “I feel a karaoke night comin’!”

His suggestion was met with diverse reactions, though most everyone agreed to it. Alice actually clapped. “Ooh! That’s perfect! It’ll be so much fun!”

I was probably the only one who *wasn’t* thrilled with the idea, honestly. I just didn’t like being the center of attention at all. Still, it sounded fun if the others were excited about it. I’d just sit back and enjoy the show.

We picked up Rosalie and headed to Molly’s. Emmett wanted “good beer and hot wings.” It had a fun tavern-type ambiance, and I thought about the last time we’d been there. We’d had fun, but the night had gone seriously awry after we’d all left. I don’t know if my train of thought was evident on my face, but I got the encouragement I needed on the way in. Em gave me a playful nudge and whispered, “It was a fun time, Bellabella. Think about *that*.” And Edward took my hand as soon as I walked through the door. He held it sweetly under the table until our food came, tracing circles on my palm and giving a squeeze from time to time.

It was easy to avoid thinking about all that had happened last time I’d left here, because this night was so clearly different. The six of us talked and laughed as if we’d all known each other forever. I don’t think that any of the three of us who were new to the group felt for a moment like

we didn't belong. Being together was so easy—so uncomplicated—that I found myself wishing that the night never had to end. Rosalie looked like she was enjoying herself, too. Emmett kept his arm protectively around her after they were done eating, and they seemed to share a lot of inside jokes.

We went from Molly's to a Karaoke bar not too far away. As we got there, an old guy was finishing up, and the crowd went wild. *This guy has a lot of groupies.* He'd been singing Purple Rain, by the Artist-Formerly-Known-as-Prince-When-He-Was-Still-Just-Prince. The announcer's voice ripped through the crowd with a, "Let's hear it one more time for Smokeless Joe!"

I giggled, thinking the name was completely ridiculous, and Edward caught me. His smirk let me know that he agreed, absolutely. "You don't want to do this, do you, Bella?" he asked gently.

"Not really," I answered, "but I'm looking forward to watching everyone else. Are *you* going to sing, Edward?"

"I was thinking about it. For you, if you don't mind..." His eyes were hopeful as he watched my face for a reaction.

I swallowed as the blood rushed to my face. "You wouldn't feel uncomfortable doing that in front of all these people?" I asked in shock.

"Well, I don't *know* all of these people...and the ones that I *do* know wouldn't be the least bit surprised that I sang to you."

I stammered a moment, searching for words. "Well, if...if you *want* to."

"I do, Bella..." he whispered.

"Bella, are you going to sing??" an upbeat voice sliced into my senses. Alice was grinning as she eyed me enthusiastically.

"I...I don't really do center stage," I said.

"Oh." She only seemed disappointed for a fraction of a second. "Okay!" And she bounced back over to Jasper's side.

We got the list of songs and sat down at our table, almost everyone drinking a little. Edward noticed that I ordered a virgin daiquiri, and he winked at me as he ordered a ginger ale. He could make me comfortable anywhere. *I want to kiss him again.*

"Aww, *yeah!*" Emmett shouted as he jumped out of his seat, almost knocking it backwards. He was over talking to the disc jockey in three seconds flat.

The dj's voice boomed into the rowdy hall again, "All right, now. We've got a live one for

you...Everybody give it up for Emmett!”

The spotlight shone down, and Emmett was standing there, head down. He looked almost benign...until the music started. His head snapped up, and his hips started rocking. “*I’m too sexy for my love, too sexy for my love. Love’s going to leave me..*” I was surrounded by fits of laughter, giggles, whistles, and catcalls. What a show! Rose was on her feet, bouncing, with her fingers in her mouth. I should’ve known—if anybody in my acquaintance could do one of those insanely loud, hear-it-across-the-football-field whistles—it’d be Rosalie.

When he came back to the table, he fist-bumped his boys and slid into his chair next to Rosalie. “Think I’m hot, Rosie?” he asked loudly.

“Enh...it was all right,” she smirked. “Cute, I’ll give you. Hot...I don’t know.”

“C’mon, Girl! You’re killin’ me! Let’s see *you* up there!”

I wasn’t sure she’d do it, but she downed the rest of her drink quickly and pushed back her chair, stomping over to the dj. I didn’t know if Emmett had expected a funny, sexy little number to compete with his own, or a song from her heart, but we got blown away in the next few moments by pure, unadulterated angst and rage. Her voice was beautiful, but the message of hate in the song was clear. I don’t even think Alanis Morissette sang it with this much attitude.

*Do I stress you out
My sweater is on backwards and inside out
And you say how appropriate
I don't want to dissect everything today
I don't mean to pick you apart you see
But I can't help it
There I go jumping before the gunshot has gone off
Slap me with a splintered ruler
And it would knock me to the floor if I wasn't there already
If only I could hunt the hunter
And all I really want is some patience
A way to calm the angry voice
And all I really want is deliverance
Do I wear you out
You must wonder why I'm so relentless and all strung out
I'm consumed by the chill of solitary
I'm like Estella
I like to reel it in and then spit it out
I'm frustrated by your apathy
And I am frightened by the corrupted ways of this land
If only I could meet the Maker...*

And as the song went on, Rosalie seemed lost in it. I looked over at Emmett, and his face was riddled with conflicting emotions. There was sadness for Rosalie, and there were anger and

indignation that someone would dare make her feel like that. But I also noticed moments of awe and adoration...he was proud of her for getting up there and fighting it out like that—for voicing it. And it was crystal clear the boy was in love.

Edward reached over and put his arm around me, running his fingers through my curls again. When I looked over at him, he smiled tenderly and said, “Emmett’s going to be with her through all of this...don’t worry.” *How had he known what I was thinking?*

Overcome with appreciation for his understanding, I leaned into him and rested my head on his shoulder. He let out a peaceful sigh as I snuggled in. “How do you like your spot from the side?” he asked. I could hear the smile in his voice.

“It’s a magic spot, Edward. I like it no matter how I get here.” His arm squeezed me into a hug for a moment, and we listened together as Rosalie finished.

*...If only I could kill the killer
All I really want is some peace man
a place to find a common ground
And all I really want is a wavelength
All I really want is some comfort
A way to get my hands untied
And all I really want is some justice...*

When she got off the stage, she walked over to the table with an attitude, the anger still evident on her face. “*That felt good.*”

Emmett stood up and faced her. “You. Frickin’. Rock.” He pulled her into a hug, and closed his eyes.

When they sat back down, she breathed out, “I need another drink.” Then, she turned her attention on me. “Bella, you *are* going to sing, right?”

“What? No!” I squeaked, terrified. *Somebody! Get the attention off me NOW!*

“C’mon! You sing in the room all the time! And I can’t tell you how great it felt to rip into the injustice up there...cathartic!”

Encouragement was pouring toward me from every side of the table. Edward squeezed my shoulder gently.

That was when Alice jumped up and said, “Well, it’s my turn now!”

The funk guitar began, and I screamed. Alice’s voice surprised me. It had a clear, bell-like quality, but slid up and down to the notes in a total confidence. She began with “*I’m not aware of too many things...I know what I know if you know what I mean...*” I was sitting straight up, because EDIE BRICKELL ROCKS!

“I *knew* I loved your sister!” Edward was beaming as I continued, “Who comes to a karaoke bar and sings Edie Brickell??? I am *seriously* impressed!” And she was awesome.

The pixie dominated. She held the unwavering attention of every soul in the bar at that moment. I felt Edward’s breath on my ear as he whispered, “Look at Jasper.”

The guy was utterly entranced. No one else existed for him in that moment.

I looked at Edward, and he shrugged, smiling. “He’s a pretty all right guy, I guess...he may be winning me over...slowly.” I laughed at that, because it was *not* slowly. Jasper had won us *all* over. He drew us in...and his devotion to Edward’s little sister was irrefutable.

Alice finished the song with a flourish and bowed dramatically. The mob went wild. Jasper walked up to the stage and met her as she leapt off the stage into his arms, which remained wrapped around her as he walked her back over to us, whispering in her ear the whole way. Her eyes were afire when she got back, and she settled onto Jasper’s lap for a while.

Rosalie grabbed my hand suddenly. “Bella! I got it. It’s just fun! It’s perfect for us, ‘cos we’re fighters. Let’s do it.”

I looked at the list and saw where she was pointing. *Now that is crazy. But if there’s a song I could do...talk about no pressure to sing well.* “I don’t know...”

Everyone was pleading with me, and Edward whispered, “You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to...but I know you could do it.”

“Fine.” *I cannot believe I’m giving in.* But I sure did.

Two minutes later, we were standing on the stage, and the light was blinding me. I could barely make out faces in the crowd. The music started, and I clutched the microphone as if it were my lifeline. I actually think it was, sort of. My eyes flashed over to the screen, and I sang each word, reading it as it came up, though I knew the song by heart. I mean, who didn’t?

Emmett’s shouts of encouragement rang out loud, and I made eye contact with Rosalie. She winked at me to bolster my courage.

Then suddenly, we were joined by a petite bombshell with spiky hair. Alice was with us, dancing her heart out and singing like there was no tomorrow.

*...When a problem comes along
You must whip it
Before the cream sits out too long
You must whip it
When something's going wrong
You must whip it*

I couldn't stand still with all *that* going on beside me. She grabbed my hand, and we danced as we finished the song together.

*now whip it
into shape
shape it up
get straight
go forward
move ahead
try to detect it
it's not too late
to whip it
whip it good
When a good time turns around
You must whip it
You will never live it down
Unless you whip it
No one gets their way
Until they whip it
I say whip it
Whip it good!*

I could feel a drop of perspiration gliding slowly down my back between my shoulder blades but I felt gloriously alive. She squealed and hugged me tightly before she bounced down off the stage back towards the table. When we joined everyone, we fell into our chairs laughing. "Thanks, Rosalie. I needed that." Turning to Alice, I said, "You. Are. Crazy. I think I love you."

She grinned back and said, "And don't you forget it."

We talked for awhile and some others sang, but finally, Edward and Jasper got up and walked over toward the dj together. A few moments later, the dj signaled another man to come over...the club owner? After a short conversation, Edward came back to the table, and Jasper settled himself on a stool on the stage. Alice swooned, totally and completely, when he started singing Jeff Healey's Angel Eyes. I would be lying if I said I could take my eyes off of Jasper while he sang. He was amazing, and all I could think was, "How romantic."

Edward pulled my hand to his lips and kissed it sweetly as Jasper sang, "...*Don't anyone wake me, if it's just a dream. 'Cause she's the best thing ever happened to me...*" And *that* got my attention. The look in Edward's eyes when I turned toward him melted me into an absolute Bella puddle. *I think I'm falling for this boy...please, somebody. Stop me if it's too dangerous, before it's too late.* I didn't hear anything. *No? No objections from anybody? Speak now or forever hold your peace.*

All too soon, Jasper was done, and Edward was standing up. I had thought he was going to sing, but he walked the wrong direction. He was walking toward the back corner of the bar. The announcer's low voice called out, "Now here's something a little different. We've got someone

here who'd like to play his own accompaniment while he serenades us...so, turn your attention to the piano at the back while we listen to Edward." The beam of the spotlight spun, cutting through the murky atmosphere and landed on Edward seated at a piano on a small stage. Alice reached over and squeezed my hand. This would be the first time I'd heard Edward play.

The whole room had gone silent. You could hear a pin drop.

Then, his velvety voice spoke smoothly into the microphone. "This is for Bella."

The first few chords sounded out loudly and clearly, and my heart stopped. *Really? Had I told him I'd always wanted someone to think about me when they heard this? I hadn't! And yet here he is actually singing it for me. On a stage. With a spotlight.*

And his voice was *so* much more soulful than Billy Joel's...but the words! The words I knew by heart.

*She's got a way about her
I don't know what it is
But I know that I can't live without her
She's got a way of pleasin'
I don't know why it is
But there doesn't have to be a reason anywhere
She's got a smile that heals me
I don't know what it is
But I have to laugh when she reveals me
She's got a way of talkin'
I don't know why it is
But it lifts me up when we are walkin' anywhere
She comes to me when I'm feelin' down
Inspires me without a sound
She touches me and I get turned around
She's got a way of showin'
How I make her feel
And I find the strength to keep on goin'
She's got a light around her
And ev'rywhere she goes a million
Dreams of love surround her ev'rywhere
She comes to me when I'm feelin' down
Inspires me without a sound
She touches me, I get turned around oh oh oh*

His fingers danced over the keys gracefully, with strength and agility I'd never imagined. His hair was all over the place, the bronze highlights looking like fire under the lights. A few unruly strands hung in his face, and I was overcome.

*She's got a smile that heals me
I don't know why it is*

*But I have to laugh when she reveals me
She's got a way about her
I don't know what it is
But I know that I can't live without her any way*

As he finished, his head hung down, humbly. Drunk women were screaming their heads off, probably wishing they could take him home with them. Even our table was shouting and cheering loudly.

But I sat there silently.

I was too moved to speak.

As soon as Edward's head came up, his eyes searched the crowd for my face. They found me, and he stood and walked toward me then, vulnerable. I placed my hand on my heart, trying to revive it, I think, and unfolded my legs shakily, standing to greet him.

"Was that okay? Did you like it?" He was actually nervous.

I threw my arms around his neck in answer, and pressed my face to my favorite spot. Squeezing him, I gushed, "*Like* it? Oh, Edward, it was *perfect*. It's one of my all-time favorites. Your voice! You...the way you played! You're incredible...you know that right?"

He chuckled and shook his head before answering, "Hmm, no..." he whispered back. "But I can't say I mind you thinking me so." He kissed the top of my head, and *I* let out a deep sigh this time. He slid his palms down my arms until he found my hands and threaded his fingers through them. Looking over my shoulder, concern flashed in his face for a moment.

I turned, and everyone was leaving their money on the table and putting on their coats. "Was I that bad?" he joked.

"Shut up, Edward," Alice answered for everyone. "You know you were awesome as always, but it's time to end our 'group time,' know what I mean?" He squeezed my hand as he nodded his understanding to her.

I wrapped my scarf around my neck before we headed toward the exit, and followed everyone out into the brisk night air. Alice was almost to the cars when she spun around to face the whole group. Her warm breath formed an icy cloud in front of her face as she exhaled before speaking. "Okay, everybody. Here's the deal. Edward, you can take Bella back in your car, and Jazz and I will ride back with Emmett and Rose. But Bella? Don't stay out *too* late, because I'm picking you up for breakfast tomorrow morning at 9:00 sharp. All right?"

Before I could answer, she nodded, "Good. See ya then!" She jumped on Jasper's back, and he laughed as he ran her around to the far side of Emmett's Jeep.

I felt Edward's hand on the small of my back then, but just barely. "Shall we?" he asked as he

leaned in.

“Definitely, yes,” I grinned back, thankful that my heart had started beating again at some point during Alice’s instructions. We shouted our goodnights to the others, and Edward opened my door for me, holding my hand as I sat down.

As he closed the door, I realized something about myself. I had one goal for the rest of the evening, and it might complicate things, but I didn’t care. I could deal with that later.

I wanted Edward Cullen to kiss me.

In the worst kind of way.

#####

Chapter: 27

But I’m dangerous...so be careful with me.

I could fall for you much too easily

I’m usually cool. I like to be free,

But I’m dangerous right now, so be careful with me.

David Wilcox

Chapter Twenty-five: Songs and Stories

Edward slid smoothly into the seat next to me and started the car. As we pulled out into the Saturday night traffic, I was still swooning quite a bit from my serenade. He had his iPod plugged in, and—at the moment—we were listening to The Fray.

Edward offered me his crooked smile as he looked over at me sideways, “So...how do you like Alice?”

I laughed. “Like’ seems like to benign a word to use with her. Your sister is definitely one of a kind. She’s pretty fabulous.”

“She told me again tonight right before she jumped up on stage with you, that you two are going to be the very best of friends,” he chuckled.

“And I get the distinct impression that Alice tends to get what she wants,” I grinned back.

“I told you she’s a force to be reckoned with, didn’t I?” His smile and his voice held nothing but love and admiration for her.

“Yes, sir. I was fairly warned...and I’m looking forward to breakfast with her.”

“I’m glad you’ll have that time with her.” His eyes were back on the road, but I could hear contentment in his voice.

We rode quietly for a few minutes, listening to the music. “Edward?”

“Hmm?” He quirked an eyebrow, but kept his eyes on the road.

“That song you played...” My words failed me. I didn’t think I’d be able to make him understand clearly how much it had affected me...short of that *kiss* I was planning to enjoy somehow.

“Yes?” I could hear his smile as he spoke, but my eyes were looking out the window, nervous that I’d say too much.

“Just...thanks. It was really amazing.”

I turned to look at him and saw pleasure all over his face. “Thank *you*, Bella. I couldn’t be more glad that you appreciated it.”

“You really play beautifully...” *Dare I ask?* “I’d love to hear you play something of your own sometime...if you wouldn’t mind.”

His head spun toward me suddenly, “Really?”

“Really! I’d love it.”

His smile nearly lit up the interior of the car. “Let’s go then. The security guards at the music building know me...they’ll let me in.” A few moments later, we pulled up behind the building. He got out his cell phone and scrolled through his contacts. A moment later, he was speaking quickly into the phone asking for a practice room to be opened. We waited just five minutes for someone to arrive while we replayed the songs from the Karaoke bar in our minds. Laughter echoed off the walls of the building as we climbed out of the car, dissecting Emmett’s performance.

Being escorted down the barely lit hallways of the music building was definitely a new experience for me. As the guard unlocked a practice room, he nodded to Edward and said, “Don’t forget to turn the light off when you leave.”

Edward thanked him and ushered me into the room as the door closed behind us.

He took my coat and laid it over the only chair in the room. *Umm...where do I sit now?*

I didn't have to wait long for my answer. He sat on the piano bench and patted the seat beside him. "Really?" I asked hesitantly. "I won't get in your way?"

His laughter, sounding just like delight, filled the room. "You could never be in my way, Bella."

I scooted in next to him as he settled his fingers onto the keys. As he began to play, the music filled my senses. I didn't recognize the song, but it called to me somehow. Feeling it in my head, my heart, the pit of my stomach, I thought at times that the melody would lift me bodily into the air; at other times, I felt as though it would consume me.

And, the only way I can describe what happened as I listened is that poetry began to fill my head. It was almost writing itself in response to his music.

I began to understand that Edward playing the piano *was* poetry.

I focused on his long, slender fingers...

Proclaiming their strength and vigor through his left hand, his grace and soulfulness through his right.

Dancing over the keys with intricate steps—

...and I realized they were playing to me.

The melody wound its way into every fiber of my being, and caused my eyes to lift from the keyboard to Edward's face. I suppose I'd expected to see a look of intense concentration, but there was none. He was perfectly relaxed, pouring himself into the music. I understood that expression of release...it was very similar to the one that I must wear on my face when I write.

At the moment, his eyes were closed, a small smile tugging at the corner of his mouth, his bottom lip sticking out slightly. His head was down, almost as if he were...

...bowing courteously to the music itself...

He turned in my direction, his eyes still closed, and my eyes traced the line of his jaw. Once in a while, as I watched, the muscles there would clench and unclench, matching the mood of the song.

I couldn't say the song was "happy." There were moments that were dark and moody, and some that seemed angry, played in a minor key. They were only variations of the main theme, though. On the whole, it was sweet and rich, and I felt safe with it wrapped around me.

Light, airy strains danced on the air, complementing and softening the passion of the fiery

baritone.

I found myself picturing a complicated dance.

And then he smiled.

The delicate and the intense blended themselves together into a song unlike any I'd ever heard. The crescendo and melody built and tensed until I felt like there must be resolution, and...then there was.

Edward's fingers guided the notes to a calm, sweet finish, as he turned and looked at me with a gentle sigh. "Did you like it?" he whispered. I watched as he took his lower lip in his teeth.

"Yes! It was...so...unlike anything I've ever heard. I kind of got lost in it...do you know what I mean?"

He smiled then, relaxing completely. "I *do* know what you mean . . . I'm glad to hear that."

"Is that the piece you've been working on for class?"

Edward looked into my eyes intensely then. "No. I wrote part of it a long time ago, but...I've never been able to finish the rest until this week."

"Wow...what made the difference? Why now?"

"Hmm...would you believe I was inspired?" He quirked his eyebrow and smirked at me.

"Sure...but, I mean...what kind of stuff inspires you, Edward?"

His head tilted slightly to the side now, confusion creasing his brow. "Do you really not know, Bella?"

Should I? "Umm, no. I guess not."

Edward turned his body toward me, and spoke softly. "That . . . was my song. The one I wrote about. I'd been able to play most of it for years, but I was only able to hear the other melody...and the dance at the end very recently. *You* were the one that inspired that part. You completed my song." He let his words hang in the air for a moment, as my heart capsized.

I think I forgot to breathe.

"Are...What? I...You're not ...serious...about *me*...I couldn't..." I eked out.

"I've never been more serious, Bella." He closed his eyes, looking like he was debating something.

I took advantage of that moment and slid one hand into his hair, the other finding its way to his jaw, pulling his face closer to mine. I felt his jaw muscle clench underneath my palm, and didn't know how he would respond, but I knew this was something I needed.

His eyes remained closed as I brushed my lips across his left cheek, just in front of my thumb. I held my face there for a moment, breathing silently, then tenderly pressed my lips just beside his mouth and held them there. Edward gasped quietly and pulled back, but my hands remained where they were.

When he brought his own strong, beautiful hands up to cover mine, he opened his eyes and searched my face intently. I didn't know what he expected to see there, or what he was searching for, but I looked back seriously, willing him to see what I needed him to know. *Edward Cullen, do you have any idea how much you mean to me?*

"Bella?" he whispered, tentatively.

"Yes?" I answered, afraid that any sound might undo what was happening between us.

"May I...?" he intoned softly. *He looks so vulnerable!* "Is it okay...?" He closed his eyes. Whispering, he tried again, "Would you let me...kiss you?"

'*Yes! Yes! YES!*' my mind, my heart, and my body were shouting, but my mouth barely eked out, "Yes."

He removed his hands from mine then, brushing them sweetly across my own cheeks, and cupped my head in his hands, his fingertips just beginning to wind themselves in my hair. Tilting his head to the side, he leaned in. I closed my eyes and let out a shaky breath.

The feeling of his warm, soft lips on mine was almost more than I could take. Our mouths moved slowly together, and I'd never felt anything sweeter. But there was an electric current between us, too, that needed to be dealt with. It was slowly overcoming me. When I felt his tongue gently, tenderly trace the length of my bottom lip, I was undone. My lips parted, and I felt Edward's breath wash over me as he sighed. He smiled against my lips and continued to kiss and run his tongue over my lips softly. When he pulled on my lower lip with his teeth, I shivered. He softly pressed his closed lips to mine once more, then, and sat back.

His eyes, filled with love, seemed to trace every feature of my face before they closed in contentment, a smile gracing his perfect face. "Thank you," he whispered.

* * *

I literally fell into bed that night after Edward took me back to my room. As I snuggled down under the covers, I placed my fingers to my lips and relived every single part of that kiss. Over and over again. It was unbelievable.

I wondered briefly if we had totally complicated things, but quickly dismissed that idea. How

could anything so perfect hurt me?

When I woke up the next morning, I got ready quietly, so Rosalie could sleep in. Today was going to be a big day. I showered and put on my black dress pants with a crème-colored cami and a periwinkle blouse with $\frac{3}{4}$ length sleeves. After blowing my hair dry, I pulled it back into a loose French braid. I wanted to look professional but be comfortable. I was anxious about my meeting with the Cullens' attorney.

Tap! Tap! Tap! A knock sounded lightly at my door. I looked at the clock, and it was 9 o'clock sharp. Grabbing my coat, scarf, and messenger bag, I let myself out quietly.

"Good morning!" Alice beamed, more chipper than anyone had a right to be this early in the day.

Grinning at her, I teased, "Seriously? Have you already had a whole pot of coffee?"

She punched my arm playfully, "No, silly. But I did get to see Jasper first thing in the morning...and he looked adorable in his pajamas. Annnnd... my *brother* came home grinning and humming last night! Any idea what might have made *him* so happy?"

This chick doesn't beat around the bush, but that doesn't surprise me. Let's just dive right in, shall we? My cheeks blushed furiously, and I tried to turn and just start walking down the hall, but she never missed a beat. *That girl must have all-seeing eyes.* As she practically skipped next to me, Alice said slyly, "I *saw* that blush...but that's okay, if you don't want to spill it just yet. I'll get it out of you later... I have my ways." She winked at me, grinning. I rolled my eyes and smiled back.

We were driving out to Lou's Restaurant and Bakery in town for breakfast. His to-die-for French toast and pancakes are famous, but he has a good selection of healthy food, too. Alice was amazingly easy to talk to, and as we drove, our conversation seemed to take us all over the place. And, as Alice predicted, it seemed like we were well on our way to becoming BFFs.

As soon as we ordered, Alice placed her napkin in her lap, smoothed it out, and said, "So, Bella. Edward told me he thought it might be helpful for you if I told you about James...everything I went through. Do you want to just listen for a while?"

I nodded profusely while saying, "Sure, yeah. Absolutely. It...I think it might be good for me." I sat back in my chair, and she began the story.

"Okay." She took a deep breath, and I wondered if it was still hard for her to talk about. "The big stuff happened about three years ago, when I was sixteen...but we'd known James and his family forever. He and Edward grew up together. They were really good friends. Our families had always run in the same circles, so our parents knew each other, too.

"All the girls at our prep school liked either Edward or James...they just stood out, and they tied for best-looking according to the school paper. I had always had a crush on James, but he never paid me any special attention. He liked the older girls, and he was definitely trying to avoid the

best friend's little sister scenario. So, year after year, I quietly pined for him, and wished he'd notice me.

"Well, the summer of my sixteenth birthday, my parents let me go to Paris. I spent the summer with some friends of the family, and...I guess I did a lot of growing up. I really figured out a lot about who *Alice* was and was not...shared my first kiss with a totally hot French boy named Stephan ... wandered around memorizing the bridges over the river...and discovered I have an insanely gifted fashion sense." She grinned and winked at me. It was totally like *Sabrina* only real...and Stephan wasn't a photographer. He was a waiter in my favorite café." She bit her lip at the thought, her eyes looking faraway for a moment.

"That sounds like an absolutely amazing summer," I sighed. I had always wanted to travel, but Forks, Phoenix, and Jacksonville had been about the extent of my road-trip experiences so far.

Sighing herself, Alice cooed, "It *was*...but I digress. I came back to Maine a new woman. Sixteen, but fully alive, fully awake, and fully adult—HA! At least in my mind. I knew what I wanted, and was confident enough to go after it. I don't know whether I'd really grown up a lot physically, but I certainly did dress better, and my new Parisian-styled hair was *tres chic*, if I do say so myself. I looked darn cute to tell the truth..." She got quiet for a moment as she suddenly stilled. Softly, she continued, "...and James finally noticed me."

I didn't say anything, but leaned forward in my seat, letting her know I was hearing her. She kept going in that same quiet voice, "My parents threw a big welcome home bash before school started, and all of our friends and fellow big money socialites were there. That night, everything shifted between James and me. He couldn't keep his eyes off of me, and we spent the whole night dancing together and ignoring everyone else. I was totally living one of my dreams...it seemed like a fairy tale."

"James actually apologized for never noticing how beautiful I was before. He said he wouldn't make that mistake again, and no one could pull him away from me now." She rolled her eyes at that thought. "In case you're wondering, Bella, it was all a load of crap...but I was too hung up on who I'd always *thought* James was to notice."

I nodded my understanding. "Been *there*," I said, hating myself for my own stupidity.

"Sorry," she whispered, meaning it.

Then she continued. "As long as we did stuff as a group, James was a total gentleman. Edward kept an eye on him...I know he'd warned James that he'd better treat me better than some of his other girlfriends, but everybody seemed at least *fairly* satisfied with how James was with me. And honestly, it's not like I'd have listened if anybody told me to stay away. I'm *way* too stubborn and opinionated for that. I was bound and determined to do what I'd always wanted...and that was to be James's girlfriend. Edward had told me *once* that James might be a good *friend*, but he was nervous that I was getting in over my head by dating him. I totally ripped into him and told him to mind his own freakin' business." She flung her hands up and made air quotes as she mocked her sixteen-year-old self, "*Honestly, Bossward, do I tell you what to do*

with the girls you go out with??!”

I could totally see her saying that. We shared a half-hearted laugh, and then she went on. “Edward didn’t bug me about it after that...but he did still watch out for me whenever and however he could.”

The waiter brought our food then, and Alice asked him if he would just refill our drinks and then let us be until we signaled for him. She smiled and winked at him as she said, “We’ve got important girl stuff to talk about here, and we just don’t want to be interrupted for a while, ‘kay?” The teenage boy blushed as he nodded and walked away.

Alice grinned as she dug in to her breakfast. “I hope you won’t be offended if I just shove this down while it’s warm, so that I can keep talking while you eat.”

“No problem,” I assured her, grinning. It was unbelievable how fast she was emptying her plate. *Where does she put all that?*

When we had our drink refills, she wiped her mouth and began again, matter-of-factly. “When I was alone with James, it was a different story. *Sure* he wooed me, kissed me, did all kinds of stuff to me that I really liked at the time, but I’d told him I wouldn’t go all the way...I guess he thought he could convince me. I was so ‘in love’ with him that I couldn’t see what a total skeeze he was. I just kept making excuses for him.

“Well, one day, I went over to his house to ‘study’ and he’d gotten this triple-X rated movie to show me. He literally made me sit there and watch it, telling me I was gonna moan his name like that and do some of those things with him one day.” Her face looked disgusted, but her eyes were filled with sadness while she told me this. “I laughed at him, and...he didn’t take that too well. He grabbed my arms—actually bruising me—and pushed me down...and he forced me to do everything *but* have sex with him.” She whispered the next part, “He even made me touch myself and then him, saying that if I wouldn’t give it up, that I was at least going to do my part alone.”

I paled, suddenly knowing exactly what she must’ve felt then, because a memory came flooding back. I wanted to scream, or throw up, or...die. Josh had been so angry...so forceful and dominant while I was just...afraid.

“Bella?” I heard her ask, sounding miles away. “Are you all right? Did you just remember something?”

I willed myself to look up at her, and swiped at the single tear that slid down my cheek.

“I’m sorry, Bella...do...do you want to talk about it or anything?”

Shaking my head vigorously, I whispered, “Not here...just...just go on with *your* story, okay?”

Still speaking in whispers, she offered a resigned, “Okay...well, I went home and—of course—

didn't talk to anybody about it. I just showered for an hour or two, and told myself more lies about how much I wouldn't mind doing some of that stuff some day...as long as James still loved me.

"Edward was going to our school football game that night, and I told him I didn't feel well. He came home about three hours later with a bloody lip and a black eye. My parents were *so* upset...I heard all of the distress from up in my room. I snuck down quietly to the landing, and overheard them all talking about James. Apparently, he'd been under the bleachers rolling around with some skank from the other school.

"Edward had beaten the spit out of him...trying to protect my honor, I guess. It was sweet of Edward, I know, and so I ran down to tell him thanks for trying, but then he actually said he wanted me to break up with James!" She laughed at herself for a moment, and then said, "He was right, of course, but I didn't think so at the time. I only felt mad at James, and jealous that he had wanted that from someone else, so I really just became that much more determined to change James's mind—to be whatever he wanted.

"Psychotic the things we do when we're screwed up in the head, isn't it?" She was smiling at me. "The end of the story is a whole lot better, Bella...and it will be for you, too."

I dipped my head in silent acknowledgement and tried to smile.

"Want me to go on?" she asked.

"Yeah...I need that good ending."

"All right, then. There was a big party that weekend. Lots of kids from school were going, but Mom and Dad said they didn't think we should go. I was totally flipping out at Edward for even *telling* them about it. But anyway, I lied and told them I was going over to my friend Shana's. For some reason, my parents bought it and let me go.

"I don't really remember much that happened that night, except that I found James at the party and I was acting like an idiot. He went to get us drinks, and...the next thing I remember was waking up in the hospital several hours later. Edward had apparently called Shana's—that *meddler*." She smiled. "As soon as he found out I wasn't there, he'd raced over to the party and searched every room until he found me." She took a shaky breath and whispered, "I was out cold on somebody's bed...with my shirt torn and my pants ripped off." She whispered, "There were bite marks on my shoulder, too."

My jaw must've been hanging open, because Alice leaned in and said, "Here's the good part. Close your mouth and listen."

I obeyed quietly, hoping the good part would *finally* offer some resolution.

"People are *still* talking about my big brother going ballistic at that party. Seriously, more than half the people were apparently getting their stuff and leaving before he even got up the *stairs*."

James had put some Rohypnol —that date-rape drug—in my drink and done whatever he wanted with me. By the time Edward got there, James had already left, but the doctor and the police confirmed that it was definitely him.

“Needless to say, we pressed charges, and he spent a night in jail before his father bailed him out. I wish I could say he’s rotting away in jail somewhere, but his high-society mommy and daddy didn’t want that on their record. They kept it as quiet as possible. At least his parents had good enough sense to make him plead guilty, though. He was charged with 1st and 2nd degree rape, three counts of aggravated assault, assault on a minor, and 1st and 2nd degree sex offense, and then sentenced to ten years in a state penitentiary with possible parole after three years.”

Alice had a faraway look in her eyes just then, but continued quietly. “For a long time, I was just kind of an empty shell. I was in denial about all that had really happened to me, but then, my parents made me go to counseling. It was extremely difficult, but—little by little—I realized what had happened, and was able to accept it, and begin to talk about it. Honestly . . . I lost it sometimes. I screamed, I sobbed, I hit, I kicked, I hated...until I was so spent that I felt like there was nothing left. Edward had the hardest time simply watching me, I think. He wanted to do more, be more involved, but I didn’t make room for him. Still, eventually, when I was done *‘feeling’* it all, my counselor helped me to understand that I could either let this destroy me, or I could walk away and begin to live. She said—and this really helped me. So I want you to remember it as you go through all this same stuff—she said, ‘holding onto resentment is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die.’ The counselor basically told me that if I let this keep me down, then James would keep winning, and I would keep on slowly dying. I could never pay *him* back...and eventually...I didn’t want to. I realized he wasn’t worth my trouble.”

“I’m so glad he went to jail, though, Alice. I mean, at least he was convicted...everything happened so long ago with Josh, that I can’t even prove he raped me.”

“I’m sorry about that, but Edward did say he’s doing plenty of other things that he can be charged with. He didn’t tell me any specifics, but he let me know that and just asked me to share my story if I would...I...hope that’s okay. He really hurts for you.”

“Yeah, it’s fine. I just wish Josh could be in prison for ten years...”

“Well, James actually only served two years, because he got time off for good behavior.”

“Wow. Do you hate that he’s out? Do you ever have to see him?”

“Well, yes and no. This really destroyed his family, and they ended up moving away, trying to start over somewhere else. I honestly feel bad for all of them now... that their son is such a total embarrassment to the family. They didn’t ask for all of this.”

“You’re so much better than I am, Alice.” I hung my head. “I can never bring myself to feel sorry for anybody about this...except me.”

“Well, that’s *something*, Bella...because at least you aren’t just numb. But, please don’t think I’m trying to say that I’m somehow better than you. I’m just further along in the healing process...it’s different for everybody.”

“But you seem like none of this ever happened to you...I’d...I’d never have known. And...what you have with Jasper now Sometimes I feel like I’ll never have my heart back completely.”

“Well, I’m not going to lie. There are definitely still times when something will jar my memory...and I still have a hard time trusting most people. But through this whole thing I’ve found a passion for life that I wouldn’t have had otherwise. I thought I found myself in Paris, but...I only learned to fight for myself and live life without holding back when I had to work to keep it for myself.

I sighed, “That gives me some hope, I guess.”

“And Jasper?” She sighed and looked off dreamily before seeming to remember she was trying to say something. “He’s so different from other guys...there’s something about him that I knew was different right away. I...I can’t explain it. It’s probably cheesy, but I really believe he’s my soul mate...” She was smiling contentedly and shrugged at her “cheesy” words. “I want to tell you this, though, Bella. The things that drew me to Jasper in the first place, were the things I’ve always appreciated and loved about my brother. They’re the same type of amazing, almost too perfect, protective guys. And I know Edward will help you through this...Honestly, I think you’re helping him, too. He’s getting to take a much more active role in this with you than he did with me...”

I looked up at her, finally understanding Edward’s need to hug, to protect, to listen, to be there...it was even more than just love. And if helping me could heal *him*, too, then this might just be the best thing *ever*.

“Umm, thanks for sharing all of that with me...it can’t be easy to talk about.”

“It gets easier every time, I guess...not that I talk about it a *lot*, but I learned from my counselor that sharing this stuff is a good way to address it—to deal with it. And, *seriously*, Bella. If what I went through can help you, I’m glad to talk about anything you want.”

I smiled at her and said, “I’m so glad you’re my new BFF.”

“Always!” she grinned.

She waved the waiter over and handed him too much money, telling him to keep the change. “What?!” she asked me when I cocked my eyebrow at her, thinking that was way too much. “He earned it! A hormonal teenage boy kept himself at a distance from two *total* hotties, willingly. He *should* get paid!”

We got back out to the car and drove back to the campus, while she told me the story of how she and Jasper met. *That girl’s got it bad!*

Lucky.

#####

Chapter: 28

It's only falling! Just what could be the fear?

You'll never learn to fly unless you take that first step

Way out where your heart will be your only guide...

Let up on your worryin' and head up on your heart.

David Wilcox

Chapter Twenty-six: Closer

We pulled back onto campus about ten minutes later, and walked back up to the boys' apartment. As we approached the door, I expected to hear laughter or music or just... Emmett somehow. But the end of the hallway was strangely quiet. Alice quirked an eyebrow at me, obviously thinking the same thing, but then she just shrugged and turned the knob, slowly.

We stepped in quietly and heard guitar music coming from the "weight room" where Jasper was staying and muted strains of hip-hop coming from underneath Emmett's closed door. Everything in the main room was still. Alice walked in cautiously, moving toward the hallway where Jasper was playing, but she stopped short as she passed the back of the couch. Her tiny hand covered her mouth as she let out a slight gasp. She laughed silently, her shoulders shaking, as she turned toward me and pointed a finger at the couch. I tiptoed up behind her and peered over the backrest.

Edward was *sound* asleep, and his perfectly tangled hair was calling to me like a siren. I let out a small gasp of my own, and I felt Alice pat my shoulder as she gently pushed me toward the couch. As I moved around quietly, she made her way to Jasper's room and knocked quietly on the door. "It's me, Jazz," I heard her whisper.

I looked down at the sleeping angel before me and was overcome with...*tenderness*? No. Was it appreciation? Nope...I couldn't put my finger on a label for it, but my heart was literally swelling with affection for the man on the couch whom I was finally just beginning to understand. He was so strong and sure of himself, but all I could see right now was his vulnerability. Well, that's not *all* I could see. There was quite a stunning picture stretched out

right in front of me.

The soft blanket that he'd offered me the other night was draped over his legs, one of which was fully extended and hanging off the end of the couch. His other leg was bent and resting against the back of the couch, and it had apparently tugged the blanket with it when Edward had shifted to that position. His gray t-shirt had ridden up while he was sleeping, the hem resting just above his navel, and I had to make myself look away. *Is it hot in here? And could his abs be any more toned?* Yeah, I wasn't going to allow myself to stare lustfully while he was sleeping so innocently. I felt like I'd be taking advantage of him.

My eyes wandered over his face, noticing how peaceful he looked. His right hand was on his chest, and I watched for a moment as it moved up and down with his rhythmic breathing. His other hand was tangled in his hair. As I allowed my eyes to rest on his face again, he licked his lips and sighed sweetly. I involuntarily brought my fingers to my own lips once again and lost myself in the memory of our perfect kiss only hours before. *Oh, I want to kiss him again.* I didn't think that was a good idea though, so instead I knelt on the floor next to his face and slowly slid my fingers into his hair, scratching his scalp gently. His eyes remained closed, but the corner of his lips slid into my crooked smile as he sighed again. "Mmm, Bella," I heard him say quietly. *What?! Is he awake? Does he know I'm here? He's probably trying to trick me...but...he looks so still...and happy. Maybe he is asleep.*

One way to know for sure. I leaned in and kissed his forehead softly, leaving my lips there for several seconds. His hair smelled so good that it was difficult to pull myself away. Still, a moment later, I sat back. His eyes fluttered open slowly, and he smiled at me contentedly. Then, as if he thought he was just dreaming, his eyes closed again restfully.

"Good morning, Sleepyhead," I teased.

At the sound of my voice, his eyes popped open and focused on me immediately. "Bella!" he breathed as he pulled himself up into a sitting position and swung his legs down toward me. "When did you get here? What time is it?" He ran both his hands through his soft and unruly bedhead, trying to make sense of things.

"Alice and I just got back from breakfast. It's about 11:30. Why were you sleeping on the couch?" I asked.

"Hmm?" he asked as he stretched. I got another eyeful of his sculpted abs and tried to refocus on his face. He caught me, and his grin told me he didn't seem to mind. My cheeks flushed within seconds. "I got up this morning with Alice, and I ate breakfast with Jasper and Emmett after she left. I hadn't really slept well through the night, though, so I crashed on the couch after breakfast for a while. I didn't realize I was sleeping so hard. I didn't hear you come in." He shrugged and grinned at me.

My brow furrowed in concern, "I'm sorry you didn't sleep well...was...was something wrong?" *Dear God, please don't let him say it was our kiss.*

He tucked a piece of hair behind my ear and smiled at me, shaking his head. “No, Bella. Something was *right*. I couldn’t stop thinking about our kiss all night...it was even better than I’d imagined.” He bit his lip and shook his head again, *this* time looking like he was trying to convince himself it was real. I recognized the look because I’d made that same face about a hundred times last night and again this morning.

“I thought so, too,” I whispered, wanting to kiss those lips I was staring at so intently, but resisting. “But *I* slept like a log.” I smacked his leg playfully.

“I’m glad to hear it,” he grinned.

Just then, Emmett walked out of his room on his way to the kitchen. “What’s up, Frumpward? Welcome back to the land of the living!” He laughed as he continued, “Bella, what did you *do* to that boy last night?”

“Nothin’, Em. Promise...I just heard his song.”

Edward winked at me as he stood up, grabbing his blanket. He offered me a hand and pulled me to my feet. Emmett’s voice boomed from the kitchen. “I hear ya, Li’l Sis. Don’t believe a word of it, but I *hear* ya.” He chuckled to himself as he grabbed a large, plastic Big Green cup and poured in some Sunny D. “Wanna drink? We can sit and chat while Edward pretties himself for the day at last.”

“Sure,” I smiled. “Just water.” Edward brushed my cheek with the back of his hand before he turned to go to his room.

As I turned back toward the kitchen, Emmett was already joining me, sitting down on the couch. He nodded at the empty seat next to him, and I slid in beside him.

Quirking an eyebrow, he said, “Just between you and me, I don’t know what kind of code ‘I just heard his song’ is...” his hands making air quotes next to his adorably dimpled cheeks, “...but whatever happened has done a number on my man, EC. But keep doing whatever it is that you did, because I like him this agreeable, you know?”

I felt the blood rushing to my face again while I was trying uselessly to deny anything. “Sure thing, Em...whatever you say.”

“Mm-hmm. I gotcha, Bellaluna. I know what’s up.” He grinned and elbowed me in jest.

“Rosalie was pretty awesome last night, too, huh?” *Let’s talk about someone else.*

“Rosalie is pretty awesome every minute of every day. Last night, she was freakin’ unbelievable. I don’t think she has a clue what she does to me...for me.” He was shaking his head, looking confused but happy.

“I think she’s figuring it out, Em. I know she thinks the world of you.”

“Well, I sure hope so...could you believe that song?”

I nodded, knowing exactly what he was thinking. “It was perfect...and I think it really made a difference for her. Does she talk about that stuff with you? Or do you guys just kind of avoid the topic? I’m just...I’m just asking because I know talking helps, and she and I haven’t spoken about things a lot recently.”

“Nah, nah,” he said, patting my knee reassuringly. “It’s okay. And yeah, we talk about things a lot...things she remembers, things that she’s scared of, things that she hates about herself now...That’s probably the one that kills me the most.”

“What do you do? What do you say to that?” I asked, genuinely curious.

“I listen, I say I understand that she really thinks that, but then I tell her the truth. I tell her how amazing and funny and beautiful and valuable a person she is...still.” He shrugged again. “She’s got to know, right? She’s gotta hear it. That’s the only way she’ll start to believe it.” He was looking at me intensely.

“You’re right...and you’re everything she needs right now, Em. I’m glad she has you.”

“Sh—, I’m just glad she’s in *my* life.” The conversation had gotten so serious so fast. We both sensed it, but Emmett turned it back around. “And I’m glad you’re in Edward’s, Little Sis. He’s a different man...I actually like hanging out with him sometimes,” he winked.

“Yeah, he can be all right sometimes.” I agreed snarkily.

The velvety voice answered before Emmett could, “Whew. I’m relieved to hear that I’m at least ‘all right’.” His smile was infectious, and we all chuckled, enjoying the tension breaker. Alice and Jasper joined us when they heard us laughing.

They sat on the couch opposite Emmett and I, and Edward went to the kitchen to get a drink. Alice’s eyes kept flickering between Edward and me, trying to catch us in whatever she could. Jasper offered casually, “‘Mornin’ Bella. Was breakfast delicious *and* helpful?”

I grinned at him, “Yes, it was. You’ve got yourself a pretty amazing girl there.”

“Mmm. I know *that*. I’m not sure how I was makin’ it without this one.” He squeezed her knee and looked at her adoringly. “What are the plans today, y’all?” He looked around at all of us.

Edward had just come back in the room, and was standing behind me, leaning over the back of the couch. I could feel his breath on my neck. I shivered a little, and I heard him chuckle as his fingertip traced over the skin just under my collar. “I’m taking Bella to meet with the attorney this afternoon, but we might be able to meet you for dinner...if she’s not too Cullen’d out by then.”

I chuckled in response, but my mind was focused on that tantalizing finger. I couldn't speak at the moment. Alice's eyes were wide open in anticipation and...glee. Her eyebrow quirked as she assured everyone that I wouldn't want to miss dinner with the Cullens for the world.

While everyone laughed and agreed, they began discussing possible activities. As I listened, I suddenly felt Edward's mouth touching my ear, his breath washing over me again as he whispered, "You look beautiful today, Bella. I love your hair like this." He tugged on my braid. *Oh. My... Gah.. Does he realize the effect he has on me?* His crooked smile spread over what was becoming my favorite half of his face as he lifted the bottom of my braid to his nose and inhaled deeply.

I turned my face up to his and smiled, thanking him. "Edward? You know that you don't have to go with me this afternoon, right?"

His brow creased for a moment before he responded, "I know...but I'd like to introduce you to Mrs. Johanssen, and be there for you when you're done. I'll just bring something to read or study. Okay?" He was using the tail of my braid to trace patterns on my neck as he spoke.

"All right."

Though we didn't say anything else to each other, our eyes never strayed for a moment. We were locked in a silent discussion, reminding one another of those things that had been said, sung and...*kissed* the night before. We had come a long way, and something had shifted between us.

We were forcibly yanked from our mute dialogue by a dark-haired pixie clearing her throat. Alice was standing there, arms crossed, smirking as smugly as if she'd correctly predicted the moment that Harry Houdini would come back from the dead. "Why don't you two just call us when you're done with the meeting? Unless you decide to have dinner on your own. We're going for a hike this afternoon, and then we're just coming back for pizza and a movie...I'm telling you this, Edward, because I *know* you weren't listening to us." She poked his arm tauntingly and grinned up at him. Then, she winked at me as she leaned in to give me a quick hug. "I'll be thinking about you this afternoon. I hope it's not too tough. Mrs. Johanssen is amazing, though. She'll take good care of you, Bella."

As she turned to walk toward Jasper who was holding out her jacket, she added, "...and so will Edward."

He chuckled and shook his head in acknowledgement. "Never bet against Alice," he warned with a laugh.

* * *

Before we left to meet Mrs. Johanssen, Edward and I walked to Novack's for a coffee and a hot chocolate. On the way there, we asked each other more pointless, getting to know you questions. Favorite flavor ice cream, favorite vacation spot, least favorite chore, what we wanted to be when we grew up, first pet, first car, first date. It was very entertaining, to say the least.

On the way to the car, then, drinks in hand, he shared his favorite childhood memory—which wasn't even really an Edward memory. It was something he had laughed hysterically at when it happened, and it still made him laugh today. "I was nine at the time, and dear, sweet little Alice was almost seven," he told me. "Even back then, she loved fashion. She was always dressing and undressing her dolls, and even making them new 'ensembles' with any material she could find. She'd begged my parents for a sewing machine for her birthday. She wanted to design clothes for all of her dolls and then actually cut out patterns and make them. My parents thought it would be harmless and fun. Little did they know...."

"What, Edward?" I laughed. "You're making it sound horrifying."

Grinning at me, he assured me, "I have the pictures to *prove* it was most definitely horrifying." I shook my head at him, and he continued. "They got her a very nice sewing machine for her birthday, and she locked herself away in her room with it. Every time I'd walk past, I'd hear *whirr, whirr*...or *snip, snip*. One of Alice's favorite parts were these battery-operated scissors. She thought they were amazing."

I nodded, smiling as I pictured Alice working so diligently.

"So, one day, as I walked past her door, I noticed that she had posted a sign on it. 'Alice's Boutique will be giving a fashion show in the salon at 4:30 sharp! You don't want to miss it!'" He chuckled at the thought. "I ran down to ask my mom and dad if they knew about it, and saw them smile at each other. My mom decided to make a big to-do about this for Alice, so she prepared drinks and some appetizers for the whole affair. At 4:30 sharp, we were all seated, and we heard the music begin. Her tinkling-bell-of-a-seven-year-old voice rang out, 'Prepare to be blown away by Alice Love, the owner of Alice's Boutique!'"

I bit my lip to keep from laughing out loud while he finished. "She stomped into the room with a doll in each hand, and spun to a stop in front of us. My father gasped in shock, and my poor, sweet mother started to cry on the spot. She had cut her birthday dress into pieces, and sewn it back together as a strapless dress with all these...raw, unfinished edges. She honestly turned it into some kind of a Tinkerbell dress or something. But the worst part...the part I'm sure made mom cry...was her hair. She'd had these big, beautiful, dark waves—down to her waist. When she'd made her grand entrance, I guess we'd all assumed she had it pulled back tightly somehow. It was only when she spun that we realized she actually chopped it all off...and I mean *all* of it. She looked like a little boy."

"Oh no!" I gasped. "What did your mom do?"

"Well, *I* got into trouble because I thought it was hilarious. I literally *could not* stop laughing. But when mom was able to stop crying, she immediately called our photographer to come over and make sure Alice would remember that day for the rest of her life....The pictures are...well, *embarrassing* to say the least."

"Poor Alice!" My voice was filled with sympathy.

“Oh, no you don’t,” Edward teased. “Poor Esme Cullen! Alice loved it! It was her first big ‘risk in the world of fashion,’ she says, and ‘it was immortalized.’ And look what she’s studying *now*...it’s what she’s always been determined to do. Sad to say, I’m sure my mom’s reaction only made her that much more stubborn about it.” He was still laughing as he spoke, his hand held to his chest.

“What a swell brother you are!” I chided.

“Hey,” he bantered back, “I’m nothing if not supportive.” He was grinning from ear to ear, as we approached the car. He opened the door for me, and—within moments—we were off to the Woodstock Inn where Mrs. Johanssen was staying.

Edward explained on the way there, that we’d be meeting in one of the parlor rooms she’d reserved for us. He told me a little bit about her, and about how she’d encouraged the Cullens to charge James with everything possible, but I knew my situation was different. I had no proof for anything but the hair-grabbing incident at the homework club. Everything else was pretty much just my word against his. Still, I was encouraged to be working with someone who’d handled this kind of case before and had success with it.

When we got there, Edward held the door open for me as he ushered me in. We stopped at the desk to ask in which parlor Mrs. Johanssen would be waiting, when we heard a sweet lilting voice behind us. “Edward...Is this Bella?”

Edward spun around, surprise written all over his face. “Mom! I didn’t know you were coming! Did Dad come?” He was pulling her into a sweet hug while he asked. She was slightly shorter than Edward, and just beautiful, her light brown hair falling gently around her shoulders. His mesmerizing green eyes were a gift from his mother, I noticed. She looked at me over his shoulder as they hugged and smiled. *His mother’s here. I’m meeting his whole family, it seems. I hope she’s not disappointed with me.*

She chuckled, “No, Edward. That’s why I’m here.” She stepped back and looked at him appraisingly, love in her eyes. “Your father had planned to come, but couldn’t get someone to take his shift at the hospital. He’ll be coming down tomorrow, but he wanted so much for one of us to be able to introduce Bella to Lydia.” Turning to me with open arms, she smiled. “It is such a pleasure to meet you, Bella, though I *do* wish we were meeting under different circumstances. I’m Esme.”

I leaned in tentatively for her hug, and she squeezed my shoulders gently before releasing me to look at me closely. *These Cullens are some hugging people.* She sweetly tucked a wayward curl back into my braid and smiled genuinely. “We’re so glad to be able to help you. Thank you for allowing us the privilege.”

“I don’t even know what to say,” I chuckled awkwardly. “Thank you...really. I didn’t expect this.” She looked at Edward again, and he reached for her hand silently, offering a squeeze of appreciation. Their wordless communication was so amazing to watch. I could tell Edward

thought Esme hung the moon.

Turning back to me, she said, “Of course you didn’t dear, but it’s a pleasure for us...Mrs. Johannsen is such an excellent attorney, and her experience from our own...*similar* situation will be invaluable.” She was *so* sincere, I couldn’t help but smile at her. She turned to the concierge and said matter-of-factly, “I’ll walk them to the parlor, thank you.”

Mrs. Johannsen was waiting for us, and greeted everyone very professionally. Her smile was warm, though I could tell she took her work very seriously, and I immediately felt comfortable with her. I briefly let my mind wander to what it might have been like if Jacob’s uncle had been the one representing me, and I was intensely thankful for the Cullens’ help.

Lydia Johannsen was in her late 30s, I guessed, and was pleasantly attractive, with shoulder length straight black hair. I think it was her smile and her bright hazel eyes that encouraged me to trust her. She assured me that she would do all she could to help me. And, as promised, once introductions had been made, Edward and Esme left us alone to discuss the case.

“I thought maybe you’d like to order a light lunch while we work...since we’ll be here for a while. Edward mentioned when he called early this morning that you would be having a late breakfast. Would you like to look at the menu?” She reached out, offering it to me. *Edward called her before he fell asleep on the couch. He is the most thoughtful person I’ve ever known.*

“Umm, yes, thank you. I honestly hadn’t even thought about eating. There’s just been so much on my mind, Mrs. Johannsen.”

She smiled, “Call me Lydia, please.”

“Okay,” I answered, feeling a little bit awkward.

We ordered and then got right to work.

We began with my history with Josh and the events leading up to the request for the restraining order. She asked me to simply tell her the story, beginning with coming back to school for the fall semester. As I talked, she took notes, nodding her encouragement when I paused to gather my thoughts. It was somewhat difficult for me to talk about, because I didn’t really feel so detached from the situation anymore—I felt all the frustration festering just beneath the surface as I rehashed it. Still, I knew this was a step in the right direction. More than just a step, really. I remembered Alice’s words about fighting to get her life back and keep it. That was what I was doing.

The food was delivered just as I finished what would be my first run-through of my testimony. As we ate, she asked several questions to clarify certain circumstances that I’d described. She explained that this is basically what I’d be doing at the hearing on Monday—just telling the judge my story. Relieved, I realized I could do this. I knew the situation well. I simply had to emphasize the threats and the three incidences of violence as I explained everything that had happened to cause me to fear for my safety.

When we had my testimony fairly nailed down, she asked for a list of witnesses that could be called upon for verification and testimony, assuring me that they could be subpoenaed if necessary. I named Edward, Jacob, Rosalie and Angela right away, then added Mrs. Anderson.

“What about any security guards who may have had to intervene from time to time?” she prompted.

I said there were a few, and explained how she might go about getting in touch with them, pointing out that all of my formal complaints were filed with campus security as well. After some more leading questions, I realized that a few of Josh’s friends—at least Travis—might be willing to come and testify on my behalf as well.

Then, she prepared me for the hearing, just coaching me through some basic court protocol and etiquette. Look the judge in the eye, always address him or her with “Your Honor,” stand when the judge enters or leaves the room, don’t lose your temper, and so on. It was basically common sense, but helpful nonetheless, because I was getting a clearer picture of how everything would go on Monday. She did tell me that Josh and his attorney would have the opportunity to ask me questions following my testimony, and that made me a little bit nervous. Noticing my anxiety, she assured me that though they would probably try to belittle and question my perceptions of the circumstances, the best recourse would just be to look them in the eye and answer truthfully and confidently. Josh was the one in the wrong here.

After we’d spoken for several hours, she suggested a brief meeting on Sunday with as many of the witnesses as possible who were willing to come, just so she could prepare them a bit. She was confident it wouldn’t be as long as this meeting had. In the meantime, she would be contacting the sheriff’s office to get subpoenas for the few witnesses who might require them to get away on Monday morning...or those who might need some extra motivation. Offering me her business card, she promised that she would welcome a call any time I had questions concerning the case. She stood as I thanked her and walked me to the door.

Edward and Esme were sitting in comfortable chairs across the hall chatting and laughing quietly. I was glad they’d had a little time to catch up. As the door opened, Esme turned and smile, and Edward rose from his seat. He quirked an eyebrow at me, silently asking how the meeting went. Esme spoke quietly to Mrs. Johannsen, thanking her again for representing us all on such short notice. Nodding politely, she bid us all good evening and returned to go over her notes and begin making some phone calls.

Though Edward declared repeatedly that we’d love for Esme to join us for dinner, she adamantly declined. We were assured over and over that she had not come to intrude on our weekend with Alice, and that she would enjoy a little time to herself wandering around town. When Edward pressed one final time, she placed her hand on his forearm with an authoritative look and laughed disbelievingly. “Edward Cullen. Take this young lady out for dinner and do not make her spend the evening trying to make sure I’m having a nice time! Truth be told, I’m going to the spa for a massage and a pedicure, and I do not want to be interrupted. I’m a busy woman, and it’s not often I get a surprise holiday. Would you be satisfied if we met for lunch tomorrow?”

Edward chuckled and shook his head. “Yes, Mom. I guess that will do. If you promise you’ll have a nice, relaxing evening. I just hate to let an opportunity to visit pass by.”

“I know, dear. Me, too...but I need this. And I’m equally sure that Bella could use some distraction right now.” She turned to me and smiled. “Edward and I usually turn to music when we need a diversion. I believe I remember he mentioned that you like music as well...has he played the piano for you, Bella?”

“Yes he has...” I blushed furiously as I thought of the kiss, but tried to recover quickly. “Is he good at *everything*?”

She laughed sweetly. “Well, you know, I’m a little biased, but I think he *is* pretty wonderful. I *certainly* hope he’s not just being a showoff, though.” She cocked an eyebrow at Edward, who also blushed and shook his head with that perfect smile. *I absolutely adore the way he looks when he blushes...I’ll have to find a way to get him to do that more.*

“No,” I chuckled. “He’s just right.”

Her face lit up at my response, and she seemed satisfied to let us go for the evening then. “Well, I’ll see you tomorrow. Please bring Alice and Jasper with you, too. I’ll arrange for a nice private lunch. Does Emmett have anyone he’d like to bring along?”

“I’m sure he’d love to bring his . . . Rosalie. Thank you for asking, Mom.” Edward smiled lovingly at her. I was only thinking how wonderful it was that he was careful not to label their relationship. *He just really understands this taking it slow thing.*

She waved goodbye as she turned head to her room, and Edward took my hand as we left. “Are you all right with joining me for dinner, or would you like to head back for pizza?” he inquired as we approached the car.

“I’m definitely all right with just being with you. I need some peaceful time.” Thinking about what I’d said earlier during the week, I decided now would be a good time to ask for a hug. “Hey,” I said, looking over at him, “Remember I said I’d probably need some hugs?” His mouth lifted in a smile as he nodded silently. “Do you think I could have one of them now?”

His eyes were positively alight with joy at my request. He stopped walking and pulled me close with the hand he was holding, wrapping his arms around me intimately. He kissed the top of my head while the fingers of his left hand played music up and down my arm. Lifting my hand to his face then, he gently pressed his lips to the back of my wrist. I looked up at him then, smiling with adoration. “It never ceases to surprise me that you always do just exactly what I need...you just seem to know what to do,” I marveled.

“Hmm,” he tested. “Then, if I kissed you again right now because I’ve been thinking about it all day, would *that* be the right thing?”

*Whoa. Didn't see **that** coming. Might as well not pretend I haven't been thinking about it all day as well...* "Well, yes. I think maybe it would."

And I closed my eyes as he leaned in and pressed his lips to mine once more, sliding his fingers around to the back of my neck and tilting my head back so that he could kiss me more deeply. I felt myself relax into the kiss this time, and I let out a trembling sigh as the tip of his tongue met the corner of my mouth. I allowed my own tongue to trace his lips and smiled at the taste of him. It was coffee, mint, and...just Edward.

And it made me forget for a moment that anyone else in the world even existed.

There were only the two of us.

Was anybody glad to see Esme?

And, is it just me, or is Edward getting a little more bold?? Hmm. I hope he's careful!

Please review! Reading your thoughts is like getting a hot chocolate AND freshly baked cookies right out of the oven...as a matter of fact, I'll share the cookies with you if you share your opinions!

#####

Chapter: 29

If I had a spell of magic, I would make this enchantment for you:

A burgundy heart-shaped medallion with a window that you could look through--

So that when all the mirrors are angry with your faults and all you must do,

You could peek through that heart-shaped medallion and see you from my point of view.

David Wilcox

Chapter Twenty-seven: Preparation

Edward and I went to a little Italian place for dinner, and I just couldn't seem to stop smiling. *Just call me Permagrin.* The day had been taxing, for sure, but I think I was almost overwhelmed with thankfulness that my heart really was beginning to thaw and feel again. When Edward asked what I was so happy about, I laughed. "I don't know...I can't really explain the smile. I just feel so...*encouraged* about my life right now. I feel like I'm headed in a good direction, and

I'm actually looking forward to the future."

His grin matched mine as I spoke. "That's really good to hear, Bella. I'm glad you feel that way." He whispered, "And I'm glad you're letting me share this experience with you."

"Are you kidding?" I asked, stupefied for a moment. "You're such a huge part of the reason I *can* feel this way. It's like you're unlocking something in me...the way you listen, the words you say, just...the fact that you're there all the time, no matter what I'm dealing with. I can be myself around you—even when that's an awful thing to be."

The slightest crease appeared on his forehead as his eyes flooded with concern. "What do you mean 'even when that's an awful thing to be?'" he asked. "You're a truly beautiful person. All the time."

"I guess it's just when all of the crud comes to the surface, you know? I don't like who it makes me."

"Bella," he breathed. "You're so wonderful—different than anyone I've ever known...and all of the things coming to the surface are just...*his* trash." His voice sounded strained with frustration, but equally full of conviction. "Those memories don't make you any less than the amazing woman you are. They might be hurtful and difficult to handle, but the reason they come up is so you *can* deal with them...throw them out once and for all. Please don't believe for a second that they make you worth any less. I love..." his voice trailed off, and his eyes dropped to study the tablecloth.

What, Edward? What do you love? I watched as his jaw muscle tightened and released, as his fingers suddenly needed to make sure that his silverware was situated just perfectly on the table. Suddenly, he inhaled sharply and reached across the table to take my hand in his, gripping it as if his life depended on it.

"I love every tiny thing about you, and I wish you could see yourself clearly. I love who you are—the caring and encouraging friend, the loving and selfless daughter, the diligent and conscientious student, the intense and honest poet, and the most beautiful and desirable woman I've ever known. I love how you notice and appreciate the smallest details, how your musical laughter makes me want to be the funniest man alive, how your eyes light up when a good song comes on, how your hair bounces and shines in the sunlight...how your heart refuses to give up. I don't take a moment with you for granted. Being with you—no matter what we're doing or saying—is...*matchless*."

I couldn't speak. Who am I kidding? I could hardly *breathe* after he hit me with all that. *What do I say to that?* I looked down and played with the napkin in my lap, wishing for a moment that I'd chosen to leave my hair down so that it could cover my face as the blood rushed to my cheeks. No such luck, though.

"Oh, and I absolutely adore the way you look when you blush," he chuckled.

I peeked at him from beneath my lashes, and my eyes locked on his lips twisted into that perfect crooked smile. It made me smile back.

Just then, the waiter brought us our dishes. I was intensely thankful for the interruption, but every bit as touched by Edward's words. I wondered if he was aware of the effect he had on me. After we'd both taken a bite of our food, Edward said light-heartedly, "Hey. I hope I didn't overwhelm you with all of that, but it just needed to be said. Just...keep it in the back of your mind for future reference, all right?" His grin warmed me to my toes.

"I'll try to do that," I answered, taking another bite, and smiling slightly.

"Good." And from that moment on, the conversation was completely comfortable.

Over dinner we talked about so many things. We talked about Esme and what a surprise it was to see her. He told me a little about his dad and assured me I'd enjoy spending time with them both. I still felt a little overwhelmed that his whole family seemed to be so deeply involved in my life when we'd only known each other a brief time, but so far everything had been much less crazy than I'd imagined. I tried to just relax in his promise that they would love me, and that they wanted to help.

And then we shared about ourselves. I learned that Edward was *planning* on becoming a psychiatrist—but that his *dream* was really to write and play music for a living. He said that his parents were supportive, but they definitely encouraged him to take his studies seriously, just in case. I shared that I'd always wanted to travel, but I loved the idea of teaching literature and composition. It was perfect, really, because—if I worked hard and saved money well—I'd be able to teach all year and travel all summer.

And, of course, we talked about Alice and Jasper. Edward loved seeing Alice genuinely happy, and he had to admit that she was positively glowing. "He's really good for her, I think."

I had to agree, "She appears to be perfect for him, too...they're really sweet together."

"Did she tell you how they met?" he asked.

Nodding and swallowing a bite, I wiped my mouth and answered, "Mmhmm. This morning. She didn't tell you?" I asked, surprised.

"We haven't exactly had a lot of time for filling in details. She gave me the quick version, though...that they met in a coffee house?" His eyes were begging me to share all of the information her hurried summary had left out.

I sipped my drink for a moment and sat back in my seat, relenting. "Well, you know she went back to school a month early this summer, right?" He nodded, encouraging me to continue. "She had so many ideas for her design projects, she said, that she just wanted to 'unload them.' So, laptop in hand, she'd go everywhere...to the Park, to sit on a blanket by her favorite tree on campus, to Panera Bread. It was at Panera that she overheard some people raving about a little

café that had opened in the spring. Apparently The Beatnik—this new place—was really amazing, but too quirky for the business crowd. It's equal parts coffee bar, book shop, and indie music hangout. They cater to the artsy. Alice couldn't wait to check it out, so she stopped by the other table a few moments later and asked where the place was."

He chuckled, "That doesn't surprise me."

"No," I grinned. "They told her to be sure and go on a Tuesday, Thursday or Friday night, because there'd been this great local artist singing and playing his guitar all summer. Alice told me that she knew as soon as she heard about him, that this guy would completely change her life. Do you believe that?" I rolled my eyes playfully, but was truly interested in hearing Edward's reaction to her "foresight."

Shrugging and sticking his lower lip out slightly, Edward answered. "It's not unusual...I can say that. Alice has always had a flair for the dramatic, and I think her determination is as much a part of it as anything, but there's no denying that she's really been right about her...hunches...more than anyone would think possible. So, what did she do?" He leaned in a little, completely pulled in to the story.

"She went to The Beatnik that night—it was a Wednesday—to 'scope the place out'," I said, making airquotes with my fingers. Edward smirked. "She asked where the guy would be playing, and the baristas were glad to tell her all kinds of good things about Jasper—at least about his music and his personality. They said he never told anyone much about his life...he always just said, 'You can hear everything I want you to know in my music.' Everything they said just pretty much cemented her belief that he was the one."

Edward's eyes encouraged me to hurry with the rest of the story, so I went on. "Thursday, she dressed up—she said she'd designed this particular outfit, knowing that she'd be wearing it when she met her 'soulmate.' She'd 'seen it.'" Edward nodded in understanding as he chuckled. "She went in early, and got a table near the window, up front where Jasper would be playing. She worked for a few hours until he came in, then went to the counter to order a drink while he set up. As she walked back to her seat, she watched him tune his guitar. She stopped in front of him on her way over to her table, and he looked up. Apparently, their eyes just locked, and they stared at each other for the longest time. Finally, he said 'I'm Jasper,' and she answered, 'I know. I'm Alice.' She smiled at him and then just took her seat, watching him. He looked over and smiled at her often, and throughout the night he sang to her...almost as if there were no one else in the café."

Edward smiled slightly as I continued. "When his set was over, he nodded for one of the baristas to bring over his regular drink, and he joined Alice at her table. I guess they talked until closing, and—other than for classes—they've spent just about every waking moment together since."

"Huh," was all Edward found to say for a few moments. I didn't think I'd ever seen him totally lost for words, so I just finished my food in silence, watching him as he stared into the flickering flame of the candle on our table. "It just happened so fast..." he mused. Then he added so quietly I almost missed it, "But, I can't say I don't understand." I swallowed quickly and realized that

we'd been drawn together quickly, too. There was just a...pull.

His head snapped up, and his eyes crinkled as he smiled at me. "Would you like dessert, Bella?"

"Well...I don't really need it. And I'm pretty stuffed."

"Have you ever eaten here before? Their cheesecake is famous," he informed me, his eyes twinkling.

"Well, I didn't know '*famous* cheesecake' was on the menu...that changes *everything*," I teased. "But would you mind if we just shared a piece?"

"Of course not." He smiled at me, and I imagined feeding the dessert to him. *Wouldn't that be nice?*

When our dessert arrived, Edward waited until I had tasted the first bite before he took one. So he was watching me when my eyes closed at the unbelievably decadent and rich cheesecake melting in my mouth. "Mmmmm." I opened my eyes and smiled, licking my lips. "This is amazing."

His eyes were wide with amusement and something else as he said quietly, "I don't believe I've ever seen anyone enjoy cheesecake that much. I almost hate to steal a bite from you."

Blushing, I blurted out, "No! Please share! I can't eat all this! I *want* to, for sure, but I can't...eat the famous cheesecake with me, Edward!"

He chuckled as he joined me, and we had the plate clean within minutes.

*_*_*_*_*

I got back to my room very late that night, Rosalie with me. Edward and I had come in from dinner and had a great time watching a movie and then just talking with everyone for hours. Rosalie and Emmett were more than willing to testify on my behalf Monday, and I was feeling more encouraged about the hearing. Emmett was completely pumped about lunch with Carlisle and Esme the next day, and his enthusiasm was rubbing off. Truly, by the end of the evening, I was actually looking forward to it, trusting that Edward and Alice's parents would like me as much as their two amazing children assured me that they would. I don't know what it was exactly, but every moment I spent with Edward made me feel more and more confident. I was actually beginning to believe that the major differences in our backgrounds and family situations really didn't matter very much. And if it genuinely didn't bother anyone else, then I decided I wouldn't make a big deal out of it.

While Rosalie jumped in the shower, I picked up the phone to call Angela. I wanted to find out how her "study date" with Ben had gone, and I knew she'd want to hear all that had gone on with Edward and Alice. Right before I dialed, I noticed a "Message Waiting" flashing across the caller ID screen. Dialing our voicemail, I punched in the PIN and waited to hear the message.

The voice that I heard startled me, the very last voice I'd expected to hear. It was Amber Hamilton, Josh's older sister.

"Bella Swan, you are absolutely unbelievable. Josh must've been blind not to see you for the gold digger you were. I kept telling him to quit ...*slumming* and move on, but I didn't realize how manipulative you could be. You are so completely *beneath* us. But a restraining order? Are you *serious*?" I could hear the thick disdain and disgust for me dripping from her voice. "You do not have a *clue* who you're dealing with here. Our family is not just going to sit back and let you sully the Hamilton name. You're nothing but poor, white trash, and not *one* of us will allow you to tarnish our reputation. You better back off while you still can, or you'll be sorry. You will be destroyed. Do you hear me? Your life will not even matter..."

"End of messages."

I sat there completely dumbfounded. After a few moments, I went ahead and numbly dialed Angela's number. When she picked up, I asked how things went with Ben and just listened quietly. She knew something was up, but when I told her Josh's sister had left such a belittling message, she totally flipped out. After ranting for a while, she made me promise not to delete it. "You've got to save it for the attorney, Bella!"

"But she called *me* manipulative. How will that help my case?"

"She threatened you! She said you'd be 'destroyed!' If nothing else, it ruins the validity of her testimony in his trial later, but—and maybe this is just me—I think it shows something about Josh's character, too...I mean, if you have a recording of his sister threatening you the same way *he's* been doing."

"I don't know...but I'll transcribe it or something and take it in tomorrow. You'll be able to come and meet with the attorney?"

"Yes. Definitely...So, has it been a good weekend otherwise?" I know she was trying to help me refocus, but it was so hard to think about anything but Amber's insults "...*you are so completely beneath us...you're nothing but poor, white trash...*"

"Sure, yeah," I answered, my voice void of emotion.

"What did you do, Bella?" she prompted.

I told her about Karaoke, and as I thought about Edward playing, my heart began to stir a bit. She asked how well he played, and I told her about hearing his song in the music room. She immediately knew I was leaving something out.

"Hmm, what are you not telling me?"

"Um...Edward may have...he may have kissed me."

“WHAT?! Wow, tell me about it!”

As soon as my mind went there, warmth flooded my body. “It was...unbelievable. I...I don’t even have the words for it, Ang. It was perfect.” *And you did a nice job of distracting me. This is much more pleasant to think about.*

We talked for a while longer, and I felt infinitely better when we hung up. Rosalie came out a few minutes later, and we talked a little as I got my stuff together for the shower.

Climbing in, I tried to let the hot water wash off the final vestiges of Amber’s call. When I stepped out, though, Rosalie was shouting into the phone—about the message on our voicemail. I figured she was talking to Emmett. *Great.* “Oh, she’s out now. I’ll call you in the morning.”

She hung up and looked at me, swearing under her breath. “Who *is* this wench, Bella? Josh’s sister?!”

Rosalie helped me record the message and save it as an mp3, which I stored on my iPod. She was livid, but her attitude and words emphasized once again that Amber’s opinion was not shared by everyone. Still, after hashing and rehashing it, I was ready to crash. Unfortunately, sleep evaded me. Amber’s words echoed in my head over and over, and—though I fought it—I began to wonder who else saw me that way. It was true that Edward, Alice and Esme seemed to accept me, blue collar family and all, but I knew that not everyone would. I couldn’t just expect to fit into their lives, as much as I might want to. Tense and sad, I finally fell asleep.

*_*_*_*

The next morning, as Rose and I ate a quick breakfast in the dining hall, Travis surprised me by joining us. I hadn’t spoken to him since that morning when he’d approached Jacob and me and apologized for how weird everything was with Josh.

“Bella?” he asked quietly.

“Hey, Travis. What’s going on?”

“Umm...” He seemed extremely anxious. He was pale, in fact, and looked a little sick to his stomach. “My dad called last night. Josh’s father called this weekend, and I...I’m going to be testifying for him when he goes to trial. Dad said I’ve got to go to the hearing tomorrow, too...just to show our support for the Hamiltons.”

I swallowed as the air left my lungs. “For...*Josh?*”

“Yeah,” he whispered. “My dad is making me.”

“But...My lawyer is planning on giving you a subpoena today to testify for *me*...So, when she asks you questions, you won’t just say whatever you want...or whatever you’re told to say, right? You’ll have to answer honestly.” The thought that he’d back Josh was completely

unnerving.

“Well, yeah. I guess you’re right. If your attorney were to ask point blank if Josh had been acting differently since he came back to school or something...or what kind of things Josh said when he talked about you...” The color was coming back to his face, though he still looked nervous.

“Okay. That’s all I can ask for. I know your families are close. But you’ll answer honestly if there’s a direct question? Because I’m sure my friend Jacob will mention the morning you spoke to us outside class.” *So maybe that’s a veiled threat. I just need to cover my bases. Travis was my friend, too, and Jacob could definitely get asked about that conversation.*

Travis smiled knowingly. “My dad will be there, Bella, and I have strict instructions, but—more than anything—my dad wants me to do the right thing.. I’ll just make sure he knows how important you are to me, too. You just make *sure* your attorney isn’t vague, okay?”

I relaxed and patted his hand as he stood up. “Definitely. Thanks, Trav.”

He looked sad all of a sudden, and I barely heard him whisper, “I miss you, Bella.” But as he walked away, he stopped and swung back toward me. “Bella. Tell your attorney to ask me what Josh said that night after the bonfire.” And then he was gone.

*_*_*_*

Today was a hair down day.

I chose a khaki skirt and a flattering scoop necked blouse. Rosalie insisted on doing my makeup since I would be officially meeting Mr. Cullen today. Before we left, I slid on my brown ballet flats, even though Rosalie hoped I’d wear my one pair of heels. “I need to avoid falling flat on my face today, don’t you think?” I challenged.

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” she agreed. “Don’t forget your iPod, Sweetcheeks.” She looked amazing as always, wearing a slim-fitting but conservative black dress and sleek black boots.

I grabbed my iPod and tucked it in my messenger bag as we headed out the door and down the steps. The boys were waiting for us by the bench, and we were both greeted with a good morning hug. I don’t know about hers, but mine was *perfect*. I settled right into my spot and inhaled Edward deeply, wondering once more about that delicious combination of scents. He kissed the top of my head before he released me, taking my hand and leading me to the car. He didn’t say anything about the voicemail message, though I was sure Emmett must’ve told him about it. Still, I was glad to avoid the topic for now. I was nervous enough just anticipating being introduced to Carlisle.

Any concern about that, though, was apparently a total waste of time. Carlisle was the epitome of graciousness. He was warm and welcoming, making me feel completely at ease. *Like father, like son*. As I hugged Esme and watched him greet the others with hugs and firm handshakes, I thought to myself that there was no doubt where Edward got his insanely beautiful chiseled

features. Edward may have Esme's eyes, but everything else was straight from his dad. *Don't I wish he'd been the doctor in **my** emergency room all those times! I mean, seriously, Mr. Cullen is **hot!***

I might have blushed slightly when he smiled at me and gestured for me to have a seat, but when Edward pulled out my chair for me and whispered in my ear, I shivered and blushed again. *No one else could have **that** effect on me.* I smiled up at Edward, and he offered his signature crooked smile as he took the seat next to me.

Conversation flowed easily, and I relished the fact that all the attention was not on me. Though Carlisle and Esme certainly involved me in the discussion, they spent time catching up with everyone. If there was one person singled out more than the rest of us, I'd have to say it was Jasper, unsurprisingly. After all, he was there in a much more "committed" sense, and with their only daughter, no less. The pressure didn't seem to faze him, though. He was as easygoing as ever, and I found myself wishing I could be so calm. During the meal he looked over at me a few times communicating a new-to-the-Cullens camaraderie, and I found his relaxed smile seemed to set me at ease.

For most of the meal, Edward and I talked quietly. I loved that he still seemed to protect me whenever he could from the awkwardness that is Bella being thrust into the limelight. Anytime Esme or Carlisle had a question or two for me, he'd immediately take my hand in his and squeeze. The support and encouragement were tangible and perfect.

I enjoyed listening to the easy father and son banter between Edward and his dad, too. It was completely obvious that they were close, and that Edward respected and loved Carlisle as much as Carlisle felt a great pride and joy in his son. I was listening to them talk about some family friends back home and was very taken in by their laughter at the story, when Carlisle turned to me and smiled genuinely.

"I trust you're satisfied with Lydia, Bella? Has she explained everything so that you understand it fully?" His eyes held sincere concern.

"Oh, yes!" I blushed. "She seems great and has been able to answer all of my questions so far. Thank you again, Mr. Cullen...so much."

"Absolutely, Bella. And you must call me Carlisle! We are more than pleased to be able to help you. I'm only sorry that you've been through all of this. Please let us know if you need something, though I'm sure our Edward will be very attentive." I caught the slight smile Carlisle flashed at his son, and noticed that Edward blushed just slightly. He nodded in agreement with his dad's meaning, winking at me.

When lunch was over, we thanked the Cullens and went to freshen up before we met with Miss Johanssen. Once we got settled in the larger room where Lydia and I had met the day before, we were joined by Angela. Alice and Jasper went out to wander and shop while we all discussed the hearing. Lydia asked each person to write down any events or conversations they had witnessed personally, so that she'd have a starting point for her questioning. While they all began jotting

down notes, she pulled me aside.

“I’ve received all of the necessary documents from the school, including a formal statement of Josh’s separation—that’s how Dartmouth refers to expulsion. Josh will be required to leave campus officially by Tuesday. The Tucker Foundation and Mrs. Anderson have both given me glowing character references for you, and quite a lengthy statement concerning Josh’s behavior at the children’s club. And I’ve been made aware that the police have recently served the subpoena to Travis Masters, since you mentioned he might be able to help you out.”

I cleared my throat to interrupt her momentarily, and her eyes smiled kindly as she paused, “Yes?”

When I told her what Travis had said earlier in the cafeteria, she began writing furiously on her legal pad. “We can do that,” she assured me. “The night of the bonfire he mentioned, that was after your neck was injured by the rock?”

I nodded. “If Travis knows something about it, that’s a big deal, right? Because otherwise it’s just my word against his...” I let my words trail off.

“You’re right, Bella. It could be extremely important. I’ll work on some carefully worded questions. Though I don’t think we’ll have any problem proving that Josh is a threat to you.”

At the word “threat,” I suddenly remembered the voicemail. I pulled out my iPod and played it for her, and I could tell that she was frustrated.

“Well, unfortunately, the hearing tomorrow is only concerning the restraining order, but I would still file a formal police report concerning this. It’s still a threat. *And* it could prove useful later, during the trial, when Amber would be called on to testify. It does certainly confirm one thing you should really be aware of, Bella...”

“What’s that?” I asked, curious.

“The Hamiltons really aren’t going to play nicely here. They’ve got their reputation at stake, and—from the conversations I’ve had with their attorney—I can tell you that they’re going to make this difficult. Once the hearing for the protective order is finished tomorrow, there will still be an arraignment and trial for the charges you’ve pressed. If Josh’s violent and aggressive behaviors are sufficiently proven tomorrow, I expect they’ll probably try to plea bargain or settle quietly outside of court, keeping the news away from the press as much as possible. Since there was no permanent physical damage to you, Josh may get off with a very light sentence—especially if he pleads guilty. I’ll do everything I can, though, Bella. I promise you that.”

I shrugged, “That’s all I can ask. I honestly want nothing more than for him to leave me alone for the rest of my life. If you can make *that* happen, you’ll have done enough.”

She finished explaining the preparations she’d made for the hearing, and then we rejoined the others.

After a few hours of going over questions and testimonies, she let us go for the evening. It was almost time to have dinner, so we all went down to the restaurant at the inn. Angela had to hurry back so she could meet Ben for another study session. She was glowing with anticipation. I was excited for her.

As we waited for the staff to prepare a large table, Alice and Jasper came in to the lobby with Carlisle and Esme. They were getting ready to drive back to New York, so we all hugged and said goodbye.

Alice hugged me with more strength than I'd have thought possible, and then hopped back to look intently into my eyes, keeping her hands on my shoulders. "I'll call you tomorrow night to see how things went, but know we'll be cheering you on from Pratt. You're in good hands with Lydia, but it's my brother's hands I trust the most. He'll do anything for you, Bella. You have no idea...well, I hope you have *some* idea by now, but I gotta tell you, Edward's heart is putty in your hands." She winked as she bounced up and kissed me on the cheek. "Let's meet in Maine sometime, so Edward and I can take you to all of our favorite places! You'll love it! Bye!"

Jasper stood behind her, grinning at her enthusiasm. As she grabbed his hand and kissed him on the cheek, too, he drawled sweetly, "We'll see you soon, Bella. You take care now..."

Before they left, she pulled Edward's ear down to her mouth and whispered something hastily. Edward blushed but was grinning like a Cheshire cat when he stood back up after wrapping his arms around her in a protective hug. Carlisle and Esme walked them back out to the car.

By the time we were finished with dinner, it was already 7:30. Emmett and Rosalie decided to go out dancing. Today had been a lot of sitting still for them both, so they said they'd be back late.

Edward and I headed back to campus, and spent a few hours relaxing. He came up to my room and read to me for a while after I changed into a t-shirt and yoga pants. I snuggled up next to him and rested my head on his shoulder. Thirty minutes later, he kissed my forehead and eased my head onto his lap, so that he could run his fingers through my hair. At about 10, I felt something shift under me, and I realized that he had helped me to lay down on my pillow and was covering me with a blanket. I didn't know when I'd fallen asleep. Before he left, he leaned over and kissed my temple tenderly, brushing my hair out of my face and back off of my neck. "Good night, Bella," he whispered in my ear. "I hope you'll have peaceful dreams."

"Good night, Edward," I mumbled back, smiling groggily. I heard a noise over by the door and sleepily assumed it had just shut behind him. "I think I might be starting to love you," I whispered.

#####

Chapter: 30

A/N: Okay, babes. Here's the update, and because you've all been SO patient, I made it extra long. :)

I've got to say, that I was nervous as HANG trying to write the legal part, but research is a beautiful thing, and Twilightzoner is even more beautiful. She read it before I submitted it JUST to make sure the legal stuff was righto. Please remember, this is not a trial, so some of what you're expecting won't be the same, but this is as close as I can get to how things would have gone down for Bella in New Hampshire. :)

Once more, Twilightzoner deserves her own planet she's so awesome.

To my ever faithful, ever witty and wise sage of a beta, FlemilyHarper, do you even KNOW how much you blow me away?? You are the world's greatest--AND I MEAN THAT--tweaker. You tweak my words and make me so much better than I am on my own. I LERVE it. MWAH!

And also, thanks you Shug for the shout out! I was humbled and flattered so, that my dear husband nearly had to scrape me off the floor and put me back together. Your compliments truly melted me into a ShannonPuddle. (If anybody wants to read her rec for *Afraid to Dance* as well as several other AMAZING recommendations, please check out the Live Journal community *Twilight Enabler*. Seriously, when I need to read something and just get lost in somebody else's Edward for a while, this is where I go, and the recs have never steered me wrong. sshg316 and GinnyW 31 are the admins, and it's fabuloso! Here's the address:

[.com/twilightenabler/](#)

And...on the offchance that the entire address isn't there, just go to my profile. is being quirky and uncooperative right now.

Happy reading! Don't forget to review! (This was the toughest chapter so far, so your thoughts will mean more to me than ever!

*I know that a heart can just get buried
Stone by stone, crushing hope until it dies
Far away, but the message somehow carries
Beloved, it is time for you to rise. Time for you to RISE UP...*

David Wilcox

Chapter Twenty-eight: Hearing

I was dreaming of the meadow again. Wrapped in the warmth of the sun, guarded by the

sentinel-like trees edging the perimeter, I was writing in my journal. Emptying my heart of all I'd like to say sometimes, pouring the words onto the paper, I confessed my confusion. Hearing soft footsteps in the grass, I watched as a shadow overtook my silhouette. I turned and looked up. Edward was there.

"You look so deep in thought, Love. What are you writing?" he asked.

"Just trying to sort everything out, I guess. But I'm confused...and a little scared."

He knelt beside me and looked into my eyes. "Don't be scared, Bella. What has you so confused?"

I paused, unsure of myself. Finally, I found the strength to voice, "I think I might be starting to love you."

His eyes lit up, a smile spreading across his face. "Hmm. I don't want you to be confused about that..."

Suddenly I heard a door close, clicking loudly, and my eyes popped open. I was in my room again. "Rosalie? Are you back?" *Hmm. No answer. Must've just been my imagination.* "Rosalie?" I tried once more.

Nothing. I allowed my eyes to close, and in no time at all, I found I'd drifted off somewhere else.

I was back home with Charlie.

We were out at the lake, Charlie fishing from the boat while I read a book on my blanket, enjoying the sunshine. It was restful, and I needed that. There were no expectations, no pressures, no deadlines. Charlie and I were just planning to enjoy the afternoon in quiet company and then share the fish that he'd caught us for dinner. Sometimes words just weren't required.

Click. The door closed again. Rosalie locked it as she kicked off her shoes, tossing them quietly into the closet moments later. She pulled her pajamas out of her top drawer and flipped on the bathroom light. I heard the shower shortly afterwards. I smiled as I snuggled down into my pillow, feeling relaxed. Seeing Charlie had been good, even if only in a dream. I'd have to call him again tomorrow before I left. He hadn't been surprised when I'd told him about the hearing yesterday morning, but he wanted regular updates. I decided I'd call Renee after the hearing.

Within moments, I was asleep again.

When I awoke the next morning, I felt more refreshed than I'd expected to. *That's a good thing.* This day was going to take a lot out of me. I grabbed the phone and dialed Jacob's number.

"Hello?" his deep voice answered.

“Hey, you. How was your weekend home?”

“Great, Bells. It was really good to see those guys, you know?”

“I bet. I’m glad you had a good time. Listen, are you still planning on coming to the hearing today?”

“Sure, sure, Bells! You know I promised I’d be there.”

“But...well, did you get a subpoena or anything?” I asked uncertainly.

“Umm...no. Was I supposed to?” he asked.

I was anxious for some reason that he wouldn’t mind *being* there, but that testifying would be too much. “Well, my attorney just explained that—after I testify—anyone who’s been involved or who’s witnessed anything that will support my testimony will have a chance to speak.” Before I could ask him point blank, he laughed and cut me off.

“Hey! You *know* I’ve got your back.”

Relieved, I explained, “Okay, well listen, why don’t you call the attorney at this number and just touch base this morning before the hearing. Her name is Lydia Johannsen. That way, she’ll know what questions to ask you—the rest of us met with her yesterday afternoon before you got back.”

“Okay, Bells. Sure thing. Gimme the number...”

Once I got off the phone with Jake, I called Charlie. He was already at the station, so I knew we wouldn’t be able to talk long.

“Chief Swan,” he said when he picked up.

“Hey, Dad.” It was good to hear his voice.

“Hey, Kiddo. I’m glad you called. Today’s the big day, huh?” He was trying to sound relaxed, but I could hear worry in his voice.

“Yeah.” His worry made me anxious.

“How’re you holdin’ up?”

“I’m a little nervous, but the attorney’s really great. You’d approve, I’m sure,” I said, trying to make us both feel better. “And today’s just about the protective order anyway.”

“Sure, Bells. But it’s still a big deal. You just tell ‘em how it’s been and, uh, let me know if you need anything from me.” He hesitated, but I could tell he wasn’t finished, so I waited. “You know, it’s really hard for me not being there with you for this. I...I want you to know I’m

planning on taking some time off and coming over for the trial.”

“Dad, you know you don’t...” I tried, but he cut me off.

“I know, Bells, but I am. And I don’t want to hear another negative word about it. You’re my only kid. A dad needs to be there. So, uh, you let me know as soon as the date is set, all right?”

There’d be no changing his mind. And, I honestly couldn’t wait to see him. “Okay, Dad. I will.”

He cleared his throat, and I could hear a smile in his voice, but he was still serious. “Is your posse still watching out for you?”

“Yeah, Dad,” I laughed. “They’re everywhere. I’m safe.” I didn’t want to tell him about Amber’s call.

“Well, I guess that’s good then. Be sure and tell the Cullens thanks for me, okay, Kid? They seem to be good people.”

“Yeah. They are. I’ll tell ‘em.” I could tell he was wrapping up.

“Okay, Bells. I’ve got to run, but—just know that I’m thinkin’ of you today, and I wish I was there. I love you, Kid.”

“Love you, too, Dad.” I didn’t want to hang up.

“Will you call me later?” he asked.

“Definitely,” I said as relief washed over me. I guess I needed him more than I realized during all of this. “Bye, Dad.”

“Bye, Bells.” I heard him hang up then, and I clicked the phone off. *I could use one of those awkward Charlie hugs right now.*

I dressed conservatively for the day, not that I was ever audacious. I liked to blend in more than your average college student, probably. It was definitely easy not to stand out next to Rosalie, but Lydia had suggested that I do my best to look innocent and studious. Charcoal gray slacks it was, then, with a cream cami under my black cardigan. Rose helped me tame my curls which seemed to have a mind of their own today, and we I left my hair down, pulling just the sides back into a barrette.

I knew I needed to eat something, but I couldn’t say I had a huge appetite. When I was just about ready to run down to the dining hall, I was surprised by a knock at my door. Edward, perfectly anticipating my need as always, was standing there in a dark suit jacket with his tan shirt unbuttoned at the collar. He looked amazing. But the best part was the bag in his hand. I knew instinctively that it was from Novack Café.

He grinned at me and said, “Morning, Beautiful. I thought that a warm muffin and some hot tea might be in order.”

“Mmmm,” was all I could smile in response at first. “It’s just the thing. I don’t know how you do it,” I finally said. “*You* made it a good morning.” I stuck my head in the bathroom to let Rosalie know I was leaving with Edward.

She had already dressed and was just working on her hair, so she stepped out of the bathroom, surprising me with a hug as she said good morning to Edward. Then, pulling back and looking into my eyes, her eyes brimmed with tears as she whispered, “I...I just want you to know that, I’m glad you’re finally getting to face this head on. I hope I’ll have the chance soon. I mean, I know you’re probably nervous, but...this gives me some serious hope, girl. I’ll see you there in a little while.” She smiled at me.

I closed the door behind me, and then stood on my tiptoes, kissing him on the cheek. This kind of surprise needed an immediate reward. “You are *so* thoughtful, Edward Cullen.”

He blushed. “Well, I like thinking about you, Bella Swan.” His eyes were bright and happy this morning, as if he weren’t about to accompany me into the lion’s den.

“Sorry I fell asleep on you last night,” I shrugged as I took the muffin and we began walking.

“It was my pleasure to stay with you until you fell asleep, Bella...believe me.” His grin surprised me. He seemed to be smiling at something only he knew about. I felt his hand on the small of my back as I turned back around and we approached the steps.

At the bottom, I turned back to him and caught him smiling again, and chewing on his lower lip. “Well, I was just *so* tired,” I excused myself.

“I know, Bella. You needed the rest. And, I’m glad I was with you, because *I* needed...” he paused. His brow creased for a fleeting moment and then relaxed as he allowed his thought to trail off. “Do you know how sweet you are when you sleep?” he asked.

I shoved his arm playfully and stepped outside. “Uggh. I couldn’t possibly be. Apparently I talk in my sleep all the time? Angela told me once, and I’ve noticed that Rose sometimes sleeps with earplugs. It’s a good thing you left when you did, because there’s never any telling what kind of embarrassing things I might say.”

He cocked his eyebrow at me and his lip quirked into that crooked smile. Only this time, the butterflies that were suddenly practicing their kamikaze dives in my stomach weren’t there just because he was so handsome. *No. Dear God, tell me I did not say anything embarrassing while he was in the room.* I stammered, “You didn’t hear...I didn’t...”

“Sit with me, Bella, while you eat,” he said, immediately putting me at ease somehow. “And don’t worry about what I might have heard. Let’s just say...I feel appreciated. It’s good to know you like having me around.” *Well, I can’t argue with that. If that’s all I said...at least it wasn’t*

anything embarrassing. “Okay.” Pulling my warm muffin out of the bag, I sat down on the bench to eat my perfect surprise breakfast.

Edward sat back and crossed his arms over his chest, sighing with contentment.

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The drive to the courthouse was nerve wracking, to say the least. Every rotation of the wheels brought me closer to this confrontation. I wished it could all just take care of itself. I wished Josh would just go away.

I leaned my head back on the headrest and began to daydream.

Edward and I pulled into the courthouse parking lot and got out of the car. I straightened my clothes as he came around to my side of the car to take my hand. The sun was shining, and everything seemed peaceful as we walked toward the courthouse. Too serene, it was the calm before the storm. As we approached the base of the steps, we saw Josh walking up the steps with a small group of people. He looked over at us, and I squeezed Edward’s hand in fear. Suddenly, Josh tumbled backwards, head over feet down the stairs, as the people with him began screaming and diving for cover. Josh had been shot.

Edward casually looked across the street to the roof of the building facing the courthouse. I saw him wink and give a thumbs up to someone dressed in all black. Then, the assassin faced us and took his mask off. Emmett cheered down at us from the rooftop as he twirled the face mask around his head like a lasso. “Woohoo! I got ‘im, you guys! Did you freakin’ SEE THAT?!”

I chuckled to myself, enjoying the wishful thinking for a moment, but acknowledging that I didn’t really want Josh *dead* . . . especially at the hands of one of my friends. I just wanted him . . . gone. . . and maybe a little maimed . All too soon though, reality came crashing down on me as we actually pulled into the parking lot. *Well, at least my day dream broke the tension for a moment. Here goes.*

Taking a deep breath, I opened the door and climbed out of Edward’s car. He held my hand as we walked. Carlisle, Esme, and Lydia were waiting for us in the lobby. Edward decided to stay for the time being in the lobby with his parents and wait for the others. Before I left, he took both my hands in his and squeezed them gently, offering his silent support. Then, Lydia escorted me down the hallway into a small spartanly furnished room, probably designed for conversations such as these. The bare walls, the straight-legged table, and two uncomfortable office chairs offered no comfort, but Lydia’s warm smile had at least a small calming effect.

I was glad to see her smile at me, because it was nice to know she was on my team. As I sat down, I noticed that she looked much more business-minded today, her navy blue pencil skirt and suit jacket accentuating her professional demeanor. The greatest contributor to her austere appearance though, was her hair, tightly pulled back into a low bun. “How are you doing this morning, Bella?” she asked.

I shifted uncomfortably in my seat, smoothing out my pants before I looked back at her. “I’m nervous,” I said quietly. “I just don’t really want to face him...or see his family. They’re going to try to make me look...just...”

“Bella.” Her voice was serious and low, but not without compassion. “They’re going to try to poke holes in your testimony. That’s all. They can’t make you anything less than you are, and they can’t hide the truth. Just look them in the eye, tell the truth, and be confident that his behavior is problematic enough to get you a permanent restraining order. That’s all we have to handle for today. It’s even going to be informal. Plus, you’ve already gotten a temporary protective order, so this shouldn’t be difficult. We can just worry about everything else later.”

I traced the woodgrain pattern in the ugly particle board tabletop with my finger rather than answering. “Hmm?” I heard.

Her voice pulled my eyes away from the table. “Okay. You’re right. I can do this.” I found myself wishing that Alice was beside me. She’d done this before.

Lydia patted my hand and smiled. “You’ve got a strong case, Bella. Don’t worry.”

Sighing, I nodded in tacit agreement. “Will we have to wait long, do you think?” I asked after a moment.

“No, I don’t think so. Any case that involves the endangerment of a person is given priority. It’ll work the same way with Josh’s trial. Everything should sort of come to a head today and then happen quickly.”

I’ll need to tell Charlie that tonight. We went over some important details for the next few minutes, and then Lydia offered to wait and work on her own if I wanted to move out into the lobby so that I could visit with everyone. The others should have arrived by then.

I decided I’d take her up on that, knowing that I could retreat to the room if the lobby were to get...crowded. So, I opened the door and slowly stuck my head out in the hall. I saw Edward standing with Emmett, Rosalie, and Angela. Edward looked embarrassed, and Emmett was apparently badgering him about something. I closed the door quickly and quietly behind me and joined them, the curiosity evident on my face.

Emmett slapped Edward on the back, laughing as Edward grimaced. “Dude! She was trying to pick you up at a *freaking courthouse!*” Edward shook his head severely as Em continued.

“What happened?” I asked.

Edward turned to answer, but Emmett plowed right in. “Right before we all got here, Edward was in here alone, and this girl tried to pick him up. She apparently waltzed right over, laid her hand on his chest, flirting with him. As Rosie and I walked in, we heard her say—and he continued in this hilarious, high-pitched, nasally girl voice, ‘Are you a law student, because I really have a thing for hot young lawyers...and I’m *definitely* free later.’” Then he snorted.

Edward turned away and looked at the floor. Looking up at me then he spoke softly, “My mom and dad stepped out for some air,” he offered as explanation.

“What did you do?” Angela asked confidently. *My stomach plummeted. Was that...jealousy? Oh, Edward. What **did** you do? Was she beautiful?*

“Well, I explained as kindly as possible that I’m neither a law student nor available...and I politely removed her hand from my chest.” The relief that flooded my heart at those words was tangible. I exhaled slowly, unaware that I’d been holding my breath.

Angela looked over at me and cocked her head, quietly asking if I was all right. I nodded, smiling slightly. Emmett noticed and pulled me into a sideways hug, whispering in my ear. “As if he could ever *look* at anybody but you, Bellaluna. You’ve got him wrapped around your little finger so tight, it’s a wonder your blood’s still circulating.” Then, to ease the awkwardness, Emmett chided loudly, “Poor E. C. It must be hard to be so hot.”

Edward smirked and relaxed at the effort to relieve the tension and punched Emmett playfully in his arm. We all laughed, and it felt good to have a moment of normalcy. While our laughter was dying down, we felt a gust of air as the large front door swung open. I tensed for a moment, afraid to look up and see Josh.

But then Jacob strode into the lobby, tall, confident, and wearing an easy grin. When his eyes found mine, his face lit up. “Hey, Bells! I missed you this weekend.” He looked great. He hadn’t dressed up as much as the others, but his khakis looked really nice with his melon and blue striped button down.

“Hey, Jacob,” I smiled. “I’m glad to see you, too. Thanks for coming.”

Emmett introduced himself and shook hands with Jacob. We all talked comfortably for a while, and then the click of heels drew our attention down the hall. Lydia was walking toward us, briefcase in hand. “Are you ready?” she asked. “We’re the next case.”

“I guess,” I whispered. Edward reached for my hand, and Emmett squeezed my shoulder affectionately. I felt safe. Angela and Rosalie were looking at me, their eyes and faces filled with support and reassurance. Jacob looked serious for a change—determined. He introduced himself to Lydia, and she welcomed him politely.

Carlisle and Esme rejoined the group shortly, and the compassion evident on their faces made me just want to cry. All this kindness and support was a little overwhelming. I’d never had it all in one place at one time before. It made the imminent hearing so much more momentous.

The Hamiltons swaggered into the lobby then, evidently feeling very confident. Mr. Hamilton stopped beside a row of chairs at the other end of the hall just behind the defendant’s table and allowed Amber and Mrs. Hamilton to take their seats before casting a decidedly condescending look in my direction and joining them. I heard Edward clear his throat and whisper something

before Emmett's, not-hushed-enough voice cut through the tension, "Are you *serious*?" He tried to keep himself from snickering, but everyone heard it, I'm sure.

I turned to see Edward looking pained, but when our gazes locked on one another's, he visibly relaxed. His eyes looked into mine with devotion, and he jerked his head once toward the Hamiltons in silent communication. I glanced over to see Amber leaning forward in her seat and staring at Edward with an expression of total shock. *Oh. Oh! She's the one who hit on Edward!* Her eyes turned to mine then, and I couldn't help but smirk slightly. *Pick your face up off the floor, wench. That's right. He's here with me.*

I turned back to the front of the lobby and just began studying the place. Every chair, every alcove, every plant, each light fixture. I was memorizing the location and characteristics as if my life depended on it. Edward, sensing my tension took my hand and traced gentle circles on it with his thumb. The door creaked again, and we all turned to watch Travis and his father come in. The two heads of family nodded firmly to one another, but Travis's eyes found mine and proffered a half-hearted smile. He looked terribly uncomfortable. His father didn't lead them to sit with the Hamiltons as I expected, but they found seats near the middle instead. Mr. Hamilton did not appear to be pleased with that choice.

Lydia placed her hand on my back and suggested we go ahead and find a seat in the courtroom. The witnesses would have to wait in the lobby until they'd testified, but Carlisle and Esme followed us in. As we walked into the large hall and sat down, the court officer stood and said loudly, "Miss Isabella Swan." Lydia approached the officer then, introducing herself as my attorney, and then she and I took seats at the plaintiff's table. The stenographer took her seat after a few moments, and Lydia leaned over to whisper that Josh would probably be escorted in the side door. On the other side of the room, the defendant's table and all of the seats were empty...but not for long.

Just then, the side door opened. An unbelievably cocky Josh Hamilton was led into the room by two officers. I felt sick. A well-dressed man followed him in and sat down beside him at the table, and Josh spared a fleeting look at me, his eyes were filled with anger. Soon, they were settled in their seats.

Just in time, apparently, because we heard the bailiff shout, "All rise for the Honorable Judge Daniel Wilson!" An older gentleman, probably in his late 50s entered the courtroom in his robes and walked to his seat. Though he had a grandfatherly face, the expression was one of total authority. I swallowed, silently hoping that there might be some grandpa-like feelings in there somewhere.

When we were allowed to sit down again, we all listened as the judge explained that—though this was a hearing, and as such would be rather informal—he would take absolutely no disrespect, insolence, or foolishness from anyone. He expected all of us young people, as well as the adults, to handle the proceedings maturely, and he made no mistake about letting us know it. He explained that these hearings were usually conducted *pro se*, meaning that the plaintiff represented herself and that her attorney acted as an advocate and helped as needed. He did seem pleased that I had an attorney with me, however, since the defendant's attorney was also present.

The judge himself would be calling witnesses and handling the cross-examinations.

Just before we began, he pointed out one other crucial factor. “Now,” he said, “pursuant to RSA 173-B: 3, VIII, the Rules of Evidence do not apply to domestic violence cases. And because this is informal and the hearing is concerning a protective order against stalking, domestic violence and/or abuse, this means that I and I alone will determine what constitutes evidence regarding Miss Swan’s case. Is that clear?” Everyone nodded.

When it was clear that we understood, he looked over at Lydia and me, and said that he’d like to hear my case as he gestured toward the witness stand. Before I took my seat, I was sworn in by the bailiff. Then, the judge asked me to tell him what has been going on to cause me to feel like a protective order is necessary. I started with our breakup in the spring, and walked through every single example of harassment that I’d had to deal with since I’d returned: Josh’s approaching me and twisting my wrist when I’d tried to tell him I didn’t want to talk...lurking outside my building and antagonizing me as I walked from place to place alone...trying to force me to see there was no way out of our relationship...threatening to find me and finish this discussion...making comments like, “You’ll be sorry,” and “You belong to *me*.” I could feel Josh’s icy stare on me, but I just kept my eyes locked on Lydia who was nodding and encouraging me silently.

I recounted the problem with incessant phone calls and threats which I’d reported to campus security when I had his number blocked. I mentioned the day that Josh had taken a seat right in front of me in the dining hall and just stared at me as I tried to eat, adding that my friends had asked him politely to move elsewhere and leave me alone. As I told the judge about the night that Josh had given me the rose right before he shoved me up against the vending machine and pinned me there with a kiss, I shuddered. The memory was just so painful and...disgusting. I pointed out that I had been escorted to class, but had not expected there to be a problem with stepping outside for a moment during the break. “I just *never* feel safe anymore,” I said.

The judge asked if that was all.

“No sir, Your Honor. There’s a good bit more.” I went on to inform the judge that Josh had followed me to the homework club and circled the building repeatedly, waiting for me while I was inside.

Then, with tears in my eyes, I shared what had happened the night of the bonfire. “My friends were scanning the crowd constantly, never leaving my side. After nearly an hour, a few of them headed off in different directions, and I—mistakenly feeling like I wasn’t in danger—stepped away from them to watch the bonfire. I...I couldn’t have been more than 15 feet away from them, but that was apparently enough. As I stood at the side of the fire, I felt something slam into my neck. I looked across the flames and saw Josh standing there, smirking at me, right before everything went black.”

“Objection! Did anybody *else* see me?” Josh shouted. His attorney hushed him and apologized to the judge, but the judge still threatened Josh with contempt if he couldn’t control himself and let me speak uninterrupted.

“Do not say another word until I give you permission to speak, do you understand me, son?” he voiced harshly.

“Yes sir, Your Honor.” Josh slumped down in his chair sulkily.

“Miss Swan,” the judge continued. “Was a report filed that evening?”

“Yes it was, Your Honor. And I was evaluated by paramedics. Their report is included with our evidence as well. It was filed with campus security.”

“All right. What else?” he asked.

I discussed the night that he’d been sitting outside of the library, and I’d been afraid to leave.

And finally, I told in great detail about our afternoon at the homework club when he’d come in under false pretenses, grabbing me by the hair and yanking my head toward him as he continued to issue threats. I mentioned the witnesses and the police reports that had been filed.

“Is that all, Miss Swan?” the judge asked, making sure I’d testified about everything.

“Yes, Your Honor. I believe it is.” I looked over at Carlisle and Esme sitting side by side. Both their faces were encouraging, though Esme’s eyes were sad.

“Mr. Hamilton, do you or your advocate have any questions for Miss Swan?”

Josh’s attorney whispered quietly to him, and Josh looked skeptical as he began to argue. Their discussion continued for a moment until the judge cleared his throat, and demanded, “Now is the time for questions, not discussion. Do you have anything you’d like to ask Miss Swan?”

“Only regarding the incident at the bonfire, Your Honor,” the attorney answered. Josh huffed, but leaned forward in his seat.

“All right. Go ahead,” the judge instructed.

“Miss Swan, I’d like to go back to Josh’s earlier question. Did anyone else, in fact, see Josh at the bonfire that night?”

I hesitated and looked at each of the faces of my friends.

“Objection!” I heard Lydia say forcefully. My client doesn’t know what others may or may not have seen that night. She only knows what she’s been told, and that’s hearsay.”

“Sustained,” replied Judge Wilson.

“I’ll rephrase the question. Miss Swan, did any of your other friends tell you that they had seen

Mr. Hamilton at the bonfire?”

“No.”

“Do you mean no one saw him throw the rock at you, or no one saw him at all?” he pressed. I trembled as my eyes filled with tears. *I will not let them fall in front of Josh.*

“Objection, Your Honor!” Lydia shouted in frustration. “He’s badgering Miss Swan regarding hearsay again.”

“Sustained.” I sighed with relief at the judge’s response.

Taking a deep breath, I steadied myself. Locking my eyes on Lydia’s again, I knew I’d be all right.

Josh’s lawyer went on. “I’m sorry. Miss Swan, can you tell the court which of your friends were with you the night of the bonfire?”

“Edward Cullen, Jacob Black, and Angela Weber,” I answered.

“That’s all, Your Honor. We have no further questions.” Josh’s attorney sat back, and when I looked at Josh he actually winked at me, looking smug.

Unfortunately for him, the judge caught it. “Did you just wink at Miss Swan, Mr. Hamilton?” His voice was thick with distaste.

“Uh...er...I was just...” Josh stammered, turning red.

“Would you like to explain to me what you meant by that?” His voice clearly indicated intolerance for that kind of behavior.

“I...I must’ve had something in my eye,” Josh tried.

“Young man, that explanation was unwise. I watched you wink at her, and I gave you an opportunity to explain yourself. Rather than making the most of it, you chose not to take me seriously. The next time I ask you a question, I expect a forthright answer.” Then, he looked at our side of the room again and asked that we begin hearing from the other witnesses.

The judge asked who we’d like to testify first, and Lydia suggested Jacob, so he was called in. He detailed the first run-in I had with Josh in the Thayer Dining Hall. He said that he’d witnessed both the wrist-grabbing and the menacing threat to finish the conversation later. He shared how he’d been called to walk me to the security office the night that Josh’s harassing phone calls wouldn’t stop, and that he’d escorted me regularly to Monday, Wednesday and Friday classes in the morning as well as to and from my Wednesday night class. Confirming the attack during the break, he reiterated that it had been unnecessary for him to meet me after class that night, as a security officer accompanied me to my room. He also made note of the report

he'd filed after Josh had followed us from the homework club, pointing out that he'd written down the license number and then driven me back since I was too emotional to drive. And, he finished with what he *did* see on the night of the bonfire...Bella Swan crumpled to the ground with a large rock underneath her—on the football field, where there *are* no rocks.

The defense simply asked if Jacob knew Josh personally.

“No,” he smiled. “Aside from our few brief conversations where I steered Bella away, I haven't had the pleasure.”

I smiled at him, and Lydia nodded her appreciation as he finished and stepped down.

Edward testified next. I was so unbelievably glad to see him. Just the fact that he was in the room with me, going through all of this alongside me, steadied my nerves. He reiterated everything I'd stated earlier, very thoroughly, emphasizing how uncomfortable and dangerous the situations appeared to onlookers. He added that he was often the one who was around helping me calm down after these confrontations with Josh. He was emphatic that Josh's words and forceful actions incited genuine fear in me, mentioning the state in which I'd been when he met me in the library that night. I was embarrassed, and couldn't look over at Josh, but I knew he was watching me squirm, and I hated him for it at that moment. I sat stiffly, my jaw clenched, wishing that this was all over.

When he'd finished, the Hamilton's attorney asked him the same question. Edward responded with a smile, “I've not met Josh personally. Every time I've stepped up to introduce myself, he's felt a need to leave quickly.”

Angela and Rosalie added their concerns and corroborations when they were called. They were asked the same question by Josh's lawyer. Rosalie said no. Angela, however answered yes. She explained that she'd been unfortunate enough to know him the entire two years we'd been involved, since she'd been my friend since high school. And she'd watch me become a totally different person—a shell of who I'd been. “I think all of Bella's friends were relieved when she broke off the engagement.”

A silence filled the courtroom. Then Josh complained, “You know that's not true, Bella! You were happy! I was good to you!” Before I could help myself, I barked out a harsh laugh. *Yeah right, you creep!*

Josh's attorney spoke up as the judge banged his gavel, and said, “Your honor, I move that Miss Weber's final words be struck from the record. That's irrelevant.” I could only assume that he thought he'd get another testament to Josh's good character, but boy was he wrong.

“Overruled,” the judge said calmly. “You asked the question, and I think it adds to the pattern the plaintiff is building.”

After they spoke, Emmett, the security guards, and Mrs. Anderson spoke on my behalf.

Finally, Travis was called to the stand and sworn in. Mr. Hamilton cleared his throat and looked at Travis's father expectantly. The latter just clenched his jaw, looked forward and straightened his tie.

Travis explained that he and Josh had been friends for years, growing up together, and that he'd never known Josh to be abusive or manipulative. A collective sigh of relief rose from the other side of the courtroom. "But he's been acting a lot differently this semester," he added. "I haven't *seen* any acts of violence. I haven't *witnessed* the phone calls. I'd honestly like to say that I've been impressed with the way my friend has handled the breakup..." He added quietly, "...but I can't."

"And why is that, Travis?" Lydia asked. "What is it that concerns you?"

"I've heard Josh brag about something he did to hurt Bella. He thought it was funny."

"Objection, Your Honor!" Josh's attorney shouted.

Travis's father shifted in his seat uncomfortably. Josh was gripping the table—his knuckles were white.

"Overruled. Standard rules of evidence do not apply, and I want to hear where this is going. I believe it will shed light on Miss Swan's earlier testimony."

"What did you hear him say the night of the bonfire, Travis?"

Travis looked at Josh, then Mr. Hamilton, and then his father. He hesitated.

And then he looked at me. Steeling himself with resolve, he answered, looking back at the judge. "I heard him telling some of our other friends about what had happened at the bonfire. He said, 'It was awesome. See if she keeps choosing those pricks over me. I found a rock in the woods the other day, and I'd been saving it for her. When she was alone, I pegged her with it. She won't forget *that* for a long time.'"

Travis was staring at his feet. Then, looking up, he spoke up with brave conviction, making eye contact with them individually. "I'm sorry, Josh...and Mr. Hamilton." He looked right back at Josh then. "There are a lot of great things I could say about you, but I can't let that slide. You were *glad* you'd hurt Bella. *Nobody* deserves that. But especially not Bella. Angela was right about everything she said. He was never good enough to her."

You could've heard a pin drop. I couldn't believe he'd actually said all that. It was *way* more than I expected. My heart was suddenly filled with deep thanks, appreciation that he risked his relationship with his father. And he totally *threw away* his relationship with the Hamiltons. There'd be no coming back from that.

But I also felt really, crazily angry. Josh had found a rock and *planned* to hit me with it. He laughed at how hurt I'd been. I turned to looked at Edward then—he was *wroth*. Emmett was

holding him in his seat with his arm *tightly* around Edward's shoulder. My eyes continued searching the faces of my friends. Esme was crying behind Edward, Carlisle comforting her quietly. Angela had her hand on Jake's arm. Rosalie was squeezing Em's other hand.

The defense had no questions on this one. None at all.

Josh was as white as a ghost.

The judge broke the silence, "I believe that's all from the plaintiff. Am I right?"

Lydia and I nodded. "That's all, Your Honor."

Turning to Josh then, the judge sighed and said, "Defense? It's your turn, Mr. Hamilton to take the stand and say what you can for yourself." Josh's lawyer spoke quickly to him as he rose to his feet. He walked slowly to the stand, swore to tell the truth, and sat down, looking at the judge.

"Well, young man?" the judge prompted.

He looked around at all the faces, and gulped. I heard Emmett whisper softly, "What a coward."

Finally, looking at his parents and then back at the judge, Josh spoke quietly. "All I can say is that Bella and I should still be together. I loved her—I still love her, and she needs me. She's a nobody from podunkville, and she was going to be *nothing*. I stepped in and gave her a shot at a real life. But she threw that all away. I don't know why she can't see it..."

The lawyer spoke up, thanking Josh for his testimony—trying to cut him off, to no avail. Josh's father stood then, eyes blazing. "That will do, Joshua." Josh gulped and hung his head.

"I agree," said the judge. "We don't need to hear anymore. We'll recess for ten minutes, and then I'll come back with my decision."

No one spoke very much. The tension in the room was palpable.

Ten minutes later, we were instructed to rise as the judge came in.

"Based on the preponderance of evidence," he began after we were seated, "I find that there is a credible threat to the plaintiff's safety. I believe we've seen and heard evidence here today of both stalking and abuse, according to New Hampshire state law. Therefore, I am authorizing a protective order with the following relief documented: (1) The court will restrain the defendant from stalking the plaintiff. (2) The court will restrain the defendant from being within 500 yards of the plaintiff. (3) The court will restrain the defendant against entering the premises and curtilage where the plaintiff resides. That is, you can't go anywhere near her dorm room, Mr. Hamilton. (4) The court will restrain the defendant from having contact of any kind with the plaintiff."

The judge stopped reading for a moment and looked Josh in the eyes. “Mr. Hamilton, I want to be crystal clear that you know what this means. This includes all forms of contact—direct and indirect. No letters, no flowers, no phone calls, no passing messages through friends or family, no emails or texts. *No. Contact. Mr. Hamilton.* Even if Miss Swan contacts *you*, son, you may be arrested for violating this order if contact is made.”

Then he looked at me sternly. “Miss Swan, you do realize that it may be dangerous and unwise to contact Mr. Hamilton. I’d advise you not do that.”

“Yes sir, Your Honor. I have no intention of contacting him.” I spoke just loud enough to be heard. I literally felt weak from relief that this was happening, but I knew it wasn’t over yet.

Picking the order back up, the judge continued where he’d left off. “(5) The court will restrain the defendant from entering the plaintiff’s work or school or any place frequented regularly by the plaintiff or by any family or household member. Miss Swan,” he paused. “It would be extremely helpful if you’d list those places where you work or volunteer, and include the hours you’re usually on the premises, so that we can enforce these properly.”

Judge Wilson explained that the order would also protect my family members and my property. He told Josh to relinquish any firearms or deadly weapons that he had in his possession, and Josh actually laughed. “It’s not a laughing matter Mr. Hamilton. I expect you to turn these weapons in to the court immediately—including any *rocks* you might be holding on to.”

He cocked his eyebrow at Josh and stared him down until Josh stammered a “Yes, Your Honor.”

“In addition, the court recommends professional counseling, so that you can learn some *less aggressive* methods of communication.”

Josh and his lawyer balked at that.

Leaning forward over the bench, the judge warned, “It’s either that or batterer intervention, son. Which would you prefer to remain on your record?” the judge quipped.

“Professional counseling is fine,” Josh agreed meekly.

“Well then,” the judge replied, “our only other orders of business are scheduling the trial, which will be as soon as possible considering the nature of the charges. Our clerk will be in touch with the attorneys, but you can expect the trial to begin within two weeks. Are there any other questions?”

“No, Your Honor,” everyone answered.

“Then this hearing is adjourned.” We all stood as the judge rose to leave.

As soon as he was gone, I fell back into my seat and cried with relief.

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Chapter: 31

A/N: I'm excited to be posting this chapter, because some things that I'd really been craving are finally happening. As always, I can't wait to hear your thoughts.

I know there'll be a lot of questions, and—sadly—I have to let you know that I'll be unable to update for about two and a half weeks. “WHAT?!” you say. *hangs her head and kicks the dirt around with her frustrated toe*

It's true. I'll be out of town for a while, with no promises of good internet access. I AM TAKING MY LAPTOP, though. I plan to get through at least the next three chapters while I'm out. SO, when I get back, updates will make you happy. I can promise you that.

If I was dying in the desert, I would see shining on the sand

True love, like distant water, on dry land...

David Wilcox

Chapter Twenty-nine: Coping

I didn't want to open my eyes.

I cried with *relief* that the hearing was over. That Josh—legally, enforcably—wasn't allowed anywhere near me anymore. That I could walk around campus and around town without looking over my shoulder constantly. That if he was idiotic enough not to leave me alone, there'd be serious, major consequences.

I cried with *pride* that I'd faced him head on. That I hadn't shrunk back, but had exposed him for the sick coward he is. That I'd looked him in the eye and said that I meant it when I didn't want anything to do with him. That I'd told people how desperate and crazy he'd been, and the insane lengths he went to make me feel like I belonged to him.

I cried with a *heart full of gratefulness* for the friends who had shown me that I *wasn't* owned. That they'd supported me—not just today, but every day since the beginning of the semester. That they'd teamed up to make sure I was never had to be afraid or alone. That they'd listened to

me and taken my fears seriously. That they'd held me when I couldn't cope. That they'd cheered me on. That they'd done whatever they could to make sure I was heard by the judge today.

But then, I cried with *remorse* that I hadn't been smart enough to recognize what a creep Josh was when I'd first met him. That I'd been so clueless and naïve. That I'd missed the signs that should have warned me to stay away. That I'd convinced myself for a while that he was actually good for me. That I'd allowed myself to be manipulated to such a degree. That I hadn't done something to stop Josh when I'd had proof that he should be put away for rape. That I hadn't even recognized that's what had happened.

How completely foolish I'd been.

I wanted to stay in this dark, little hole I was in while my eyes were closed and my face was covered with my hands. Where I could scold and revile myself quietly, in private. I'd allowed my life to be totally messed up—almost irrevocably. What would've happened if I'd married him? Married into that family? Signed my life away to be an empty trophy.

It hadn't happened, though. Thankfully, I'd gotten myself out of it before it came to that. Mercifully so. I quietly wished myself away from this scene again. If I could just keep myself wrapped in this safe, comfortable cocoon for a while longer. If I could just be alone...

But I wasn't alone.

Reality was beckoning me back, forcing me to deal with faces and feelings...with others. Real life and real people were all around me. I'd have to look up into their eyes soon, and I'd need to find my way back to the relief that I'd felt when I started my cryfest. I'd need to thank them each for doing so much for me. I'd need to smile at them, if I could make my face work. My hands fell into my lap, and I squeezed my eyes shut even more tightly.

I heard the scraping of metal against tile. Someone was sliding a chair nearby.

I felt a pair of hands take mine into their own, small circles being traced on the backs of my hands.

I reasoned that this was the best moment to open my eyes, because I'd be face to face with the one person whose presence had been more calming and satisfying to me than I could understand. If I could see Edward's deep jade eyes before I had to deal with anything or anyone else, I'd make it.

Keeping my head down, I opened my eyes. The tears that had been streaming down my face splashed onto my hands then. I watched for a moment as his long, elegant fingers held mine safely, his thumbs continuing their pattern on my skin. One of them pulled out of my hand just then, and I felt this thumb wiping away my tears. I squeezed the hand that rested in my lap and looked up at him.

The tenderness I saw in that moment eclipsed everything going on around us. There was only

Edward and I. He leaned in and pressed his forehead to mine softly, whispering, "It's over, Bella. This step is finished. We can go home now." I smiled weakly at him, trusting that he understood. I was simply out of words.

I lifted our hands from my lap, allowing him to pull me to my feet, and I made an effort to look around briefly. I saw Rosalie and Emmett standing with Carlisle and Esme, talking quietly. Angela and Jacob were several feet away, deep in conversation, but each keeping a discreet eye on me. Lydia was right beside me, packing her briefcase in silence. I reached for her, placing my hand on her forearm, and she turned her face to mine, mercifully reading in my eyes all that I couldn't say. She nodded at me with a small smile and placed her hand over mine, squeezing gently. To Edward, she said softly, "I'll be in touch soon." He nodded his understanding, looking at me to be sure that I'd heard as well. I dipped my head once before looking back at the floor.

His fingers threaded themselves through mine then, and he squeezed, turning us toward the door. I felt a hand on my shoulder, and turned to see Jacob standing there. "Bella?" he whispered. "I...I'm glad you did this. And I'm really glad I could be here to help." I nodded at him then, as I felt my eyes brimming with tears once more. As soon as she noticed, Angela linked her arm with Jacob, effectively pulling him back toward her. She smiled sweetly, her eyes nudging me back toward the door. Jacob simply looked chagrined.

I blinked the tears away and turned back to the exit. Carlisle, Esme, Emmett and Rosalie stood quietly as I passed. Their faces each communicated support and compassion in their own ways. They knew now wasn't the time for conversation, and for that, I was deeply grateful.

Edward led me out into the hallway, and I saw Travis standing near the main exit with his father. Thankfully, everyone related to the Hamiltons had apparently already cleared out. As we approached the door, Travis's eyes met mine, and I saw such sadness and regret etched there, I knew I had to say something.

I pulled gently on Edward's hand to let him know I needed to stop for a moment, and he let go, stepping back. I moved closer to the Flemings, my eyes on Travis the whole time. "Travis?" I said, my voice breaking.

He didn't speak, but cocked his head slightly to let me know he was listening.

"I...I don't even have the words to thank you. I understand that this was...more than difficult. That it cost you those relationships. I don't know if I deserved that, because I haven't been much of a friend to you this year..."

He put his hand up to cut me off. "Don't, Bella. I know why you couldn't be around this year. You were right. You needed to just stay away from all of us. I'm sorry I let this go on as long as I did. And you deserve...well...you deserve to be able to move on, you know? I just did what we all should've done. Sorry this all got so crazy. I'm...I'm really sorry we ever introduced you to Josh, honestly."

I gave a weak laugh. "Well, who knew it'd get like this. Just...thanks, Travis. Really." I felt the

tears rushing to the surface again, so I started to step away. As I turned, I chanced a glimpse at Mr. Fleming. His expression held a strange mixture of disappointment and pride as he looked at his son. His eyes found mine, then, and he nodded gruffly.

I took Edward's hand again, and we stepped out into the sunlight.

We pulled up in front of Mass Row, and I looked over at Edward as he ran his fingers through his hair. His voice wavered a little as he made a suggestion. "I thought maybe we could fix lunch together at my place. It'll give us something to do..." He let his words trail off, and I knew he understood I needed to be distracted for a while.

"That sounds good...I'll just go change and be right back."

As I got out of the car, he called after me, "Think about what you'd like to eat. We can make anything you want."

I smiled at him as I let the door close softly behind me.

In no time at all, I was back, with my laptop in tow, wearing jeans and my favorite maroon sweater. This was exactly the kind of day when I needed that thing. I tossed my pack into the backseat and climbed in the front.

"Well? What would you like for lunch?" Edward asked with a smile.

"Quesadillas."

"Hmm. I don't have tortillas on hand. Okay if we run to the grocery store quickly?"

"Sure, I think I can handle the grocery store."

With no further words, we pulled back out into the slow campus traffic and headed to the nearest store.

I had fun shopping with Edward. He grabbed a brownie mix and some Breyer's mint chocolate chip ice cream for a late afternoon treat. It was great to be wandering the aisles with no deadlines and no expectations. It turned out, I liked the mundane when I was with Edward...it ceased to be mundane. *And had I ever actually said to him that Breyer's mint chocolate chip and a warm brownie was the closest thing I'd ever experienced to heaven? He just knows. He somehow always knows.*

Once we were back at the boys' apartment, he got out a few pans and a cutting board for me, showing me where all the kitchen tools and gadgets could be found. I smiled at him genuinely then and said, "Go change, Edward. I'm sure you're ready to get out of that suit. If I don't see something, I'll just play the old 'If I were a spatula, where would I be?' game."

He grinned and touched my hand as he walked away.

When he came back to the kitchen, he was wearing low-slung jeans and a well-worn black U2 t-shirt. He asked for the basics, and I gave a quick summary of the art of making the perfect quesadilla. We worked easily together, maneuvering around the kitchen, chopping, dicing, and sautéing the chicken. Edward grated the cheese, because I told him freshly grated cheese is an absolute MUST in my mind. There was no room to argue.

Thirty minutes later, as he set the table and poured drinks, I slid the hot, crispy tortillas onto our plates and joined him at the table.

He rubbed his hands together greedily as he sat, and grinned at me. “These smell unbelievable. I can’t wait!”

I reached for the sour cream and plunked a big blob of it on top of my quesadilla. “If you like sour cream,” I said, “it’s definitely better this way.” I smeared it around with my fork, and Edward added a dollop to his own plate.

I watched him as we dug in then, and he rolled his eyes as he chewed his first bite. “Bella! These are unreal!” He moaned and laughed at the same time.

I bit my lip and smiled. “Thank you. I’m glad you like ‘em.”

“Do you cook everything this well?” he asked a few moments later.

I blushed as I answered, “Well, I told you I love to cook, and I do, but I definitely have a few specialties.”

“Wow...I’d like to taste some more of your specialties,” he chuckled. “If Emmett tasted these, I don’t know if he’d ever let you leave.”

“Do you guys cook here a lot? Or mostly do the sandwich deal?” I asked, remembering the smorgasbord of sandwichy goodness I’d enjoyed the week before.

“Both...equally,” he said as he took another bite. “We’ve got some specialties as well. Nothing like *this* though,” he added emphatically.

“It’s got to be nice having your own kitchen...”

“You know you’re welcome to eat with us anytime, Bella. My kitchen is your kitchen.”

“Thanks,” I shrugged. “Maybe we’ll take you up on that sometime.”

“I hope so,” he said, his eyes communicating how serious he was about the invitation. The corner of his mouth lifted into my favorite crooked grin, and I might have melted a little. It was so easy to be relaxed around him. Edward Cullen was good for me.

Once we cleaned up, we decided to study for a while. I was immensely thankful that Mrs. Anderson had suggested cancelling the homework club for the day. I smiled to myself as I thought about Edward's first time meeting the kids the next afternoon. He had sounded excited about it when we'd spoken briefly about the club. Apparently, Emmett had told him all kinds of fun stories.

After a while, I knew it was time to make those phone calls I'd been putting off. Talking with Charlie was easy. The relief in his voice was obvious, and he seemed as pleased as could be at how things had worked out. When I told him the trial would be soon, he said he'd already tentatively taken the next week off, just in case. He'd wait to hear the details, but he was looking forward to seeing me as much as I was him.

Renee was another story altogether. Though we'd been playing phone tag for the last week, she was very upset that I hadn't gotten in touch with her. I knew that all this was important, and that it would be scary for any mother to hear her only daughter was dealing with all of this, but I just hadn't been able to reach her. She *had* spoken with Charlie, and I explained that that had actually caused me to feel even more at ease about never being able to catch her. She knew what was going on, even if we hadn't been in touch personally.

Once we'd gotten over the initial frustration, we slipped back into our easy conversation style. I was always able to say anything to Renee, and today, that had been important. She really listened as I explained how I'd been making new friends since I'd returned, and she seemed impressed when I told her about how all the guys were looking out for me. I tried not to emphasize my relationship with Edward over Emmett and Jacob, but though I didn't go into a whole lot of detail, she immediately read between the proverbial lines. By the end of the conversation, she only had encouraging things to say. We both promised to be in touch more, and agreed that she didn't really need to come up for the trial, since Charlie would be here. She had a lot going on, and suggested that we get together some other time in the near future. "And you can bring Edward," she'd added with a chuckle.

When I got off the phone with Renee, I'd felt spent. I knew without a doubt that she loved me completely, but sometimes our relationship wore me out. It had always seemed more like a friendship than the typical mother/daughter relationship...unless I'd been the one acting like the mother. Still, she'd really grown and changed a lot since she'd married Phil. I think he was good for her in more ways than one. Renee was still very much a free spirit, but she and Phil seemed to help each other look toward the future and make choices together...to plan things a little more.

I sat back against the armrest on Edward's couch and flung my legs out, stretching out and crossing them at the ankles. Closing my eyes, I laughed quietly to myself about the strange conversation I'd just had. I shifted my body, nestling myself down into the cushiony corner of the sofa, and before I knew it, I was asleep.

When I awoke what must've been a few hours later, the room was a chilly gray. The rays of sunshine that had been responsible for the warm glow had moved on. I noticed that I was well tucked in, my head resting on a pillow that smelled just like Edward and his soft green blanket

wrapped around me. Unwilling to climb out of the warmth, I stayed there for a few minutes, listening to the sounds around me. Muffled voices were coming softly from the direction of Emmett's room, so I assumed he and Rosalie had come back while I slept. From the hallway, I could hear quiet strains of music, but nothing I knew. I realized that Edward was playing on his keyboard.

Carefully pulling myself up into a sitting position, I made sure my feet were firmly connected to the floor so that I wouldn't trip over the blanket. I tugged it tightly around me as I stood, wearing it like a shawl, and I shuffled down the hall toward Edward's study.

I tapped gently on the door and then cracked it open an inch or two, peering inside. Edward looked up at me, and chuckled, standing up. "Did you have a good rest, Bella?"

"Mm-hmm. I did. Thanks for the snuggly warmth," I smiled.

He grinned back, coming over to me and pulling the blanket even more tightly around me. "It was my pleasure. You looked so peaceful, resting there, and I knew you needed it." He reached around my head and unclasped my barrette. "Your hair looks like a haystack."

I blushed and looked down as my hair fell down around my face.

Edward tipped my chin up gently and said with a grin, "It's the cutest haystack I've ever seen, Love."

"Thanks, I guess," I said, but I was regretting not stopping in the bathroom before I knocked on his door. All that regret went out the window, though, as he gently threaded his fingers into my hair and ran them through the length of it as he smoothed it out. He was very clearly enjoying this, and I was enjoying that he hadn't taken off his glasses when he'd stood up from his work at the keyboard.

Each time he reached his fingers into my hair, I felt them more closely to my scalp. After a few strokes, he was practically giving me a scalp massage, and I closed my eyes, leaning into his hands and smiling. He cleared his throat awkwardly, and when I looked up at him, I was surprised by the intensity I found there. His eyes were dark, his lips parted. When he looked into my eyes, his lips quirked into a slight smile. *Hmm. My leaning against his hands surprised him...*

The look in his eyes overwhelmed me. *Is he about to kiss me? I think I need him to kiss me.* His eyes shifted to his fingers working through my hair.

I tugged the blanket tightly around my neck and shifted my weight to my other leg nervously, wondering what he was thinking. "Edward?" I said quietly.

"Your hair is so *soft*, Bella. I love getting my fingers tangled in it. Do you mind?" he whispered.

"Uh...no." I swallowed, finding it difficult to look in his eyes at the moment. Looking at his chest, I said, "It feels wonderful...it's very relaxing."

“I’m glad,” he said softly. “I know you’ve been tense...and understandably so.” His fingers became more purposeful, and his smile was warming my heart. I closed my eyes again, allowing myself to concentrate on the feel of his fingers easing through my hair.

Suddenly, I felt the soft warmth of his lips on mine. It wasn’t a hungry, passionate kiss, but it was perfect. His lips moved chastely over my own, and I couldn’t keep a smile from forming. He smiled back as he pulled away slightly, and then pressed his lips softly to my smile once, twice, three times more. When he gently stroked my hair away from my face, I looked up at him. He looked so completely content, that I couldn’t help but feel the same way.

Sighing, I asked sweetly, “So, what are your plans tonight?”

He grinned at me and said, “My mom and dad called while you were sleeping. They’d like to take us out to dinner, if that’s okay.”

“Sure...am I dressed all right?” I was cozy, but maybe they wanted to go to a really nice place.

“You look perfect, Bella. They just want to go to the steakhouse...does that sound good?”

“Yeah...it sounds great. Umm, what were you playing when I came in?” I asked.

“Just a few more pieces I’ve been working on,” he said somewhat sheepishly.

“Oh...well, I’d love to hear them sometime.”

His eyes lit up. “I love that you like to listen to me play. Thank you.” He tucked a wayward piece of hair behind my ear, and said, “Let me call my dad now and see what time they were thinking, and then we’ll know what we need to do.”

While he was on the phone with Carlisle, I folded up the blanket and took it and the pillow back to Edward’s room. The poem I’d given him was laying open on his nightstand, and I blushed.
How often does he read that?

I quickly made my way out of his room and sat on the couch waiting. We didn’t have too long, as it turned out. Thirty minutes later, we joined his parents at Joe’s Tavern and Steakhouse, and had a very nice evening. Carlisle and Esme were almost as easy to be around as Edward, and I was very relieved. It’s what I had expected after all our other brief meetings, but a part of me kept remembering the first time I’d met Josh’s parents. They’d—unconsciously or not—done a thorough job of making me feel...less than. But Edward, I was enjoying observing, was a product of the ease, good humor, and integrity modeled by his parents. I made sure I thanked them for Charlie, and they gushed that it was nothing. They were just glad they were close by and able to help.

I knew it was so much more than that, but I didn’t have any better way to thank them at the moment than letting them see that I enjoyed their company and that I treasured Edward’s

friendship...or whatever it was. *What is it anyway? How could our relationship be defined? We'd definitely passed the "friend" threshold, and yet, it was lingering just on the other side of the line. Though we weren't committed, and we'd not declared anything (at least I hadn't), there was more to us than a simple friendship. There was a deep, deep level of understanding and compassion. A connection that made us feel like we belonged with each other.*

And I absolutely couldn't deny the attraction. Edward's touch was electric. His smirk made me weak in the knees, his eyes drew me in and wrapped me up, spinning me around until I couldn't see straight. His lips called to mine, his fingers awoke me with the lightest contact. And his hair! My hands wanted to nest in it and never, never leave.

I bit my lip as I silently watched him talking and laughing easily with his mom and dad. Carlisle was just finishing a story about something that had happened at work, and they all laughed. When Edward turned to look at me, with the laugh lines still crinkling his eyes, I realized I hadn't heard a single word that had been said. I smiled awkwardly and looked down to straighten the napkin in my lap.

Esme's voice cut through the awkwardness I was feeling. "I'm going to run to the ladies' room before we head back to Maine. Bella? Would you like to walk with me?"

My cheeks flushed, and I wondered if I was as transparent as I felt. *Is she going to tell me that I was out of line, staring at and dreaming about her son while I was supposed to be participating in the conversation?* I carefully set my napkin down beside my empty plate, and stood to join her. We walked quietly to the restroom, and—just like Edward always does—she stopped at the door and held it open for me to enter first. Her smile was genuine, and I felt a little less anxious.

As we washed our hands, she looked at me in the mirror and smiled once more. "Bella, it has really been a pleasure getting to know you a little bit. I hope we'll be able to visit lots more in the future. You really are as lovely as Edward told us."

I'm sure my eyes widened a little at the compliment, but I managed to eke out, "Well, then I'm sure Edward hasn't told you everything." I smirked good-naturedly and added, "I feel a bit manic most days. The slightest thing can crumple my spirits, and I've had a few insanely angry moments, too." I didn't know why I was telling her all this. It certainly wouldn't make her feel better about psycho-girl spending so much time with her son, but understanding was written all over her face.

"It's so good that you're beginning to feel things, though, and to deal with the damage and abuse you've been through. Alice told me she shared her story with you, and I just want to encourage you. You seem to be making the same great strides she did. You'll make it through all this—and you'll be stronger."

I reached for a paper towel and said quietly, "I don't want to overwhelm Edward. Or to be unfair to him. He's been so patient and understanding...I never want to take that for granted."

"Well, I think Edward is just the right person to help you through all this. He's great at listening,

and he has some strong shoulders. He was so good with Alice. But, Bella, don't put too much pressure on yourself. Allow your heart to heal all the way before you push it. Edward knows how to be patient. Take your time, and don't let *any* of us Cullens make you feel like you've got expectations on you. All right? Especially my Alice! When she sets her mind on something or someone..."

I laughed, knowing exactly what she was talking about. "She's definitely spirited."

"Ah, now *that* was a diplomatic way to tell me you've seen her passion...and her stubbornness. Am I right?" she chuckled.

"You might be..." I grinned. "But I truly am thankful for her friendship, and I'm looking forward to getting to know her even better."

"Well, that's good. Because we'd never hear the end of it if you weren't."

As we left the ladies' room, Esme told me that they were planning on coming back the following Saturday, and staying for a few days. They'd be here for the trial, but were looking forward to some time to just enjoy away from home together, too. She asked if Charlie would be coming, and suggested we all get together. I thanked her and said that would be great.

They said their goodbyes as we left the restaurant, and Edward sighed sweetly as we pulled out of the parking lot to head back to campus. "It was good to see them."

"They're wonderful, Edward. I'm so glad that they're involved...I didn't think I'd be able to say that, because I don't like letting people see what's going on in my heart and mind. But...they're just different. Maybe it's because of Alice...maybe your whole family's just irrationally kind. I don't know, but I feel so comfortable with them. So, thank you."

"You're thanking me?" he said, surprised.

"Well, yes. I wouldn't have even gotten to meet them—much less have been afforded the opportunity to work with Lydia—if you hadn't told them about everything."

He exhaled with relief. "I was so nervous that I was overstepping my bounds, honestly. And I still feel like I might have, but I'm really glad you appreciate it and trust me with it. I was so afraid it would push you away..."

"I'd be lying if I told you I was thrilled with it initially, but I haven't felt anything but acceptance from each one of your family members. You...I don't think you can understand what that means to me."

"I know what it means to *me*," he whispered.

I couldn't respond to that immediately, I was so overwhelmed. Instead, I let my head fall back on to the leather headrest, and I stared out the window. George Michael was crooning his *Songs*

From the Last Century quietly in the background. Edward reached over and took my hand as he drove. When we made it back to campus, he didn't let go. He just placed my hand under his, shifting gears with me as we parked the car.

We walked to his apartment to finish studying, and he made us some hot tea as soon as we got in. Emmett and Rosalie had left a note saying that they were studying in the library, and she'd meet me in the room later. Since we knew the apartment was going to be quiet, we did our reading on the couches rather than in Edward's study.

Around nine, I thought I'd better head back. We stepped out of his building into the freezing night air, and I reached for his hand. I was a little surprised with myself, but he shouldn't always have to be the one to make the first move. Holding his hand felt so right, that I hadn't even thought about it until our fingers were already laced together and he was smiling at me with unadulterated joy.

As we walked, we talked about what would be going on for the rest of the week, making final plans to meet outside my dorm before heading to Lebanon for our homework club duty. I was so excited for him to meet Ki-ki...and the others.

Rounding the corner of the engineering building, we noticed a moving van. *It's kind of late to be moving in.* Then, I noticed the men were putting furniture and boxes *into* the van, and they were being directed by an annoyingly familiar voice. I tensed when I heard Amber shout, "Damage that box, and you are *over*. Those are my brother's LPs, and his collection is worth more than you earn in a year!"

Edward noticed, and wrapped his arm around me, leading me behind the truck and toward the other side of the street. Not soon enough to avoid being seen, though.

"Wow...Are you *serious*?" she bristled. "I thought you were just an overly-concerned citizen. I didn't realize she was digging her claws into you, too! You'd do better not to get sucked in. Look what she did to my *brother*. Honestly, if I'd have realized you were into slumming, I'd have been more...*provocative* today...just to get you out of the skank's clutches."

Edward's jaw was clenched tightly, but he pretended not to notice. Still, even as he led me past her, I knew neither of us could ignore her. Amber was just too conspicuous...and *way* too hateful. Not to mention that she was trying to make sure everyone and their dog heard her.

Amber called out obnoxiously, "When you get finished toying around with the help, give me a call. You could use some time with someone who knows how old money deserves to be treated."

And that was it.

Edward spun on his heel, facing her with a look of utter disgust. He never let go of my hand as he said with an alarmingly calm voice, "Unfortunately for you, I've lived enough to realize that someone's worth has nothing to do with their daddy's bank account. It's too bad your father's money couldn't buy your brother a spine or you some class. Don't speak to me again."

Spinning back toward me, he pulled me to his chest for a hug. Hearing him defend me like that--hearing him take Amber down a notch or three--I was overcome. I desperately needed to show him how much I appreciated it. Before I knew what I was doing, I reached up and pulled his head down toward me, crashing my lips onto his. There was no hesitation on his part. The moment our lips met, Edward more than willingly wrapped his arms around me tightly, and his mouth took over. His kiss was feral in its passion, and I lost myself in it. I could not believe he'd said that to Amber Hamilton, but I. Loved. It. I entwined my fingers in his hair roughly, and pulled him even closer, if it were possible.

At some point during the makeout session with the audience of one, I'm pretty sure both Edward and I forgot she was standing there. All of the confusing desire and pent-up attraction that we'd evidently both been hanging on to just flooded our senses. I tugged Edward's bottom lip between my teeth, and I heard him moan softly. *Oh. I need to make him sound like that again.* His hand fisted in my hair, and I whimpered into his mouth.

"It's not...*right*," Amber huffed in disgust several yards away. I'm sure she didn't intend for us to hear her, but her high-pitched complaint was carried right to us on a sudden gust of wind.

Edward teasingly bit my lower lip as he pulled away with a wicked grin on his face. "Let's get you to your room, my Bella. The freaks come out at night."

I laughed as we turned our backs and walked away.

That. Felt. Good.

Chapter End Notes: Just a couple of things: The fabuloso JShay set up a thread for us to chat on, so come and play. I'm planning on writing some outtakes and different POVs to go along with ATD, and I'd love some input. **What scenes or side stories would you like to read???**

And—just to toss it out there—**what do you think will happen to Josh at the trial?**

[http://www.twilighted.net/forum/viewtopic.php\(questionmark\)f=44&t=4583](http://www.twilighted.net/forum/viewtopic.php(questionmark)f=44&t=4583)

Also, it's time to nominate your favorite stories (by June 26) for the Bellies! And the Razzle Dazzle Awards are going on now, too. Please take the time to stop by and check out the nominations—and **nominate your favorite!** We writers need to know if people love our work! I'm not asking for someone to nominate ATD, but simply that you'd take a little time and show some love for the stories that have truly won your hearts—whichever they are. You know what I'm talkin' about...the ones that you drop everything to read when you see an update. The ones that make you say, "Sorry, kids. We're having cereal for dinner."

These awards are a great way to pump up the stories, too, and get the word out for the authors!

Make sure to nominate your favorite stories here!

Bellies <http://www.thecatt.net/tw/Rules.aspx>

Awards <http://razzledazzleawards.webs.com/>

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Chapter: 32

Maybe where the heart breaks in two,

That's the only place grace can get through to find you

Stronger than ever now in the broken places

David Wilcox

Chapter Thirty: Unresolved

Rosalie wasn't back yet when we got to the room, but we both knew she wouldn't be long. It was already ten.

Edward made himself comfortable on the edge of my bed as I set my backpack down and flipped on the light. He held out a hand to me in silent invitation. I took his hand and allowed him to pull me directly in front of his body as he rested his hands on my hips. He sat there with his eyes closed for a moment, a smile playing at the edges of his lips. I wondered what he was thinking so contentedly. *I know what I'm thinking. I'm thinking I could relive that kiss for the rest of my life and probably be content.*

"That was perfect," I said quietly. His eyes opened, and he quirked an eyebrow at me.

"*You* were perfect, Bella. I would never have expected..."

I cut him off, leaning down and pressing my lips to his again. *Hmm. He doesn't seem to mind my going back to this. I think I could do this for hours.* Our lips moved effortlessly against each other, and I sighed with pleasure as his hands gripped my hips tightly, pulling me closer to him. My fingers lost themselves in his hair, and he tugged my bottom lip into his mouth, sucking lightly. When he gently released it, I straightened myself up again, looking down at him. He lifted his head and looked up at me, his eyes dark with desire.

I could feel my own desire tightening and curling in the pit of my stomach, and I was sure my eyes must've matched his in their intensity, but, regretfully, I had some things to say before I let

this go any further. I turned sideways and sat myself down on his lap. “This okay?” I whispered.

“Yes,” he breathed, his eyes tracing over my face. He was being patient, but the longing in his eyes was evident. It made it hard for me to begin speaking instead of kissing him again...and again. But he needed to know how deeply I appreciated his words to Amber.

“I don’t think I have the words to thank you for the way you defended me out there,” I said quietly, pressing my forehead to his temple. He slid his left arm around my waist to lock his fingers together, holding me to him.

“I just spoke truthfully, Bella. You are worth so *much* to me. I hope you understand that.” His eyes held that question. As he looked at me, I could almost hear them asking, “*Do* you? Do you really understand how much you mean to me?”

I so wanted to assure him. None of this was easy for me to take in—or to communicate. I wasn’t sure the sensual attack had communicated my appreciation as much as my attraction. I wanted *that* to be clear, too. *And what if he only kissed me back because he knew she was watching? He’s certainly proven that he’s gentleman enough not to blow me off in front of her. How much of that was real?* “I think I’m really beginning to...and I hope you didn’t mind my...um...reaction out there.”

His perfect lips slid into that crooked smile as he turned his head to look right into my eyes. “Now, I would’ve thought I clearly communicated how I felt about your...*reaction*.”

Oh, Lord. This boy will be the death of me. I cleared my throat quietly and smiled. “You did...I guess I’m just sort of second guessing myself here. I was afraid that you just went along with it for Amber’s sake.”

He laughed huskily, shaking his head at me. “Bella Swan, that girl had *nothing* to do with the way I felt in that moment. I love that you finally just let yourself go out there, and if she was the instigator, then I guess I’m thankful for that. But you really just sort of...*unleashed* something in me. I’ve been careful with you...and I’ll still be careful...but I’ve got to tell you honestly, that all of that has been just lurking under the surface. There’ve been *several* times I’ve wanted to hold you and kiss you like that. And it doesn’t just go away...”

His eyes darkened, and I felt my stomach clench with need. When he looked at me like that, it was all I could do not to tremble. I wanted Edward so very differently than I’d ever wanted anyone else. It wasn’t only physical. I wanted to know more of his heart and soul, and for him to know mine. But, gah, it *was* physical. I closed my eyes, trying to sort through what I was feeling, and several things—heavenly things—happened at once. One of his hands lifted to my waist and squeezed around my ribs firmly. His other hand reached into my hair, cupping my neck. His mouth found mine, and my body flooded with warmth. I moaned quietly and wrapped my arms tightly around him, feeling like I was on fire.

When his mouth left mine and I felt his lips moving down my jawline hungrily, I shuddered with pleasure, and he pulled back. *That feels too good...*

“Bella?” he whispered. “I’m...I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have... You’re trembling.”

“Edward, stop that. I wanted it, too...probably more than I should,” I smiled at him coyly, surprising myself. “If I’m trembling, it definitely isn’t because I have a problem with the way you were kissing me...” Sighing with resignation, I continued, “...but we probably *should* remember that Rosalie could come in any second.”

He bit his lip self-consciously, and looked at me sideways with a relieved half-grin. “You’re right...and I’m glad to hear you didn’t mind, but...I shouldn’t let myself get carried away either. I’ve just...I’ve never felt like this before.” His eyes were liquid tenderness, his voice quiet and sweet.

“I haven’t either,” I whispered. I knew we needed to say goodnight and *not* get carried away, but I also didn’t want this to end. I kissed his cheek sweetly, and felt his stubbly skin move underneath my lips as he smiled. I leaned back slightly and gently traced the crinkles beside his eyes with my fingers.

He reached for one of my hands and kissed my fingertips. “I should probably go, Love.”

“Yeah,” I answered. “Sometimes I hate when you say that.”

He chuckled sweetly, “Probably as much as I hate saying it...” He squeezed my knee firmly, and it tickled. I laughed quietly and stood up reluctantly, pulling him to his feet after me. “I’ll see you tomorrow at lunch?” he questioned.

“Yes.” I smiled as I thought about Edward meeting the kids at the club. “I can’t wait.”

“Neither can I, Bella,” he said as he gently swept my hair off of my shoulder. “I hope you rest well tonight.”

“You, too, Edward. Good night.”

He leaned in and kissed me chastely once more, pulling back and whispering, “Good night, Love.”

And a moment later, he was gone.

— * * —

Getting back to classes and “normal life” were a welcomed change for me. I didn’t realize I’d be so glad to just sit in lectures and take notes following the hearing, but I certainly was. The morning went smoothly, and Edward and I had a nice lunch together before leaving for the club. He smiled when I told him I wanted to drive. It had been a while, and I was glad he didn’t mind.

“So, I get to ride in the red monster. I’ve been looking forward to this,” he chuckled.

“Beast,” I said. “I call her the Beast.”

Smiling, he nodded. “It definitely suits her.” We climbed up into the cab and were pulling out into traffic a few moments later. He asked me about my morning classes, and my mind was fairly occupied with our conversation—as well as potential ideas for my upcoming writing assignments. I drove into the Upper Valley and—at the first light in Lebanon—realized a moment too late that there was a fairly long line of cars backed up much further than usual. I didn’t see it until I was on top of the other cars, and then—reacting on instinct—I slammed on the brake, the screeching filling our ears. I only *barely* missed the bumper of the compact car idling in front of me.

Before I realized what I was doing, I began whimpering, “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.” *Please don’t scream at me or cuss me out. I feel so stupid.* I was **so** angry with myself for not paying better attention, and I knew he’d be angry, too. *Way to go, Bella. Now he thinks you’re an idiot.*

Edward reached over with his hand, probably—I would realize later—in what was meant to be a soothing gesture. Still, in the moment, I panicked, flinching away. “I didn’t see it until I was on top of it. I’m so sorry! *Please...*”

He must’ve sensed my fear, because he paled and his hands fell into his lap with a thud, locking themselves onto his own knees as the light turned green and I began driving again. Whispering, he asked sadly, “Did...did you think I was going to *hit* you?”

I sighed and said nothing for a moment. Finally, I realized I had to respond, so I said regretfully, “I don’t know...I guess I just got used to getting chewed out for making mistakes.” I let out a shaky breath, not even wanting to say the name. “Josh...yelled at me a lot now that I think about it. He would berate me and just make me feel...worthless.”

He gently squeezed my knee as I drove, my eyes fixed on the road and hands locked onto the steering wheel. He sighed, and his voice sounded defeated for a moment. “Well, if anything, I was going to compliment your reflexes. That was a good save.”

“Really?” There was a huge lump in my throat, and my eyes were burning. The road was becoming blurry, but we were almost there.

And then his voice held determination. “Really, Bella. You did well, and I’m...I’m sorry he made you feel like that.” Tears poured out of my eyes as my emotions overflowed. He whispered, “It must’ve been hard to ever feel comfortable around him...what pressure.”

I actually laughed at that, though there was no humor in my voice. My head cleared and I felt both saddened and frustrated. The tears continued to flow. “Hard to ever feel comfortable,” I repeated. “I guess you could say that. I think I spent all our time together trying to make sure he stayed happy and content...because when he *wasn’t* content, that’s when I had to deal with all of the yelling...or do other things to make him happy.” Several scenes flashed into my mind’s eye,

playing out moments where Josh shouted and I cowered...And there were a few too many scenes replaying where I felt the only way to calm him and get back on his “good side” was to distract him with my body. I clenched my jaw and concentrated on the road. *Way to ruin my afternoon, Cretin! I hate that you are still invading my mind. Why do I let you have that power over me?! I want to concentrate on Edward and the homework club.*

I was silent the rest of the way there.

When we pulled into the Romano Housing complex, Edward turned toward me in his seat. I put the Beast in park, and he caught my hand in his before I could turn off the engine. I stared out the windshield, biting my lip, not knowing what to say.

“Bella?” he called soothingly. I tore my eyes away from whatever meaningless piece of scenery I’d been studying and looked at him. “I’m sorry.”

I nodded sadly and acknowledged the unpleasantness. But I refused to let him blame himself. “It’s not *your* fault, Edward.”

“But I need you to know that I won’t ever yell at you.” His eyes searched mine. I guessed he was looking to see if I believed him.

I smiled weakly, and he repeated, “You are safe with me.” His words were gentle but adamant. He meant it.

“Okay,” I whispered. “And I know that. I *do* feel safe with you. You’re...*so* different from him that I don’t know how to act or what to say sometimes...but...*thank you.*”

“Of course, Bella. It means a lot to hear you say that you know we’re not alike.” He offered a half-grin.

Laughing at the understatement, I added, “...sometimes I don’t even see how you’re the same *species*. I’m sorry I flinched. I *know* you’re not going to react the same way to things, but...I guess I still have a long way to go.”

“You’re doing great, though.” His smile reached his eyes now, and he was trying to change the subject. “And I can’t wait to watch you interact with these kids today. Emmett said it’s one of the best things he’s ever seen.”

That thought made me smile. I’d enjoyed watching Em with the kids even more than he liked watching me, I bet. “Well, we better get ready for them.” I turned the engine off and pulled out the key.

“Let’s do it then,” Edward said encouragingly as he hopped out of the cab, closing the door gently.

We headed in and got the treasure chest and snacks ready.

Mrs. Anderson came out to welcome us. She gave me a warm hug, and asked how I was doing today. “Pretty well,” I assured her. “Getting back to my routine is a good thing.”

“I’m sure it is, Bella. Well, the kids missed you yesterday for sure, so I know they’ll all be thrilled to see you. Shea came by with the girls last night to check on you. They were worried you were sick. Ki-ki made you a card.” She held it out to me.

I took the card, smiling. Ki-ki was so sweet. I could tell that she had spent a great deal of time making the card. The front showed a beautifully colored picture of me snuggled between the girls on their blue couch, reading together. This must’ve been Ki-ki’s favorite memory from the weekend I’d spent with her and her sister the prior year. It was one of mine, too. She’d framed the front of the yellow card with a bright red ribbon. Inside, she’d drawn a picture of us hugging. On the opposite side, written in her large childish handwriting were the words, “You make me feel happy and love. Come back soon, Miss Bella!” My eyes brimmed with tears and my heart with love. That girl was too precious.

“Thank you, Mrs. Anderson.” She smiled at me and patted my shoulder.

“Well, the kids should be here any minute. I’ll let you gather your thoughts. I’m glad you’re here to help, Edward.” She looked at him appraisingly, evidently remembering him from the courtroom yesterday. I thought she seemed pleased that he was there.

He noticed her discreet perusal and extended his hand, shaking hers firmly. “I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else, Mrs. Anderson. I’ve been looking forward to this all week.”

She turned to wink at me and then back to him, “Now, that’s what I like to hear.” She left us with a smile and headed back to her office.

The kids came in shortly thereafter, and—though they were a little rowdy—it was easy enough to get them settled. They were all just glad to be back.

Damika, one of the eighth graders, smiled when I came over to her table to ask what the girls needed help with. “Yesterday was so borin’, Miss Bella. I am for *real* glad you back.”

“Well, I missed all of you yesterday, too, Damika. You got through all your homework, though, right? You don’t really need me as much as you think you do.” I smiled warmly at her.

She pursed her lips defiantly, but there was laughter in her eyes. “Yeah, I did my work, but it took me a long time. When I’m at home, they’s always lots to do to help Mama. My little brother and sister get into *everything*.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re willing to help out around the house, and I’m very proud of you for making the time to concentrate on your work.”

Natalie piped up from across the table. “And she still made time to talk to A.J. too, *didn’t* you?”

“What?!” Damika tried to play it off. “He just called about homework.” Natalie nodded, but her facial expression clearly said she wasn’t buying it.

Shauna, a beautiful and shy sixth grader with caramel-colored skin, reached over and touched my hand quietly. I turned my head to her and smiled. I’d noticed from the first day that she was a hard worker, studious. “Yes, Shauna?”

“Is that guy who’s helping Damian...is he a model or something?” She blushed, and I thought it was adorable.

Giggles erupted in stereo before Natalie added, “Yeah...’cause he’s *hot*.” Damika agreed fervently.

I cleared my throat and winked at the girls. “Shh. He is nice-looking, I agree. But I don’t think he’s a model. It looks to me like he’s concentrating on Damian’s homework. And *you* girls need to focus on your work, too. What’ve we got this afternoon?” *Apparently, no one is immune to Edward’s dazzling.*

They were surprisingly easy to redirect, and most were able to get their work done before it was time for us to give them a snack. At quarter ‘til four, the students put away their papers while Edward and I began to pass out the food. I watched Edward discreetly and noticed that he said something personal to each of the boys as he passed out the food. Some he asked how their day had been, some he talked to about sports, and some he offered a compliment. I knew he’d have tried just as hard to connect with the girls, but, for some reason the boys and girls just never sat together at the club. They divided themselves. I figured it was probably so they could stare at and talk about each other more easily. Middle school.

When Edward reached the end of the table, though, Ryan Miller didn’t look up at him. Ryan was a very quiet kid...and a little awkward. No one really ever spoke to him, and I assumed it was just that he was lacking in social skills. Jacob and I had tried to get to know him a little bit in the days that he’d been there, but we’d never really had much success. I passed out the last of the snacks to the girls and then sat down to observe. Edward sat in front of Ryan, and put down two snacks right in front of himself. He stared out the window behind Ryan rather than addressing him directly and trying to start a conversation. I noticed that Ryan visibly relaxed when he noticed that Edward wasn’t speaking. Edward tacitly opened one of the granola bars and took a bite, sliding the other unobtrusively across the table. Ryan picked up the granola bar silently and offered a quiet thanks. Edward just nodded, and—though I couldn’t hear anything—I saw that somehow, at that point, he was able to strike up a conversation. A few moments later, Edward stood to encourage the other kids to throw away their trash. He rested his hand on the table next to Ryan as he said something in parting, and Ryan actually looked up and smiled. I was impressed. Edward seemed to be able to reach even the most difficult.

And I couldn’t be surprised by that. He’d sure reached me. I smiled in appreciation, wondering once again at his ability to know what people needed from him, and then I stood to join him. We were no sooner out the door with the older kids than the elementary school bus pulled up and our

second group stampeded toward us. He stepped back to watch as I was literally surrounded by a throng of the younger kids jumping up and down and hugging me. Shouts of “Miss Bella! Miss Bella!” echoed off of the closely situated buildings. I welcomed them all with hugs and fist bumps, and we headed in to get started. Edward brought up the rear, and I was surprised as I looked over my shoulder to see Ki-ki walking quietly beside him.

She looked sad today, and I saw that Edward noticed. *How does he even do that? Is he a mind reader?* He squatted down beside her and tugged on her fingers, stopping her just inside the entrance. They talked quietly while I got the other kids started on their work. Thankfully, most of them understood what they were doing, so I was able to steal a moment and step over toward Edward and Ki-ki. He looked up and saw me, and whispered something to Ki-ki, who turned suddenly and looked over at me. Her face lit up, and she ran toward me with arms outstretched. I caught her as she jumped at me, and she put her head on my shoulder.

“What’s the matter, Ki?” I asked.

“Errybody else got to ya first, ‘cause I sat in da back o’ da bus.” She looked frustrated, but as sweet as could be. Her little brow was furrowed and her bottom lip stuck out in a pout.

“Ki-ki, you know that no matter when you get to me, you always get a hug, right?” I asked, touching my forehead to hers.

“Yeah...I juss really needed one today.” She patted my back as she continued speaking in my ear. “You give da best hugs.” Ki-ki leaned back and looked at me frankly. “You feelin’ better?”

“Oh, yes ma’am,” I said seriously, thankful for her concern. “*Especially* since I’ve gotten a Ki-ki hug. I wasn’t sick yesterday, though. I just had a very important appointment.”

“Aw, dat’s good. I’m glad you wasn’t sick.”

“Why’d you need a hug so much today, Ki?” I asked as I carried her over to a chair at one of the nearby tables and sat with her.

“Some otha kids was makin’ fun of me...sayin’ my daddy’s in jail, an’ dat he don’t love us.”

“I’m so sorry, Sweet Girl. You know that you’re super lovable, right? And your daddy might be in jail, but your mama loves you and Z like I’ve never *seen* a mama love her girls. I’m sure she loves you enough for both of them! And she works hard so that you can be together, so you’ll be able to grow up proud of who you are. Don’t let those kids make you feel ashamed, okay?”

“I guess you right...Mama do love us. She always tellin’ us and huggin’ us.” She offered me a smile.

“Well, I’m glad you know that. And you know what else? *A lot* of kids don’t have daddies who live at home. Probably even some of the kids who were teasing you.” I tugged gently on one of her braids.

“Yeah...some just got left. And some daddies got killed or beat up in fights ‘n’ stuff.” She nodded emphatically.

“Right. So, it’s sad, but you’re not the only one. Even I didn’t live with my daddy for most of my life.”

“You didn’t?” she asked in disbelief.

“Nope. Not until I was sixteen, and now I guess *I’m* the one who moved out, huh? All the way over here in New Hampshire going to school?”

She chuckled. “You *did!* But I’m glad you here.”

“Me, too, Sweet Girl. Me, too.” I kissed her forehead sweetly and set her in the chair next to me.

“Your friend’s nice,” she smiled up at me, her dimples showing. “Mr. Edward,” she added, to be sure I was clear on the friend we were discussing.

“He *is*, isn’t he? He’s a good guy.” I looked over at him as he milled around among the tables, stopping to answer questions and help with directions. “We better get started on your homework, Ki-ki. Do you have lots?”

We got to work then, and she really focused. I was able to get up and help several kids for the remainder of the time. After snacks, the kids hugged me and danced around Edward, high-fiving, fist-bumping, and doing all kinds of tricks. He was laughing and enjoying it. Ki-ki took a while to pack up her bag, so she’d be the last one out.

We walked her to the door as we turned off the lights behind us. Once we stepped outside, she turned and shook Edward’s hand formally. “Nice to meet ya, Mr. Edward. Take good care of Miss Bella, okay?” Her little face was so serious and determined!

“Absolutely, Miss Ki-Ki. I’ll do my best,” he answered, as straight-facedly as possible. The light in his eyes, however, was unmistakable—at least to me.

“Thanks,” she said. “Miss Bella’s the best.” She turned to me and wrapped her arms around my waist again, squeezing tightly.

“Love ya, girl. Tell your mom and sister hey for me, all right?” I said, loving her attention.

“Gotcha. Bye, Miss Bella!” she called out over her shoulder as she ran toward her building.

I shrugged at Edward and his smile lit up his face. “She’s precious, Bella. I’m so glad I got to come with you and watch you with all the kids today.”

“You weren’t so bad yourself, Edward. You weren’t so bad yourself.” He took my hand and led

us to the Beast for the drive home.

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We stopped at my room just long enough for me to change clothes and grab my stuff for studying. A voicemail from Lydia explained that the trial would begin the coming Monday. Only a week reprieve. But then it would be over.

At the boys' apartment, we all sat to eat some spaghetti and salad that Emmett and Rosalie had made together. They were all smiles, and they both seemed to be more comfortable with each other physically as well. Not only did Rosalie not flinch when Emmett touched her hand or shoulder to get her attention, but I noticed her take his hand to lead him to the table when it was time. I was so relieved to see her acting more like her old self. None of the audacious and bold flirting were evident, but she didn't seem to be lacking in confidence around Em either.

And then her cell phone rang.

She answered with a smile, but her face paled only a moment later as she sank onto the couch. The air was so thick with tension that I could've sliced it with a knife. Emmett, Edward and I stopped moving—we practically stopped breathing. Em swallowed the bite in his mouth noisily and set down his fork.

All eyes were on Rosalie. And she wasn't saying much.

A few uh-huhs and yeahs later, we heard her say, "Well, thanks for letting me know, anyway."

A minute later her phone clicked shut, and she sat there silently, her back to us.

Suddenly, she stood to her feet and hurled her phone at the wall, the force of impact shattering the phone into several small pieces. "***Screw that!***" she screamed at the top of her lungs, just before she collapsed once more, landing in a crippled heap on the floor beside the couch.

Emmett was beside her before I could get a decent breath. His voice broke with concern and fear. "Rosie? Baby? What is it? What happened?!" She was nearly choking on her sobs—completely unable to answer.

Edward and I stepped toward them to see if there was anything we could do to help. He was directly behind me, and I could feel his chest against my back, his hands on my shoulders, offering his silent support. We watched as Rosalie crawled into Emmett's lap and buried her face in his massive shoulder. His arms wrapped around her, and he looked up at us with helplessness and confusion in his eyes.

I have no idea what's going on here, and I don't know what to tell you, Em. Still, I nodded in encouragement and offered him a slight smile, wanting him to know that my best guess was that he was doing the right thing already. Just sitting there and holding her was obviously what she needed. He closed his eyes and pressed his face into her hair.

After some time—none of us knew how much exactly—something shifted in Rosalie. The sobs that had been tearing from her chest began to sound like growls of frustration. The hands that had been clinging to Emmett’s arm began punching it. Slowly. Wordlessly. Softly at first. Then angrily and with some force behind them.

She looked up at Emmett, and it seemed to register somewhere in her heart that she did not, in fact, want to hurt him, so she began pounding on the couch cushions. The beating escalated, each impact punctuated by a grunt. Language wouldn’t suffice for her. This was something only violence could communicate.

Edward sat back down at the table, where he couldn’t see her directly, allowing her to have this private moment. He carefully tugged me down into his lap. He wound his arms around my waist and rested his chin on my shoulder as we sat quietly, waiting.

Finally, she spoke.

“They found him...they found Alonzo Calderas Wallace.” Her voice spit out his name as if it were putrid.

None of us spoke. I couldn’t tell you why neither of the guys said anything. I only knew why I couldn’t find words. *Why in the world would that be a bad thing? They got him. She’d get her reckoning, right?* I gripped Edward’s hands tightly—they were my lifeline.

One deep, shuddering breath later, she continued. “He’s dead. Somebody else got him. And now I don’t get to look at his sick face and send him to jail. I don’t get to make him suffer.” Her fist nearly impaled the seat of the couch with that announcement.

Edward and I were on our feet as one, and he sat on the couch above me as I knelt on the floor beside her. “Oh no,” I breathed. “I’m so sorry.” This I could understand. No chance to see justice done. I imagined I’d felt just a fraction of her frustration when I’d realized Josh had raped me. Though I’d been able to press charges, there were things done to me that I’d never be able to prove. Wrongs I’d never be able to confront. Things that I didn’t want to leave unsaid.

And Rosalie must be dealing with that to a degree that I couldn’t begin to fathom.

Emmett looked at me then, his eyes boring into mine. They were saying what his voice couldn’t. “Keep her talking, Bella...you’re the one who can ask the questions. Let me just hold her.”

I nodded at him and began carefully. “What happened to him?”

Her head remained down, and she traced something wordlessly on the knee of Emmett’s jeans. Then, “They found him in a parking lot outside of a bar in South Boston. He’d apparently been hit over the head with a beer bottle and then stabbed repeatedly. They pronounced him dead on the scene.”

A collective whoosh sounded as we all exhaled at the news.

“South Boston, huh?” I asked no one.

“Outside of a bar on the corner of 1st and L. Murphy’s Law.” Her voice was filled with disgust.

“Murphy’s Law...whatever can go wrong probably will,” I said with no emotion.

“That’s the name of the freaking bar. Fitting, isn’t it?” Her words were venom.

At least he’s off the streets. He won’t hurt anymore women. I knew better than to say that out loud.

I looked up at Edward, and his eyes were so...somber. His lips were quirked in the gloomiest frown, and my heart felt heavy for him...and for Emmett. Edward caught my gaze and began to stroke my hair quietly.

The silence hung in the air for a while, and Rosalie finally punched Emmett one last time in the leg and said, “At least he’s in hell. I hope he was stabbed by someone he was trying to attack rather than just a gang of rowdy thugs. I hope he died slowly. And I hope he saw the face of every one of his victims flash in front of his eyes before he took his last breath.”

She stood then, and Emmett stood with her. She grabbed his hand and pulled him out of the den into his room. Just before she closed his bedroom door, she said apathetically, “Good night guys.”

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Chapter: 33

*I'm hopelessly sentimental
When the winter comes a storm
When the snow is on the mailbox
And the sidewalks all are gone*

David Wilcox

Chapter Thirty-one: Changes

I was still on the floor where I’d been kneeling in front of Rosalie. Edward’s hand that had been gently stroking my hair in encouragement had stilled and was resting on my shoulder. Our eyes were locked on Emmett’s bedroom door, where Rosalie had just pulled him, effectively

ensconcing the two of them.

The den was silent. I looked up at Edward, and his eyes flooded with compassion. He reached down and took my hand, pulling me up onto his lap. I nestled my head into the crook of his neck, inhaling deeply and relishing the warmth and safety that was Edward. His hand played soulful music on my back.

“Can you believe that?” I whispered, almost afraid to break the silence.

“It doesn’t seem real...or fair,” he answered quietly. “But I am absolutely glad that he won’t be able to harm anyone ever again. It does seem that in some way, some *bizarre* way, justice has been done.”

“I know what you mean,” I agreed. “But facing him in court, testifying against him and being a part of putting him away for years would’ve felt so good to her...and given her real closure. Where can she go from here?” My voice held a trace of desperation, because I understood that I’d have to work hard for closure as well.

“Rosalie’s a fighter, Bella. We know this...and finding closure is still possible, though it’ll be more difficult. She can find ways to face him and get things off her chest without seeing him personally.” His chest was moving rhythmically beside me, and I breathed in again, losing myself in the rich woodsy scent of him as well as the hope that I found in his words.

“I guess so,” I sighed. *If it’s true, then I want closure on everything, too. Every way Josh has ever, ever hurt me...not just the stupid stuff he got charged with. I need closure on all of it.*

“Em will help her. Count on that. I have a feeling,” he said, “that Emmett McCarty will do whatever it takes to walk through this with her.”

“You’re right. It’s obvious how much he loves her.” He swallowed suddenly, and I felt his body tense around me slightly.

“He does, Bella. We’d both do anything for you girls. You know that, right?” He turned his head just slightly so that he could look into my eyes, only inches away from my face.

“I do,” I said. “You’ve proven it over and over again.” A small smile curved my lips.

“And I want to continue to do that, if you’ll let me.” I felt his breath wash over my face as he whispered the words that warmed my heart. *“If you’ll let me...” Like I’d ask him to stop.*

I leaned in and kissed him chastely on his cheek, which moved underneath my lips, creasing in a perfectly satisfied crooked smile. “I think I can do that, Edward.”

“Excellent. Will you...go somewhere with me? I know it’s getting late and we haven’t studied much, but...there’s somewhere I want to take you.” Hope filled his eyes, and in that moment, I couldn’t have denied him if I’d wanted to.

“Okay...are we driving?” I asked as I stood up.

“No ma’am...just walking, but we’ll need to bundle up, all right?” He’d stood up just after me, and was tilting his head in my direction, smiling.

“Sure. I have my coat, scarf and gloves. Do I need more?”

“I’ll bring along a blanket, and you can wear one of my hats.” He dashed off down the hall, while I walked quietly over to the coat rack and pulled on my peacoat. I wondered briefly how Rosalie was doing, but decided to trust that she would be fine with Emmett. I heard soft music playing and murmured voices drifting up from beneath his door. It was good that she was talking. I knew she’d be proactive and really deal with this. She’d been doing so well.

I decided to grab the plates of nearly finished spaghetti off of the table and help clean up before we left. Edward joined me and we made quick work of straightening the kitchen. I noticed that while I’d loaded the dishwasher, he’d been boiling some water and putting some things in a picnic basket, but I didn’t ask about it. I just went to the door and buttoned up my coat, throwing my scarf around my neck. Once I’d tugged on the knit cap that he’d set on the table, I pulled my gloves out of my pockets and whispered loudly, “Are you about ready?”

“I am,” he said, smiling as he popped out of the kitchen with a basket. He put on his own peacoat and skull cap, and handed me his green blanket. “Would you mind carrying this for us?” he asked.

“No problem. This is a good blanket. It’s so soft.” I rubbed my cheek against it before I hugged it to my chest.

He slid gloves onto his long fingers and grabbed the basket, opening the door. “Shall we?”

“Yes.” And we were off.

Moments later, we stepped out into the frigid evening air, and it took my breath. It was only 7:30, but the darkness was coming early in New England now, and the meteorologist had said winter weather was really on its way this week. The air had a sharp, metallic scent, and I thought it would probably snow before the night was out. I couldn’t wait. The first snow of the season was magical somehow. I found the pristine glaze absolutely beautiful. *Edward had told me there was beauty in my winter...I wonder if that’s what he was picturing, too.*

We walked past the Green for ten minutes or so, cutting through the lawns and I was surprised when he stopped beside Shattuck Observatory. We were up on a hill, though the view was very different from my hill on the other end of campus. From here, we could look out over the Connecticut River, and the panorama was breathtaking, even at night. The clear sky was filled with stars. He led me over to a picnic table, and we climbed up on top, resting our feet on the bench below. He wrapped the blanket over my shoulders quietly, and opened the basket. He handed me a brownie first. *Yes! I’ve been wondering when I’d get one of these.*

I watched as he pulled a thermos and two heavy mugs out of the basket, pouring us some hot chocolate. He looked up at me a few times and grinned. With each smile, my heart opened itself to him a little more. Finally, the mug was nestled in my hands, warming my fingers deliciously. He carefully snuggled his way under the blanket with me, and picked up his own drink.

“Thanks for coming out into the cold, Bella. This is one of my very favorite spots--especially in the winter.”

I nudged him with my shoulder. “It’s a great spot. Thanks for the hot chocolate.”

“I thought it would be just the thing,” he smiled.

“Well, it’s no Novack’s, but on the spur of the moment, it’ll do.”

He laughed next to me and slid his arm around my waist under the blanket.

Taking a deep breath, I looked up at the tiny, perfect twinkling lights. Over here, at the back of the campus, there weren’t many streetlights or buildings. I could see more stars from this hill than anywhere else around. Arcturus, my favorite star, looked especially bright. It was perfect. I sighed with contentment and watched the foggy evidence of my breath swirl around my head.

Edward squeezed me to his side in a hug, and I rested my head on his shoulder. We sat like that for at least 15 minutes without so much as a word between us. It was perfectly comfortable, especially with his warm fleecy scarf lying under my head. I let my mind relax, not bothering to think about how complicated my life was just then. It was nice to just be with Edward and to know I was completely safe there, wrapped up in that blanket with him. I wondered briefly what he was thinking about.

And then, he took a deep breath. I could hear a slight trepidation in his voice as he began to speak. “I want to talk to you about something, Bella.”

I thought about sitting up straight and looking at him, but thought that—maybe, since he seemed a little nervous—it would be better to leave my head where it was. Sometimes it was best just to speak out into the void. “Yeah?”

“Well, I just wanted to make sure you’re okay with the way things have been...*changing* between us. I don’t want things to happen so fast that you’re uncomfortable. I’m not going to deny that I’ve really enjoyed being able to kiss you and hold you more, but...I guess I just don’t want you to feel like you can’t get away. I don’t want our relationship to get too complicated. I still want to be whatever you need me to be.”

Silently, I let his words sink in. He didn’t want to be anything like Josh. He didn’t want the physical attraction to control me. That was so comforting to hear. And I truly believed that he’d be okay with my honest response, whatever it was. I inhaled a cleansing breath and tried to frame the words that were whirling like dervishes in my head.

I responded quietly, “Well, I guess that none of this—the sudden friendship with you, the memories that come back when I least expect them, the crap with Josh, the legal stuff—nothing is what I expected of my life this semester. I sort of thought I’d come back to school and be completely unwavering in my focus...alone. And when I try to think about how all of this has come to be, I don’t completely understand it. It has happened fast.”

He blew out a breath, I noticed that his arm around my waist loosened a little. I quickly reached across my waist with my left hand and threaded my fingers through his, keeping his hand there. “It’s been fast, Edward, but it’s all been comfortable. You’ve been such a gentleman—taken things as slowly as possible under the circumstances. And...I’m not sure how, but I guess maybe because of the friend you’ve been, you’ve helped me to trust you. That’s a really big deal for me, I think.”

“It is, Bella, and I want you to know I don’t take that for granted.” His fingers squeezed mine gently.

“I can tell. And I think that’s why even the kissing and touching has been okay. I’ve...I like it.” *It’s so awkward to say all of this out loud.*

“Has it...have I ever done too much? Too fast?” His breathing seemed ragged and tense. He was really worried about this.

I sat up and turned to him, looking intensely into his eyes. “No, Edward. You’ve done everything...*everything* right. Honestly, sometimes I wonder how you could be so perfect. How you seem to know what I need, before even I realize it sometimes.”

The corners of his mouth lifted just slightly, but the concern hadn’t left his eyes. “It didn’t bother you when I told you that the way I feel about you...physically...is always under the surface?” He laughed without humor. “I think I used the word lurking. That didn’t...*creep* you out a little?”

Now it was my turn to laugh. “No, Edward. I feel like you’ve been letting me set a pace that I’m comfortable with...and...” I lowered my voice considerably, not really able to believe I was about to say this. “There’s something between us that I just can’t ignore. I’m sort of always thinking about all of that, too.”

His eyebrows shot up, but the relief I saw in his eyes just made me want to take his perfect face in my hands and kiss him. I set my hot chocolate down on the bench.

“The last few days, especially. Since you asked if you could kiss me on Friday night, I...I haven’t been able to stop thinking about it. There’s a small part of me that keeps saying that being attracted to someone can be dangerous, but this time...it’s *you*. And you’re *so* careful with me.”

My inner battle began then, as he sat in silence, playing with the fingers of my free hand. *But what about when you flinched away from his touch in fear when you almost rear-ended that*

*other car? Weren't you afraid of him then? No. Not of **him**. It was a stupid programmed response. So, are you afraid of **yourself** then? Afraid you'll do something stupid and he'll think less of you?* Hmm. Now that was a question I couldn't answer right away.

That's what Josh had done. Whenever I'd made a mistake, he'd mocked me and berated me for it. I knew Edward would never mock me, but he might think less of me. *Could I bear that?*

And I was frustrated with myself that I needed him to tell me these same things over and over. It wasn't as if he needed to persuade me, but I knew that his willingness to repeat all this, to talk openly with me as often as I needed to hear it, was crucial. Each time he told me he cared and that he would be patient with me, each time he told me he wanted to be just what I need, I believed him a little more deeply.

And my heart healed just a little more.

Edward lifted my hand to his lips and kissed the top of it gently. He set it down in my lap as he pulled his other arm from around my waist. Turning to face me fully, he tugged the edge of the blanket tightly around me and picked one of my hands up in both of his. He gently unrolled my fingers and pulled off my glove, turning my hand over and tracing the lines in my palm. He ran his fingertip down the length of each of my fingers before turning my hand over in his and memorizing the back of it in the same way.

Pulling my hand to his face, he cupped his own cheek with it, his eyes closed tightly. His long eyelashes extended beautifully over his cheek bones, and I was moved. He was saying absolutely nothing, yet my eyes were brimming with tears. Edward laid my hand, palm down, in one of his much larger ones, and spent several moments drawing gentle patterns on it with his fingertips once more. He brought it to his lips and kissed it just before he inhaled the scent of my skin deeply. Then, he opened his eyes again and studied each individual fingernail as if his life depended on committing the details to memory.

And finally, he kissed each fingertip, before leaning in and pressing his forehead to mine.

I have never, *never* been so painstakingly adored and appreciated as in those moments. Every doubt, every fear, every concern was erased from my mind.

Edward sat up slightly then, locking his eyes on mine.

Perhaps I shouldn't have spoken, but my head and heart were swirling with such emotions that I was desperate to understand what was happening. My voice broke as I spoke into the silence, "What...what are you doing?"

His voice was gravelly as he answered, the intensity and truth of what he spoke evident in every syllable. "I want to know you completely. All the details...everything there is to know about Bella Swan."

I gulped and hoped he hadn't heard me. "But...*why*?" The tears began to overflow now. "What

about me makes you want to know me that way? This kind of attention, I don't deserve..."

His jaw tightened for a moment, and I saw disappointment in his dark green eyes. "Please don't ever say that again, Bella. You don't see yourself clearly. You deserve every good thing this world has to offer...and I want to be the one to give them to you. My heart is literally consumed by you, do you know that? I watch you give and give and give to others. You pour out this selfless and unassuming love, and I want you to *be* loved like that. Let me love you like that, Bella. Let me..."

My body shook with silent sobs. I could not understand this love. But most importantly, I knew I wasn't whole enough to return it. He tipped my chin up gently, searching my face. I saw the mirroring tears in his eyes and bit my lip sadly.

"Bella, what is it?" he asked in a whisper, as a frosty breeze began to blow from behind us.

"Believe me, I would love to be loved like that...the way you say you love me. But there's so much of my heart that is still broken and undone. I can't love you back the same way. I can't give you enough, Edward...not the kind of love you deserve."

A kind smile softened his eyes. "I know that, Bella. And I don't expect you to love me back right now. My love is patient. It's not going anywhere. I can't say enough that I don't expect anything from you. I will relish every gift of your time and your *self* that you give me..." he paused and tenderly tucked a piece of hair behind my ear "...every single kiss that you allow me." He touched my lips, softly running the tip of his finger over them. "But I will never *expect* those things. I know that they are gifts." The backs of his fingers ran over my cheek.

When he exhaled, I felt his sweet breath and the icy fog it made wash over my face as he continued. "All I ask is that you let me love you. I simply can't hide anymore that this is what I'm feeling. I am utterly and irrevocably in love with you, Bella Swan, and I need to be able to say that to you. Just...*hear* me. And share with me whatever you will."

I knew I had a long way to go. I knew that I wasn't anything close to the woman Edward Cullen deserved. I knew I would probably hurt and disappoint him over and over again. But, I closed my eyes and did the only thing I could in that moment that was changing everything for me.

I nodded yes.

And the gentle, perfect kiss that I felt on my cheek a moment later told me that Edward had understood.

As he packed up the thermos and cups, I stood, watching my breath form frosty clouds in the moonlight. I heard him say behind me, "Would you carry the blanket again, Love?"

I turned to answer him, and was surprised by the sky behind him. Thick, billowing clouds had rolled in while we'd sat there unaware. I expected the snow to start any moment, and I shivered

with anticipation. Reaching out, I took the blanket and held it tightly to my body, allowing it to warm me.

And then my stomach growled. Thankfully, underneath both the blanket and the peacoat, Edward hadn't heard. But there was no denying that I needed something, since I hadn't finished dinner. He hadn't finished either, because Rosalie's phone call had stopped us all dead in our tracks, so maybe he was hungry, too. I decided to be brave and just ask.

"My stomach's growling. Are you hungry, too?"

He chuckled. "I was just thinking that, but had assumed you'd probably be ready to get back. It's just after nine."

"No...honestly, I could seriously go for one of Ellie's grilled cheeses. Feel like driving out there?"

"Mm. Actually, that sounds perfect." We walked in companionable silence to his car, and were on the road in no time.

Ellie's *did* satisfy the craving, and by 10:15, we were on our way back to campus, the conversation much lighter.

When we pulled into the parking lot and got out, the sky was considerably darker, and the icy breeze had picked up a bit. About halfway to my dorm, huge, beautiful snowflakes began falling. I laughed out loud before I could help it, twirling around like a five-year-old in her first snowstorm. Palms up, face to the sky, I stuck my tongue out and waited for the frosty crystals to land on my tongue. Hearing a soft chuckle behind me, I spun around with my hands on my hips. "What?!"

The chuckle turned into hearty laughter as Edward said, "Is this your first time in the snow, Little Girl?"

"No, but I like it!" I retorted, stomping my foot playfully.

"Sassy, too...so, you like the *snow*, Sunshine girl? I thought warm weather was your thing."

I smiled and walked back toward him. "It is. I am a sunshine girl, through and through. I do enjoy the first snow of the year, though. It changes everything. And these snowflakes are the perfect kind...the big, pretty ones. It doesn't snow like this often, so you have to appreciate it while it's here. Besides, if it didn't snow and get wintery, then the spring wouldn't be such a miracle."

"Truer words were never spoken, Bella." Something told me he wasn't only talking about the weather anymore, and I felt warmed to my toes by his words. He reached out, offering me his hand, and I took it, twirling around once more. His crooked grin was drawing me in again. I spun toward him and—of course—my feet went right out from under me. Edward caught me against

his chest, holding me there with his face dangerously close to mine again. He closed his eyes for just a moment, and then opened them, quirking his eyebrow, silently asking for permission. I smiled up at him and closed my eyes, waiting, *needing* for him to close the distance between us.

He leaned me back as if we were waltzing, and kissed me softly, gently. Once, twice. His lips were smooth and molded to mine as if they were made to fit there. Then he stood me back up, making sure that I was standing firmly, and stood facing me. “Thank you, Bella,” he barely voiced.

I looked down as the blood rushed to my cheeks. He was insanely gorgeous in that skull cap and scarf with his peacoat. He seemed to have stepped right off the pages of an GQ magazine. The snowflakes caught in his eyelashes, and his smiling eyes were fixed on my face. He adjusted my scarf, and I bit my bottom lip nervously. “What?” he asked.

Almost silently, I answered, “Kiss me again.”

For a millisecond, I caught a glimpse of a smile, but his lips were on mine before I had a chance to breathe. The kiss was deeper this time, insistent. His tongue ran along my upper lip, slipping into my mouth when I opened it to take in a shuddering breath. He swirled his tongue around mine as his hands came up to cup my face, and then he pulled back, biting my bottom lip gently before he took his lips from mine.

I could do nothing but sigh in a delighted stupor. He grinned at me and pressed his lips to my temple as he whispered, “I love you, Bella.”

Giving me no chance to feel awkward or to say something depressing, he grabbed my hands and swung me up onto his back as he jogged to the dorms. I heard my own squeal of surprise at the piggyback ride echoing off of the buildings.

Edward didn’t stay long at my room. We both needed to study, and I needed to call Charlie and Angela before I went to bed. Charlie was glad to hear from me, and said he’d probably end up flying in on Sunday afternoon. I couldn’t wait to see him.

Angela didn’t pick up the phone, so I left her a voicemail. I’d catch up with her at lunch tomorrow.

I realized I hadn’t checked my own voicemail when I’d gotten in, so I grabbed a pencil to jot down any phone numbers. There were three messages.

Angela had called to tell me she’d be out late tonight with Ben. She had a lot to tell me, and she sounded really happy.

Jacob had called to tell me he’d meet me before class in the morning. Seth was shouting and laughing like a crazy man in the background. The message made me smile.

And the last message was from Rosalie. She sounded infinitely better than I’d have expected.

With confidence in her voice, she let me know that she was all right, but that she'd be staying with Emmett tonight. She just needed him beside her.

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Chapter: 34

A/N: Okay, my lovely readers! This is the final installment of “What I Wrote While I Was On Vacation.” After this, I’ll be going back to the regular weekly updates, but the story will be picking up the pace a bit. Thank you all so much for your patience while I was away!

To Flemily my love, thanks for hashing things out with me. Your voice speaks reason to me...and you’re frickin’ hilarious.

Twilighzoner mah beta and legal guru, thanks for reading and speedy validating.

On to the story! Happy reading!

*It's only falling, just what could be the fear
You'll never learn to fly unless you take that first step*

Way out where your heart will be your only guide

Let up on your worrying, and let up on your heart

David Wilcox

Chapter Thirty-two: Determination

I bounded down the steps the following morning to find Jacob waiting for me on the bench.

“Hey,” I greeted him. “How was your lab yesterday? Dominic said to tell you he missed you.”

“Aww, it was all right. Homework club is more fun, for sure, but I get into the dissecting and stuff.” He stood up and stretched.

“That’s nasty,” I smiled at him. “But I’m glad you like it.”

His eyes searched mine for a moment, before he asked, “How’re you doing? You know, post – hearing and all.”

“Loads better,” I said as we started walking toward the cafeteria. “Everything just kind of hit me at once when it was over, you know? Just the relief, the memories, the frustration...sorry I couldn’t really talk after...”

“Sure, sure, Bells. I understand. It was a lot for *me* to handle, and none of it happened to me. He’s really an ass, isn’t he?” he smirked.

I chuckled in spite of myself. I could’ve said a whole lot more about him, but that pretty much summed it up. “Yeah, Jake. He really is.”

“I couldn’t believe his testimony! Did he think that would actually *help* him?” He was laughing at Josh now. “I mean, how freakin’ stupid can you get?!”

I shook my head in disbelief as I thought about Josh’s words—words that were now on record to be used in the trial on Monday. “Yeah, he really did screw himself over...but, you know? The sad thing is that I think he really believes all that.”

“Bells? That’s not *sad*. That’s *demented*.” He nudged me playfully, and I smiled. Deep down, though, I was thinking about the truth of his words. Somewhere along the line, I think, Josh had really lost it.

We grabbed breakfast and made it to class quickly. The professor handed back some of our essays, and I’d done superbly. I allowed myself to really enjoy that, because I’d had a *lot* going on. And despite all that, academically, at least, I was clearly having the semester I’d intended to. Focused and excellent. *Eat that, Joshua Hamilton.*

Class ended, and Jacob and I headed to the other side of the building where he always dropped me off. “I’ll see ya around 2:30?” he asked.

“Yeah...just outside my dorm again.”

“Kay, Bells. Later.” His smile was so sincere, and—once again—I was thankful for my friendship with Jacob. He was really dependable...and genuinely good.

And then I turned the corner and saw Edward, sitting in a chair outside of our lecture hall. Good didn’t even begin to describe him. And the way he looked today? *Have mercy*. His peacoat was draped over his satchel on the floor beside him, and he was leaning forward, his elbows resting on his knees, and his hands folded under his chin, watching the hallway for me. When his eyes met mine, they lit up, and his mouth slid into my crooked smile. *My crooked smile??? Well, yes. I guess it was kind of mine.* He stood then, running his fingers through his already wildly unkempt hair, and I let my eyes wander over him. He had on jeans that fit low on his hips and a tight navy blue t-shirt. I’d never seen him dress down like this for class before, but I liked it. He bent to grab his satchel and slung his coat over his shoulder. As I approached, he leaned over and kissed the top of my head in greeting. “Good morning, Bella.”

“Morning, Edward...I like your...t-shirt.” Not that I minded having any excuse whatsoever to

look at his beautifully sculpted forearms or perfectly rounded biceps, but it *had* snowed last night, and the temperature remained in the teens.

He grinned comfortably down at me and said, “Well, they always seem to overdo it on the heat when the weather’s like this outside, don’t you think?” He adjusted the strap of the satchel over his shoulder as he spoke, and his forearms rippled, the clearly defined ropes of his muscles playing under his skin. *Mmm. Piano playing forearms. There’s so much strength there...I want to trace his muscles and memorize them with my fingers like he did with my hand last night.*

As we walked into the hall and took our seats, I thought back to the night before. Though we’d done more discussing my heart than kissing, my memory of the whole experience was overwhelmingly romantic. The way he’d adored every line, every crease, every detail of my hand before declaring his love for me was...matchless. I’d never felt anything like it. It made me ache to be the whole person that Edward deserved. It made me ache to love him back...completely, wholly.

Today, a few times during class, Edward reached over and ran his finger down the length of my arm, or squeezed my thigh sweetly, or tucked my hair behind my ear. When I looked over at him, he always seemed to be concentrating on the lecture, but then he’d look at me out of the corner of his eye and offer me that crooked smile. I was melting.

And not just because of Edward. The heater running in the building was way too hot. Edward had been right. My turtleneck was making me feel a little claustrophobic, and I kept tugging at it. Finally, I grabbed an extra pencil out of my bag and twisted my hair, pulling it up off of my neck and shoving the pencil through it. I looked over at Edward, and he was writing diligently—and *not* dying from the heat. Again, the play of his muscular forearms stunned me. I’d seen strong guys before, but this was mesmerizing. I lost myself in a daydream for a little while.

I was in a large house somewhere, the room positively full of windows. The creamy walls and thick rug on the hardwood floor seemed to soak in the rays of the sun, creating a warm glow. Dressed in a simple white linen dress, I was standing near a well-worn wooden table smelling a bouquet of fresh wildflowers in a simple glass vase—It was full of daisies. As I stood there, I felt a man’s arms wrap around my waist, pulling me against a strong, hard body. I stroked the arms, lacing my fingers with his. He lifted our hands to twirl me, as if in a dance, and stopped me when I faced him. “Good morning, Love,” Edward said in that velvety voice.

I smiled at him as he led me over to the white couch and sat down with his right leg stretched out along the length of the sofa. He pulled me back to lean against his chest, my head resting on his shoulders, and he wrapped his arms around my chest, hugging me to his body. I pulled my legs up on the couch and bent my knees, keeping myself as close as possible to Edward. Bringing my hands up to his arms, I traced the lines of his muscles with my fingers. I could feel him smile against my cheek, and he hummed in pleasure. “I love you, my Bella,” he whispered.

I was jarred back to reality by the sounds of people moving and talking. Apparently, class was over. Edward was packing his things into his bag. I *so* wanted to love him. Something in me needed for that picture to become a reality. *What if I messed this up? What if I never got to have*

that dream?

He cleared his throat next to me and asked gently, “Are you all right? You seem to be somewhere else.”

I didn’t know how to answer him, so I just bit my lip and nodded. “Just thinking,” I finally said.

His eyes searched my face for a moment before I looked down to gather my things and slide them into my open backpack. As I stood up, he was looking at his phone. “Em just texted me. They want to know if we can meet them for lunch again. He said Rosalie wants to talk to us.”

“Oh! Sure. I want to find out how she’s doing. She left me a voice mail last night that said she was okay, but...I just don’t know how okay she could really be.”

As we walked, he told me what he knew. “She seemed quiet this morning before she headed out, but she certainly didn’t seem as upset as she was last night. I imagine she must’ve just missed you at your room this morning. Emmett told me before we headed out today that they...sort of...came up with a plan.”

“A plan?” I asked, confused.

“Yes...I’m guessing it’s a way for her to begin dealing with all of the anger and frustration she’s been bottling up. Emmett and I have talked about how to encourage the two of you through this process, so...I bet that’s what she wants to talk about.”

“Hmm.” My mind ran through all of the ways the boys had encouraged us, cheered us on, listened when we ranted, held us quietly, or even let us vent our anger on them. I wondered silently if Rosalie had had any experiences like I’d had the night I chased Josh’s car and then had gone ballistic on Edward.

I didn’t feel like I’d had any sort of plan mapped out, but Edward was certainly helping me to deal with anything that came up. I was so deeply, deeply thankful for him. I reached over and took his hand as we walked, and his face crinkled in pleasure. I loved the deep laugh lines around his eyes when he smiled.

We walked into Home Plate, and saw the other two in line. After getting our food, we found a table near the back and got settled.

Em grinned at me and said, “How you doin’, Bellaluna?”

“All right,” I answered.

Rosalie jumped right in then, “Okay. This is just something I need to say...something I’m gonna do. Lonnie the Skeeze is gone, and there’s nothing I can do to make things any worse for him, but I’ve just *need* to rid myself of him completely. Edward, Em told me that you suggested maybe writing some letters to him, saying everything I’d say to his face if I got the chance.” I

looked over at Edward and saw him nod quietly. “I wrote one last night,” she continued. “It felt really good. I’ve got a lot to say, but I got some important things off my chest. So, thanks for that.”

“I’m just glad it helped,” he offered humbly.

“The other thing...well, it’s a little crazy.” She looked at Emmett for encouragement, and he wrapped his big arm around her shoulder and kissed her cheek. “I don’t know whether it was more Em’s idea or mine.”

She paused and we leaned forward a little in our seats, willing her to go on. Finally, she did. “Have you ever just wanted to beat the crap out of Josh, Bella? Just rip him to shreds? Hit and kick and scream and whatever you needed to do?”

I blushed and looked over at Edward, my hero, the one who’d taken the brunt of all those emotions so willingly. He smiled at me and reached for my hand as I answered. “Yes, Rosalie. I’ve *definitely* felt that way.”

“Well,” she said with confidence. “I’m gonna do it. I’m gonna beat Alonzo Calderas senseless.”

“What?” I asked. “How?” I was sure the confusion was written all over my face.

“I blurted this out in anger last night, as far from meaning it as could be, but...Emmett says it wouldn’t be hard to arrange.” Edward and I looked at each other again, and then I turned to Emmett who was nodding and grinning.

He leaned across the table and told us conspiratorially, “She said, ‘I wanna get a picture of his freakin’ face and throw darts at it. I wanna stick it on a punching bag and knock him into hell...’ so...”

Rosalie finished, “...he told me he would find a picture.”

Edward shifted, leaning back in his seat with a slight smile on his face. I was a little shocked by the thought, personally. I honestly couldn’t see how that would have helped *me*...but, she seemed genuinely encouraged by the idea. It was the first time in a long while I’d seen her look excited about something. I grinned at her and said, “Well then, it sounds like a good idea.”

“At the very least, it’ll be cathartic,” Edward added. Rosalie nodded, and Emmett squeezed her shoulder.

Unorthodox? Yes.

Strange? Definitely.

Voodoo? No. Just something that would help Rosalie take out her frustration on the one who caused it all—whether he was aware of it or not.

And I could see how it was different for us. For me, a picture wouldn't help. Josh was very familiar and had been very present and threatening for so long. And, way back at the beginning of it all, I had *chosen* to invite him into my life. I, blind idiot that I was, had opened the door to all the crap myself.

In Rosalie's case, her attacker had been nameless and faceless. Her rape was most certainly more violent than mine and that was traumatic, but she wasn't carrying around two years worth of memories either. Calderas had wanted a victim to hurt for his own sick satisfaction; Rosalie had come away needing to believe that she'd hurt him in the process and that he would pay for his choices. Now, as things stood, he had *definitely* faced consequences for his seedy life. All that remained was for Rosalie to feel like she got her vengeance. I sure hoped this could work for her.

I know I'd pictured Josh when I'd punched and screamed at Edward. Maybe Rosalie's method would be just what she needed. And judging by her face after she'd heard our reactions, she was pleased that we'd support her. Emmett carried on the conversation from then on. "We're gonna run by Kinko's with his mugshot this afternoon."

I chuckled to myself as I saw Rosalie slide her arm through the crook of Emmett's elbow and look up at him. *Whatever he's been doing and saying, I think it's safe to say, he's won her affection and trust. Good for them.* "Let me know how it goes, then. Okay?" I said.

She nodded and Emmett winked at me. We ate our meals and enjoyed lighthearted conversation after that. Edward walked me back to my room and promised to see me that evening during the break in the middle of Zoology. I gave him a quick hug before I hurried up the steps to get my things together. We'd spent a little too long enjoying lunch.

By the time I got back downstairs, Jacob was waiting for me. He grinned as I ran up to him, a little out of breath. We walked quickly to the parking lot, and hopped into the truck. I cranked it up, and he chuckled. "It still makes me smile to see you driving this big ol' thing."

"Well, I need something sturdy and safe to get around in," I smirked. "I'm too clumsy to have a car made from fiberglass and Styrofoam."

"Now that's the truth," he agreed. We cranked up the music and sang along with the radio as I drove. I maneuvered very carefully through the lights as we came into Lebanon. I needed to avoid a near miss and the unfortunate overreaction I'd experienced last time, thank you very much.

And on the way back home, there was no shortage of fun conversation. Jake had really missed the kids. It had been four days since he'd seen them, and they had a lot of news for him. The sweet little girls had all needed big hugs, too. I'm pretty sure he was wrapped around some of their little fingers. I enjoyed watching his face when he helped the little ones. I could tell how much he loved it even as he filled me in on their sweet comments and questions.

We swung through a fast food place as we headed back to campus. I wanted to change before

going to my night class. When I said goodbye to him outside of the lecture hall, Jacob surprised me by pulling me in for a hug. I squeezed him back tentatively, looking up at him with a question in my eyes. I was completely comfortable in his arms, but it was so vastly different from being wrapped up in Edward's arms, that it stunned me. "Umm, what was that for, Jake?" I asked.

He smiled down at me. "I'm just sayin' good night, Bells. I know Edward will be here for the break, and I thought you'd probably like for him to walk you back after..."

Oh. I searched his face for a moment, and I didn't see any real disappointment. He squeezed my shoulder as he stepped away, and I said a little awkwardly, "Well, okay...I'm sure he'll be glad to. Thanks, Jacob."

He chuckled at me and added, "Yeah, I *know* he'll be glad to. He's a good guy, Bells. He, um...he really cares about you a lot."

I nodded and said quietly, "He does. And I'm glad that he's around, but I'm glad because of you, too, Jacob."

He shrugged and gave me a half-hearted smile this time. "Well, I'm not going anywhere, so don't get all sad. I just...I don't want to get in the way. From what I've seen, Edward...he just deserves a real shot. He's sort of laying it all out there. It'd be insulting to try to compete with that. And, if you're happy, then I'm happy, Bells."

"I'm really getting' there, I think." *Where is all this coming from? Jacob Black is encouraging me to be happy with Edward Cullen. Huh.*

"Okay, then. 'Nuff said. I'll see you tomorrow for the club."

"Okay, Jake. Good night." He waved at me as he walked out of the door, and I stood there, trying to process that conversation.

Class was...mediocre. All I could think about was my conversation with Jacob. "*He just deserves a real shot,*" he'd said. "*He's sort of laying it all out there.*" Honestly? There was no 'sort of' about it.

Edward Cullen had handed me his heart on a platter and said, 'Do with it what you will.' If there was a heart in the world that deserved to be loved, it was Edward's. I knew it was almost a guarantee that I'd hurt him as I continued to heal. I was bound to have more emotional overreactions to things, and Edward had been *crushed* by my flinching away just the day before. And yet, hours later, on the very same day, he'd told me he loved me.

Edward Cullen wasn't the average guy. And this was a conclusion I'd reached early on, but I'd never really understood would affect me so deeply. Edward had proven that I could trust him to hang in there, to deal with my mood swings, my fears, my memories, and my reactions.

And Alice had told me that he would. Esme had told me that. Edward had told me that himself.

And now—against all odds—Jacob Black had told me the same thing.

So, why was I so hesitant? What was I really afraid of?

I would make mistakes, but he'd promised me he'd be patient.

I let my mind wander further. I thought back to the night Edward had defended me and shot Amber Hamilton down. The way I'd kissed him.

The way he'd kissed me back.

The way he'd pulled me against him.

The things I'd wanted to do with him when we'd come back to an empty room.

The things I'd thought about doing to him and for him, to make him happy.

The things I'd done with Josh...to keep him...content.

*C'mon, Bella. Your motives here are entirely different. You **had** to keep Josh satisfied or deal with his anger and hateful words. Edward expects **nothing**. He's not **asking** to be satisfied. He's just sharing himself with you.*

*But isn't this physical attraction dangerous? Isn't it just a means to control another person? Isn't **it** what's made me feel so dirty and used?*

I didn't know.

It felt so different to be kissed by Edward Cullen.

And not only on my lips.

It felt different in my heart.

I knew I was probably *years* away from considering giving myself to someone so completely again. That wasn't the issue.

The issue was simply, would the way I feel toward Edward—and the way he treats me—lead to me feeling dirty and used again?

I couldn't imagine that.

All he'd ever made me feel was cared for...*treasured*.

And he wanted to see me whole and alive...and dancing.

My professor was droning on and on like Charlie Brown's teacher. I probably needed to try and tune in a little. Of course, I could just get notes from someone again.

I wondered if Edward was out there yet.

Looking at the clock, I gauged my time...usually 7:30 break would begin. It was 7:20. I could make it.

I listened diligently for the next 10 minutes, but at 7:30, the professor was still yammering on. *Dr. Blah? I mean this with all the respect in the world. Will you please shut up, so I can go out there and see Edward???*

The clock continued to tick by...*I. Am. Dying. Here.*

7:45. *God, deliver me from this turmoil.*

7:55. *Seriously, I'm going to act like I'm sick and just take off running with my hand over my mouth.*

8:05. Mercifully, the droning ceased. "And that's all for tonight. I've got to leave a bit early, which I'm sure none of you mind." *Was it just me, or did he look at me when he said that? Yikes. I'd thought I was masking my impatience better than that.*

Two minutes later, I was waiting at the door for the crowd to squeeze its way through.

The bodies moved on, going in their various directions, and then I saw him.

He looked up from his book, took his glasses off and hung them on the collar of his gray v-neck sweater, and my heart constricted.

Something in me had changed.

Edward Cullen loved me, and I was determined to love him back.

End Notes:

Afraid to Dance didn't make the cuts for the Bellies, but—from the bottom of my heart—thank you to those of you who nominated the story. You're the best! Thanks for your faith in me! (And Supportward says thanks, too!) Kisses!

The story *did* however, make the top five for the Twilight Indie Awards, so I'd be honored if you'd go over and vote for *Afraid to Dance* as the Best Alternate Universe Human WIP. In fact, Edward told me he'd bring you some hot chocolate from Novack's. Voting will begin on July 7th and go through the 12th, and there are a *lot* of great stories that need

votes...and more readers. So, don't JUST vote, make yourself a new list of "stories to check out!"

The web address is: <http://theindietwificawards> dot com

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Chapter: 35

A/N: Huh, so it turns out that I like updating. I know I told you that I wouldn't update until the weekend, but this chapter is just sitting on my desktop, taunting me. I figured none of you would mind going ahead and getting it a little early. ESPECIALLY because of what happens in it...*dum-dum-dum*

To mah sweets, FlemilyHarper and Aerosoldoc, you two are beta-lovely. And your stories make my heart thump when I read them.

Twilightzoner, you are fantabulous! Thanks!

To the handful of ladies who join me on the thread, I love you! I love hearing your thoughts...

And, without further ado...Enjoy!

Makes me high, you whisper to me.

It's a sound that I'll always keep with me now forever

When I heard it the first time, I knew that it would change me where I stood

Change me for good...

David Wilcox

Chapter Thirty-three: Progress

Edward stood, turning away only for a moment to set his book down. I made my way to him as quickly as possible and wrapped my arms around his waist, squeezing forcefully. He chuckled as he wrapped his arms around my shoulders and hugged me to his chest. The deep rumble I could hear and feel against my cheek warmed my heart. His voice vibrated against my face as he asked, "To what do I owe the pleasure of this great hug?"

“I thought I’d *never* get out of there!” I answered, snuggling my head more tightly into my spot.

“He did keep you longer than usual,” Edward affirmed.

“Well, that’s because we’re done. He has to leave now, so he finished his lecture a little early.” I leaned back to look into his eyes, but his hands remained locked behind my back. “But, *still*, he could’ve told us! I thought he’d just forgotten about break...and I wanted to *see* you!”

His finger traced the frustrated creases in my brow, and he smirked. “Well, you’re here now, so let’s not waste time. Do you want to go back to your room to study?” His eyes told me he was asking sincerely, but I couldn’t believe it.

“Are you kidding? I have an unexpected hour of freedom! Let’s...hmm. What *can* we do?”

Edward looked at me, his eyes adoring, and waited for me to come up with something.

“Will you play for me again?” I asked hesitantly.

“Really?” he asked, obviously thrilled by the idea.

“Definitely. I could listen to you play forever!” *I could watch you play forever, too.*

“I’d love to play for you, Bella.” He let go and turned to put his book and glasses in his satchel. Facing me again, he asked, “Do you need to call Jacob to tell him class let out early?”

What do I say? Simple would be best. “He already said good night...he said he thought you might be able to walk me back.”

Edward’s eyebrow quirked. “Jacob’s not coming back here?” He looked surprised, but there was a hint of satisfaction on his face.

“Nope. He said he knew you’d be here, and he knew you wouldn’t mind.”

“Did he have somewhere else to be tonight?” he asked as we started walking toward the exit. He was really trying to sort this out. It made me smile.

“No. He just said that he’d see me tomorrow. He knows you like walking with me and...” I hesitated before adding quietly, “...he doesn’t want to get in the way of...us.” I pulled my bottom lip between my teeth anxiously.

Edward reached for my hand, smiling. “I’ll have to thank Jacob Black for that.”

We stepped out into the frosty night, and I pulled my scarf around my neck tightly. I was so eager to hear Edward play the piano that I was nearly bouncing. Of course, I had a sneaking suspicion that the decision I’d made to let my heart feel whatever it *could* was also contributing to my excitement. I felt freer somehow.

Edward's warm voice cut through the icy air. "Would you like to go to my place and listen on the keyboard, or go to a practice room over in the arts building?"

"The Hopkins Center. I want to hear you on a real piano...can you get a room again?"

He grinned at me. "Of course. I'll call over there now."

I studied the stars and the beautiful glaze of snow and ice on the trees all around us as we walked. His call only took a moment.

As we walked down the road and headed over to the arts center, I asked Edward if he'd seen Rosalie that afternoon.

"As a matter of fact, I did," he chuckled. "She and Em had just gotten back, and they were duct taping a laminated Alonzo Calderas face to Emmett's punching bag. By the time I left, she was wailing on it. I hope they made some replacement copies." He shook his head, remembering.

"Well that's good. I've got to say, I was a little skeptical, but...if it works, it works." I shrugged, and he squeezed my hand in response.

"Your situations are just so different, Bella. And everyone copes differently, too." He tilted his head slightly in question as he asked, "Have you ever written a letter to Josh? It might help you get some of that stuff off your chest. Alice kept a journal and wrote everything she wanted to say to James. Of course, he never read a word of it, but she swore it helped her."

"No..." I said. "I've written lots of poetry, but nothing *to* Josh." I let my words hang in the air for a moment before I added non-committally, "Maybe I'll try it."

"Well, your poetry is beautiful, and it's obviously doing good, too. Whatever you need, Bella. No pressure...ever." He offered a smile, and I gave one back.

When we got to the practice room, he tossed his bag down, and I put mine with it. Sliding on to the piano bench, he asked, "What would you like to hear?"

She's Got a Way. Or your song, Edward. "Anything's fine. Maybe the composition you've been working on for class?"

He nodded as his fingers gracefully began to dance across the keys. I scooted onto the bench beside him and watched, enraptured.

As he finished, he shrugged with a half smile and began playing Debussy. When he finished Clair de Lune, I asked if he knew Reverie. He looked surprised, but pleased at my question and started playing the dream-inducing music quietly. I closed my eyes and swayed to the music. Every time I heard this particular piece, I found myself in the meadow.

I was lying on a blanket, reading, and feeling the warmth of the sun soak into my skin. A shadow fell across the page, and I turned to see Edward's silhouette above me. He squatted down beside me and then stretched out. I rolled over closer to him, and—without a word—snuggled in next to him. My head found its spot, and I rested my hand on his chest. He threaded his fingers through mine and sighed contentedly. "There's nowhere else I'd rather be right now," he whispered.

"Just here," I answered. "Me either. Or anyone I'd rather be with."

"I love to hear you say that, Bella Swan." He hummed quietly as we lay there together, enjoying the sunshine, the breeze, and the perfect company.

The music stopped, and I quirked my eyebrow at him as I opened my eyes smiling. He was looking at me. "Can I play you something I've been working on?" he asked a bit nervously.

"Of course! Anything!" I smiled in encouragement.

"Okay...I was thinking about reading it in the next Literary Society meeting, but, I could just sing it to you *now* and choose something of my own for tomorrow..."

He was going to sing to me again??? "Um...okay. Whatever you want..."

He licked his lips and his fingers played the chords of an unfamiliar song. When I heard his husky, soulful voice begin to sing, my heart stuttered.

*Let me tell you a secret
Put it in your heart and keep it
Something that I want you to know
Do something for me
Listen to my simple story
And maybe we'll have something to show*

*You tell me you're cold on the inside
How can the outside world
Be a place that your heart can embrace?
Be good to yourself
Because nobody else
Has the power to make you happy*

*How can I help you?
Please let me try to
I can heal the pain
That you're feeling inside
Whenever you want me
You know that I will be
Waiting for the day
That you say you'll be mine*

I could hardly get my breath. What *words!* What was this song? He'd been working on this for me? I wanted to wrap this man up and never, ever let him go.

He paused for a moment and looked at me strangely. "Um, this next verse wasn't exactly right, so I changed a few things..." His words trailed off and he began again after a brief musical interlude.

*He must have really hurt you
To make you say the things that you do
He must have really hurt you
To make those pretty eyes look so blue*

*He must have thought
That he could
That you'd never leave him
Now you can't see my love is good
And that I'm not him*

I may have flinched, but I knew for sure that his love was amazingly different.

*How can I help you?
Please let me try to
I can heal the pain
Won't you let me inside? (Um, yes please.)
Whenever you want me
You know that I will be
Waiting for the day
That you say you'll be mine*

*Who needs a lover
That can't be a friend?
Something tells me I'm the one you've been looking for (I believe you're right.)
If you ever should see him again
Won't you tell him you've found someone who gives you more?*

*Someone who will protect you
Love and respect you
All those things
That he never could bring to you
Like I do
Or rather I would
Won't you show me your heart
Like you could?*

*Won't you let me in?
Let this love begin
Won't you show me your heart now?
I'll be good to you
I can make this true
And get to your heart somehow*

I was at a total loss for words. Edward slid his hands off of the keys and hung his head humbly. *Speak up, Bella! Don't let him think you didn't like it!*

“That was...um...” I cleared my throat. “I don’t know what to say. The words were just perfect! Thank you, Edward.”

He turned to me, and offered a slightly sheepish smile. “But not *all* the words. I want to make sure you know I recognize that, because you’re strong...that you were able to walk away.” His look had transformed into one of determination.

“Who wrote that?”

“George Michael...and I’m not really a fan of *his*, per se. But...this song just said all I wanted to...once I changed just a few things.” He looked down and played with the keys absently.

I wrapped my arms around him from the side and kissed his cheek. “I absolutely loved it, Edward. And...I really like your voice. I don’t think I told you that after the Karaoke night, but you sing so...*soulfully*.”

Edward Cullen actually blushed at my words. His hands reached for the keys, and he began improvising, creating the music as he went along. I thought it was probably because he didn’t know what else to say or do.

So, I stood up. “Edward, will you scoot back a little, please?”

He looked up at me, confusion and surprise written all over his face. But he pushed the piano bench back with his legs and waited.

I stepped between him and the piano, steeling myself with my newfound resolve, and I stood between his legs. My hands rested on his shoulders as he turned his face up to mine, his eyes questioning.

I swallowed and tried to frame my words carefully. Biting my lip in concentration, I closed my eyes momentarily.

“Bella?” he whispered.

“You told me you love me,” I began, exhaling with a whoosh.

“Yes,” he answered calmly. “I *do* love you.”

“But you don’t expect anything from me,” I clarified.

“Right. I’m just glad for the time that I get to spend with you...however long that lasts, and however much you choose to share with me.” One look at his face told me that he was speaking the utter truth.

I tenderly pushed some of his messy hair off of his face and then rested my hand back on his shoulder. “Well, I...I *trust* you.”

He smiled genuinely, the deep creases appearing beside his eyes again. *Mmm. They do phenomenal things to his already perfect eyes.* “Thank you, Bella, he said.”

“There’s more though,” I added hastily. He looked surprised. “I have never in my life met anyone who is more deserving of my love, who is more patient, more selfless, more understanding. I know I’m not there yet...but, I’m thawing out, I think. And I want to...”

His eyebrows rose hopefully, a smile played at the edges of his lips.

“I want to let you love me, and I want to...*try* to love you back.”

His brow furrowed slightly. “I’m not asking that of you, Bella.”

I cut him off. “No, you’re not. And that’s exactly *why* I want to. You don’t need my love, you don’t control me to make me feel like I need *you*. You’re just so consistent and genuine...you’re the best person I’ve ever met in my life. And if you’ll accept the little I have to offer, as it grows, I’ll try to give you more and more. Okay?”

He closed his eyes and hung his head.

I waited, anxious.

When his eyes met mine again a moment later, he just whispered, “Bella...I...are you sure this is what *you* want?”

“Yes. I don’t know how it will all work, and I know it’s not going to be easy. More than that, I know I’m going to mess up, maybe even pull away sometimes. There are parts of my heart that are really still out of my control. But, if you can be patient with me, I can tell you that I’ve never wanted anything more in my life.”

His arms were around me in a heartbeat, his face pressed into my stomach. “I love you so *much*, Bella. You have no idea...Thank you,” he breathed against me. “You have no idea.”

*_*_*_*_*

When we got back to the boys' place, I heard thumping and banging coming from the weight room. I set down my back pack, and went to look in cautiously. Peering around the doorframe, I saw a sweaty, spent Rosalie pulling back to pound the face of her attacker over and over...her arm was like a jackhammer. After every few hits, I'd watch her muscular leg come up and kick the punching bag with a jarring force. I was pretty sure I heard her growling and swearing under her breath, as well. Smiling to myself, I scooted back from the door noiselessly and walked toward the kitchen where Edward was making us some hot tea.

I slid my arms around his waist, and he hummed in pleasure before asking how Rosalie seemed to be doing.

"Em's gonna need a new bag, if she keeps it up like she's going at it now...but it does look like she's really getting the hate out of her system."

He turned to face me, but I kept my arms around him. "That's good to hear." He gently wrapped his hands around my upper arms and smiled at me. "Can I tell you again how deeply I was affected when you shared your heart with me tonight?"

Please. "You can tell me anything as often as you want...I probably need to hear it at least twice anyway," I smirked.

He tipped my chin up and pressed his lips to my forehead... "I..." he whispered as he kissed my left cheek. "...love," his lips pressed on my right cheek. "...you." And his mouth found mine. There was none of the urgency that there had been before, because this kiss communicated nothing but tenderness and love. His lips were soft, but firm against mine as they parted, inviting me to deepen the kiss whenever I wanted to. One of his hands wound its way into my hair, the other reached around my back holding me tightly as he leaned into my body. *It's safe here, and he loves me,* I told myself, but was soon lost in the sensuality of his touch. His strong fingers were tangling and untangling themselves in my hair, stroking and massaging my scalp, and I moved my hands up his back to hold on to his shoulders.

I felt his tongue graze the corner of my mouth and flicked my own out against it tentatively, which elicited a quiet groan from him. Our tongues and lips began to dance around each other, as I slid one of my hands into his tousled mop, tugging and pulling him even closer to me.

"Aww, snap!" we suddenly heard from the kitchen door. "Sorry, lovahs. I'll be on me way." I spun to lock eyes with Emmett, who was standing there grinning as every drop of blood in my body rushed to my face. I stepped away from Edward quickly and dropped my head, so that my hair hung like a curtain, separating me from the gazes of the boys. *I'm sure Edward has mentioned to Emmett at some point that we've been kissing, but...to be caught like **this!***

Edward reached out and grasped my fingertips in his hand. "Wait, Love," I heard him say.

I still wasn't looking up, but there was obviously some silent communication going on, because I heard a repentant Emmett say quietly, "I'm sorry, Bellaluna. I just got out of the shower and was coming to the kitchen for a drink."

“I know, Em. It’s your apartment. It’s really okay.” And I really wanted it to be, but I felt *so* awkward. I just couldn’t look up. I concentrated on tracing a pattern in the linoleum with my toes.

“Nah, I shouldn’t have teased...it’s just, you’re so much like a little sister to me that sometimes I probably act like an aggravating big brother without realizing it.” He sounded so sincere, and so I turned to look at him. Emmett was offering a tight-lipped smile, his eyes hesitant. But his dimples were so pronounced, that all I really saw was the sweetness of my big grizzly-bear-brother. Edward released my fingers as I stepped toward Em, who enclosed me in his gigantic arms and asked, “Do I aggravate you *lots*?”

“Of course not,” I smiled at him.

“Good then,” he answered, obviously feeling better immediately. “I’m just in a freakin’ awesome mood. This ‘Do-bad-things-to-Lonnie’s-face’ therapy is really helpin’ Rosie...”

It seemed like there was more to his good mood than he was saying, and—no sooner than I sensed that—I heard a loud “Nuh-uh!” from the bathroom. It was followed by an, “Emmett McCarty, that’s *gross*.”

“Rosie,” he laughed as he headed back that way, “it’s not like the guy doesn’t deserve it.”

Edward and I followed close behind. When we arrived at the bathroom door, we peeked in and saw Rosalie smirking and pointing into the toilet.

“I’m not gonna argue with you on that,” she said in a huff, “but if it’s one of the laminated ones you made, he’ll just stop up the pipes. And I am *not* going to be the one to reach in there and get him.”

I stepped in and bent over the toilet to see exactly what they were talking about. There, in the bottom of the bowl, was the face of Alonzo Calderas Wallace. I covered my mouth with my hand in an unsuccessful effort to hide my laughter. As I walked out of the bathroom, I said to Emmett quietly, “It’s too bad you boys clean your toilets regularly. You should drop him in the toilet of one of the frat houses.”

Emmett guffawed with laughter, and the other two joined him. “I love the way you think, Bellaluna. *Love*. It.”

After that, though Emmett was very careful about gauging Rosalie’s mood, we never knew when something bad would happen to Lonnie. It was always when Rosalie could appreciate it, and it was always creative. Emmett McCarty was having a good time helping Rosalie.

Late that night, after we’d settled down to study, and Rosalie and I had made it back to our room, I called Angela. We laughed as I told her about Emmett and Rosalie, she gasped when I told her what Jacob had said, and she listened raptly as I told her about my decision to give loving

Edward a shot.

“I think you’re closer than you realize to succeeding already, Bella.”

“What do you mean?” I asked honestly.

“Well, this has all been happening so gradually, right? I mean,” she clarified, “if you look at a calendar, it’s only been a month, but what you two have been through together in that month, kind of took it up a notch or two...*exponentially*.”

I didn’t respond, but quietly pondered her words. Knowing me as well as she did herself, she understood what I was doing, and continued. “He’s built your trust slowly and carefully, and so—without any of the danger—you’ve let him in. And I think it’s great!”

“You’re right,” I conceded. “He’s kind of given you a run for your money in the best friend department.”

“HA!” she laughed. “Cracker, please!” she said confidently. I laughed out loud at that. She always took me off guard when she’d pull out her ghetto slang. “But he does have a few qualities I lack.”

“Yeah,” I smirked. “A *few*...”

“And he makes you happy...which makes me happy.” I could hear her grinning on the other end of the phone.

“What about you, Ang? Are you happy with your busy life? How are things going with Ben?”

I heard her sigh dreamily and teased, “That bad, huh?”

“He’s *so* great, Bella. We really *get* each other. He’s so down to earth, and we have the best time together. And no one has ever made me laugh like he does.”

“I’m so glad. He sounds just right, Angela...and *how* is it I haven’t met him yet? I hate that things have been so crazy.”

“Well, it took us a while to get here, but you do definitely need to meet him now. You’ll love him.” It was unbelievably great to hear the joy in her voice. She deserved this. She’d been so different from most of the people at Forks High School. No one there had been good enough for her. She was bright, intelligent, and wonderful. And no one had understood either of us. I guess that’s why we’d clicked immediately. And she’d quickly become the best friend I’d ever had.

“And he told me I’m different than any girl he’s ever known...” she breathed.

“...right before he kissed me.”

“Ang! What??? When was this?” I asked giddily.

“Tonight,” she confessed. “I just got back to my room about twenty minutes ago, and—honestly—I’ve been lying here staring at the ceiling and replaying it over and over since I walked in the door. My stomach is just in *knots*! Good ones, though.”

I squealed my excitement and then wiggled into a better position on my bed. I needed to be comfortable enough to hold still and hear every detail. “Well, how was it?”

“Perfect.”

After her heart-melting description, we got off the phone, so I could go to sleep and she could continue reliving every moment of her perfect evening.

And the rest of the week literally flew by. Homework club was filled with sweet conversations and memorable moments, and so many of the kids were doing well with their school work. I was very encouraged. And Jacob told me he loved being there every afternoon. He said he found it “so fulfilling to be spending time helping kids grow like that.”

Jacob Black. That boy continued to surprise me. He was still full of smiles, and there was never any awkwardness after he’d told me that Edward deserved a shot. Obviously, he’d never gone as far as asking how my love life was either, but he continued to be a great friend.

The literary society meeting was a nice diversion from studying and regular activities. Only half of the people read anything aloud. Instead, we discussed a sample work for a short-story contest that the club would be hosting, and the administrator reminded us that we could bring in essays and prose to distribute at any time. Once everyone had had a week to read them, we could discuss and critique the piece at a meeting.

At the end of the meeting, Edward and I walked to the parking lot, so that we could meet Rosalie and Emmett to study at Ellie’s. Before we got to the car, Edward stopped, leaning against a tree and pulling me to him. “Do you know I love you?”

I laughed, warmed by his sweetness. “Yes, Edward. No doubt.”

His lips curved into a full smile, and I stood on my tiptoes to press a quick kiss to his cheek.

“I love hearing that. ‘No doubt,’” he repeated, looking truly satisfied.

His eyes searched mine for a moment, but he said nothing.

“What?” I asked.

“I’d like to take you out,” he said confidently.

“What do you mean?” I asked. “We do just about everything together.”

“I know,” he said. “That’s just it. Our relationship has evolved so gradually, that I’ve never had the pleasure of taking you on a *proper* date. I’d like to take you out to dinner, and then to a concert tomorrow evening. Would you like that?”

A proper date. I loved the idea. “It sounds wonderful. What concert?” I had no doubt I’d enjoy it, because Edward’s taste in music was excellent, but it was also diverse. A concert could mean many things.

“I’ll leave that up to you. The Boston Symphony Orchestra will be playing at the Hopkins Center tomorrow evening, if you’d like to stay around here. Or, if you’re up for a drive, I could take you to my favorite jazz club just on the outskirts of north Boston.”

No question. *A two hour drive anywhere with Edward? Dinner and jazz?* “Let’s go to Boston! I’d love to go to your favorite club.”

He grinned, and it was apparent that I’d made the choice he’d been hoping for. He cupped my face in his hands and kissed me sweetly, leisurely. Reluctantly tearing ourselves away from each other, we smiled and turned back toward the parking lot. Emmett and Rosalie were just arriving at Edward’s car, walking from the other direction.

We greeted each other and then climbed into the Volvo. Emmett got in last, and closed his door quietly. Edward started to back up, when something jarred the car, and we heard a loud noise.

“Bro, I think you hit something,” Emmett said.

My eyes were on Edward, who looked concerned. He got out of the car to see what had caused the bump. Emmett jumped out after him.

“No way!” Em shouted. “Rosie, Bella! You guys have got to see this!”

When I looked out the back window, Edward was shaking his head with chagrin ...but he seemed mildly entertained. Rosalie and I shrugged at each other and made our way to the back of the car.

We had to step over a crushed can of tomato sauce, being careful not to get any on our shoes.

And sure enough, stuck with the sticky red sauce to Edward’s left rear tire was the face of Lonnie Calderas.

Emmett was pointing and laughing. “Bro, you *nailed* him!”

So...what’d ya think? Click that little review button and tell me!!!!

Also, *squee* The Twilight Indie Fic Awards are open for voting RIGHT NOW...until the 12th, and *Afraid to Dance* has been nominated for the Best Alternate Universe All Human WIP, so if you love this story, run and vote!!! I’m so excited I’m dancin’ like Emmett.

You can vote at: <http://theindietwificawards.com>

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Chapter: 36

Author's Notes:

Squee! This one was so much fun to write! As you can see, I'm back to my "every weekend" schedule...sorry if it seemed a little longer since I updated early last time. Weekends are just better for me. Such is life! Also, for all of my wonderful, faithful reviewers, PLEASE forgive me for not responding this time. I'm getting behind on things. I imagine you'd prefer an update to a personal response, but...I like to respond when I can. Please don't be offended if I don't get a chance to write you back, though. Your reviews are encouraging and wondermous!

Flemily Harper is magic beta number one! You make me sound better, you Tweaker of Love!

AerosolDoc, your encouragement and pointed questions keep me on track!

I lurve ya both!

Thanks as always to Twilightzoner who makes me (and my story) feel valid.

You all KNOW that the characters belong to Stephenie Meyer, but I'm borrowing a real life jazz club and its owner and manager, too. Let me just say, I've never been to Scullers, so I took a little creative license, but...from all the research I've done? I WANT TO GO...All of the musicians are real, and Elias Bailey still plays Pick-up jazz in NYC. Check it out!

*My heart had felt like years at sea
Freezing and afraid
Breathe the life back into me
Kiss me warm that way*

David Wilcox

Chapter Thirty-four: A Proper Date

When I rushed up the stairs to my room after homework club, I was out of breath and still clueless as to what I should wear for the evening. Our first proper date, as Edward called it, would start at 6:30, and that didn't leave me much time.

Flinging the door open, I was surprised to see candles glowing in the dimly lit room and hear the soft strains of Sting's music being played by the London Philharmonic drifting from the speakers of my stereo. Rosalie sat on her bed smiling at me and watching my reaction. I exhaled, calming myself, and allowed a smile to play at the edge of my mouth, but I'm sure she could still see the confusion.

"You didn't..." I left off the rest of my thoughts, because she was already shaking her head no. She pointed behind me, and I turned slowly.

On my desk was a single long-stemmed crimson rose in a beautiful wrought-iron and stained glass vase. A creamy colored envelope leaned up against it. I looked back at Rosalie with a grin as I picked up the card, and she shrugged tacitly, though there was a sparkle in her eyes. The card would tell me what I needed to know. Carefully, I pulled out the parchment and began reading.

Bella,

Tonight is special to me for so many reasons. It's a celebration of how far you've come. It marks the beginning of something new and wonderful for each of us. It's the first of what I hope will be many occasions for me to take you out and share my favorite things with you...things that will show you more of myself. It's the first time I'll have the pleasure of treating you to the kind of evening you deserve.

I've been waiting for this.

And so, I wanted it to begin well. Don't feel rushed. Enjoy the music and relax as you get ready. I want tonight to be stress free for you. Enjoy the "appetizers" since our dinner reservations are for 8:30.

When you're ready, just come down, and I'll be waiting. We'll drive away from everything and everyone and just be us. I can't wait to see you, Love.

All my heart,

Edward

About halfway through the letter, my hand had found its way to my heart. I was pretty sure it was trying to hold the sporadically beating muscle securely in my chest. The things this boy said! As I finished, I sighed deeply, and all of the tension and hurry that had wound me up so tightly

just floated away. I looked back down at the desk and saw a cheese and fruit sampler with a variety of crackers and breads. He left nothing undone.

Looking back at Rosalie, I whispered, “He’s for real, right? This isn’t all going to just vanish, right?”

She stood and walked over to me, giving me a quick hug. “He’s definitely real, Bella, so let’s get you ready for your amazing date with him.”

We snacked on grapes, strawberries and little gouda and white cheddar cubes as we talked about the guys. After I washed up, I stepped out of the bathroom and found the perfect outfit laid out on my bed. It was a combination of my own simple black flair skirt, and Rosalie’s copper satin empire waist halter top that bunched tightly—and flatteringly—across the bust. A sterling silver and amber necklace completed the ensemble. I smiled as I thought about the way my clothing would complement Edward no matter what he wore, because I’d be matching Edward himself...his fiery bronze hair. I couldn’t wait to put it on.

“It’s *perfect*, Rosalie. Thank you,” I said, holding it up to my body as I looked in the mirror.

“It is, Bella. You’ll look fabulous.”

Twenty minutes later, I was dressed, and Rosalie was finishing up my hair and makeup. While she worked, she told me Em was cooking dinner for her, and they were going to watch a movie. Their big plans were for Saturday. He was taking her to a classic muscle car show up in Concord.

Before I knew it, she was finished. She stood me in front of the mirror, and I was floored. I’d never seen myself look so stunning. My smoky and sultry eyes were framed by big, soft curls that hung loosely around my face. The look was simple, but perfect. I’d never even known I had this kind of potential. Rosalie was some sort of an artist, it turned out.

I hugged her in thanks, popped a final piece of cheese in my mouth, and then brushed my teeth. Before I left, I stopped to breathe in the scent of the beautiful rose once more, and reached for my peacoat.

“No, Bella...wear this,” she said, offering me a thick black wrap. I put it on, and the sultry transformed into elegant. It was the perfect final touch. She nodded in response to my breathy thanks as I turned toward the door.

When I got to the top of the steps, I saw Edward leaning against the wall at the bottom of the stairwell. My black ballerina flats weren’t exactly clicking on the tiles, but he must’ve heard me, because his head shot up and he inhaled sharply.

His voice was deeper than normal, and echoed softly all around me, thanks to the stairwell acoustics. “Bella...”

As I made it to the bottom step, Edward held out his hand to me, his eyes perusing me from head

to toe. He stepped in front of me, keeping me at eye level on the last stair. His sweet breath washed over my face as he whispered, “You look simply exquisite, Bella.” His eyes bore into mine then, and I felt warm all over.

Blushing, I bit my lip and smiled back, “You clean up pretty well yourself.” *Understatement of my life*. He wore black dress pants and a sport coat over a mocha colored button down. A tight black t-shirt peeked out of the open collar. His clean shaven jaw was striking, and his hair was in utterly perfect disarray.

“But *you*...I’ve never seen anyone so beautiful.”

I let my eyes take him in once more before I smiled and answered, “I hope so, because otherwise, I’d have no right to be seen with you.”

He smirked, placing his hands on my waist, and said, “Well, I’m sure that tonight, no one will even notice me.” His eyes were smoldering as he looked deeply into mine.

Guh. I could sink into his eyes. Not noticing him would be a physical impossibility. “Well, I will. You look amazing, and...*thank you*. For the proper date, for the soothing ambiance and appetizers in my room. For everything.”

“My pleasure,” he whispered, pressing his lips softly to the corner of my mouth. “Are you ready?”

I nodded as he took my hand and led me out the door.

As we drove, we talked more about what we each wanted to accomplish in life...about our dreams. I knew Edward would be an excellent psychiatrist...his compassion made him ideal for that. Still, it was obvious to me that music was his heartbeat. It made Edward who he was. The soundtrack for our trip was incredible, I noticed, and I complimented him on it. It was one jazz great after another. “You’ve got *everybody* on here. I love it.”

He grinned at me and said, “I’m so glad you like it. Everyone on here has played at the club we’re heading to. Ever heard of Scullers?”

“No,” I answered honestly. I liked jazz, but I’d never been to a jazz club before...and I didn’t know much about what the city had to offer anyway. “It’s in Boston?”

“Cambridge, actually...just before Boston on the northeast. But it’s a really famous venue. Stan Getz, George Mraz, Chet Baker, and Miles Davis all played there. There are still a lot of the old masters that come in from time to time, but they’ve got more contemporary musicians, too. Norah Jones, Harry Connick, Jr., and Chris Botti have all played there recently.”

“Wow.” I knew most of the names, and was confident that I’d recognize some of their more famous pieces of the others if I heard them. “Who’s playing tonight?”

“The Freddy Cole Quartet. Freddy is Nat King Cole’s brother, and their voices are a lot alike, but...I think Freddy sings more like Frank Sinatra. Just the way he puts his words together. He’s one of my mom’s favorites...she followed him when he wasn’t as famous...in New York. I’ve met him, actually, and he’s a musical genius. The bass player, Elias Bailey, is my favorite of the quartet, though. I think you’ll like them.”

Wow again. You’ve methim? “I’m sure...so, you go to this place a good bit?” I asked.

“I, um...I used to go every weekend. It’s one of the reasons Emmett has given me a hard time about not getting out and going crazy. Esme took me for the first time when I was 16, and I couldn’t get enough of it. So, they bought me a gold club membership for my birthday...and have every year since. It’s one of my favorite places in the world.” He reached over and squeezed my knee gently. Then, looking at me with a sweet smile, he added, “I’m glad you’re going with me.”

I had no idea it was such a part of him. “Well, thanks for sharing it with me, then.”

His lips slid into my crooked smile as he responded, “I want to share so *many* things with you. I’ve got to slow myself down and try not to be overwhelming.”

I just smiled back.

The rest of the trip flew by, and before I knew it, we were pulling into a big hotel parking lot. The lot was absolutely packed with cars. He came around and helped me out of the car, offering me his arm as we walked to the club entrance on the closest side of the building.

Once we were inside the warmly lit foyer, we took off our coats and made our way over to the maitre d’. The small, lean man with mocha skin and curly silver hair, welcomed Edward by name and grinned at me. He was probably in his fifties, but I could tell he had a passion for life. Chuckling, he said “I bettah go get Estelle,” and gave us a knowing wink. “She’ll want to seat you herself. It’s been a while, Kid.”

“I know, Sam. I’ve been occupied with other things...*important* things,” he added as he wrapped an arm around me.

“Gotcha, my man. And who is this fine lady?”

“This is Bella,” Edward said proudly.

I extended my hand to shake his, but Sam brought it to his lips for a kiss. Naturally, the blood rushed to my face. I immediately felt Edward’s hand on the small of my back.

Sam winked at us again and spun around smoothly. “Be right back, you two.”

I looked around and noticed for the first time, that we were not the only ones in the foyer. There were several groups of people, all waiting to be seated. They all seemed to be studying

us...probably trying to guess who Edward was. I wondered if they thought he was a famous musician.

The sharp click of heels across the marble floor cut into my observations. “Edward!” Estelle’s hair was light and long, her thick braids piled up on top of her head. She wore a tight black long-sleeved dress which hugged her ample curves.

The elderly woman wrapped Edward in a hug, and he laughed. “Good to see you, Estelle.”

“And you, too, Boy.” Her caramel skin tone contrasted beautifully with his as she laid her hand on his cheek, patting it fondly. “’S been too long.”

She stepped back then, saying “Samuel. Take their coats,” and turned to me. She practically danced and swayed with delight as she smiled at me.

Edward reached for my hand, smiling, his eyes cheeks creasing deeply. “This is Bella.”

“Oooh, and she must be special, too! Four years, you been comin’ here, and the only girl you’ve evah brought was yo mama.” She spoke slowly, and I could hear her love for Edward in her voice. “’Course, I was always keepin’ an eye out. Too many young girls thought he look too good to be comin’ here alone, Bella.” Sighing with motherly adoration, she added, “He’s always been here for the music, this one. He’s really somethin’.”

She shook her head sweetly and turned, looking over her shoulder at us. “Let’s get ya to your table now.” She led us to the Green Room for dinner. “Sandra will be here in a minute, babies. I’ll see ya at the show.”

“Thank you,” we both said as she sashayed away.

Edward looked at me and grinned then. “Well, what do you think?”

“It’s no secret that they love you. I can see—at least a little—why you like being here so much.”

Edward pulled out my chair, and I noticed that his eyes lingered on my bare shoulders before he made eye contact with me again. He leaned in and whispered, his lips against my ear, “Have I told you that you look unbelievable tonight?” His voice trailed off as I took my seat, shivering, though the room wasn’t cold at all. When he sat down across from me, he smirked and blushed slightly.

“What?” I asked, quietly.

He cleared his throat and said humbly, “That blouse is just so flattering...and your shoulders look so soft.” He concentrated on placing his napkin in his lap as I absolutely melted in my chair. Thankfully, I was able to scrape myself up off of the floor before the waitress came and took our orders, allowing us to choose three courses from a delicious list of the chef’s evening fare. *I want you to touch my shoulders...with those piano-playing fingers. As much as you want.*

We compared the concerts we'd each attended as we waited for the food, and when it arrived, I almost passed out just from the tantalizing smell of it. Delicious...and it absolutely melted in my mouth. Dessert was phenomenal as well. Edward had a tall sugar-rimmed Martini glass filled with a delicious variety of fresh berries, and I ordered the chocolate-ginger truffle tart. Both tasted fabulous. *And I nearly turned into a puddle of goo when he offered some of his to me on his spoon. Yum...in all kinds of ways.*

After dinner, we moved into the club for the show. The large hall somehow felt warm and intimate. Dark mahogany walls edged two sides of the room, and on the third, there were large windows overlooking the Charles River. The Boston skyline was alight and twinkling. We were met at the door by yet another face familiar to Edward. Dayla, the manager, welcomed him back and led us to a table right up front by the piano. I wondered for a minute how many artists I personally admired had played there. Would I ever get to see someone I loved play on this stage?

Edward ordered us some coffee, and then we listened as the quartet played—some familiar songs, some completely new to me. About halfway through the first set, Edward discreetly slid his chair right next to mine and rested his arm across the back. His dexterous fingers on my shoulder lazily accompanied the band. It gave me goosebumps, and I snuggled in a little closer.

The music was excellent. I loved the rich baritone that made Freddy Cole's voice just different enough from his brother's. And I couldn't decide which I liked better—watching Freddy's big hands pound the piano keys or Elias's fingers dancing up and down the strings of the upright bass. I noticed that the drummer kept his eyes closed most of the time, just feeling the music.

I loved everything. Every once in a while, Edward and I would catch each others' eyes and smile. I was so thankful to be sharing this with him. Honestly, since I'd decided to really give my heart a chance at love, I felt even more relaxed with him. I realized the decision not to live in the shadow of my fears was really liberating. I didn't find myself worrying all the time, questioning myself. I still wasn't going to be quick to trust others, but those I already trusted? I just didn't feel the need to hold back. I knew I'd be safe, and I reveled in that.

At the end of the first set, Freddy stood up and introduced the rest of the band members. When he gestured toward Elias Bailey, Edward whistled and cheered much louder than he had for the others. I peeked over at him, clapping myself, but definitely amused by his enthusiasm. And then I looked back up on stage. Elias winked at Edward just as I turned my eyes back to him.

Then he grinned and stepped over to the microphone. "Now, look here, folks. We've got a young lion with us tonight...that's what we call these up and comin' jazz musicians. I used to play pick-up jazz, sorta like improv, with this boy and his mama back in New York City. He was just a little one then, but his fingers play like magic. Anybody wanna hear him?"

Edward looked shocked, and I suddenly realized that every eye in the house was on him at that moment. He smiled and turned to me, asking "Do you mind?"

"Are you kidding me? What an opportunity! Get up there, Edward!" I couldn't believe this was

happening.

“C’mon, Eddie. Get up here and lay one down with me and the boys!”

The audience cheered encouragingly. Dayla was with Fred Taylor, the man whom Edward had pointed out earlier as the mastermind behind the club. The pair was waiting over by the wall to lead Edward to the stage. He stood and shrugged modestly, making his way over to them.

A few moments later, he settled himself at the piano, and Elias said in his raspy voice, “It’s been a long time, hadn’t it, Kid? Let’s do this.”

They talked for a moment, and then the drummer counted them off. I knew the song instantly. Time After Time. It was one of my favorites, and I was thrilled.

Until Edward started singing.

Then? I was completely entranced.

The rest of the room, the others in the audience...everything and everyone else just ceased to exist.

“Time after time, I tell myself that I’m so lucky to be loving you. So lucky to be the one you run to see, in the evening when the day is through...”

Edward’s fingers glided across the keys, matching the rhythm of Elias’s thumping bass. The drums were like an overwhelmed heartbeat, syncopated perfectly. And the guitar complemented it all marvelously. Each musician commanded center stage for a minute or two during the number, showcasing their masterful skills, and then Edward led into the chorus once more, finishing out the song.

He dipped his head in acknowledgement as the audience roared, turning the attention back to Elias as quickly as he could.

Elias smiled and stood. “You did well, Son.”

“I appreciate the opportunity,” Edward said quietly into the mic. Turning to the audience, he added sincerely, “Thanks.”

He unfolded himself from the piano bench and bowed modestly, heading for the wings. When he returned to our table, he was positively glowing. “That was crazy wasn’t it?” he asked with a wry grin. “I didn’t see *that* coming.”

“It was incredible...I guess I know now why Elias is your favorite. You didn’t tell me you’d played with him before.”

“Who knew it would be important? You didn’t ask about him, so... I didn’t want to sound full of

myself.”

I couldn't imagine Edward sounding cocky, even though, if there were ever somebody who had reason to be, he was standing right in front of me...looking completely and utterly kissable, I might add. The band took a break, and Edward and I were lost in conversation.

For the rest of the concert, he was even more attentive than he'd been before. Where his fingers had been tapping out the rhythm and notes on my shoulders, he was now caressing my skin tenderly. He'd pulled me in closer, and our other hands were intertwined on my lap. I didn't feel like I could get close enough to him, and I never wanted to get up. If I could've dragged the show out for another 12 hours somehow, I would have.

Still, we had to leave eventually. Several people made a point of coming over to us on their way out, encouraging and complimenting Edward. He took it all in stride and remained genuine and gracious. It was amazing to watch.

As Edward was helping me put on my wrap, we heard shuffling feet and husky laughter. Elias said, “Now, you're not just gonna run off without introducing me to the lady, are ya?”

“Absolutely not,” Edward chuckled. “I know I'd never get away with that.” The two embraced as old friends, and Edward said, “Elias Bailey, this is Bella Swan. Bella? Elias Bailey.”

He took my hand as Sam had done earlier. “How do you do, Miss Swan?”

I was charmed. Grinning and blushing, I answered, “I'm doing well, thanks. And your show was incredible. I enjoyed every minute of it.”

“Why thank ya. I bet I could guess your favorite part, though.” He winked at me. Then he cocked his head at Edward, looking at him intently. “We ought to get together again sometime and lay a few tracks, my man.”

Edward's eyes widened, though his voice didn't betray him. “I'd be honored, Mr. Bailey.”

They talked for a few moments more, and promised to stay in touch. After saying goodnight, we walked out into the frosty air and got into the car. Our trip home was full of discussion—about the night, the chance to play, the possibility of Edward recording with Mr. Bailey. Edward was so talkative and excited. He couldn't wait to see Esme that weekend and talk with her about it.

When we got back though, his attention never wavered from me. He kept me tucked closely into his side as we walked to my dorm, and he led me up the stairs, never letting go of my hand. I unlocked the door, and we noticed that—though it was already almost 2am, Rosalie wasn't back. I assumed she was staying with Emmett again, but there was no note to say for sure.

No sooner than I made it inside the door and set my keys down, though, Edward squeezed the fingers he'd been holding on to and pulled me back toward him. When he spun me to face him, I looked up into his eyes, and they were smoldering. Slowly, carefully, he pulled my wrap off of

my shoulders and laid it over the back of my desk chair. His hands immediately found their way into my hair as he pulled me closer and kissed me firmly. I molded myself to him, and his lips smiled against mine. One of his hands began to gently tease my neck and run back and forth over my bare shoulder.

I shuddered a breath, and Edward whispered, "Is this all right?"

I eked out a quiet yes.

And then his lips were peppering kisses everywhere his fingers had touched. His hands found both of mine and our fingers locked us together, but my mind could do nothing but feel his hot breath and soft kisses on my neck and shoulders. My hands gripped his tightly, as I whispered how good his lips felt on my skin.

His breath grew ragged as he tried to speak. "It's just so...you're just...*Bella*."

I whimpered slightly, tilting my head so he could kiss *more* of my neck, but instead, he nuzzled his head down in the crook of my shoulder and just breathed me in. Bringing our hands up between our bodies, he pressed them to his heart, and said, "I have enjoyed tonight, with *you*, more than any other night of my life. I should...I should let you sleep now."

I pulled my lip in between my teeth, hating to end things, but silently thanking him for continuing to be a gentleman. "And tomorrow?" I asked.

"Will you spend the day with me? My parents will be coming in the afternoon, but I just...I'd like to be with you."

"That sounds good," I sighed. "Do you want to meet for breakfast?"

"Would you let me make you breakfast?" He pulled his face out of my hair and quirked an eyebrow at me.

"I'd love that," I whispered, smiling up at him. "Tonight has been...perfect. I hope you can keep up with this amazing 'date' standard you've now set for yourself. It won't be easy."

He chuckled and pressed his lips to my forehead. "No, tonight will be hard to beat in a lot of ways...but I *did* happen to find out that Howard Jones will be at Scullers in a few weeks. If you're interested."

"Gah! Are you kidding? I'd love to go!" I was bouncing with excitement.

"Good then. Another proper date..." His eyes were filled with anticipation as he searched mine. His arms encircled me then and held me to his chest. "I love you, Bella Swan."

"I know, Edward...and...I love you, too. You make it easy."

I'd never seen anything like the joy that flooded his face at my words. Though he was smiling, his eyes filled with tears. And suddenly, his arms squeezed me until I thought I wouldn't be able to breathe.

End Notes:

Well, whatcha think? Anybody else wanna go on a date like that with Edward? :)

She said it, you guys! BIG STEP. And more to come.

Tune in next time when Charlie meets the Cullens!

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Chapter: 37

A/N: There were so many fabulous, fabulous reviews. I wish I'd had time to get to them all with a personal response, but this week, I had time for almost NONE. Please don't give up on me. For this chapter especially, I want to hear what you think. I wrote it, rewrote it, and revised it again (several times), trying to get the explanations and conversations CLEAR.

Because of my angstiness over it, I need to thank a whole lot more people today. Flemily and AerosolDoc first and foremost, as always. You beta my very soul.

But the ladies that helped me tweak until I felt that all of YOU would like to read it are: Irritable_Grizzzly, Alicedances, SpikelsHotter, and WndrngY. To you bbs, (and to Flem & AerosolDoc) I send kisses, cookies and hot chocolate. Edward will deliver it wearing what he's got on when he steps out of the bathroom.

*I got a weakness for strong chemistry
One touch - all my resolutions change
...Our bodies fit desperately together
Like a needle against a vein*

David Wilcox

Chapter Thirty-five: Tension

The night had been positively exhilarating, but the week had taken its toll. I fully expected to fall asleep before my head hit the pillow. But after Edward left my room, after the kisses that woke my body, my senses, my heart—after I spoke the words that I never thought I'd be able to say—

my mind was alert.

It was positively racing. And I couldn't wipe the grin off my face.

I wiggled and twisted under my covers, searching for the perfect position. I wanted to settle in and just let my mind go. I wanted to relive every moment of our unbelievable date. And the moment my body found its ideal nesting place for the night, I let my mind flood again. Everything that had happened—from walking into my candlelit room to my declaration of love—was running through my mind.

I mentally replayed every single event of the night... a few of them eleven or twelve times.

I'd never felt like this before. Ever.

My heart felt as if it would burst, but I smiled to myself as I realized that it was *feeling*. And that made it swell even more... because Edward had made it come alive again.

I drifted off to sleep at some point, probably an hour or so after I'd finally stilled, and I must've been focusing on our final moments at the time—concentrating on the softness of his lips on my skin, the heat of his breath on my neck and shoulder, the sensuality of every move he made.

Because, in my dream, there was more.

When I felt his mouth moving against my collar bone, a moan escaped my lips. Pulling my hands away from his, I slid them into his jacket and pushed it off of his shoulders. I tugged him over to my bed and sat him down on the edge. When he smiled lustfully at me and whispered my name against the tender skin just below my ear, I climbed onto his lap, straddling him.

Groaning into my hair, Edward wrapped his arms around me, and I pulled myself even more tightly against him.

And then, suddenly, his voice was full of pain. He whispered, "Stop."

"Did I hurt you?" I asked, trailing kisses along his jaw.

"No, but..."

"Then, I don't want to stop," I whimpered. I kissed his neck, nipping and pulling his ear gently between my teeth.

"Bella." His voice was full of grim determination. "Not like this. Not tonight."

"I don't understand..." I pulled myself off of his lap and stood in front of him, turning away slightly. "You don't... Do you not want me? Why do you always stop?"

"I just want to be careful."

It didn't matter what he said. No words could make the rejection sting less. I knew as I stood in front of him, that he might love me, but he didn't want me...at least not physically.

And I didn't know what to do with that.

"I think you should go, Edward."

"Bella, I..." he pleaded.

"Leave. Now."

Quietly, he stood, picked his jacket up off of the floor, and whispered, "I wish you'd let me explain. I love you."

"Good night," I answered tersely.

"Good night, Bella." He sounded defeated.

The door clicked shut behind him.

Rosalie's voice stirred me from my slumber. "Bella? Are you okay?"

I sat up and looked around. Realizing I'd been asleep, I rubbed my eyes and tried to process what I'd been dreaming about.

"Sorry to wake you so early, but I just got in and ... you looked upset. I didn't know if you might be dreaming about...*him*."

"No," I said in a huff. "I was dreaming about Edward."

"And it was *bad*?" She seemed surprised.

"Well, it was frustrating." I didn't know exactly how to explain it.

Sitting down at the foot of my bed, she asked, "Can you tell me about it?"

"Well, the first part was just kind of a replay of last night...when we got back from the date. We kissed and...I guess in the dream we went a little further. He seemed to want me as much as I wanted him, and so...I might have straddled him on the bed." *I don't want to say the next part.*

"And?" Her voice was gentle rather than demanding.

"And...he told me to stop. He didn't want me, Rose." I sighed in defeat. "He *always* stops."

"You're not just talking about the dream anymore..."

“No. I thought he was just being a gentleman. You know, taking things slowly, because who knows what my heart is ready for? But...he just never does anything but kiss me. What if he...?” I allowed the question to evaporate, because I didn’t even want to hear the words said aloud.

“Bella, I’m probably the last person who’s qualified to help you deal with all of this, but...at least I understand what you’re going through. And I think Edward’s just being *cautious* with you. Emmett does the same thing with me. They don’t want to push us too far and scare us off. I’m sure that’s all it is.”

“So, you and Emmett haven’t...”

She shrugged. “We’ve done more than kiss, but we’re definitely taking things real slow. Sometimes—I guess because of how I used to be—it bothers me how careful he is...but then I see the love in his eyes. I know he means well, and I’d rather have him be annoyingly slow than pushy. Wouldn’t you?”

“I...I guess so.” She had a point.

“Also, you said only the first part was what really happened. So...was the date okay? Did it end well?”

I sighed, frustrated with myself. “Yeah, the date was great. Better than great, really. It was amazing. I fell asleep happy.”

“So, Edward doesn’t know you’re frustrated with him or thinking he doesn’t want you, right?” Her eyes studied my face carefully.

“No...he has no idea.” I coughed out a humorless laugh as I added, “I actually told him I loved him before he left last night.”

Surprise followed by an encouraging smile graced her face. “That’s a big step. What did he say?”

“Nothing...with words, but I’ve never seen such joy on anyone’s face. He was...*thrilled*.” I thought back to his expression, the way his eyes had reflected his heart to me. Edward had been absolutely ecstatic. I was suddenly uncertain about my dream. Maybe I was getting all worked up over nothing.

“So...he’s making breakfast for you over there, humming to himself and probably planning a sweet morning, and you’re over here...” She cocked an eyebrow at me.

“Being wrong.” *Stupid Bella. You’re just overanalyzing a dream.*

Smiling, she rubbed my foot soothingly. “I’ve had dreams that seem incredibly real, too. Just try to remember it *was* just a dream, okay? Unsuspecting and Good Edward doesn’t realize that Dream Edward hurt your heart.”

“I know,” I whispered. I felt awful, but I there was still a part of me that couldn’t stop wondering if there was any truth to what I’d dreamed. He *was* always the one to pull away. *Ugh. Why can’t I just be normal already? Why do I have to make everything an issue?*

“You’re still not sure about it all, are you?” she asked tentatively.

“Not completely. I guess time will tell, though, huh?”

“It can...but, it might not be a bad idea to talk to him about it if it’s really bothering you. One of the best parts of my relationship with Em is that I can say anything to him...and he wants to hear it, whether it’s hard or not.”

“Maybe...we’ll see.” *Could I honestly talk to him about this?*

She stood up and nodded. Turning to get some clean clothes out of her dresser, she said, “Well, he sure does make a delicious breakfast. He tried it out on Em and me this morning before I left.”

“Then, I should get up and head over there soon, huh?”

“Yeah...and...be *gentle*. He’s really excited to see you.”

“Okay.” I pulled myself out bed and found some comfortable but nice-looking clothes, wondering all the time how today would turn out.

When I got over to the boys’ place, Emmett met me at the door on his way out. He picked me up and twirled me around. “Good night, eh, Bellaluna?” When he set me back down, he planted a loud smacking kiss on the top of my head.

I grinned at him, because who wouldn’t grin at Emmett?

“Well, I hope today’s every bit as good. The fam’s comin’ in this afternoon, right? And your old man’ll be here tomorrow?”

Nodding, I turned to hang my coat on the rack.

When I spun back around, Emmett had ducked down, so he could be on eye level with me. “You okay, Li’l Sis? You’re awfully quiet.” I hadn’t figured him to be so perceptive with me. Rosalie maybe, but...

“Yeah,” I said without a whole lot of emotion. “I’m good...just didn’t sleep well.”

“Okay...” he said, not really that gullible. “Well, I hope Edward can make you smile again. Let him at least try, all right? I’ll see ya later.”

“Thanks, Em. Bye.” He smiled sweetly at me, dimples deep as he threw his coat over his shoulder and headed out the door.

“Love ya, Bellaluna.” And he was gone.

I walked toward the kitchen tentatively, passing the beautifully set table. I wasn’t sure what I’d say to Edward when I saw him. Willing Dream Edward out of my head, I peeked around the corner. The kitchen was empty.

Should I just sit on the couch and wait? Maybe yell down the hall and make sure he knows I’m here?

I moved into the hallway, and was just about to shout when the bathroom door opened, and Edward stepped out wearing those low slung jeans...and nothing else. He was toweling off his hair with one hand, and I could see the outline of every ropy strand of sinew in his forearm and the hard softball sized mound of his bicep. My eyes leveled at his chest, which was strong and well-formed, but nothing could have prepared me for his abs. *Guh*. His skin was stretched taut over six very well defined muscles...and I wanted to trace them with my fingers. I watched as a solitary drop of water mercilessly traced its way from the side of his neck, down, down, down to the denim waistband. I was suddenly jealous. I’d never wanted to be a drop of water so badly in my life.

His wet hair was dark and hung messily in his face. As my eyes traced over his face with longing, I finally noticed that his eyes were creased with amusement. He was grinning at me. *Agh! Crap! He’d noticed my blatant ogling. Of course he thinks it’s funny.*

“Uh...sorry. I just...erm...didn’t know where you were,” I stammered. Turning quickly to hide my blushing cheeks, I hurried to the kitchen. Busying myself immediately, I reached for a glass and opened the refrigerator to find a drink. Before I could choose what I wanted, I felt him behind me—one hand on the refrigerator door and one on the counter beside me. I stood still, unwilling to turn and face him, unsure of how to respond to his nearness.

“Good morning, Bella,” he said against my ear.

I think goosebumps covered every inch of my skin. “Good morning!” I said it with too much enthusiasm, trying to be nonchalant.

He chuckled behind me, and I felt his chest against my back. The hand that was on the counter wrapped around my waist and held me flush to his body. “You’re chipper today...” His lips found my cheek, and while he moved them against me, he shut the refrigerator door. Then, using his right hand, he swept my hair off of my neck and plied kisses all along my jawline, in the hollow beneath my ear, and down my neck. His left hand slid to my hip and gripped it tightly as he slid his thumb into the beltloop of my jeans.

And then, the most frustrating thing in my life happened. My heart and my body said, *Ung, I want this. I want...* But my mind said *Wait. What is happening?* I stiffened, and he noticed,

pulling back.

“Is everything all right?” I could hear the concern in his voice.

I sighed, resting my hands on the counter. *I wish my head and my body weren't so completely at war.*

“Bella? Will you look at me? Please?”

His anxiety was tugging at my heart. I turned to face him. *Ugh. He hadn't put a shirt on yet. C'mon, Bella. Look at his face. His face.* I forced my head up and looked him in the eyes.

I don't know what he saw there, but it made him sad. “Did I do something wrong?”

His face was etched with worry, and it made my chest feel tight, so I looked down again. Wrong move. *Pecs. Abs. Biceps. Delicious. Can't concentrate. Shoulders. Look at those shoulders!*

“Bella?”

“Edward? Can you please put a shirt on? I can't talk to you like this. I'm...I'm sorry. It's...er...distracting.”

He offered an apologetic smile. “Yes. Absolutely. I didn't realize that I was making you uncomfortable. I just hadn't heard you come in, because I was in the bathroom. And then...there you were.”

Edward turned away, looking a little chagrined but smiled when I added, “Get a big, bulky sweater, okay?”

He jogged down the hall, while I calmed myself, taking several deep breaths. Only a moment later, he padded down the hall wearing a red Ben and Jerry's t-shirt, which didn't do much to hide his sculpted frame. *Cows. Ice cream. Waffle cones. Ice cream. Chunky Monkey.*

“So, you wanted a drink. Can I fix something for you?” My body relaxed—probably visibly—at the benign question.

“Yeah. Orange juice, I think.”

I plopped down on the couch and waited. When he handed me the glass, our fingers brushed against each other, and I looked away.

“I'm sorry my being half-dressed bothered you so much, but is that all? Did I do anything—too much—in the kitchen just now?” He sat down beside me.

I shook my head, feeling like a total idiot. His kisses had made me feel warm and...I'd never felt like that before. But then, I was the one who had stopped *him* a moment ago. I was so confused,

and I knew it was all because of the stupid dream...because there was some part of me that still wasn't completely trusting. My juice suddenly became a welcome distraction. *Mm. I love when the juice is pulpy.*

"If not that, then what?" he asked cautiously.

May as well just get it out there, I guess. "It's just this dream I had last night."

"About Josh? Oh, Bella. I'm sorry. I didn't even..."

I cut him off. "No, Edward. It was about us."

His eyebrows shot up in surprise, and he was immediately silent.

"It was about what started to happen last night, in my room."

"Did I push you too far? Bella, I never meant to..."

A humorless laugh escaped my lips just as it had when Rosalie had asked about the dream. How was I going to talk about this? I couldn't explain to him the chaos that was my mind at the moment. I didn't even understand it myself. How in the world could I expect him to understand? "Never mind, it's stupid. It was just a dream." I set my empty glass on the end table beside me.

"No, Bella. It was real to you. I've had dreams like that. I've been mad at Emmett for days because of something stupid he did in a dream." He smiled, hoping I'd appreciate his effort to lighten the mood. "Please tell me about it?"

"It's just awkward. I think...I think I'm the one who pushed *you*, and, you stopped..." I tacked on under my breath, "...like you always do."

He reached for my hand and whispered gently, "Like I always do?"

All I could do was nod. He leaned back against the couch, letting his head fall backwards with a sigh.

Eyes closed, he whispered, "Do you know why I always stop myself?"

"No," I exhaled. "I sort of thought... in the dream, at least, that it was because you didn't want me like that."

His head jerked up, and his eyes locked on mine. "Now *that* would be impossible, Bella. I...I want you more than I have any right to, and I *never* want to do something with you that you'll regret. I don't want you to look back on anything we've said or done and feel like we rushed, that we did something before your heart was ready. That I took advantage of you. It's because I love *you*, not because it's what *I* want. I'm trying to put your needs before my own, because I don't want to hurt you. But sometimes kissing you makes me *want* to give in to my needs—my

wants. It's easy to get caught up in how...incredible you feel in my arms—and how you make *me* feel. I don't want to just get caught up, though. I want to take care of you. So, I make myself stop." He hung his head humbly.

"Oh." I didn't have anything more eloquent to say.

He pushed up, resting his forearms on his knees, and turned his hands back and forth nervously. I watched the cords of his piano-playing muscles twist and move under his skin. Slowly, I reached out and ran my fingers over the stripes I saw there, tracing his muscles. He turned his chin up toward me, looking into my eyes again.

"Thanks for, umm, explaining that," I said. A weak smile was all I could muster. "I don't even know how to describe what's going on in my heart. But, I'll try." He smiled at me in encouragement, placing one of his hands over mine as he listened. "It's umm...thawed again, which is amazing, but there are pieces that still aren't healed. I guess it's because of the way things were with Josh, but this... *want* I feel all of a sudden can be scary. Sometimes I feel like I'm dirty, and that any physical attraction I feel is wrong. I don't know what to do with that, because it's definitely not just going away. When *you* kiss me, I want so much more...and I feel sad when you stop, but if we went too far, then I'm sure I'd beat myself up about that, too. Am I confusing enough?"

The tenderness in his eyes made me feel like everything would be all right. "Well, it sounds like we just need to keep things slow. You're still sorting through things, and that's what I honestly expected. I'm not in a hurry, Bella...and I'm not going *anywhere*."

"That sounds good...but remember that some part of me *seriously* enjoys it when I feel wanted, too. So, don't be like a Puritan or anything."

He chuckled at me and tucked a piece of hair behind my ear. "I can't be a Puritan around you. Not possible." He held out an arm, and I leaned in, allowing him to wrap me in a hug. Then, he whispered, "So...I'm going to just keep feeling the way I do about you while you figure out what you want. And...I'll make sure you're okay with things as we go. Okay?"

Sighing with relief at his understanding, I let out a "yes."

"For example," he said, "I'm wondering about something. You said you were just upset because of the dream, right?"

I nodded.

"So, did the way I kissed you in the kitchen bother you?"

"Umm...no. It was...the kisses were... really, *really* nice." I blushed slightly, feeling silly admitting it. And vulnerable.

"Good, because before I make you breakfast, I'd *really* like to kiss you some more."

Yes, please.

I turned my face to his, and his eyes searched mine for a moment before his lips molded to mine, moving against them unhurriedly. Edward's hands cupped my cheeks, and we leisurely—and very willingly—tangled ourselves in each others' arms. Tender, sweet, and sensual, but slow. It was just right.

After breakfast, which turned out to be a late brunch, we decided to play cards. His iPod was playing loudly in the background. It was a great mix, and I was especially enjoying Gavin DeGraw.

We laughed and enjoyed a game of rummy, both of us seriously competitive. About two hours later, we heard a knock at the door. Carlisle and Esme had arrived.

After warm hugs and welcomes, Edward got them settled on the couch while I poured drinks for everyone. He wasted no time in sharing with them the highlights of our evening at Scullers. Obviously, they were thrilled.

Carlisle told me that Lydia would be arriving later that day, and she hoped to meet with me Sunday evening for a little while to prepare for the trial. I reminded him that Charlie would be arriving around noon. He assured me it wouldn't take long, and suggested we all have dinner together. While we discussed all this, Esme was listening raptly to more of the details from Edward. The smile never left her face when he told her about Elias coming out to meet me and talk with him after the show. She patted his knee with pride.

After visiting a bit more, we went out for a late lunch and wandered around Hanover, stopping in several of the shops. We enjoyed the coffee in a local café when our feet needed to rest, really taking our time. The day was completely comfortable. Edward's family made me feel like I fit right in.

Surprisingly, Esme suggested that we order Chinese take-out and just eat at the boys' apartment. I suppose I'd expected her to do everything high class, but spending the entire afternoon with her and Carlisle helped me to realize just how down-to-earth they were. It was easy to see how Edward had become the man he was.

When we got back to the campus, we found that Emmett and Rosalie had already gotten back from the car show. They thought Chinese was a great idea. Em pulled a takeout menu from one of the kitchen drawers and picked up the phone.

"Knock, knock!" we heard from the doorway. Every head spun in the direction of the tinkling voice. Alice and Jasper had let themselves in. Squeals, laughter, and explanations filled the air, a cacophony of joy. I snuck over to the sitting area and sat down, letting them all say their hellos.

The couch shuddered beneath the force of Alice's sofa dive. "How are *you*, my BFF?" Her bell-like laughter made me smile as she flung herself at me, hugging me tightly.

“I didn’t know you were coming!” I said. We’d talked on the phone a few times since she’d gone back to Manhattan, but she’d never even mentioned the possibility of their visiting again so soon.

“I know. It was sort of unplanned. Jazz and I just decided to take off at the last minute. I knew everyone else would be here, too...and I just wanted to be with you for the trial. How are you doing . . . with everything?”

Shrugging, I told her what had been going on since we’d last talked. When I told her about my date with Edward, she was positively bouncing.

Jasper slid onto the couch next to her then and said, “Evenin’, Bella. What are you tellin’ my girl here to get her so excited?”

“Jazz! She and Edward had the most amazing night at Scullers! I *knew* they would end up together. It’s perfect!”

He smiled adoringly at her as she went on about Edward and me, but Jasper was interested in talking about the venue. “Scullers, huh? I saw Kevn Kinney there once. He was incredible.”

“He’s the lead singer of Drivin ‘n’ Cryin, right?” Alice asked.

“Yes, ma’am.” He looked at Alice with affection. “But I like his solo work even better, more bluesy, artsy. He even does a little beat poetry.”

I thought about mentioning that I’d seen Kevn Kinney at a blues club once and really liked him, but the conversation was pretty much going on without me. It was okay, though. I thought it was sweet to watch.

“I love it when you talk about music, you know that?” Alice asked Jasper, biting her lip flirtatiously.

“Ali, you just love it when I talk.” He winked at her, and she snuggled up next to him.

“So?” she asked coyly.

Just as it was getting to the point where I *would* have felt awkward hearing or seeing any more, I felt a big, strong pair of arms wrap around my waist from the side. Edward’s chin was suddenly on my shoulder. “This was a good surprise, don’t you think?”

I laughed and turned to face him, kissing his cheek. “Definitely. Did you know they were coming?”

“Nope,” he said, turning and kissing me back. “Mom and Dad offered to get them rooms at the inn, but I think Jasper would like them to stay here.”

“I’m glad Charlie’ll get to meet Alice, too. He’ll love her.”

“And me? Does he know that I’m head over heels in love with his only daughter? Will that bother him at all?”

“We’ll have to wait and see, won’t we?” I teased. “Hmm...I wonder if he brought his gun.” Edward’s eyes widened for a moment.

Suddenly, Emmett’s voice boomed out over everyone else’s. “HEY! I thought you guys wanted me to call for Chinese! Anybody still hungry, ‘cause I’m wasting away over here!”

“Oh, absolutely! Quick, somebody, get the people on the phone and place the freakin’ order before Em starts to look like Nicole Richie!” Rosalie snarked.

Emmett pouted. “Aww, C’mon, Rosie! Where’s the love?”

Smirking, she answered, “Emmett McCarty? You could stop eating today, and you’d still look as healthy as a bear for weeks. You *might* even be able to hibernate all winter!”

At some point during all of the happy chaos, Esme had found a pen and paper, and wrote down a big order that included a little of everything. She handed it to Emmett when she was done. “There you go, you poor baby.” Winking at him, she stepped over and slid her arm around Carlisle’s back. He looked down at his wife, and both their faces were full of love. Love that had clearly weathered the most difficult circumstances and trials. The kind of love that is intensely grateful for the blessings that come their way, not taking a moment for granted.

“It’s good to have everyone together, isn’t it?” he asked her.

Eyes glistening, she merely nodded in return.

Edward and I had agreed that a little time with just my dad and me would be a good thing, so I met Charlie at the airport the next day, and the hug he gave me was one of the best things ever. He’d never been a really touchy-feely guy when I was growing up, and as far as emotions, he was tight-lipped. But the love and pride that were communicated in that one gesture filled my heart to overflowing.

“It’s good to see you, Bells. You look good.”

“You too, Dad.” He kept his arm around me as we walked toward baggage claim, and I loved it.

“You holdin’ up all right? That scum still leaving you alone?” he asked, eyebrow cocked.

“Yep. Things are going really well. I’m enjoying all of my classes, loving the homework club where I’m still volunteering, and...my heart’s doing better, too.”

There it was. Shouldn't have mentioned my heart out loud, because Charlie was sweet, but sort of emotionally inept. "Oh, uh...that's good. Glad you're feelin' better, kid."

I smiled at him, and we stood there in comfortable silence until his bag came down the conveyor belt. We stopped at Ellie's for lunch, and then I drove him around town for a little personalized tour. Once he was checked in at the hotel, I told him I'd let him settle in and clean up for a bit by himself. He asked about meeting 'my bodyguards' and if Mr. and Mrs. Cullen had arrived yet. I could tell that the trial and circumstances were weighing heavily on his mind. I decided to give Jake a call when I got back, since he wouldn't be having dinner with us later.

"Thanks, Bells," he'd said. "I just want to have a chance to look all these people in the eye and tell 'em thanks for lookin' out for my girl."

And so it went. Two hours later when we pulled on to campus, Charlie was spiffed up, and Jacob Black was waiting on the bench outside my dorm. He stood as we approached and offered Charlie that award-winning grin.

Charlie didn't hesitate for an instant. "Jacob? Charlie Swan," he offered.

"It's nice to meet you. I know Bella's sure glad you're finally here."

"Well, I'm happy to be here, but I wish it could be under different circumstances."

Jacob nodded his understanding and smiled at me.

"Listen, Jacob, I just want to tell you how much I appreciate you lookin' out for my Bella. Walking her to class, testifying at the hearing...and whatever else you've done for her. She's all I've got, and it's hard to be so far away."

I blushed, feeling awkward, but Jacob's grin made me feel better. He turned to Charlie and said, "I understand. Not a problem. Bells is really cool."

Charlie just shrugged and said, "Well, just thanks."

After the masculine headnods were exchanged, and Jake went to meet Seth and their friends for dinner, I walked Charlie up to my room, just to see it. Then we headed over to Edward's.

On the way, he said, "Will this be everybody at once?"

"I doubt it. This'll probably just be Emmett and Edward...and maybe my roommate Rosalie. Emmett's the one I said could take you. He and Rosalie are sort of a thing. And Edward is the one... who would do anything for me. Remember?"

He eyed me carefully while I spoke. Finally, he said authoritatively, "So, Emmett gets my thanks, and Edward gets grilled, right?"

I smiled and smacked his arm. “Don’t be *too* hard on him, Dad. Edward has been really great. I’m sure you’ll like him. His parents will meet us for dinner, and his sister, too. Everybody’s in town for the trial.”

“The whole *family* is here for you?” he asked incredulously.

“Well, yeah. Alice and I really hit it off when she came down to visit, and she’s been through something really similar. I think that’s why they all feel for me.”

“Uh-huh. And their support has nothing to do with Edward.”

“Well, it’s...um...I wouldn’t say nothing, but...he’s different, Dad. He’s the best person I’ve ever met. I didn’t know someone could be so patient and understanding. Please trust me. I’m positive you’ll like him. He’s really important to me.”

Charlie cocked an eyebrow and scrunched up his lips, causing his mustache to touch his nose. Sniffing, he said, “We’ll see.”

We walked up the steps and to the end of the hall. I was all right until we got to the door, but then it hit me.

Edward was about to meet my dad.

End notes:

Yikes! How will THAT go? I wonder.

Remember, this fanfic is based on my own healing from an abusive relationship, so what happens here is often tense, sad, and frustrating, but VERY realistic. You can take it from me. I’ve walked this very road. I know not everyone deals with things in the same way, but this is, very literally, *my* story. Still, I hope that the confusion that is happening in Bella’s heart is understandable. While her heart has thawed, and is better every day, every step, it’s not whole. There are roadblocks ahead, and she’ll have to work through them. I can’t just make everything sweet and sappy and perfect once she says, “I love you.”

So, tell me what you think, okay?

Also, DON’T forget to vote for your favorites at the Twilight Indie Awards! There are some fabulous stories there that deserve a shot! The nominees make a great “future reading list.”

Thank you everyone who voted for *Afraid to Dance*. It didn’t make it into the top ten, but you warmed me to my toes nonetheless! I love yas!

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Chapter: 38

I loved, loved, loved the reviews last chapter, and thank you each SO much for writing. They were so encouraging...especially because several of you hadn't known that this story was autobiographical. I could literally feel the support and hear the cheers. So, from the absolute bottom of my very healed heart, thank you. It's been 15 years, and I'm thriving. (And MY Edward thanks you, too. He's been so encouraging as I write all this...it's cathartic!) :)

Flemily Harper, you insanely rock. You got me straight trippin', Boo.

Also, you should all know that I would have completely botched the legal portions of this chapter without the welcomed intervention of Twilightzoner. You are fabuloso. Thanks for teaching me to speak a little Legalese.

Without further ado...

*Take your situation, all your circumstances,
Put it on you like its made to fit you right
Take your friends and family, take the mile around you
Take the time that's left and step inside your life.
David Wilcox*

Chapter Thirty-six: Introductions and Interviews

As if I were perfectly composed, my hand raised involuntarily and knocked on the door. But I was not perfectly composed. Far from it, in fact. I knew that I was standing on a precipice.

Charlie, of course, was just being my good-natured and protective father. I couldn't fault him for that. In fact, I appreciated it. And honestly, he probably had no idea that I was as nervous as I was. I wiped my suddenly sweaty palms down the legs of my jeans.

In high school, he hadn't had to *try* to intimidate the boys. Very few came anywhere near me, because everyone knew Charlie Swan, the chief of police, was a proud and protective father. They also knew how good he was with a gun.

The exception to the norm was Michael-Stupid-Newton. His dad was also a prominent member of Forks society, since his family owned and operated the biggest (and only) sporting goods store

in the area. Mike was rich, boyishly handsome, popular, and totally full of himself. When I moved to town, he'd wasted no time in singling me out and repeatedly asking me on dates. And I'd wasted no time in refusing them. Still, for the sake of getting to know other kids from school, I'd eventually gone out with him once or twice in large groups, but I made sure he knew I wasn't interested in forming any kind of attachment. Charlie backed me on that. He'd made a show of cleaning his guns the first time Mike came to pick me up. I seriously thought that Mike was going to lose control of his bodily functions and run, crying, out of the house. It. Was. Hilarious.

The only other time Charlie had met anyone I was dating was Josh. He'd flown home to Forks with me for spring break the year we'd met. This was before...before the rape and the rest of the abuse had started. He was right in the middle of executing the con that changed my life. I was completely snowed, and Josh must've known it. His meeting my dad was the step that sealed it for me. I'd known how different our backgrounds were, but as long as we were by ourselves, it hadn't mattered. His willingness to travel out to Forks and stay with me had been a big deal. *Of course, that's where he got lots of his manipulation material to use later. He'd always bring up my past—Forks, Charlie, and Renee—when he wanted to make me feel small.*

I'd been shocked that Charlie hadn't liked him.

At all. Josh did everything he could to win Charlie over, but there hadn't been a connection. Looking back on it now, I could see that—though he'd tried to find common ground—Josh hadn't shown Charlie simple respect. He'd been polite, but in a condescending, almost patronizing, way. And then I remembered my brief conversation with Charlie before we'd flown back. It was just after breakfast, and Josh had been busy loading the car.

*“Bella, all I'm saying is that nobody deserves to have people cater to them like that. He came to **my** house, with **my** daughter, and we were eating our last meal together. If the breakfast casserole you got up early to make was good enough for us, it should've been good enough for him. Seriously, Bells. He had the audacity to ask you to make him an omelet and bacon! Who the—*who does he think he is?*”*

“Dad, it's the last home-cooked meal he'll get before we go back to cafeteria food. I was glad to make him the breakfast he wanted.”

Charlie exhaled harshly, and I wasn't sure whether the sound held more disgust or disappointment. I was sure there'd been a measure of both, but Charlie wasn't looking me in the eye. He was staring up at the ceiling with his arms crossed over his chest.

When he looked back at me, his eyes were softer. “It's just common courtesy, Bella. And your boy there is seriously lacking in it. He's a taker, kid. He feels entitled to whatever he wants, and you need to ... just be careful. Take care of yourself.”

Charlie smoothed his mustache and cleared his throat next to me, bringing me back to the present. Until that moment, I hadn't remembered that conversation. Charlie had seen, and he'd warned me. *I'd been so blind!* I wondered briefly if Charlie had known just how much of a taker Josh could be.

For a moment, I wished he *had* known. That his warning had been more blatant. “Run, Bella. This guy is going to destroy your life.” Something like that. Of course, if he had told me that continuing to be in a relationship with Josh was out of the question—if he’d tried to forbid it—then I’d have just run toward Josh that much harder. Sometimes I’m too stubborn for my own good.

Charlie’s voice beside me pulled me from my musings, “I guess they didn’t hear ya, Bells. Better knock again.”

Oh, right. We want to go inside. Not stand here in the hall and analyze the Stupid Mistakes of Bella Swan.

I smiled at him half-heartedly and swallowed the bile that suddenly rose in my throat. Charlie loved me and wanted what was best for me. I knew that. I just didn’t know if he’d realize that—for me—Edward had become a part of that equation. Or if he’d approve of our relationship. I had a suspicion that, in Charlie’s mind, no one would ever be good enough for me.

I knocked more loudly on the door this time. *May as well get it over with.*

We heard laughter from the other side, and then Edward’s voice. “Coming!”

I took a deep breath, and then the door opened. Edward’s eyes met mine, and the smile that lit up his face set me at ease immediately. He opened the door wider and gestured for us to step inside. “Chief Swan, it’s very nice to meet you. I’m Edward Cullen.” He extended his hand, and Charlie took it, squeezing it firmly. I looked up at my dad’s face for a moment.

Charlie pursed his lips to the side and cocked his eyebrow. “Edward.” *Ugh. Don’t start this way. Edward has done more for me than anyone else.* I chanced a peek over at Edward, but he looked completely at ease.

“Why don’t you come in and sit down? You can meet the others while I get you something to drink.” He smiled at Charlie, and showed him the couches. Emmett was lazily reclining on one of them, watching a football game. Rosalie chewed on a highlighter at the other end of the sofa, her legs curled underneath her as she studied one of her textbooks.

Charlie and I made our way to the other couch, and Emmett held his hand out for a high five as I passed. Shifting in his seat, Em sat up and reached out to offer his hand to my dad. “Mr. Swan, I’m glad you made it. How was the trip?”

“Not too bad, son.” Charlie was already getting a little distracted by the game. It didn’t take long.

“I’m Emmett McCarty.” He grinned and his dimples made him look like a sweet little boy.

“Emmett.” Turning to me with a mischievous smile, Charlie said, “This is the one you said could take me, Bells?”

Emmett's jaw dropped and he started laughing so hard the couch was shaking. "No way, Bellaluna!"

I blushed, but was secretly letting relief wash over me. Charlie was relaxing, and he was trying to connect with the guys. At least with Emmett anyway. "Well, assuming he's not carrying his firearm. You're not packing now, are you, Dad?" I winked at him as I looked over my shoulder into the kitchen. Edward's eyes locked with mine for a moment before his mouth curved into my crooked smile.

Rosalie looked up from her book then and introduced herself. Charlie smiled at her kindly.

"What would you like to drink, Sir?" Edward asked just then. "We've got Coke, iced tea, water, and fresh coffee."

"Coffee. Black." Charlie's answer was terse, but only a second later, he turned to Emmett and started talking sports. Emmett scooted closer to the other end of the couch, so he and Charlie could chat more easily.

"Bella?" Edward said more softly. "What would you like?"

For you to come and sit beside me. "Just water, thanks." He dipped his chin with a grin and waggled his eyebrows at me.

A moment later, he handed us our drinks and sat down between Emmett and Rose.

Charlie nodded his thanks, and everyone was silent for a moment, caught up in the game. Except me. I stared at the screen wondering how long it would be before Alice, Jasper, Carlisle and Esme got there.

A commercial came on, and Charlie cleared his throat. "Mute that for a minute, will ya, Emmett?"

"Sure thing, Chieftain." Emmett had the remote next to him, so the response was fast. Charlie's eyes flashed with amusement before he put on his serious face again.

"Listen, boys. I need to tell ya both—uh, you too, Rosalie—how much I appreciate you watchin' out for Bella. She's told me how you've ...just made sure she wasn't alone. For the hearing and everything, too, you just...well, it means a lot."

Edward quietly answered, "It's been my pleasure." Charlie nodded and smirked, but didn't say anything. Not that we would've heard him anyway. Emmett was talking loudly.

"Aww, no *problem*. We don't mind lookin' out for Bellaluna here. We like havin' her around." He was grinning a mile wide.

Rolling her eyes at Em, Rosalie smiled and said in an uncharacteristically sweet way, “Glad to...and she’s done the same for me.”

There was some awkward silence after everyone had spoken, but mercifully, the game came back on. “That’s all. You can turn the sound back up,” Charlie stated flatly.

“Aye,aye, Cap’n.” Emmett could be such a dork sometimes.

As other eyes glued themselves to the television, I glanced at Edward. He was watching me, and when our eyes met, he smiled in encouragement.

I sighed and relaxed under his gaze. I knew he was good for me.

Within the hour, the rest of the family showed up, and introductions were made. I’d never had the chance to see Charlie in a social situation where he was the new guy, so it was interesting. He didn’t look as comfortable as he would, say, at the Forks diner, but he made a point to greet everyone.

Notably, it took Alice only about five minutes to completely win him over. Whether it was her adorable face, her bell-like laughter or just the sheer force of her charismatic personality, I don’t know, but she had him laughing, smiling, and listening raptly as she told him about the weekend she and I had met.

“Of course, I think the world of my brother Edward,” she praised, gesturing toward him as he spoke with his parents. “I’m always glad to have the chance to visit, but that weekend was different. I made the mistake of telling him about Jasper over the phone.” She smirked knowingly at Charlie, and he smiled down at her. “Edward’s just always been really...protective of me. Our whole family’s close, but I went through some stuff in high school, and it just sort of cemented our already close relationship. He became more than just a brother.” She got a faraway look in her eyes and turned to look at Edward for a moment. “He was my only friend after a really traumatic relationship, and I’ll never forget his compassion or his patience with me as I dealt with everything.” *And this is why you’re my BFF, Alice. Way to impress Charlie. Edward’s not even having to do it himself!*

Right then, I watched as Charlie looked over her shoulder at Edward who was standing between Carlisle and Esme with his hand around his mom’s back. She was looking at him adoringly, while Carlisle laughed at something he’d said. Noticing the direction of Charlie’s glance, Alice winked at me, bouncing up and down for a second.

As Charlie brought his attention back to Alice, she continued with gusto, “So, of *course* he felt like he needed to grill Jasper personally as soon as possible and make sure he was a complete gentleman. He wouldn’t just take *my* word for it. That’s why we came to visit.” She rolled her eyes, but somehow looked adorable doing it. *Good one, Alice. Do you know how awesome you are?*

Cocking an eyebrow and smiling at her, Charlie said, “And Jasper made the cut?”

“Well, let’s just say that—at first—Edward was worse than my dad, but before we left he told me that Jasper seemed to be not only a good guy, but the perfect match for me. I already *knew* he’d feel that way, but...the protectors have to do their protecting, huh Charlie?”

He nodded, sniffing and wiggling his mustache. “That we do, Alice. That we do.” Quirking his eyebrow at me then, he let me know that he’d been aware of my eavesdropping the whole time. “Bella, what do *you* think of this Jasper fella? Alice seems pretty smitten.”

“Smitten is definitely the right word, but they *do* seem to be great together. He’s just as smitten with her, I’m sure.” I grinned at her and then made a quick plug. “And Edward is a great judge of character, I think.”

“Is that so?” Charlie asked, with a hint of a smile.

“He thinks the world of *Bella*,” Alice chimed in. “And he’s always been extremely picky.”

“Well, there’s a lot to like about Bella,” Charlie concurred. “She’s a good kid.” He looked at me and winked. My heart warmed at his effort to show affection.

“Yeah, she is. Meeting her was the best part of my weekend. Probably yours, too, right, Bella?”

I looked away quickly, trying to conceal my blush from Charlie as I felt the blood rush to my face. *Let’s see...Edward had sung “She’s Got a Way” to me...and then kissed me perfectly and sweetly after playing me His Song. That weekend had been the beginning of the real heart thaw for me. “Yeah, it was great.” There. That’s all I’m saying. Let them read what they will into that.*

Emmett, who’d been whispering quietly with Rosalie—unknowingly rescuing me from the most awkward part of my evening so far—stood up from the couch then, pulling her up by his side. “Anybody else hungry?” he shouted. “My girl needs to get her eat on!”

She smacked him on the shoulder, rolling her eyes.

“Where does everyone want to go?” Edward asked. “Charlie, why don’t you tell us what you’re in the mood for. We all get to eat around here all the time.”

Charlie nodded in thanks and thought for a moment. “A juicy steak and a baked potato sound just right to me. Anyone else?”

Gregarious Emmett jumped up in the air and yelled, “Heck yeah!” He threw up his hand for a fist bump, but no one was quick with a response. “Aww, you guys! Don’t leave me hangin! Who’s thinkin’ Joe’s Tavern?”

To my surprise and amusement, Carlisle stepped up and gave Em the fist bump. “Sounds good, Emmett. Let’s go.” Esme beamed at me as she followed him.

Charlie chuckled next to me and leaned over, whispering, “These are some pretty good people, kid. Not a bad job pickin’ your friends.” *Whew.*

Once again, the time at Joe’s Tavern was exactly what I hoped it would be for all of us. The food was absolutely delicious, and the atmosphere was relaxed and informal. Everyone shared a little more about themselves with Charlie, telling stories and laughing easily. Charlie, as far as I could tell, never felt like he was the one in the spotlight. My favorite thing about listening to the conversation was the way the Cullens talked about each *other*. When Edward talked about his plans to become a counselor, for example, others jumped in with stories about how he’d always been a good listener. And they did the same thing as he discussed his love of music. Their support and belief in one another was astounding.

Esme and Carlisle encouraged the rest of us, too, when we spoke about our goals. I’m pretty sure that Jasper and Emmett felt every bit as loved and heartened as I did. Charlie leaned back in his chair, taking it all in.

I could barely contain my joy when Carlisle asked Charlie if he ever did any fishing. Charlie’s face lit up, and he leaned forward, elbows on the table to get deep into this discussion. They tuned everyone else out for a while, and I felt a hand on my knee under the table. Edward had noticed, too.

I turned to him, and his eyes communicated volumes. I knew he’d been thinking the same things, carefully watching Charlie’s reaction to the conversations.

I covered his hand with mine and squeezed. “Thanks,” I whispered.

“For what?” He bit his lip, and I thought it was the most endearing thing in the world. He couldn’t know how he was affecting me right now.

“For understanding where my mind is right now. What I’m feeling and thinking. I honestly don’t know how you do it.” *And I want to wrap myself in your arms and stay there forever. You make me feel so safe and so...right.*

“It’s not hard, tonight, Bella. I’m sure we’re both hoping for the same thing. It’s important to me that your dad thinks well of me.” He looked both nervous and determined.

“Me, too. But you know *I* like you, right?” I offered a half-grin.

Edward leaned closer to me then, and touched his forehead to mine. “I do,” he said. “And you know I love you, right?”

I blushed and pulled my lower lip between my teeth, looking down. Then, peeking over at him from underneath my lashes, I said “Yeah, I know. It’s kind of hard to ignore.”

The corner of his mouth lifted, as he sat back, and he said quietly, “You tried, huh?”

Pulling my hands from my lap and resting my elbows on the table, I admitted, “I did, but you won me over. Before I knew what was happening.”

His hand reached over and found mine, squeezing it gently before lacing his fingers together on the table in front of him.

Alice and Jasper joined us in conversation then, while Esme caught up with Emmett and got to know Rosalie a little bit better. I overheard Carlisle inviting Charlie to come back to the Inn with us, so that they could continue visiting while I met with Lydia briefly.

“Is Edward planning on riding over with Bella?” Charlie asked.

“I imagine so,” I overheard Carlisle answer.

“Good. Yeah, I’d like to come over for a bit. We’ve all got some things to talk about.”

I couldn’t look over there, couldn’t let them know I’d heard, but my heart was racing as I tried to focus back on the conversation in which I was supposed to be participating. *What would Charlie say? What were they going to talk about? It was just thanking them for helping me and offering Lydia’s legal services, right? He wouldn’t grill Edward in front of Carlisle, would he?*

Feeling a light touch on my arm, I looked down. Edward was gently trailing the backs of his fingers up and down in a soothing motion. “You okay?” he asked.

I swallowed my anxiety as best as I could, nodded, and joined the conversation again.

After dinner, Em, Rose, Alice and Jasper headed back to campus, planning to watch a movie and relax. Edward asked me if I’d rather he rode with Charlie and me or with his mom and dad over to the Inn. I was about to answer, when Esme invited Edward to ride with them. She said she had something to discuss with him.

Charlie and I followed behind the Cullens, and I wondered aloud what he thought of everyone.

“Everyone seems really great, Bells. They’re...ah...some of the most genuinely caring people I’ve ever met. I guess I felt pretty strange at first about their quick attachment to you—not to mention their hiring a lawyer for ya. It was humbling and a little awkward, but... I was glad they were willing to help. I understand a little better now, though. They don’t seem like the type that can *help* looking out for others. Those kind of people are few and far between.”

I exhaled in relief as Charlie chuckled quietly in the passenger’s seat. “Nervous about it, were ya?”

“Yeah.” I had to admit it. “I wasn’t sure you’d understand the... ‘attachment’ with all of them either. Especially Edward. But, it’s...it’s exactly like you said. They’re genuine and kind. And I guess my friendship with Edward started with his just looking out for me, but...”

“But what, Bells?”

“I trust him. I didn’t think I’d ever trust anyone...or feel anything like I do. Ever. I kind of just thought I’d forget about everyone but myself and do my own thing for the rest of my life. He’s just kind of slowly and *very* carefully helped my heart to come alive again. And I literally cannot believe I’m saying all of this out loud to you.”

Charlie cleared his throat, searching his mind for a response, I’m sure. “He’s a nice kid, I suppose. And you clearly...uh...think pretty highly of him.”

“I do, Dad. He’s so cautious with me. And he makes me feel...” How should I say this so that Charlie will really understand? “...I feel treasured. He does everything he can to make me feel valuable.” *That’s got to be something a dad’s okay with, right?*

“Hmm. Well, that’s a good thing.” We were pulling into the parking lot then, and as I turned off the truck, Charlie put his hand on mine to get my attention. “Bells? You know I just want you to be happy, right? You’re a good kid, and I trust you. I’ve just gotta try to scare him a *little*.” The wink was encouraging. I felt like Charlie had really listened—had really *heard* me. I didn’t think we’d ever communicated so much, but I was sure we both knew how important that conversation had been.

Grinning, I slapped his knee. “Okay, but just a little. Don’t make him cry.”

Charlie’s laughter filled the air as we got out of the truck.

The meeting with Lydia didn’t take very long. She explained that she didn’t have much of a role in the proceedings this time. Apparently, the Cullens had just asked her to come and make sure I understood how things would go, and to coach me on what I needed to do, as the complainant. I wouldn’t have a major role either. Because this was a criminal trial, he was officially being tried by the state of New Hampshire. I’d have the role of a primary witness, but basically, it was the job of the district attorney to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that Josh was guilty of assault and battery against me that day at the homework club. I’d get to tell my side of the story, and then I’d get cross-examined by the defense attorney.

She also let me know that—as far as assault and battery charges go—the jury would probably think that what Josh had done was relatively minor, especially for a first offense. I’d walked away with no marks on my body at all. She wasn’t belittling the circumstances, but was just trying to prepare me for the possible outcomes. Even though he’d done other things to me, left marks other times, he wasn’t being charged for those things in the trial taking place tomorrow. I understood, and was grateful for the heads up. As much as I’d like to see justice completely done, I needed to be realistic. And honestly, as long as he wasn’t allowed anywhere near me, I felt like I could be content with that at this point.

We met the others in the lobby after our meeting, and I didn’t sense any tension. I was incredibly grateful, and felt myself relax. Then I realized that Edward, Charlie and I would all be squeezing into the cab of my truck for the ride back into town. *How cozy.*

I could not, try as I might, imagine either of the long-legged men in my life straddling the gear shift, so I tossed Charlie the keys casually. He nodded, and I think I caught a look of relief on his face. We said goodnight to the Cullens, and I watched with pleasure as Charlie and Carlisle gave each other a firm handshake and a pat on the back.

I scooted across the seat once I was in the cab, and turned my body so that my back was angled slightly against my dad and my knees were pressing against Edward's thigh. He waggled his eyebrows at me again as Charlie turned away to reach for the seatbelt, and I almost laughed out loud. *That would've gone over well. His new seductive eyebrow thing is fun. I like the playfulness... and the suggestion behind it. I hope he keeps it up.*

Once the truck was running, Charlie reached around me, resting his arm on the seatback as he backed out of the space. It was a natural move, but I recognized it as a possessive one as well. Out on the road, though, both his hands were on the wheel, and we rode toward town in a surprisingly comfortable silence.

In the brief time that we were on the dark road between the Inn and the lights of Hanover, Edward's fingers found my calf and traced circles on it with his strong fingers. I felt a sense of loss as we drove into the town limits, under the streetlights, and he rested his hand on his thigh.

Charlie drove straight to his hotel, and said he'd be ready around 9:00 the next morning. Edward offered to drive so we'd all have a little more room, and Charlie chuckled quietly. "That'd be great, son." *Am I wrong to be completely and absolutely thrilled that my dad just called Edward "son"?*

Charlie gave me a nod as I slid over into his spot for the rest of the drive. "See ya tomorrow, Bells. 'Night, Edward." We waited as he made his way into the lobby.

The drive back to school was really short, so we just listened to music, but neither of us moved quickly to get out once I'd parked the Beast.

I turned to face Edward, grinning as he patted the seat next to him. He turned and rested his arm on the back of the seat, saying, "Would you mind if we stayed out here for a while? I'm not really ready to go hang out with everyone yet."

I scooted over and snuggled my back into the nook he'd made for me, resting my head on his shoulder. The hand that was behind me began playing with my hair, even scratching and massaging my scalp gently.

"That feels sooooo good," I mumbled. I suddenly remembered I'd been waiting to ask him something. "Hey. What did all you men talk about while I was with Lydia?"

I could feel his cheek move as he smiled against the top of my head. "Well, after your dad thanked my dad for providing the attorney and supporting you through all of this, he talked to me about you."

“Am I allowed to know what he said, or was it a confidential man-to-man thing?”

He chuckled, “Well, I won’t rehash it all, but he asked some important questions. Like... what my intentions are, how I feel about you, what my plans are for the future. Those kinds of things. Most of the questions I expected.”

“Oh? You said ‘most.’ Did he ask you anything you didn’t expect?” My curiosity was burning a hole in my chest.

“Yes, actually. And it was an insightful question. He’d noticed that my entire family likes to encourage and help others—and that I, especially, had mentioned I really enjoy counseling and listening. He wanted to know if you were a “hobby” for me. Was I around for Bella Swan, because I was serious about Bella Swan, or do I want to fix you and then find some other girl to help?”

I gulped swallowing my surprise. That **was** insightful. It was something I’d asked myself in the beginning of our relationship. Though I’d long since felt that Edward had proven I was more than a case study, I’d never heard the answer from his mouth. “So, can I hear your answer?”

He ran the backs of his fingers over my cheek as he whispered, “Of course.” He shifted his weight in the seat, turning my head to look at him.

Needing to face him completely, I angled my body toward him and looked into his eyes. Our faces were only inches apart.

Biting his lip for just a second, he began quietly. “I told him that—because of everything Alice had gone through—I definitely had a particular desire to work with victims of any kind of abuse. But, with you, that only served to make my compassion for your heart even stronger. It gives me insight, and I do want to help you...but it’s because I love you. I made sure your dad understands that I love you because of the person you are, not because I feel sympathy for you. If none of this had ever happened, you would still be my perfect complement in every way. I love your passion for others, your desire to live a full life, your taste in music, your smile, your brilliant mind, your wit, your innocence. I love you because you are you, and nothing will change that.”

At some point during that speech, the tears that had filled my eyes spilled over and were flowing freely down my cheeks. Edward tenderly cupped my face and wiped away the tears with the pads of his thumbs. “Did you really tell him all that?” I asked.

Edward nodded and continued to run his thumbs over my cheeks, lovingly tracing the stained paths of the tears.

“What did he say?”

“Well, it took him a while to say anything at all, but then he told me that’s what he’d needed to hear.”

“That’s it? He’s okay with us?” I couldn’t believe it had been that easy...but that *was* some answer.

“He’s got sort of a death grip when he shakes hands, Bella. I have a feeling I’m on probation—that this is a trial period. He’s willing to give me a shot if you are, but he did let me know that I wouldn’t want to disappoint him.”

I grinned. “That doesn’t surprise me at all. I just can’t believe you...you said all that to my dad. He wasn’t intimidating?”

“I didn’t have anything to hide. I meant every word of it, Bella. I love you completely...absolutely everything about you.”

I could tell that he was being utterly sincere, and I was overcome. I reached up and slid my fingertips into his hair, and he inched closer to me.

He pressed a chaste kiss to my left cheek, then my right. When his lips gently brushed my forehead, I whispered, “Edward?”

“Yes?”

“I love you, too. I love you more than I thought it was possible to love anyone.”

When he pulled his face back a few inches from mine, I saw that his eyes were brimming with tears. “Thank you for telling me that. I’m honored that you trust me with your heart. I’ll be careful with it.”

“I know,” I whispered.

And then his lips found mine. The kiss was slow and sweet at first, but as my hands tangled themselves in his hair, tugging and pulling, it deepened quickly. Our mouths opened, and we let our tongues explore each other hungrily. His arms lifted me slightly, pulling my body across his, so that I was lying across his chest, facing him. My legs stretched out on the seat beside him. One of his hands wound its way into my hair, his fingertips pressing desperately into the nape of my neck. His other hand ran up and down my leg, over my jeans. When it slid up my thigh and squeezed my hip, I let my head fall back into his hand. His lips and tongue tasted the skin of my neck, and I whimpered as his teeth nipped at my earlobe. His breath was hot on my ear as he whispered. “I love you, Bella. I want you so much. You...tell me what’s okay.”

I couldn’t think about anything at all but the way his hands were gripping me, the way his mouth felt on me. Wrapping my arms around him more tightly, I dug my fingertips into his shoulders. I kissed his cheek, his jaw, his neck. When I breathed into his ear, I think I actually heard him growl. The hand that was holding my hip slid around to my back and slipped under my sweater, his fingers dancing over my skin, up and down my spine.

It felt...everything was perfect. I felt loved, wanted. I loved. I wanted. I heard the desire and passion in his voice. Still, we needed no regrets this time, so—without a word—I softened my kisses, released my feverish grip on his back, and began to tenderly stroke my fingers through his hair and touch his face. I placed feather-light kisses along his jaw, moving back toward his mouth. His own touch lightened and his left hand slid back to just above my knee. His right hand slid out of my hair and simply cradled me against him, and we sighed at the same time. Gentle, breathy kisses were exchanged, and then he tugged my bottom lip between his teeth as he pulled away. I let my head rest on his chest, nestling into my spot, and I heard him begin to hum His Song softly. We sat like that for awhile, just reveling in the contentment we found in one another. After ten minutes or so, I asked if he minded if I just went to bed instead of joining the crowd back at their apartment.

He walked me back to my room, slowly, his fingers laced with my own.

This time, when I fell asleep, I had peaceful, happy dreams.

The next morning, I woke with a smile, knowing that Sunday had been momentous, but this day would be even more so. This day, I would close a chapter of my life and walk away.

Rosalie and I got ready together and ran to the cafeteria for breakfast. We met the boys at their cars at about ten minutes to nine, and headed over to the hotel for Charlie. Em and Rose followed us in his Jeep.

Charlie was waiting outside the lobby doors looking downright sharp. I'd never seen him dress up before, but the gray pants and sport coat really were flattering on him. I whistled out my window as we pulled up, and he chuckled.

“I expected you to be more quiet today, Bells. You're not nervous?”

“Hmm. I *am* nervous,” I told him as he climbed in the back. “And maybe I should be more reserved, but...I just feel expectant. I know that—one way or another—this will be done soon, and I'm ready for it to be over, you know?”

Both Charlie and Edward nodded in understanding. “I just hope it doesn't get dragged out too long,” Charlie said.

Thankfully, it didn't. I really didn't expect it to go so fast, but when the judge stated the charges and asked for the plea, we were all shocked. Josh's attorney stated simply that he'd be pleading Nolo Contendere—no contest. He wasn't outright admitting his guilt, but he must've known that the trial by jury would only make things worse for him. This was probably a wise move on his part. His attorney plea bargained for a lesser sentence, and it was granted. Josh was sentenced to three years of community service, probation, and anger management classes. He looked disgusted as the case was dismissed, but his father looked grimly satisfied. I guess after the debacle that the hearing had turned into, his dad just wanted the best case scenario for his guilty son. The quieter the better.

*With the little that I know about ticking time,
Maybe I can manage to imagine your heart beat next to mine.*

David Wilcox

Chapter Thirty-seven: Forks

I gripped the armrests tightly as the plane touched down at SeaTac, not a bit surprised to look out the window and see the tarmac glossy with rain. As we taxied toward the terminal, my head flopped back onto the headrest, and I wished for the hundredth time that Edward had been able to come home with me for Thanksgiving Break.

In the month since the trial, I'd really developed a sense of strength and peace again...and not only when I was with him. Granted, I was never happier than when Edward and I were together, but our schedules just didn't allow it to be a constant thing. Our classes, midterms, papers, and other academic pursuits were keeping us busy, in addition to the homework club and his composing. I'd found a sense of purpose again, and my weekday afternoons with Jacob and the kids were challenging. Several of the children had been opening up to me and sharing their struggles—both school and home-related. I loved the opportunity to really mentor and challenge them rather than just helping with homework. I treasured the relationships I'd been able to build, knowing that my concern and time meant the world to each of them. Pouring my life into theirs and watching them change and grow was invigorating.

Obviously, Tuesdays were my favorite. I loved watching the kids interact with Edward. He was so wonderful with them, encouraging and challenging them where they needed it the most. His insight was mind-boggling at times, and the questions he'd ask about them as we drove out for our regular Ellie's date each week demonstrated that to me. The kids loved being around Jacob, too, but it was Jake's ease and casual nature that drew them. They had fun with him, hoping to get him to laugh and cut up with them. Edward, however, they wanted to make proud. It was as if they could see the hope and high expectation in his eyes, and they wanted to please him with their best efforts. The difference in atmosphere on Tuesdays from the other afternoons was stark.

I smiled to myself as the seatbelt sign blinked off and the other passengers began standing and stretching. I hated getting caught and jostled in the crowd, so I pulled out my cell phone as I waited, texting Edward to let him know I'd arrived.

Just landed. Hug your mom and Alice 4 me. Wish U were here. Love you. –B

As the last few people squeezed their way down the aisle, I stood to pull my peacoat out of the overhead compartment and tug my backpack from under the seat. Slinging my pack over my right shoulder and sticking my left hand in my pocket, I jumped with surprise as my phone vibrated against my fingers almost immediately.

Glad you've arrived safely. Think I might go mad without seeing your face for 5 days. Remind me again why I'm so far from you? Love you, too. –E

Warmth flooded my body, and my heart raced. Yes, he still had that effect on me, even from over 3000 miles away. My fingers typed quickly.

Family and recording music. 2 things that could be well-worth the temporary break from “us” time. Call me tonight? –B

I stepped off the plane and began the walk to the gate. Just as I came out into the terminal, my phone buzzed again. I couldn't keep the smile off my face.

Counting the minutes. Tell Charlie I said hi. Alice sends enthusiastic hugs and hellos. Miss you so much it hurts. –E

That I could identify with. My heart was filled with gratefulness and the desire to be wrapped in Edward's arms. The need was a ball of lead in my stomach. But it would definitely be good to see Charlie. I made my way toward baggage claim where Charlie would be waiting. It had only been a month, but I was really looking forward to spending a little time with him again. I got onto the escalator and descended into the crowd.

And there he was. My dad stood at the bottom, looking around with his arms crossed over his chest. His face broke into a smile when he glanced up and saw me, and we grinned at each other until I stepped off. He wrapped one arm around me in a sideways hug as we began making our way into the throng of people. “How ya doin’, Kid?”

“Good, Dad. School's going really well. I can't complain.”

Turning his head and squinting at me slightly, he added, “And Edward? He still makin' you happy?”

I felt the blood rush to my cheeks, and Charlie rubbed my shoulder affectionately as he read my face. “Good to know, Bells.”

I shrugged and smirked, and then noticed my bag gliding toward us on the conveyor belt. Pointing, I moved forward to grab the bag, but my dad beat me to it. As we headed out to the cruiser, he asked me how Rosalie and Emmett were doing. I was sure that he was just doing his best to provide conversation.

I told him they were doing well and mentioned that Rosalie and I had started attending a sort of therapy group for survivors of violent crime. He quirked his eyebrow at me, surprise all over his face. I really didn't want to go into all that had happened with Josh and why I felt that I could benefit from this group specifically. Honestly, I feared his reaction if he were to find out how deeply Josh had truly wounded me all that time we were together. The group was helpful to me, for sure, but I hadn't really experienced things that were as vicious or brutal in nature as the others. Better to play it down.

“Umm. . . a counselor suggested it to Rosalie, and she didn't want to go alone. Edward and Emmett go with us, too. It's actually pretty helpful. Everyone just sort of shares how it's affected

them personally, and. . . I guess it helps to hear that we're not the only ones who still struggle with anger and crazy fears."

Charlie's lips pursed, making his mustache press against his nose slightly. He seemed at a loss for words. He nodded and, after a moment, managed, "You still afraid to go places alone?" He opened the trunk of his cruiser and tossed my bag in. We were quiet as we got into the car. The answer wasn't coming easily to me.

I was apparently still afraid of many things, and they cropped up at the most inconvenient times. My fear of the intensity of my attraction to Edward, for one. I didn't think mentioning that particular phobia to Charlie would be wise. It was more frustrating to me than anything, but Edward and I were doing really well talking about it and taking it slowly. Every once in a while, I also felt afraid that he'd wake up and realize I wasn't good enough for him. But I was making great progress, and he absolutely never gave me any reason to doubt his affection.

Nevertheless, none of *those* fears made it into our conversation. "Yeah, sometimes," I finally conceded. "It's not like I'm afraid there's a stalker behind every tree, but. . . I just wonder sometimes if he's really gone. What if he came back when I least expected it? Or. . . somebody else bothered me."

"Do you walk around a lot by yourself?" he asked, concerned.

"No! I'm rarely by myself, though the few times I have been, I haven't been too anxious. The boys still walk Rose and me everywhere they can. It's getting better, for sure. It just helps to talk about it. I don't feel so out of control, you know?"

He nodded quietly as he drove. I wasn't sure he really understood, but he at least seemed relieved that I felt like things were improving. And he was definitely pleased that I still had some manner of escort most of the time.

Truly, the group sessions had been really encouraging. Not only was it good to not feel like we were the only ones dealing with all of this, but the therapist encouraged us all to try and recognize the false foundations that most of our fears were built on. She said that when we recognize that we're believing a lie, we need to find the truth and tell ourselves that instead. One thing that Edward and I kept working on was this fear that I wasn't good enough for him. He had been adamant that Josh had convinced me that my family and social status were liabilities. And that it was nothing more than a lie.

I remembered vividly the first time I'd told him how I felt like I wasn't enough. He'd cupped my face in both hands and looked deeply into my eyes. "No, Bella. Josh lied to you about that. Don't believe it. Your family loves you, and has instilled that love in you greatly. And if anything, you've proven that—no matter where you've come from and what you've been through—you can overcome obstacles and achieve anything. Your strength and determination challenge *me*. And I'm sure I'm not the only one who feels that way. People who get things easily also take them for granted easily. You make me appreciate everything I have. . . especially you."

Completely lost for words, I'd simply stood there, staring up at him. He'd kissed me tenderly, and then placed his mouth against my ear, whispering softly, "Believe this. The truth is you are priceless. And you are the best person I know."

I caught myself biting my lip at the memory as I watched the rainy streets drift past through the window. I heard Charlie sniff next to me, and turned to look at him.

Noticing I was mentally back in the car with him, he said, "Feel like eating at the diner tonight? I know everyone would like to see you."

I nodded. "Sounds good."

"Well, we'll swing by the house first and take your stuff in. You can, uh, freshen up a little if you want."

Smiling my thanks, I turned back to the window and watched the world pass by.

That night at the Forks Diner, I actually enjoyed seeing Charlie's friends again. Everyone was clearly very impressed with me for getting the scholarship to Dartmouth, and my dad looked like he was just going to burst with pride. The conversation was comfortable and relaxed. Most people from Forks had never been further than Port Angeles, the next big town. They had lots of questions about New England and "the fancy people I was running with these days." I laughed off most of their inferences and let them know just how normal it was over there.

As I was telling everyone some of my favorite anecdotes from the homework club, the bell above the door chimed, and raucous laughter interrupted me. Pearl, the owner of the diner rolled her eyes and said, "I guess you'll have to finish your story later, Sweetie. I'm sure that your friends will want to talk to you now."

I looked over my shoulder to see Lauren Mallory, Tyler Crowley, Jessica Stanley, and Michael-Stupid-Newton heading toward a booth in the corner. Jessica's nasally voice sliced through the air, "Mike, you are SO hilarious!"

Mike didn't bother to respond to her. He'd noticed the crowd gathered around Charlie and me at the bar, and his face literally glowed when his eyes met mine. My eyes flashed over to Jessica, who was flopping into her seat with a "hmpfh." Lauren muttered something that sounded like ". . . better than everybody else."

Mike swaggered over, very evidently still completely full of himself. "Bella Swan. How nice it is to see you around Forks again."

The crowd dissipated quickly, everyone going back to their previous conversations, and Charlie glanced over at me, watching my reaction. It was understated, but I caught it. I tried to shout at him with only my eyes, "Get me out of this!" but he only chuckled and picked up his coffee in a silent toast.

“Hi, Mike. I’m just in town for Thanksgiving. How’s school?”

“Oh, U-Dub is great. I’m only taking classes three days a week, so I can run the store for my folks. You should come by sometime.”

“Yeah. . .I’m not really going to be doing much but studying while I’m here, unless my Dad and I do something. Thanks, though.”

“No, seriously, Bella. It’s a holiday! You’ve got to have a little fun! A bunch of us are going to the beach Friday night. Down at La Push. You should come. Catch up with the old gang.”

The old gang? Are you nuts? The only person from Forks I’d want to hang around with is Angela. Of course, if she goes. . .it could be fun. I looked at my watch, realizing she’d be landing right about now. She’d had to work late. That was the first time I’d seen her frustrated with her job. “Well, let me talk to Angela when she gets home, and we’ll decide what we’re doing.”

“Okay,” he said, his perfectly straight teeth gleaming at me. “I’ll call you.”

“Umm. . .No? Why don’t you just tell me what time everyone’s going to be there, and. . .if we decide to come, we’ll come.”

He made a great effort at looking like my answer satisfied him, but I could tell he was disappointed. “About 9, I guess. I hope you’ll come, Bella.”

“Maybe!” I smiled at him, hoping it reached my eyes.

He returned to his friends, and I heard Tyler laugh, accompanied by a sharp, nasal, “What?!”

When I glanced over, I saw four very different facial expressions. Lauren looked disgusted, Jessica defeated, Tyler amused, and Mike? Mike’s eyes met mine, and he winked. *Oh good grief. Somebody put me out of my misery now. How fast can Angela get home from Seattle? I’ve got to talk to that girl.*

Charlie turned toward me from a conversation with one of the other diner regulars, and he smiled. “Sorry, Kiddo. You can’t blame a guy for tryin’, huh?”

“Whatever, Dad. Are you about ready to go home? I want to get an early start on dinner for tomorrow, and I probably need to run to the grocery store. Something tells me you don’t have *everything* we’ll need.”

Chuckling, Charlie pulled out his wallet to pay. “I’m sure you’re right about that, Bells. Let’s go.”

As it turned out, Charlie had remembered to buy the turkey. Other than that, though, unless I was planning on garnishing our meal with cold cuts or fish, I had to pick it up myself. I got in around 8:30, and worked in the kitchen for about an hour, before slipping upstairs to get a shower.

Charlie said he was just going to finish the game and go to bed.

After my shower, I got dressed in my clean, comfy yoga pants and a tank top. Then I reached deep into my bag and pulled out Edward's black hoodie, holding it to my face and trying to inhale the smell of it. Only two things would've warmed me more just then: Edward's green blanket, or Edward's arms. I slid it on and zipped it up, rolling the sleeves so that I could use my hands should the need arise. I wanted to be close to Edward, but this was as good as it was going to get for the time being.

Climbing up onto my bed, I fluffed the pillows and propped myself up with a good book. I must've checked my phone fifteen times to see if I'd missed a call while I was in the shower. When I finally heard Chet Baker singing "Time After Time"—yes, I'd programmed that as Edward's ringtone after he'd sung it at Scullers—I was so excited that I nearly dropped the phone.

"Edward?"

"The sound of your voice right now..." His own voice sounded husky and filled with longing. It didn't make it easy for me to speak. After a few seconds, he sighed. "Bella?"

"I'm here." My voice was breathy. "I miss you."

"You, too, Love. I wish I were with you."

"Me, too," I laughed. "You have no idea."

"Well, tell me about your day. Did you have a good flight? How's Charlie?"

"The flight was good, and it's always good to see Charlie. We went out to dinner tonight, and I was able to catch up with lots of people I haven't seen in a while. It was nice."

"Nice. You rarely use that word. Did you enjoy catching up with everyone?"

Chuckling that he'd caught me, I admitted, "Not *everyone*. I've never been attached to the people here. Nobody but Angela. So, we saw several of Charlie's buddies from the diner, and then a group that I went to high school with came in."

"Ah. . .and it wasn't a phenomenal reunion." I could hear the smile in his voice.

"No. They invited me to get together on Friday, but I'm not thrilled about the idea. I'm going to see what Ange wants to do."

"Sounds like a good idea. I wish I could spend Friday with you myself."

"But that's the day you record with Elias, isn't it?"

“Yes, for most of the day. But we’ll be in New York at the studio until late, so my mom has arranged for us to visit some family friends. We’ll stay with them overnight and then head back up here on Saturday afternoon.”

“Well, I hope it’s a good visit. You can call me if you get bored.”

Sighing, he answered, “Mind if I call you for the entire visit?”

“You really don’t want to go, do you? Do you not get along with them?”

“It’s just one of them, but. . . I need to tell you about her.”

Her? I sucked in my breath involuntarily, and of course, he noticed. “Bella?”

Steeling myself for whatever he’d say, I said sweetly, “So, what is there to tell?”

“The Denalis and our family have been friends for ages. We’ve all grown up together. And Tanya—their daughter closest to my age—has always. . .um. . .had a bit of a crush on me.”

“A crush?” I asked, wanting him to unpack that a little bit. “I’m surprised you’re not constantly having to chase women off with a stick.”

“Well, I guess it was a crush when we were younger, but it’s actually been fairly awkward the last few times I’ve seen her. She can be very. . .forward. I think she’s always hoped we’d grow up and get together, and she’s gotten pretty serious about it more recently. I’ve never mentioned her before, because she literally means nothing to me. There’s no *chance* that anything will happen between us, but she’s not going to like that I’m so absolutely consumed by you. I don’t anticipate it being a friendly and comfortable visit.”

I didn’t know what to say. He honestly sounded annoyed that he had to visit them at all, and my heart had pleasantly gotten hung up on the words “absolutely consumed by you.” I wasn’t worried about anything on Edward’s end. . .unless she could convince him that she really was a better match. I mean, if they’d grown up together.

“I’m sorry it’ll be awkward. I hope not too unbearable. You really *can* call me,” I offered. *Please don’t let me sound worried and desperate. I’ve got to make him understand that I trust him.*

He chuckled slightly. “Thanks for the offer. I absolutely will call you. It’s never felt gentlemanly when I’ve had to explain to Tanya over and over that there’s zero chance for us, but. . . I just. . . I only ever see myself growing old with *you*, Bella. You’re it for me.”

Guh. Did he just say “growing old with me?” “Well, now *that’s* nice to hear. Especially when I know you’ll be the “hunted” this weekend. It sort of puts my mind at ease.” *I hope my attempt at humor and light-heartedness were the right approach.*

Genuine laughter filled my ear. “The hunted. I like that. I just want to make sure you know that

I'm elusive. I'm not easy to catch. And I. Am. All. Yours. In fact, that's the only thing that will be awkward with Tanya. Every time I've set her straight in the past, I think she's believed that she still—somehow—had a chance. This time, though, when I tell her about you, I think she'll be insanely jealous. I've always been a challenge to her. But *someone* has won my heart completely, and that'll be difficult for her to accept."

"I just hope it doesn't get ugly. Otherwise, I'll have to show up and go all Chuck Norris on her."

Chuckling, he answered, "I might pay to see that, Bella. Emmett would seriously be proud of you."

"Well, that's what I want, for sure. That and you. . .next to me."

I heard a tense sigh, and Edward whispered, "I want you lying next to me wrapped up in my arms. Wearing my sweatshirt."

"I've got your sweatshirt on now." I bit my lip, wishing I were close to him just as he described.

I think Edward might have growled, and I wasn't sure if he was frustrated or. . .

"I am so glad I gave that to you. I love that you like to wear something with my name on it."

This slightly territorial Edward was new, and—very strangely, I had to admit—I liked it. I loved his name on the back, too. I wondered if he'd like it if I wore it Friday night, so everyone would know I belonged to someone. "I'm going to wear it on Friday if Ange and I go."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. I've got an 'I-don't-take-hints-well-guy' over here as well."

"'I-don't-take-hints' as in 'I never have'? Or is this relatively new?" He didn't sound bothered, just curious.

"Since high school. I'd never go out with him then, either, but did let him give me a ride to a few group things. I guess the hope must've gone to his head. But Charlie cleaned his gun really carefully when he came to pick me up, and Mike got the message back then. I don't know what he thinks must have changed. . ."

"Hmm. Well, I hope you can be convincing, and I'd be thrilled for my hoodie to help with that. I can definitely understand, though, why it's hard to give up hope. I know I would have waited and waited for you, Bella. I'm just thankful you gave me a chance sooner rather than later."

"You'd have waited, huh?"

"Indefinitely."

“Do you know how your words make me feel, Edward?”

“Mm, no. But I sure hope you really take them to heart, because I mean them with all of mine.”

I sighed with pleasure, and I heard a deep chuckle. Then he continued, “If you were next to me, I’d *show* you how much I mean it.”

I blushed and was thankful he couldn’t see it.

“Did I make you blush?” he asked softly.

“You know you did, Edward. You’re merciless with that stuff.”

“Well, you have no idea, I’m sure, how your blush. . .affects me.”

“Really?” I almost giggled. Almost.

“Bella, Love. You look so beautiful, and my fingers want to touch you wherever I see it.”

Guh. Again. Does he ‘write these things down to give them as unstudied an air as possible’? My words stumbled out of my mouth in response, not nearly the graceful answer I’d been hoping for. “Erm, thanks. I. . .uh. . . don’t know what to say.” And I was blushing furiously because of that, too.

He exhaled in frustration then. “This is so hard, Bella. Being away from you like this. Even when we’re busy at school, at least we can meet for a meal or something. I honestly feel like a part of me is missing.”

“I know what you mean. I miss you, too. So much, Edward.” I yawned before I could help myself.

“You’re tired,” he whispered. “I should let you go.”

“Okay. I hate it, but you’re right. Listen, give hugs to everybody and wish them all a happy Thanksgiving for me.”

“Will do, Love. I hope you have a great day with Charlie. I’ll be thinking of you. . . in my sweatshirt.”

I laughed lightly, but the exhaustion was evident in my voice. “I’ll be wearing it.”

“I love you, Bella.”

“You, too.”

“Good night.”

“Night. Bye.”

“Bye.”

As we hung up, I blew a lonely breath out. This was going to be a long break.

* *
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Thanksgiving Day was relaxed and cozy. I got up early to cook, and Charlie and I sat down at about 2:00 for the big meal. I made way more than we needed, because I wanted to be able to freeze a lot of food for Charlie to have when I was back at school. After we ate, I curled up on the couch with my book while he watched the football game.

Angela swung by that evening, and we went for a walk, enjoying the sunset. Flying out late had turned out to not be such a bad thing for her, since Ben had picked her up to take her out for dinner before he saw her off at the airport. Their relationship was moving along considerably, and I was extremely thankful that he treated her so well. Angela was one of those people who thought of everyone else first, genuinely concerned about their needs. Ben recognized that, and he went out of his way to make her feel appreciated. The thing that made me happiest for her, though, was the fact that he made her laugh. Her sense of humor was one of my favorite things about her personality. She needed someone who understood that.

As we walked, the big invitation to La Push came up and, and she ribbed me about Mike for a while. “Dude! He’s got a thick skull! It must be all that hair gel.”

Elbowing her, I laughed my agreement. “I guess I’ve got to admire his persistence, though.” I remembered Edward’s comment about it, too. He’d have waited for me indefinitely.

“Yes!” she replied with mock enthusiasm. “And ‘persistence’ is right at the top of the ‘Things I look for in a Guy’ list. Just below extreme hotness, crooked smiles, musical genius, and dazzling green eyes. A close second.”

I guffawed. “Right! Edward deserves his own category of desirability.” I found my mind wandering to all of the ways he was desirable, and the blood rushed to my face and neck. Even though it was only Angela beside me, I was thankful for the gathering darkness. It hid the nature of my thoughts until we were almost back to my house. “So, what do you think about going to hang out with everyone tomorrow night?”

She cocked her head to the side slightly and studied me. “Are you okay with it, really? I mean, I don’t think it’d be awful to catch up a little, but I’d definitely want to be able to get out of there early if we felt like it. We could just drive out separately.”

“That sounds perfect.”

I spoke with Edward before I fell asleep, and he told me that being apart from me had inspired

another composition. Apparently, he missed the sound of my heartbeat. He'd just realized how much he liked listening to it the other day, during an episode of sappy sweetness, but it had oddly strengthened our relationship.

The week before break, we'd spent an afternoon ensconced in his room listening to music and snuggling. It was one of the most contented moments of my life. Where there was normally such desire and tension between us, that afternoon had found us needing to simply hold each other. He'd just bought a CD from a relatively new indie rock group, and we discovered that we had a very similar process for delving into new music. He always made sure he had two hours or so, to listen to the entire album, uninterrupted. It gave him a true feel for their sound and musical style. I did the same thing, only my focus was always on the lyrics. So, we had climbed onto his bed, and I'd arranged the pillows to hug and support me while I perused the jacket from cover to cover, learning all I could about The Beggar's Guild. He'd burrowed under his green blanket and nestled his head against my shoulder, just under my chin. Wrapping his arm around me, it hadn't taken Edward long to fall asleep. When he'd awakened a few hours later, he'd hugged me tightly to him and sighed with pleasure.

"Have a good nap?" I'd teased him.

"Your heartbeat lulled me to sleep. It was definitely better than the album." He'd crawled up higher then, pressing soft, wet kisses along my jaw and burying his face in my hair.

"Hmm. Well you missed out, I'm afraid. The Beggar's Guild is really pretty great. They've got a unique sound, but you can tell they've been influenced by Tom Petty and Bruce Springsteen. The lead singer's voice is really raw. I liked it a lot."

"Did I ever tell you what it does to me when you talk music?"

Uh. . .no? No you haven't. But your breath in my ear is about to make me come undone. Pull it together, Swan. "I don't think so, but I'm happy to oblige."

"It makes me feel like you're a part of me." He had maneuvered his arm between the pillows and my shoulder, and pulled me over onto my side. I found my favorite place under his shoulder and nuzzled his chest as he cocooned me in the blanket with him, hitting play once more. And then I learned firsthand how calming a heartbeat can be.

I'd been drawn from my snoozing by fingers gently running through my hair, and had realized my head was rising and falling right along with Edward's chest. The room had grown dark, and I didn't know what time it was.

"Bella?" he had whispered into the shadows.

"Mmhm?"

"I love you. You are everything I need. Thank you for this afternoon."

“It was really perfect, wasn’t it?”

“More than perfect. And I don’t ever want to forget the sound of your heartbeat.”

So. . .he missed my heartbeat. I missed his, too. I missed cuddling in my spot. I missed his smell of cinnamon and woods and strength. I missed his voice and words, all soothing truth and burning intensity.

And the phone calls weren’t quite giving me the Edward fix that I needed. I zipped up his sweatshirt and pulled the hood up to cover my face, inhaling as much of his scent as I could. Diluted by detergent, it wasn’t enough. I grabbed my phone to text him once more.

Is it weird that my heart is aching? –B

Only a moment later, my phone vibrated in my hand, and I read the words that would get me through the next day.

Love, there is not a part of me that wouldn’t be soothed by having you with me. You are my air and my water. You are my life now. Sunday is too far away. –E

His words ministered to me, mollifying the deep, gnawing ache of loneliness in my chest, and I finally fell asleep imagining him next to me.

Friday sped by, mostly because I slept in and then lazed around the house all day thinking of Edward. I wondered what time he’d finish his recording session with Mr. Bailey, and I hoped that things wouldn’t be too awkward or tense at the Denali’s house. At least Esme would be there, too.

I made dinner for Charlie, and we ate together in companionable silence. We didn’t have much to talk about other than our evening plans, but the quiet was never awkward or tense.

Knowing that it would be really cold at the beach, I planned to dress in several layers. The crucial outer one, though, the one I wanted everyone to see would be my Cullen sweatshirt. So, I piled on a couple long sleeve t-shirts over my tank, followed by my big, wool sweater. I left my hair down to keep my neck warm, but grabbed a hat to keep it in place. Out at First Beach, wind was inevitable.

Charlie smiled knowingly when I tossed my gloves into the chair by the door and pulled on my boots. “Hopin’ that sweatshirt’ll convince Newton to leave you alone, are ya?”

I chuckled. “Maybe. I sure hope *something* will, because I’m going to get tired of pushy conversation really quickly.”

“Bring Cullen home sometime, and Newton won’t have a leg to stand on.” As if he thought better of encouraging that level of commitment, he amended, “Nah. Nevermind. You’re not *that* serious about Edward yet. We’ll just hope the hoodie does the trick, huh?”

I nodded, but thought about how many times I'd already wished Edward were here, sharing every experience with me, learning about my past. I especially wished he were going to be with me at the beach that night. I wondered what Charlie would think of him coming to Forks with me later this year.

I saw Angela's headlights and grabbed my stuff. Saying a quick farewell, I ran out the door, slid into her car, and we drove out to La Push. There was already quite a crowd gathered around, and—for the size of the bonfire—I knew someone must have brought wood with them. A pickup truck was blaring Kmart rock-n-roll, and I chastised the owner under my breath for living this close to Seattle and not even recognizing decent music.

"You'd think they could at least play Soundgarden or something," Angela complained.

"Seriously."

"Oh well, let's make this as fun as possible. We don't have to stay long."

And we didn't.

People from our high school seemed to be everywhere, and they still acted like they'd never left. Angela and I spoke to several people, but most of them were already at least buzzing, and weren't up for much intelligent conversation.

Of course, the only ones who were really interested in chatting with us anyway were Mike and Tyler. Tyler wasn't awful to talk to, but I learned quickly that a drinking Mike Newton equals a Skeezy Mike Newton. He wasted no time in coming over and putting his arm around me, telling me loudly that I'd really "turned out well."

I tactfully removed his arm and asked what everybody usually did on a Friday night.

"Ah, you know! Clubs, movies, and a couple of good pubs in Seattle. But when we're all around here again, this is it. 'Course if the weather's bad, we go to somebody's house. Whoever's got parents out of town."

I swear. Nothing will ever change around here. I'm glad I got out when I could.

I turned to tell Angela I didn't know how much longer I could last, and we talked about what we would do if we were still in Hanover. We missed the culture, the variety.

About that time, a loud bass beat started coursing through the air, and I felt someone behind me, their arms around my waist, bouncing and grinding against me to the music. Mike's voice spoke right into my ear, "C'mon, Bella. Dance with me. Let me give you some good things to remember about home."

I turned my head to respond and was overwhelmed with his nasty beer breath. "Get OFF me,

Newton!” I slammed a heel down on one of his feet, and he stumbled backwards.

Angela was trying not to laugh at him. She mouthed “Awkward” at me. I nodded and shuddered momentarily.

“Sheesh, Bella! You didn’t have to...hey. Who’s Cullen?”

Love it. Thank you for asking.

Angela answered for me. “Edward Cullen is Bella’s hot millionaire boyfriend.”

“Huh. Well, he’s not here. . .”

I spun around, glaring at him, willing a hole to open up in the earth and just swallow this total nuisance. “Neither are we, Mike. Thanks for the invitation, but I’m sure we can find something better to do.”

We left quickly, and went back to Angela’s to watch a movie.

I decided to call Edward when we got there, so she helped her mom put her little brother and sister in bed. Stepping out onto the porch, I dialed his number.

An unfamiliar voice answered, “Hello?”

“Um. . .is Edward available?”

Laughing seductively, the catty female said, “He’s in the shower. Who *is* this?”

My instincts told me that she was no concern, just a family friend being a wench. But she sounded so *confident*. I cleared my throat and forced out, “Would you just tell him that Bella called?”

“Will do, Sweetie,” she said condescendingly. “But I’m sure he’ll be too. . .*busy* tonight to call you back. Maybe you should try calling tomorrow. Late.”

“Right. Thanks, Tanya.” I was trying to keep the anger out of my voice.

“Edward told you about me, did he?” She sounded so sickeningly pleased with herself, and I wanted to tell her *exactly* what he had said about her.

“Oh, he *definitely* told me about you.” Of course, there was that niggling doubt in the back of my head that she *was* a better match for him, but *she* didn’t need to hear that, so I bit my tongue, allowing the venom to pool in my mouth.

“Just let him know I called, okay? Because I’m sure he’ll be interested to hear that we’ve talked.”

“Edward was pretty miserable without you yesterday,” she said. “I mean, we all had a great time as family, but he was *seriously* wishin’ you had come home with him.”

“Oh, yeah? I was thinkin’ the same thing out here.” I wanted to be polite and ask if they were going to visit Jasper’s family sometime in the future, but I saw this as my inroad for the questions that were overwhelming me. “I’ve gotten so used to being around him that it’s hard not to see his face every day.”

“I bet. When he talks about you, I love to just watch him.” She chuckled as she pictured it. “He gets this far off look in his eyes and smiles to himself . . . until he realizes you’re far away. You’re *so* good for him, Bella.”

“Have you talked to him today?”

“Nah. Jasper and I are meeting him and Mom tomorrow for lunch, but he was busy all day with the recording. Then they were gonna be with the Denalis tonight. He hasn’t called you yet?” She sounded surprised.

“Not yet, but I’m sure he will. I tried to beat him to the punch a little bit ago, but Tanya answered and told me he was in the shower. So, I just told her . . .”

She cut me off abruptly. “I’m sorry, *what did you say?* Did you just say that Tanya answered my *brother’s* phone?”

“Yeah.” I waited for her response, which blared through the phone less than three seconds later.

“What the—? Where does she get off?” she said. I could tell she was trying to maintain self-control. After a very deep breath, she exhaled through her nose. The carefully measured calm in her voice was almost funny, but I knew better than to laugh right now. I was getting the affirmation I desperately needed from her reaction. She continued, “Will you please tell me *exactly* what she said?”

“Okay, well, she answered and . . .”

“Wait. I’m sorry. I forgot to ask one *crucial* question: Had Edward already told you about Tanya, or was this the first time you’d heard about her?”

“Oh, he told me. He said she was really pushy and that it wasn’t going to go well this time, since someone had finally won his heart.”

“Aww, that’s sappy. Sounds like him. Good. She’s been the proverbial thorn in his side for years. Mine too, actually. I can’t stand the wench. Our moms are really close, though. That’s the only reason we put up with her garbage.” Deep breath. “Okay . . . so, tell me exactly what she said, Bella, word for word. I wanna make sure I get this right.”

I gave her the full rundown of our little chat, and she listened carefully, not interrupting once.

She giggled a little as I wrapped up with, “. . . and I told her to make sure she put Edward’s phone back.”

“That’s awesome, Bella. Can I just say, first of all, that I’m really proud of you for not letting her scare you. You’ve come a long way, *chica*. I’m glad that you trust Edward. Tanya’s just being her normal manipulative skank self.”

“Well, I’m trying, but there’s a part of me that is still a little unnerved by her. Don’t get me wrong, though, it’s *her* I don’t trust. Edward—I trust completely. But your family wouldn’t . . . *rather* him be with someone like Tanya?”

“HA! No *way*, Bella. Our families are close, but that doesn’t make us irrational. We all just want Edward to be happy, and every one of us is glad that you’re the one to finally make him feel that way. He’s a different guy now that he has you. I mean, he’s always been great, but . . . it’s just good to see him so complete. Seriously, this is way out of line, even for Tanya. My mom’s gonna be so pissed.”

“Listen, Alice, I don’t want to start anything.”

“Oh, you’re not. Tanya started this. We’re just going to finish it, once and for all. Trust me. It’s been a long time comin’.”

“I just don’t want to do anything that will make Edward uncomfortable or put him in an awkward situation. And I’m not trying to stir up trouble for you eith—”

“Listen, BFF. That’s enough. I have no doubt that he’ll be uncomfortable, but it’ll be because of Tanya, and you’re gonna need to just sit back and let him handle it. I promise that I’m not going to do anything—except make sure he calls you. You don’t expect her to actually give him the message, do you?”

I laughed, in spite of the situation. “I guess not, but he said he’d call me tonight anyway, so I could just wait.”

“Pfft! You can wait, if you want, but I’m gonna . . .”

“Hey, Alice, I’ve got an incoming call. Hang on a sec.” I looked at the screen, hoping to see Edward’s number, but I didn’t recognize the caller.

“Huh. I don’t know who it is. Do you want me to call you back?”

“Nah. I’ll check in later. I love you, Bella. Not as much as Edward does, though. Don’t worry about any of this, ‘kay?”

“Okay. Bye.”

“See ya.”

When I switched over, I was delighted to hear Edward's voice answer my hello. *This is an excellent surprise.*

"Hey, Love. Did you have fun tonight?" There was a rich smile in his voice, and I knew immediately he hadn't spoken with Tanya about my call.

"Nope, but that's okay. Ange and I are going to watch a movie in a little bit. That's always fun. How was your day with Elias?"

"It was . . . incredible, really. I wish you could've been there with me. You'd have loved it."

"Mmm. I wish I'd been able to be there. How are things with Tanya? Is it awkward?" I was asking sincerely. Really.

"Yeah, she laid it on a little thick when I first got here, but I set her straight." He lowered his voice a bit for the next part. "She can be a little thickheaded."

I chuckled, and then calmly asked, "So, she gave you my message?"

"Your mess— She didn't say *anything* about you. What are you talking about?" He sounded totally confused.

"I called while you were in the shower, and she made it clear that I should try back tomorrow, *late*, because you'd be . . . how did she put it? Oh. She just said you'd be too *busy* to call me."

"Are you..." he paused, exhaling sharply, and it sounded like a hiss through our phone connection. "Are you *serious*?" I could picture him on the other end of the line, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"I wish I weren't, Edward, but . . ."

"My phone . . ." There were equal parts disappointment and anger in his voice.

"I know. I was surprised she answered it." Something occurred to me then. "Wait. Where are you calling from?"

"I'm on Mom's phone. Tanya brought some coffee to my room while I was in the shower, and she "accidentally" spilled it all over my cell. It's dead." The mirthless laugh that he choked out told me that he'd just figured everything out. "Honestly, it seems like nothing's beneath her."

"Sorry, Edward."

"No, Love. You've got absolutely nothing to apologize for. I'm just sorry I missed your call." He paused for a moment. "You know what? Can I call you back in about an hour?" He answered his own question. "Agh . . . you'll be in the middle of your movie. Why don't you just call me when

you're done, or home? It doesn't matter what time. You'll just have to call *this* number."

"Okay, sure." I hated that our call was ending almost as soon as it had begun, but then, I was glad that he evidently wanted to handle this right away. I truly hoped it went well.

"Bella? Love?" his voice was hesitant. "You knew she was lying . . . right?"

"Of course, Edward. I believed what you'd already said about her. Thanks for telling me beforehand, by the way. It was good to know about Tanya before I um. . . got a chance to talk to her."

I could feel his relief through the phone as he chuckled and added, "I'm so sorry about all this. Thanks for trusting me. I love you—more than anything."

"You, too, Edward. I love you, too."

"I'll talk to you soon, then. Tell Angela I said hello."

"Will do. Bye."

"Bye."

I sat there in silence for a few moments, just wondering how all this was going to play out. I was really proud of myself for not jumping to conclusions and making all of this worse with my crazy insecurities. Edward definitely deserved my trust.

The screen door creaked open then, slicing into my thoughts.

"Ready?" Angela asked.

"You bet." I smiled and followed her inside.

._*_*._

Knowing that I could use the distraction, I hedged around Angela's questions when we got inside. Of course, she read me like a book, and she knew not to push me for information. Once again, I couldn't have been more thankful for her friendship. After the movie, though, was another story. She turned to face me on her parents' couch and ordered, "Now tell me about your talk with Edward!"

I filled her in.

"Girl! I didn't know there was a psycho wench! What are you waiting for?! Get home, Bella! You need to call him and see what happened!"

So, I hugged her and took off.

Charlie had already gone to bed by the time I got home, but that didn't surprise me. After showering and changing into something comfortable, I dialed the new number. He picked up before the end of the first ring.

"Hello?" I knew I wasn't imagining the relief in his voice.

"Hey, you. How'd everything go?"

"Well, it's *done*. I had a talk with my mom about everything. I really needed to, you know? She and Tanya's mom are really close. But she was as furious as I was."

"Ugh. I hope the rest of your stay won't be terrible now."

"I left, Bella. I'm at Alice's."

"You just . . . left?" *Wow*.

"Yeah," he explained. "Alice called while Mom and I were trying to decide what to do about it all. I explained that I didn't feel comfortable staying any longer, so when Alice invited me, Mom told me to go. She was totally appalled at the situation and said she'd take care of everything there. I wanted to confront Tanya myself, but neither of us thought it would be wise for me to be alone with her—at all. And Mom wanted to be the one to explain things to Sasha. So, I just grabbed my stuff and headed out. Al's roommates are out of town until Sunday, so Jasper and I are both crashing here."

"Hey, bonus Alice time is always a good thing, right?"

"Absolutely. I just wish I was getting some Bella time."

Swoon. "Me, too. But I'll see you in two days. We'll just have to hang on until then."

"I'll struggle through it if you will," he said playfully.

"We can make it," I teased.

He exhaled with resolve. "I'm driving back to school tomorrow after lunch, I think, though. I wasn't planning on leaving until Sunday morning, but I'm ready to get back to campus."

"Wish I could fly back a day early."

"Love, if I thought you'd do it, I'd call the airport and have your flight changed right now."

I laughed. "Get serious, Edward. You know how I feel about anyone spending money on me. There's no way."

With a sigh, he said, “I know, Love. It’s crazy stubborn, and at times like this I wish that you’d just get over it, but I understand. One day, though, you’ll realize that I really offer things like that for *myself*.”

“Whatever,” I teased. “You keep telling yourself that.”

He laughed, and we fell back into easy conversation, sharing every little detail of our respective days.

The next morning, I woke up and wished like mad that I’d accepted Edward’s offer. Just knowing there’d been a possibility of seeing him that night and I’d passed it up made me want to kick my own butt. I made my way downstairs, and found Charlie in the kitchen.

“Mornin’, Bells. Have a good time last night?”

“It was . . . interesting.” *Let him make of that what he wants.*

“Sweatshirt work its magic?” he asked as he poured me a cup of coffee. *God bless you, Dad.*

“Very nearly. It still wasn’t enough to dissuade Newton from trying, but . . . some people just have to get knocked in the head before they can focus enough to get a clue. Ange and I just went back to her parents’ and watched a movie.”

“Oh, well, that sounds good. Sorry Newton’s a brickhead. More like his old man than I figured.”

“Whatever. I won’t run into him too much, I guess.”

“Hey, Kid. I need to tell you, there’s been some trouble around town—robberies and even a few muggings. Somebody not from around here I’m figurin’. Anyway, I’ve got to go into work soon, and . . . I probably won’t be able to take you to the airport tomorrow. We’re gonna be swamped. Think maybe Ange could drive you?”

“Aw, are you serious? I hoped we’d get to relax together a little today. I’ll call Angela and ask her, though. Just be safe, okay, Dad?”

“Always am, Bells.”

“You leaving now?” I asked, disappointed.

“Yup. Gotta get over to Compton’s lumberyard. Call my cell when you find out whether Angela can drive you. Otherwise, I could maybe get Waylon to take you up . . . or you could call Newton.”

“Right,” I laughed. “Not a chance.”

He chuckled and grabbed his gun belt as he opened the door. “See ya later tonight, Kiddo.”

“Bye, Dad. See you later.”

Angela must've gone out for the morning, because we finally caught up with each other around two. She couldn't drive me, because her flight left at 8 o'clock that night.

“Come back with me, Bella. It wouldn't cost a lot to change your ticket. Then Charlie won't have to feel bad about leaving you alone tomorrow.”

The temptation finally wins. It's practical now, too. Still, I decided not to tell Edward. I'd rather surprise him.

We got everything worked out, and Charlie called to change the ticket. He wouldn't hear of me paying for it myself. Just a few hours later, after stopping by the station to give a final hug to him, Angela and I were on the plane back to New Hampshire. I was so giddy, I felt sick.

We touched down just after one in the morning, and—though we were exhausted—I couldn't even remotely entertain the idea of sleep. I just wanted to talk to Edward. I turned my phone on, and had apparently missed several calls from him while we were in the air. His only message said to call him as soon as I could. “I'm going through withdrawal,” he'd explained.

I called him as we drove back towards campus to make sure he was there.

“I got in about ten,” he told me. “Em's not back yet, though.”

“Okay, well, can I come see you?”

“I wish,” he sighed. He sounded drained.

“Seriously, Edward. I'm ten minutes from campus.”

And suddenly, his voice was *not* drained. “Are you kidding me?”

“Why would I . . . ?” He didn't let me finish.

“I'll meet you in front of your building! Gotta go!”

And then he hung up.

We pulled up in the back lot, and I asked Angela if she'd walk around with me, just to see if he was really there. It was too late to walk anywhere by myself, even if it was right outside the dorm.

When we rounded the corner, I saw him standing up on the bench where he usually sat calmly. But tonight, even from 50 yards away, I could feel the energy flowing from him. When his eyes found mine, his smile took up his entire face. I watched as he launched himself from the bench

and started running toward me. Within ten seconds, I was wrapped in his arms as he twirled me around.

It was the best reunion. Ever.

“I cannot believe you are here right now!” he said, the words rushing out of his mouth as he pressed his forehead to mine.

“So, it’s a good surprise?”

His answer was a scorching kiss. Both of us lost ourselves there for a moment until someone cleared their throat next to us and jerked us back to Dartmouth.

I peeked over my shoulder at Angela, only slightly embarrassed for the display. One eyebrow cocked and a dangerous smile on her face, she said, “I thought it might be a little rude to walk off without so much as a goodnight—not that either of you would’ve noticed.”

I blushed as I turned toward her, and Edward squeezed me tightly to his side. “Sorry, Angela,” he said. Peering up at him, I watched as he bit his lip, but I could swear there was no remorse there at all. Just playfulness. “Um, goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Ange!” I added with a grin. “Thanks for walking me up here. I’ll call you tomorrow?”

“Good enough, Bells. You two have fun catching up!” She smirked at us as she turned and walked toward the building.

Edward and I watched to make sure she made it all the way inside, but the deep chuckle shaking him as we stood there told me that his mind was elsewhere.

When the door clunked to a close, he spun me to face him again. “Stay with me?”

I wanted nothing more. “Okay.”

His eyes crinkled as the smile took over again. “Good. I just can’t let you go right now. Do you need to run to your room?”

“Well, I’ve got my duffle with me. . .”

“I’ll just grab it then, and I can help you get it back to your room tomorrow sometime. Is that all right?”

I nodded, and he picked up the bag, threading his free fingers through mine as we walked.

“I can’t believe you’re here,” he said quietly.

“Yeah, you said that,” I teased. “But I didn’t want to stay away.” I explained the practical reason behind my decision, too.

“Well, I’m sorry you missed your last day with Charlie, but I’m entirely too glad you came back early.”

I tugged on his hand, and he stopped, turning to face me. Hopping up on my tiptoes, I pressed a tender, chaste kiss to his lips. “I’m glad, too,” I whispered as I pulled away.

His smirk might have melted me a little, so all I could really do coherently when he suggested we get inside was dip my head in assent.

We practically jogged to his building and up the stairs, and I was thankful he was maneuvering the heavy bag. I’d have broken something important by now if it were up to me.

Once we made it inside, he offered me something to drink.

“How about some hot tea?” I asked.

“Perfect.”

“I’m gonna change into some comfy clothes. Be right back.” I pulled out my yoga pants, a tank and the hoodie and dashed to the bathroom.

By the time I got out, Edward had our tea ready, and he was sitting on the couch waiting for me. He’d apparently changed too, while the water was boiling. He was wearing a very worn long-sleeved gray Dartmouth t-shirt and a pair of flannel drawstring pants. He had his green blanket tucked under his arm, and a smile graced his face as he appraised my appearance from head to toe. I knew the moment that the Cullen hoodie registered. He inhaled sharply, and quirked an eyebrow at me.

“I’m never giving it back, you know.”

Biting his lip again, he said, “I certainly hope not. It looks infinitely better on you than me.”

This lip-biting thing is newish, and I cannot express well the warming, twisting, coiling affect it has on the pit of my stomach. “Thanks,” was all I could manage.

I climbed onto the couch next to Edward, tucking my legs underneath me as I turned to face him. He passed me my mug, and it warmed my fingers immediately. I smiled as I noticed he’d remembered I liked lemon in my tea.

“So,” I began. “How are Alice and Jasper?”

“Good,” he chuckled to himself. “We had a great time together. And lunch with my mom today was . . . enlightening to say the least.”

“Oh?”

“Apparently, Ali got to the Denalis’ to pick up my mom just in time to overhear a very interesting conversation.”

“Tell, tell!” Was I overeager? I didn’t flipping care at this point. I wanted to hear what happened, and Edward looked like he was enjoying filling me in.

“Well, I’ll tell you exactly what Alice told me. All of the ladies were in the kitchen when she arrived. Mom and Sasha were chatting nicely over coffee while Tanya was sort of brooding at the bar. Alice sat down at the kitchen table and just listened, trying to pick up on the dynamic of the conversation. Sasha welcomed her warmly, and asked if she’d had a good visit with me. I guess she realized she’d never really gotten a good answer as to why I’d left so suddenly, so she asked about it. Alice said Tanya really perked up at that point, but it was clear my mom didn’t want her friend to feel awkward. So she just jumped in and said that I’d had an unexpected phone call from a special girl, and that I’d wanted to talk with Alice about it.”

I leaned in a little as I sipped my tea, waiting for him to continue.

“Sasha was intrigued, to say the least. She’d noticed that I’d seemed upset when I left—though I was honestly trying to be as gracious as possible. She asked Mom if the young lady and I were having problems communicating.” He laughed quietly as he continued. “Mom told her that you and I were blissfully happy, and the whole family was thrilled about you. The problem communicating was actually with another girl, who couldn’t seem to understand what relationships are really about.”

“Uh-oh,” I chimed in. “Was Tanya getting uncomfortable with the conversation?”

“Alice said she was pretty huffy at this point, yeah. But, Sasha wasn’t picking up on a thing. She actually said, ‘Some people can be so blind.’ And something about what a catch I am.

I gasped quietly. “Do you think she supported Tanya’s . . . pressing the issue?”

“No. I think she knew of Tanya’s interest, but Mom assures me that Sasha wouldn’t put up with Tanya’s behavior if she knew. Mom was trying to be discreet, but this would be the last time. I hope Tanya got the hint, for her sake—and for Mom and Sasha.” He shrugged and continued.

“Anyway, my mom told her that there’d always been girls who were interested, but I’d just focused on other things that were important to me, waiting until the right girl came along. Sasha said she wasn’t surprised that there’d several admirers, and that’s when my mom went for the throat.”

“What did she say?” I asked, hanging on every word at this point.

“She said that recently, there’d even been a girl that was so entirely desperate to get my attention

that she'd stooped to stealing my phone and acting like she was my girlfriend. When it was about to blow up in her face, she promptly poured coffee in my phone to erase the evidence. Alice told me my mom laughed and said, 'I mean, can you even *imagine*? That's just crossing the line. I guess I feel a little sad for a girl who'd lower herself to such a level, but, I have to believe my son. Wouldn't you, Sasha?'"

He'd impersonated Esme's mannerisms wonderfully, and I couldn't hold back a laugh. "How did Tanya react?"

"Alice said that when Mom gave her the 'Esme Cullen Look of Shame' following her speech, Tanya just mumbled something under her breath, got up, and left. I'd say she definitely got the message. And I'm thankful that Mom got to handle it her way, so that things are still good between her and Sasha." He leaned his head back on the couch and let out a satisfied breath.

"I am, too. I'd have hated to cause any awkwardness in their relationship. Alice said they've been friends since college."

His head snapped up. "Bella Swan, you have caused nothing but my happiness. If there had been a falling out, it would've been entirely Tanya's fault. Mom told me she's done with all of Tanya's conniving. If she doesn't get the hint from that little conversation, Mom told us she could honestly walk away and not look back. Her family is more important to her."

"Wow. I . . . um, hope it doesn't have to get to that point." I traced an imaginary picture on my thigh as I spoke.

Reaching over and covering my hand with his own, Edward said, "So do I—for Mom's sake. But I'm pretty sure Alice was ready to run head on into the drama. She's been sick of Tanya's crap for ages. Kind of like my little protector . . . it's sweet."

"I love the way your family looks out for one another," I said, squeezing his hand.

When I looked up at him, his eyes were burning into mine. "I love that you're such a part of my family now. . ." he whispered as he stroked my cheek with his fingertip. "... and I hope you always will be."

What? Two comments in as many days about 'always' and growing old together. What if it wasn't just sappy mush? What if he was serious? I searched his eyes, looking for any sign of teasing or joking, but all I could find was sincerity. That shouldn't have surprised me. He was the single most genuine person I'd ever known in my life.

Not knowing what to say, or how to respond, I finished my now cool tea and set it on the end table. It would be amazing if I could spend the rest of my life with him, but that was crazy to even think about. He must've known that his comment made me a little unnerved. For once, though, he didn't apologize. He just closed his eyes and leaned his head back again, leaving the words out there. His thumb lazily drew circles on the back of my hand.

My brain busied itself with a slideshow of possible future scenes until I felt tired. Cullen Family Christmas. Edward fishing with Charlie. Enjoying ball park hotdogs with Renee at one of Phil's games. Edward's concerts all over the world. A more settled life, the two of us snuggling on the couch reading together. Standing and laughing as I watch Edward chase after a little copper-headed boy in my dream meadow.

When I'd sifted through one after another, I still had no response. Glancing over at Edward, I realized how very content he was, eyes still closed, a slight smile playing at the edge of his lips, his thumb still gently tracing invisible patterns on my skin.

I knew one thing for sure, though. I wasn't going to take one single moment with Edward Cullen for granted. He loved me, and I loved him. That was all I needed to know for now.

I stretched and snuggled up to him, and he silently turned his head toward me, burying his face in my hair. "Tired yet?" he said, his voice hushed.

"I am."

"You can sleep in my bed, okay? I'll stay out here." He pulled out the big green blanket as he extracted himself from me and got up from the couch.

I sat there, surprised, realizing that I wasn't ready to just walk away from him for the night. "Wait, Edward. I . . . will you just hold me tonight? Would that be okay?" My stomach knotted as I waited for his response.

Hesitating for a moment, he said, "Bella. You have no idea how much I want to . . . but are you sure?" So vulnerable.

"I think I just need you to be *with* me tonight. Just to know you're real." I hung my head as I spoke, but could feel the love in his eyes as I peeked up at him.

"I'm real," he whispered. He pulled me to my feet and grabbed the blanket, bringing it with him.

When we got to his room, he tossed the blanket onto the far side of his bed and pulled down a corner of his duvet, motioning for me to climb in. I did, and he tucked me in tenderly, climbing over me once he was sure I was comfortable. Surprisingly, he didn't get under the covers with me. He scooted up behind me and wrapped an arm around me, pulling me close to him, and then he arranged the green blanket so it covered his body.

"Are you going to be okay like that?" I asked, wanting to understand every reason behind his choice to keep the barrier between us but afraid to ask.

"Of course," he said, "I'm getting to fall asleep with my Bella beside me." I heard the smile in his voice. He pressed his nose into my hair and inhaled deeply. "I want every little step we take together to be meaningful and perfect. It's just. . . I . . . I'm sort of keeping myself in check here."

He was always so careful with me, and it communicated more than his words could on their own. Everything he did spoke volumes to my heart. "I treasure you," his actions said.

"Thank you," I breathed. I turned my face toward his, searching for his lips. "Good night, Edward." Our mouths found each other, and began to move effortlessly over one another. His lips smiled against mine as his fingers danced up and down my arm.

"Are you going to sleep in my sweatshirt?" he asked teasingly, moving his lips to my ear.

"Mmhm. I don't like to take it off." I shifted to my back and smiled at him. Just a hint of the moonlight shone through the edges of his window around his blinds, but it was enough to see his silhouette.

He gently brushed my hair off of my neck and placed a kiss in the hollow beneath my ear. His lips moved down the length of my jaw then, finding my mouth. "I love you," he breathed over my lips.

"I love you, too," I answered, feeling him smile against my skin. He slid an arm underneath my neck and hugged me tightly with his other arm as he made his head comfortable on his own pillow. I found the hand that had snaked beneath my neck and threaded my fingers through his, sighing with contentment.

"Goodnight." He snuggled up behind me as closely as he possibly could.

"Night, Edward."

Nestling against him, I felt safer and more loved than I'd ever felt in my life. I was starting to believe maybe I *could* stay there forever.

With a smile on my face, I drifted to sleep, lulled by the rhythm of his breathing.

OO

Hmm. What did you think? Click that little button and review. I need motivation to sit down at my computer these days. Smalls is callin'!

#####

Chapter: 41

A/N: Seriously, you thought I was never coming back, didn't you. Sorry. I have been walking in a total haze of tired-dom. I had this written two weeks ago, but could NOT find

the time to sit down and revise it post sending it to the betashop. I've got to give a LOUD shoutout to my ladies at the Coven, because I could not have done this without your sage advice and serious encouragement (and did I mention your patience and understanding?) FlemilyHarper, Aerosoldoc, Sidekick, WndrngY, IrritableGrizzly, and Spikeishotter, you ladies ROCK. Sweet little wet baby-smelling kisses from Smalls. Fistbumps from me.

Actually, I've got to thank ALL of you for the patience and understanding. I have SO appreciated the personal messages that some of you have sent, cheering me on, asking about Smalls, and letting me know you miss me. Truly, keep it up. It's what makes me want to take some time to sit and write when I could be crashing face first into my pillow.

In case you wanted to know, Smalls is topping 8 pounds now, and has a great set of dimples when he grins at me. My other three kids are adjusting well to having the little one around (he's a great excuse to take breaks from "lesson time", and are a fabulous help to this exhausted homeschooling mama. So a shout out to my BigKid (9), my Princess(6), and my Short Son (3). I love you guys.

Twilightzoner, I miss ya. Thanks for gettin' this up for everyone.

On to the story. It's not as long as some chapters, but...maybe you'll show me some mercy? Let me know what you think. (And you have my permission to ask me how it's going. PM me. For real.)

— * — *

Wrap around me...sleep inside this curl

After how alone I've been, it's like a whole new world

My heart had felt like years at sea, bleeding and afraid

Breathe the life back into me, kiss me warm that way

David Wilcox

Chapter Thirty-nine: Sanctuary

I don't know what time it was when I woke up, but gentle rays of light were filtering down on us through the blinds, splaying out across Edward's bed like creeping vines intent on holding us there forever. Breathing deeply and willing myself to wake completely, I shifted my body slightly and realized that some time in the night I'd turned to face Edward. My left leg had made its way out from under the duvet and was draped lazily over the lower half of his body. My arm lay across his chest. I slid my bottom arm out from beneath the pillow and propped up my head, so that I could comfortably observe my Edward as he slept soundly. *My Edward.*

He was beautiful. Stretched out on his back, he'd pulled his right leg up and positioned his foot

just inside of his left knee. The green blanket was haphazardly strewn across his body, not doing him much good, but it wasn't in my way as I let my eyes wander over his sleeping form. Both of his arms were folded behind his head, as if he were lying on a blanket in the sun, soaking up the rays of warmth. His shirt had ridden up during the night, revealing a rather wide belt of skin. I watched his abdomen rise and fall slightly with every breath, wanting to ghost my fingers over his taut skin.

But his face was my favorite. He was the picture of serenity. His eyes were closed, the long, thick lashes curling outward. I studied the lines of his face—the high cheekbones, the strong jaw slightly shadowed and scruffy from a day's growth, the slight bump near the bridge of his nose, and his dusky pink lips. It was extremely difficult for me not to reach up and trace his features, but I didn't dare rouse him from the peace that he exuded.

I blew out a quiet sigh and noticed that his eyelids had begun to twitch slightly. He must've been dreaming. His right arm moved heavily from beneath his head to his chest, where it landed on my left hand. I wiggled my fingers against his palm and watched his hand wrap around mine as he inhaled sharply. When I looked back up at his face, he was squinting at me, and his other hand scratched at his head, creating an even wilder tangle of hair. He licked his lips and smiled at me groggily.

“Good morning, Frumpward,” I said as I squeezed his fingertips.

He laughed quietly at my use of Emmett's mocking nickname. “Morning, Love. Did you sleep well?” he asked, the morning adding a rough edge to his voice.

“I did. I slept *hard*. You?”

“I slept really well, too. It's nice waking up with you.” He smiled tenderly, shifting slightly onto his side. His fingers threaded their way into my hair.

Resting my head on his shoulder, I squeezed him in a one-armed hug. “So, what's on the agenda for today?”

“Hmmm. I want to be lazy. Are you interested...?”

“That sounds perfect, because you know that after tomorrow. . . no slowing down until Christmas.”

“You're right. I'm not ready to hit reality head on just yet. So. . .” he paused long enough for me to turn my face up toward his. “Can I make you breakfast?”

“Hmm. I don't know. Can you make perfectly light and fluffy French toast? Because that's what I'm craving,” I said teasingly.

Chuckling, he answered, “Well, I can make surprisingly decent French toast for a college guy, but, if you're looking for the ‘wow’ quality, I'm not sure. . .”

I grinned, loving that we were wrapped up in each other in so many ways at the moment. “Then how about I wow you with my Nana’s French toast recipe, and you fry up some perfectly crispy bacon? You *do* have bacon, don’t you?”

In perfect mock-seriousness, he replied, “Always, Miss Swan. We don’t go without bacon in this apartment.”

“Nice.”

As I started to roll toward the edge of the bed, he swiftly threaded his fingers through mine and pulled me back toward him. “Do you know how beautiful you are?”

“You’re telling me this at who knows what o’clock in the morning, while my hair is a rat’s nest, my eyes are puffy from sleep, and I could probably kill you with my dragon breath if I aimed it correctly?”

“Yes ma’am. Because you *are* beautiful. . . and because you’re in that condition in *my* apartment, in *my* room waking up with *me*. I’m still a bit overwhelmed that you’re here.”

Those last words could have meant so many different things, and I was thankful for every single one of them. “I’m glad I’m here, too,” I smiled.

He hugged me to his chest, and I listened to the strong, steady beat of his heart. It was becoming one of my favorite sounds. A few moments later, he released me as he kissed the top of my head. “Want me to make some coffee, Dragon Breath?”

I could hear the smirk in his voice. I’d have to do something about that.

“Be nice, Frumpward,” I said as I stood up, grabbed my pillow, and swung it at his face. He blocked it with ease as he laughed and slid out of the bed after me.

I turned to head toward the kitchen and felt his arms snake around my waist from behind. His fingers wrapped around my wrists, holding them still in front of me. “You do not want to start a pillow fight with me, Swan. I hold the title three years running.”

“Oh.” Rolling my eyes, I taunted, “Duly noted. So, do you have these championships while Emmett is asleep?”

He spun me around and did his best to look completely affronted, but his eyes were laughing all the while. “I’m going to pretend you didn’t just ask me that.” He smirked, and I wished that I’d somehow already managed to brush my teeth, so that I could grab him and kiss him. Hard. *Cocky Edward doesn’t show up much, but I’m sure he’s an amazing kisser.*

I laughed and turned quickly to run out of the room in an effort to avoid temptation, but I lost my balance and felt myself careening toward his bedroom carpet. Everything was in slow motion.

No! A faceplant is unacceptable! Not on this perfect morning! Fortunately, Edward's strong arms rescued me from my fall, and no one was hurt. *No one but my pride.*

"Silly Bella. You know you can't move gracefully this early in the day. Let's get you some breakfast." He chuckled and buried his face in my hair as the blood poured into my cheeks.

"And coffee. Stat," I agreed, smiling. *I love your arms around me, Edward. For any reason at all.*

It turned out to be much later than we realized, since we'd fallen asleep around four in the morning. So, we got ready and sat down to enjoy our "breakfast" at about one o'clock. Emmett had called while I was in the shower and said that he and Rose were going to meet up in town and hang out all afternoon. They planned to come in around eight, and we could all have dinner together. And then the beginning of the countdown to finals would commence.

Back in Edward's room, I flopped onto his bed, my own deep ease surprising me. He settled in next to me, the remote for his stereo in hand, and soon we were being serenaded by the melancholy voice of Duncan Sheik. Edward's fingers traced the lines on my palm, wove themselves in between my fingers, pulled away and then repeated the steps of the dance. I absolutely loved this artist, and I wasn't surprised that Edward's taste in music once again matched my own—but the *song*. I was so caught up in the lyrics that I couldn't speak. It was like I was hearing them for the first time again. Edward was also silent, and I wondered if the words moved him as well. Their meaning hung in the air around me like a thick fog, mixing with the intricate movements of Edward's fingers, and I couldn't sense anything but the emotions they were evoking in me.

I sighed when the song ended, feeling a loss, and Edward's hand squeezed mine meaningfully.

And then the song started again.

My head snapped in his direction as he fumbled for the remote. "Agh. I'm sorry," he said, grimacing. "I had that one on repeat all yesterday evening before you got here."

My hand found his and stopped him. "Don't. Let it play again. *This* was the song you had on repeat?"

He smiled shyly and nodded. "Do you like it? It spoke what I was feeling all weekend. I just sort of cocooned myself in it when I got back and missed you so much."

I bit my lip and took his admission in completely. The song did mean a lot to him. I couldn't get over how much I loved him. We were a match in ways I was only beginning to understand. "I do like it," I finally answered. "It's my second favorite on this album."

He nodded, and we listened again, the lyrics filling every empty space in the room.

Don't get me wrong, I'm feeling o.k.

But when I'm without you, it's just not the same

Don't misunderstand me, I'm feeling all right

But when I'm without you the day turns into night. . . into night

You dream of a future. . . a possible place

Where we lie together face to face

And I'm looking forward, I will not deny

I dream of a future made for you and I

You and I

. . . and then I'm with you

No longer alone

When I'm with you

It feels like I'm home

And you are with me

No longer alone

How could it be?

It feels like I'm home

It feels like I'm home

Our eyes never strayed as we listened to the music playing. We stayed there, side by side on our backs with our faces turned toward each other, my eyes asking question after question—his mossy green eyes answering without hesitation.

He meant it. Every word.

I felt my eyes brimming with tears and could hardly breathe for all of the love that consumed me. A tender smile graced his face as his thumb wiped a tear away from my cheek. If Edward's eyes reflected his heart, then I knew with certainty that it belonged to me. Everything about his expression was whispering insistently, "I'm yours. I'm home."

Finally, his voice sliced through the stillness. “I didn’t like being without you, Bella. It was much harder than I expected. I certainly don’t want to overwhelm you, but I . . . I have to be honest. It’s difficult for me to describe how very much my heart wants to be next to yours. All the time.”

With a watery smile, I whispered, “I understand. Can I play you *my* favorite song on here now?”

Nodding, he simply asked, “Which track?”

“Five.”

And I let Duncan Sheik say what my own tongue couldn’t.

I know it’s not fashionable to be this hopeful. . . well, laugh away. I didn’t think it was possible to be this grateful. . . anyway.

The song went on. I hummed quietly when it got to the chorus. Edward’s eyes were closed in meditation.

Days go by. I catch myself smile more than you’d ever ’s been a long while since it’s been okay to feel this way.

Edward’s lips slid into my crooked smile as he mouthed the word, “Perfect.” He opened his eyes and slowly stood to his feet, extending his hand to me in silent invitation as the song continued. When I was standing in front of him, he gracefully lifted our hands above our heads, twirling me around. His face was alight with pleasure as he pulled my body toward him and began dancing with me, keeping the steps slow and very, very simple.

Desperate not to ruin the moment with my clumsiness, I bit my lip and confessed in defeat, “I . . . I can’t dance, Edward. I’m not. . .”

“Will you let me lead? Please? I won’t let you fall,” he whispered.

“But what if I mess up?”

“Everybody missteps sometimes. . .we’ll just keep dancing. It gets easier.”

As the musical interlude ended and the second verse began, I remembered Edward’s promise months ago. He’d promised to lead whenever I was ready to dance again, and here he was. He’d waited—standing still as I made the first few solo steps. He’d listened—noticing every nuance, every tempo change in the music. He’d proven himself to be the ideal partner for me. As my heart thawed, as I began to awake to real, genuine love—the kind that puts the other person first—I knew that I really was ready to dance with him. It might not be perfect, but it would be real.

And it would be *us*.

The moment that realization hit me was matchless.

I looked into his eyes, a dark mossy green, and saw the depth of his love. He lowered his head and sang into my ear, "*In the wildest mythology, were the gods and goddesses ever so in love?*"

I'm honestly not sure how I was able to continue standing then. If I hadn't been leaning against Edward's strong, firm chest, wrapped in his arms, I'm sure I would've simply dissolved.

Edward's fingers pushed my still damp hair away from my face as they gently reached into the wavy mess. I hadn't done anything to it since I'd gotten out of the shower. He stroked my scalp and swept the long strands off of my shoulders as his eyes drifted over my face and neck. My arms were wrapped around his waist as we stilled, our first dance ending as the song wound down. He dipped his head, his eyes fluttering closed, and I saw a contented smile on his face just before his lips brushed softly against mine.

Closing my eyes, I let myself just feel him. His strong fingers, his warm, sweet breath in my mouth as he sighed, his soft lips and tongue tasting mine, his sinewy arms encircling my shoulders as his hands entwined themselves in my hair and one cupped the base of my neck. When he tilted my head back and let his lips wander down the curve of my jaw and ghost over the dip at the base of my throat, my breath shuddered.

He inhaled deeply as he drew a line back up to the hollow beneath my ear with the tip of his nose. "You smell *so* good, Bella," he told me, his voice husky.

My breathing was ragged as I tried to thank him, so I settled with reaching up and digging my hands into his hair, pulling him closer. He walked forward, silently urging me to sit, and I did as the back of my legs found the edge of the bed. He joined me, but simply turned his body toward mine and continued kissing and caressing tenderly, letting me set the boundaries. When his hand came to rest above my knee, he deepened the kiss, and his fingers gripped my thigh. I whimpered into his mouth, and even I didn't know whether it was more from desire to continue or a need to stop. My senses were on fire. He paused then, pressing his forehead to mine, and asked, "Do you want to stop?"

All I could do was shrug, my confusion and my desire warring in me. I closed my eyes and waited for him to make the decision. I was completely undone.

Finally, when all I could hear was my breathing, I ventured a glance up at Edward who had stilled next to me, one hand still gently resting on my leg.

Though his eyes remained dark and lustful, his words were easy and encouraging. He pressed his forehead to mine and sighed. "I love you more than anyone, Bella Swan. More than anything." He kissed my nose, each eyelid, my cheeks, and then pressed his lips to mine once more.

There were so many things I wanted us to be able to do and say to each other. It had been an arduous journey for my heart to begin to see sexual intimacy as a precious thing again. That *lowlife* had almost ruined all of that for me, shaming me and making me think that sex had to be

dirty and awful. But it was something that I knew could be good again. In fact, if I'd thought sex was a special and intimate thing before, its value had increased more than tenfold to me.

Thankfully, I could tell—by the way he treated me—that Edward understood how special it was. I also knew that he valued and respected me completely, and I didn't want to cheapen that or do anything to risk it. "I love you, too, Edward. More than I've ever imagined it possible to love someone. . . even. . . even *before*."

With the tip of his index finger, he traced the outline of my face, and said, "You know I'm not rushing you, right? I'm not expecting. . . not pressuring you at all."

I bit my lip nervously, working it between my teeth.

"Bella? You know that, right?" he pressed gently.

"Yes. . . but I think I want. . . Edward? What if I want to wait until I'm married now? I just don't think I can share that with someone anymore unless we'd be together forever. Is. . . is that okay? Is it wrong for me to want that after. . . everything that's happened?"

His eyes softened immediately. "Perfectly okay. I'm glad it's important to you to wait." His brow furrowed then, and it seemed as though he was struggling to find the words to go on. Finally, he tucked a string of hair behind my ear and said softly, "Bella, I've never seen any reason to bring this up, but. . . it might help you to know that—well, I've never—I'm a virgin. My parents waited until they were married to have sex, and I've always loved that there's never been anyone else for either of them. Call me an old-fashioned romantic, but I want the same thing."

At first, it was a blessed relief to hear that, but suddenly my heart sank and my head fell. I gut wrenchingly realized that I was already used. I was dirty, my first time—among many others—wasted. Stolen. Even if I did see a future with Edward, even if we were both secretly dreaming of being together forever, there *had* been someone else—someone awful—for me. Edward was saying that he would wait until he was married, and I believed he deserved to marry someone who'd stayed pure, too. Someone who'd guarded that experience to share with him alone.

He apparently picked up on my abrupt shift in mood, because he began trying to backpedal furiously. "Bella? I didn't mean. . . I'm so sorry. I didn't mean that the way it sounded. There's never been anyone that held my heart the way you do."

I nodded in understanding, but still couldn't look him in the eye.

His voice continued pleading with me. "I meant exactly what *you* said. That's not part of me that I'm willing to give away to just anyone. But I. . . I *do* want you to be the one I share it with. . . one day. I love you so much, and I hope that I'm somehow proving to you that I can be worthy of your sharing yourself with me—that I can deserve you."

Is he serious? If anything, I'd be the one who didn't deserve him.

He sighed, probably reading my thoughts on my face. I wished I weren't so transparent. "Bella, I really do want a future with you. Those aren't empty words. I'm not saying these things just to get you to trust me. I want to love you the way you deserve to be loved, and I don't ever want to stop. I promise. I've never had any ulterior motives, and...Bella?" He tipped my chin up and waited until my eyes rested on his. "I'll never, *ever* hold what he did to you against *you*. I just want to love you through the healing process and then do all I can to make you forget about him for the rest of your life—by filling it with happiness and helping you to make new memories. . . with *me*."

My eyes filled with tears as I tried to smile at him, and I allowed those words to sink in as much as possible. *Making memories for the rest of my life with Edward. He must be serious about it, because it's becoming a regular theme.* It would take more than words to make me feel worthy of Edward, though, now that I knew he'd been waiting. Still, he'd basically just told me he wanted to spend the rest of his life sharing everything with me. One thing bothered me, though. I couldn't wrap my mind around the fact that he said he was trying to prove that *he*, Edward Cullen, deserved *me*. He couldn't mean that. Surely he realized it was the other way around.

Edward gathered my hair back into a loose ponytail in his hand and swished it sweetly against my neck, smiling genuinely. He offered to spend the afternoon snuggling on the couch and watching a movie. The heavy thinking and figuring everything out could happen later. Today was just supposed to be us. After debating for a few moments, we settled on Dead Poets' Society, and he spooned me on the couch, where we relaxed and enjoyed the last of our afternoon alone.

Just before eight o'clock, the door banged open, and Emmett flipped the light on, shouting, "Where's my homies?!" He barreled into the room, and cannonballed over the other couch, missing the cushions by just a hair and landing on the floor. *I wouldn't be surprised if he broke his tailbone.*

Of course, we sat up and asked if he was all right before we busted out laughing. Renee had at least taught me that much.

Em groaned as he stood up, and he bent over, pointing his bum in our direction. "I dunno. Look and see if I broke anything."

Lonnie Calderas's face was staring back at us. Wait. No it wasn't. Emmett had taken a sharpie and marked out each of his eyes with a black "X". His butt started shaking as he convulsed with laughter. "Did I get him?"

Rosalie sauntered over a moment later and kicked Lonnie again for good measure, knocking Emmett face first into the couch.

"Baby! Seriously? You could just kick me over like that? After the best date you ever had?"

“Em? I was kicking Lonnie. And you took me to play Pole Position at a gas station with good chili dogs.”

“Yeah, but you schooled me. You ranked fourth, and I was a hundred and somethin’.” He looked baffled that she didn’t see it all as amazing.

“A hundred and thirty-seventh, Emmett. You ranked one hundred and thirty-seventh,” she answered cockily.

His face was a mask of utter admiration. “You guys should’ve seen my girl. It was totally hot.”

Rose sat on the couch and pulled him in close beside her, scratching his head with her nails. Emmett was giddy with love.

We caught up with each other over dinner, and agreed that—no matter how busy things got this week—we’d all meet again for dinner and some time to chill on Friday night.

When the boys walked us back to our place at the end of the evening, we had no idea how eventful the week was going to be.

— * * —

So, what do you think is going to happen?

#####

Chapter: 42

A/N: I’m going to go out and discover a new star just so that I can name it FlemilyHarper. Thanks to you my beta and my sister.

To my readers who are still hanging on and being patient with me. Smalls and I thank ya HEAPS. I got this one out surprisingly quickly and have high hopes that the next one will follow on its heels. Expect it by this weekend, but don’t throw virtual tomatoes at me if I am unable to come through on that. I only put it in print to make me feel more accountable to it. I’ll do better if I feel like I have people to answer to.

Thanks to Twilighzoner, too, for her betawesomeness.

OO

...it's not just what you're born with. It's what you choose to bear

It's not how much your share is, but it's how much you can share

And it's not the fights you've dreamed of, but those you really fought

It's not just what you're given. It's what you do with what you've got

David Wilcox

Chapter Forty: Overload

Monday came and went without a hitch. In fact, it was a really pleasant day, all around. Edward had a meeting with his piano performance professor, so after classes, we only caught up over the phone. But I did meet Emmett for Calzones at the food court, and I realized how much I treasure his friendship. We were people watching, and the stories Emmett would make up about their lives were hilarious.

Leaning over and whispering in my ear, he said, “Now that guy collects weird things: He’s got this huge Caboodle filled with paperclips—organized by color, a shoebox packed with old keys, and a garage full of solitary shoes. The ones that show up in gutters or beside the interstate. He’s got them separated by brand and size.”

“Whatcha think he’s going to do with all the shoes?” I queried.

“He’s trying to develop a new foot powder to combat shoe rot. It’s been a goal of his for years, ‘cause he was mercilessly teased for his smelly feet as a middle schooler.”

“Well, at least he’s got goals and dreams.”

“Yeah. He’s turnin’ it in to somethin’ good. Kids can be cruel, but he’s not one to let it beat him down.”

It’s hard to find words that express what a great guy Emmett is. He understands and appreciates Edward’s quietness and thoughtfulness, even though they’re completely different in that regard, and I’ve never seen a truer or more loyal friendship. He would walk through fire for Rosalie Hale, and I can honestly see myself getting Christmas pictures of their babies every year. Their relationship is growing by leaps and bounds. They were absolutely made for each other. But I love the big brother that I’ve found in him.

He gets me. He sees past the façade I keep up for the world at large, straight to my heart. And—though he’s as aggravating as an older brother—he knows how to cheer me on and make me smile no matter what. My first impression of him months ago was grizzly bearish, but with me, he’s more of a giant teddy bear. A well worn, ever faithful, favorite teddy bear. It was easy to tell that, in the right set of circumstances, he could absolutely turn grizzly. But he’d only ever given me strength and love...in his crazy, crazy way.

So, we enjoyed lunch in each other’s company, and I headed to the homework club with a huge

smile on my face. After a great afternoon with the kids, Jake and I said goodbye until Wednesday and headed off in different directions. I was going to the library for some research time, and Jake? He was on his way to meet a girl for a study date, and I was really glad for him. Jacob's wonderful honestly, and he deserves to be cherished by some lucky girl. Maybe she'll be the one.

So, Monday—as I said—was really an encouraging day.

It wasn't until Tuesday that my newfound strength began to be tested to its limits.

Renee called to catch up with me first thing in the morning, while I was getting ready. I was running a little late already, so she agreed to call back later. Just one thing she wanted to ask before we hung up: Would I like to bring Edward to Florida with me over Christmas break? She was insistent that it would be wonderful, and said she didn't even mind if we split her week of my vacation time between Florida and Maine, so that we could be with Edward's family, too. I was shocked by her generous offer, and though I knew it would prove to be a much better holiday experience than Thanksgiving had been, I was overwhelmed by the idea.

I understood that she desperately wanted to meet Edward face to face, and I knew I'd love to travel with him, but, how in the world was I supposed to bring it up? Would this put too much pressure on him? Would it seem like I was trying to rush our relationship headlong into the future? I wouldn't dare just invite myself to his parents' home over break. I didn't know exactly what to say in response to Renee, but I knew that she doesn't do early morning anything. This must've been really important to her, and I didn't want to disappoint her. I love my mom so much, and her heart really was in the right place.

I settled for making sure she knew that I'd love to bring Edward to Florida with me for Christmas, and that I'd get in touch with her once I knew what his holiday plans were.

Five minutes later, I was ready but running late. Slinging my bag over my shoulder so hard that I almost knocked the wind out of myself, I grabbed a granola bar and rushed out the door to my first class. The morning flew by, and I ducked into Novack Café to buy a premade turkey sandwich that I could eat in my room before I went over to Lebanon for club that afternoon. Edward would be meeting me up there, because he had a meeting with his advisor that couldn't be rescheduled.

Enjoying the frosty weather as I walked to the parking lot, my mind was occupied with thoughts of Edward. He hadn't said much about his meeting with his performance professor when we were on the phone last night, but I knew that the meeting today was especially important. He'd been sorry we couldn't ride together, but very serious about the appointment. Still, I noticed as the red hood of my truck came into view, he must've had *some* time to let me know he was thinking about me. There was something white stuck to my windshield. I tossed my backpack into the cab before reaching for it.

I lifted the wiper blade and pulled out a piece of delicate paper—an amazingly intricate hand-cut snowflake. Around the outer edge, in his calligraphy-like script, Edward had penned, “I'm

always thankful for beauty in the winter. Can't wait to see you this afternoon, Love. Yours, Edward."

Climbing into the Beast, I pulled my notebook out of my backpack. I gingerly placed the paper between the pages and sighed at the warmth that was flooding my heart. Then, reaching up to adjust the rearview mirror, I checked my hair and makeup before turning on the engine. The young woman looking back at me was confident and deeply happy. I was a vastly different person than I'd been this same time last year, and it surprised me at moments like this how far I'd come. Smiling at myself, I twisted the mirror to reposition it.

It came off in my hand. *Ack. Oh well. Edward can help me with it later.*

Edward wasn't at the housing complex when I got there, but—rather than sit in my truck and wait for him—I went ahead inside and pulled out the treasure chest and snacks, mentally preparing myself for the afternoon. I'd been doing a little more listening and encouraging the kids in their lives outside of school recently after a few sad conversations with Mrs. Anderson. Dominic, for example, was really struggling, because his dad hadn't come home from his last trucking run. From what we understood, his mom hadn't heard anything at all from him in about two weeks. They didn't know whether he'd been in an accident, or if he'd just decided he'd had enough of the "settled" life. I'd watched yesterday as Dominic kept staring at Jacob sadly. Once, when Jacob was sitting beside him to help with his assignment, Dom had reached up tentatively and touched Jacob's ponytail. I don't even think Jacob noticed, but I was determined to be especially sensitive to the boy's emotions today. *Hopefully, Edward will pick up on it, too.*

I checked my watch and realized that the kids would arrive within five minutes, deciding to go stand at the door and wait for them. My mom's invitation and my anxiety over bringing it up with Edward kept trying to invade my mind, but I was determined to be focused. It probably wouldn't be a big deal anyway. I had a habit of blowing things out of proportion and worrying. The chill air washed over me, and I leaned against the doorframe willing the icy breeze to clear my head.

As I stood there, Edward's Volvo zipped into the lot and into a spot in the far corner. The bus groaned in at the same time, and was just opening its doors as he got his things together and made his way to the sidewalk. All at once, the kids scrambled off the bus and swarmed him, their shouts and laughter bouncing off the walls of the activity center. I lost my view of his face for a moment, but the joyous expressions on the middle schoolers made up for it. Almost.

When the mob funneled into the building, Edward was in its midst. He made eye contact with me, communicating a quick "hello." He brushed my hand lightly with his fingers on the way by, and I was once again flooded with gratitude that he was a part of my life.

The afternoon rolled on, and we both had many opportunities to reach out to the kids that needed us most. Edward somehow knew that Dominic needed him close by, even without my filling him in. He just sort of set up shop at Dom's table when the younger kids came in and directed those who needed his help to come to him one at a time. Throughout the hour, I stole glances at the two of them as they connected with meaningful looks and occasional touches. A simple hand

mussing Dominic's hair earned a heartfelt smile from the boy.

As we packed up after the kids left, Edward asked, "Are we still on for our regular Ellie's date? I miss you."

Smiling up at him, I said, "Definitely. We've got to steal every minute we can. But I've got to run by the cleaner's to pick up something for Ange first."

"Do you want me to follow you?" he offered.

"Nah. I'll only be a sec. Why don't you just go ahead and get us a booth? I'll meet you there."

Edward reached for my hand and squeezed my fingertips gently. "Okay. I can't wait to talk with you. Do you want me to order you a coffee?"

A grin formed on my lips as I noticed excitement in his eyes. "Yeah. And you'll fill me in on what's got you all wound up?"

"I will." His smile lit up the room.

"Kay." His joy was infectious. Holding the door for me as we stepped outside, he asked how my day had been so far. I rolled my eyes and smiled. "Well, I'll give you the details at dinner, but the definite high point was the surprise someone left for me on my windshield."

"You liked it?" he asked, almost bashfully.

"It was beautiful, Edward."

"You're beautiful," he whispered as we stopped at my truck. After glancing around briefly, he seemed satisfied that there were no onlookers. Leaning in, he ducked his head for a quick peck on the lips. "I'll see you in a few minutes, Love." He opened the door for me and helped me into the truck, closing it gently when I was settled inside. I watched him walk over to his car, and the crooked smile that graced his face as he turned to look at me one last time called to me powerfully. *It's only five minutes, Bella. Get a grip. You can kiss him later. As much as you want.*

Moments later, I pulled up alongside the curb in front of the dry cleaners, oblivious to anything other than the way my heart was thudding as I thought of the way Edward made me feel. I physically craved his presence, and was nearly bouncing as I ran in and out of the drycleaners. I needed to get to Ellie's fast. I was dying to hear Edward's news, and figured I may as well jump into the winter break conversation—even if it was going to be presumptuous and awkward.

I cranked the engine and threw my Beast into reverse, and I hit the gas.

And the car behind me.

The crunch stopped my heart momentarily. *Stupid rearview mirror.* Wincing, I slammed on the brake and swallowed the bile that had instantly risen. *I did **not** just do that. Not now.* I turned in my seat to see what I could make out of the scene behind me. The top of a small, black car peeked at me over the bed of my truck. No one was getting out.

I turned back and slumped over onto the steering wheel, berating myself. *Pay attention, Bella! If the rearview mirror is missing, you've got to turn around and look! What a stupid mistake! And such fabulous timing!* I knew I should call Edward and let him know what happened, but figured—if no one was even in the car—the quickest thing would be to take a few pictures and then just leave a note with my insurance information. Pulling a pen and index card out of my pack, I scribbled down my contact info, adding the company name and phone number. *I'll just leave it under the wiper and go.*

I opened the door and heaved a giant sigh, the weight of my error beginning to crush me. All I could do was hope the owner would at least be civil about the whole thing. I tucked my cell into my pocket and slid down out of the cab, gently letting the door click into place. Walking slowly along the side of my truck, I tried to breathe in some peace from the bitterly cold air and prepare myself. *Maybe the damage won't be awful. Maybe the crunch of metal was worse than the damage done. Wishful thinking, probably.*

As I made it to the back of the truckbed, my stomach plummeted to my feet. The tailgate of the Beast had scraped its way across the shiny black hood of a Saab Turbo X. I warily walked to the back of the car to check the tag. Ohio. My breath left me in a whoosh. I had mangled the front of Joshua Hamilton's car.

Josh, who was only still in town because he was doing community service for assault and battery—against me. Josh, who wasn't supposed to be within 100 yards of me or have any contact with me whatsoever. Josh, who was the creepiest, slimiest, most manipulative ass I'd ever known.

And I was about to put my contact information under his wiper blade and invite him back into my life. *Who are you kidding, Bella? He deserves it. Get in the truck, and back up even further, **hard.** And then peel out. Don't look back. You owe him this. He'll have no way to know it's you.*

In that moment of hesitation, my decision was made for me.

A too familiar voice cockily sneered my name. "Bella Swan."

A brief glance at the deceitfully winsome expression on his face told me he hadn't noticed *why* I was standing beside his car yet. In that second, I watched as he dropped the hand of the girl who was being pulled along behind him, adoration for him in her eyes. He stepped forward and leered at me, while her sweet sing-song voice sheepishly offered, "Hey, Bella. It's been awhile."

A sharp look from Josh silenced her. She was studying the cracks in the sidewalk intently, no doubt feeling reprimanded for speaking up and embarrassed at the public chastisement. *Gah, this is awkward.* Casey and I had worked with each other the year before at the housing complex. We

had been in the mentoring program together. I was genuinely surprised that she'd be dating Josh after seeing him with me all last year. She'd known we were engaged—and had even remarked once that he seemed to be rather moody. What had changed? *He can fool anybody, I guess. Maybe she thought she could help him.*

Josh's eyes raked over my body, and I wrapped my coat more tightly around myself, trying to hide from him. Briefly, I felt ashamed that I'd messed up again, and that he'd get to rub it in my face. Then, I saw that same shame on Casey's face, and realized that this was his M.O. This was the way he enjoyed making people feel.

That arrogant smirk needed to be slapped off his too handsome face. My blood was boiling. *How dare he stand there and ogle me when Casey is right there, evidently very much **with** him! How dare he speak to her that way! He will **not** speak to me that way today or ever again. I won't let him win this time.*

"Hey, Josh, looks like my truck won." It was a little difficult to keep the smugness out of my voice. "Sorry about that. I didn't see you parked behind me."

The moment that recognition struck was obvious. He let out a string of profanities that Eminem couldn't have come up with.

Thwack! The heavy handbag hit the back of his head as a seemingly benign elderly woman shuffled past muttering something about "the young folk these days." I bit my lip and tried not to smile.

"What the—?" he shouted at her as he rubbed his crown. She turned back and gave him a look of total disdain. Huffing, he spun back to me, spitting out the words, "Bella! You ruin everything, you worthless. . ."

"Save it, Josh," I cut him off. "I don't care what you think. I'll take care of the damage my truck did to your car, since it's my fault. But, considering you're not allowed to be this close to me anymore, I'm not going to prolong this awkwardness. I guess I'll have my lawyer call you." I snapped a few pictures of the accident with my cell phone, so that he couldn't trump up any additional damages after the fact. I'd worry about how to pay the attorney, later.

"Yeah, fine. It's not like I want to get in trouble for talking to you even though you're the one who got us together this time. But you'll pay for this, Bella. I'll make sure..."

I didn't let him finish. "I will pay for the damages to your precious Saab and nothing more. Be careful what you say, because I'm sure that my attorney would be very interested to hear that you threatened me."

His jaw clenched as he hissed, "Just go then, you slut. Run back to your new..."

"Enough!" I shouted, staring him down. "This is over." I turned to go and climbed back up into my truck, starting it quickly. Turning the wheel to ease out into traffic, I looked back over my

shoulder. Josh was facing Casey tracing her cheekbone with the tip of his finger, and I could imagine what smooth excuses must be rolling off his serpent's tongue. The trusting look on her face made me sick. *He is poison.*

I sighed, feeling sorry for her and disgusted with myself for ever being with him. And then reality set in. This wasn't over. I didn't get to just drive away this time.

Overwhelmed, I drove to Ellie's in an emotional stupor. There were no spaces up front, so I parked in the alley behind the diner and walked in the rear entrance. At least it was all well lit. Coming around the corner, I saw Edward check his watch and pull out his cell phone. I jogged over and slid into the seat across from him. The relief on his face lasted only a moment before it was replaced with concern.

"Are you all right?" he asked seriously.

"I backed into a car outside of the cleaners. My rearview mirror fell off today," I explained.

"Was it bad?"

"The damage? Not awful. It's the owner that's going to be the problem."

"Oh?"

"It's Josh."

The words hung in the air for a few moments, much like Edward's jaw, slack with disbelief. Finally, he spoke, his voice rough with feeling. "Are you okay? Did he touch you? What did he—" He stopped himself and took a moment to regain self-control. "Okay, listen. I'm just jumping to conclusion after conclusion here, creating all kinds of terrible scenarios. Will you just back up and tell me what happened from the beginning, please?"

So I did. The play of expressions on his face told me he ran through the same gamut of emotions as I had. "Well," he finally said, "it could've been a lot worse, I suppose. I'm really thankful he didn't touch you. But this will all be awkward, I'm sure. You didn't call the police to write a report about the accident? Josh was okay with that?"

"No, I didn't, and he said he was okay with it. I don't think he wanted the police involved either. It was weird because of our...situation, you know?"

"Yeah. Well, we need to get his car fixed on our own then, so this can be as uncomplicated as possible. Why don't Emmett and I take care of this for you? You don't need to have any more to do with this than necessary. Is that okay? Can I talk to Emmett and see what we can work out? He might know someone in the area who does bodywork."

"Umm, yeah, I guess so. I don't want to be any trouble to you guys, though."

Edward pshawed as he threw his head back in incredulity. “There’s not a chance of that, Bella. Em’s probably actually going to enjoy talking to Josh for you. He likes bullying bullies. Besides, I feel like I need to do this. Would you write down Josh’s telephone number for me, please?”

The waitress came over then to take our order while I scribbled down the number and slid it across the table. This was Ellie’s busiest time of day, and the small restaurant was crowded. I was glad Edward had been able to get us a seat in the corner, out of the way.

When she was gone, I grabbed the sugar and started doctoring my coffee as I asked, “So, what were you so excited about earlier?”

There was a very brief, very minor flash of uncertainty in his eyes just before he smiled, but I’d seen it.

“I’ve been offered a great opportunity. It’s an honor, really, but I’m not sure what I’m going to do yet.” He took a giant swig of his coffee and rolled his shoulders, stretching.

“Well, that sounds wonderful. Is it your piano? Talk!” I encouraged with a smile. I tried to ignore the ball of lead that was forming in my gut.

Running his fingers through his already wild hair, he said, “I’ve been recommended for one of the ten places in The Karamazov Foundation’s Young Musicians program. It’s very prestigious. Have you, uh, heard about it before?” The table was vibrating rhythmically, and I realized that Edward was bouncing his leg.

His nervous activity was making the knot of anxiety in my stomach even worse. Was I supposed to be excited for him or not? “No, I don’t know anything about it, but if it’s such a coveted thing, then you’re excited, right?”

“Well, yes. I’m really excited. It’s the greatest compliment I could’ve received from the program here. Each spring, ten music performance majors are selected from all over the country to study under the most gifted musicians and professors in the world. The program ends with a series of concerts in a handful of well-known venues across the U. S. They only choose one musician for any type of instrument, so there’ll only be one pianist in the program. The auditions are in two weeks.”

“Oh, wow!” I gushed. “That’s huge! Have you told your parents yet?”

“Yeah.” He was grinning, pleased by my reaction. “I called mom on my way to the homework club this afternoon. She’s thrilled. Dad will be, too. It’s a dream come true, honestly. It could make my dream of performing instead of counseling a reality, Bella.” He was smiling at me, but there was still something in his eyes that was hard for me to read.

“So...what’s the hesitation? I can tell you’re not 100% excited.” *Please be honest with me, Edward.*

He inhaled deeply and straightened his napkin, placing the diner-quality fork, knife and spoon just so. "I'm not even sure I'm going to be a part of it yet, you know? I'll be up against the best young pianists in the country, so it doesn't really matter."

"What, Edward? Seriously, you're making me anxious." I tried to bore into his heart with my eyes.

"Well, the final tour isn't the only time the musicians in the program travel. It'll sort of be a semester abroad. If I get in, I'd leave at the end of January."

Oh. "For how long?"

"Until late May...and then there's summer. Will you be at home, or are you planning to take summer classes?"

Crap. "I'll be at home in Washington." I was sucked into a vortex of swirling emotions. How could I want so badly for him to succeed and fail all at once? I hardly knew what to say. The summer apart would've been bad enough, but toss January through May in with it, and we'd be apart for 8 months. The week of Thanksgiving break had been miserable. How would we survive this? *Could we?*

He hung his head. "That's what I was afraid of. It'll be such a long time apart."

"Well, listen," I said, trying to sound chipper, "it's an incredible opportunity. You audition, do your best, and I'll cheer you on the whole way. And we'll deal with the rest when we know a little more, right?"

"Right. We don't need to worry. It may amount to nothing." He looked relieved...and still sad somehow.

"It's already amounted to something. Just the recommendation will look great on your musical resume. And you've recorded with Elias, played at Scullers...seriously. You've got an amazing future ahead of you."

His lips slid into the crooked smile. "Thank you, Bella. You're right about all of it. I already have lots to be thankful for. I just don't like to feel like I have to choose between being with you and being a musician."

"Pshh. It's just a semester. You don't have to choose." But if he ever did, I'd have to let him go. I wasn't worth Edward giving up his dreams. I could never hold him back.

"Good, because...I couldn't. I can't do without you, but music is...just...a part of who I am. It's a part of us."

God, I love him. Please don't ever make me have to let him go. I nodded firmly, very aware that if I spoke just then, the tears that were threatening to fall would be unstoppable. Thankfully, the

waitress arrived with our food, and the conversation ended. We dug in and listened to the jukebox like our survival depended on it.

When we'd finished and gotten refills on our drinks, I decided that Edward's news made Renee's offer a little more reasonable to discuss. "So, I have a question."

He quirked an eyebrow at me and smiled.

"Remember how we like to be together as much as possible?" I was doing my best to keep my voice light, infusing the conversation with good humor.

"Um...yes. Yes, I think I do remember that." His eyes said, "Go on."

"Well, my mom called this morning, and said that she'd *really* like to meet you. She wants to know if you'll come to Jacksonville with me over winter break."

His face lit up. "Are you serious? I'd love to. But will you come home with me, too? It's such a long break. We could do a little while there, a little time with your dad, and a little while at Chez Cullen. What do you think?"

He was making this so easy. "Sounds perfect."

When we got back to campus that night, we had to turn in early, our studies and a few phone calls pressing us. Edward walked me up to my room, and stepped inside the door with me for just a moment when we noticed that Rosalie wasn't there. I took off my coat and tossed it on the bed when suddenly I was wrapped up in my favorite arms. I turned within the embrace, nuzzling into his shoulder, and snaking my arms around his waist.

"I love you, Bella," he whispered.

"You, too, Edward...so much."

"I'm excited about Christmas and New Year's," he said, with a lightness in his voice that made me feel infinitely better.

"Yeah, and I'm really proud of you. You're incredible, and I'm glad that people are starting to take notice."

He chuckled, shaking us as we stood pressed against each other. "The only one I *needed* to take notice is in my arms right now."

"Aww, thanks." I started to say more, but the phone rang. He released me, and I grabbed the receiver.

"Hello?"

demeaning and abusive relationship was not something I could handle adding to my mounting pile of struggles at the moment. I had to at least hear her out.

Angela and Edward both offered to be nearby, in case I needed an outlet following our chat. Punching in the letters that would seal the deal, I sent off the text with a sigh, just before I climbed into bed. 11:15 tomorrow morning. Edward would walk me to Novack Café from British Lit, I was sure. Angela had said she'd be in the library, studying.

As I wrestled with my comforter, I thought back on two other conversations I'd had over the phone that evening: Charlie and Renee. A geyser of plans and ideas gushed forth the moment I told my mom I'd already spoken with Edward and that he was excited to meet her. I decided then and there to visit her first, because we'd apparently need time to recuperate afterwards. Still, there was a big part of me that couldn't wait just to be hugged by her. Sure, she was unorthodox, flamboyant, and spontaneous in ways that I couldn't wrap my head around, but she was my mom. It would be great to see her.

Now the conversation with my dad had been something else altogether. I ran it through my mind once more. I hadn't been prepared for the freaking Newtonian audacity that Charlie had called me to share.

"Hello?"

"Bells? It's me. How ya doin', Kiddo?" *Hmm. Lighthearted tonight.*

"Hey, Dad. I'm doing okay. There's a lot going on—almost time for finals, so, you know."

"Still focused on your classes, though, right? You're not out runnin' around with that Cullen boy all the time, are ya?" The smile was evident in his voice.

"No," I huffed good-humoredly. "We'll pretty much only get to see each other on the weekends until the semester's over. But I had dinner with him tonight."

"So . . . you're happy? I mean, you've, ah...been through a lot."

"Yeah. I am. I'm really doing okay. But I wanted to tell you...um, I backed into somebody's car today."

"*What?!*"

I shot out my excuse as quickly as I could. "The rearview mirror came off earlier. I just, I wasn't in the habit of looking back there." Contrition sunk me. "I'm sorry, Dad. I know it was...."

"Geesh, Bells. You gotta look!" A deep sigh crackled through the phone, and then his voice was gentle again. "You're okay, though?"

"Yeah. But, umm . . . it was Josh's car."

“I must not have heard you right. Tell me you didn’t say it was that scumbag’s car.”

Now it was my turn to sigh. “I wish it weren’t, but…”

“Did you call the police? That’s a violation of his sentence! He’s not supposed to be anywhere near you! I’m gonna fly over there and—”

“Dad! Hold on! Listen to me. It was actually my fault, unfortunately. I’m pretty sure he wasn’t following me. He was inside some store or something already. I didn’t see his car and parked in front of him to run into the cleaners. He came out when I was trying to leave a note on his windshield.”

“Leave him a *what now?* Bells, no contact means no contact. You should’ve just called the police.” Sigh again. “What happened? Did he touch you? I need to know what was said. Tell me all of it.”

I explained everything to Charlie, and he seemed really pleased with the idea of having Edward and Emmett handle it all for me. He was adamant—of course—that I stay away from Josh completely, but reluctantly agreed that this would work out somehow.

I heard the humor in his voice again as he teased, “Kiddo, only you could manage to single out that one car in all of Hanover and Lebanon to back into. You let me know if those boys need anything, you hear? And tell ‘em to send me the bill.

“Thanks, Dad. I’m so sorry.”

“It’ll all right, Bells. I’m just mighty glad you’ve got the boys watchin’ out for ya.”

“Yeah, they’re pretty wonderful.”

He chuckled suddenly, evidently enjoying a private joke. “Speaking of boys…”

“What? What are you laughing about?”

“I had a very…strange conversation with someone today.”

“Oh?” I knew that it must’ve been a significant chat, if it was worth bringing up on the phone.

“Yeah,” he laughed quietly. “Michael Newton, Senior. He said his boy had been extremely impressed with—how’d he put it? I believe it was, ‘the way you’ve turned out.’ Apparently, Mike noticed that you’ve grown into quite the lovely young woman.”

I made a gagging noise into the phone. “Gross. Did you tell him that I wasn’t at *all* impressed with how his son had ‘turned out’?”

“Well, I had to be polite, Bells. Just agreed with him that you’re really special. But then he actually asked what he and I could do to help this thing along. Seemed awful convinced that the two of you were headed somewhere.”

“Nuh-uh! Did you tell him that was about as likely as the Beatles getting back together for a reunion tour?”

He coughed out another laugh. “I just told him you seemed to be pretty serious about someone at school. Didn’t like to hear that, but what’re ya gonna do? Some people just assume everybody wants what they want. Ah, well.” He sniffed quietly.

“Dad. That’s seriously disturbing. I can’t believe...never mind. Not worth it. Thanks for telling him about Edward.”

“Don’t worry about it, Kiddo. No biggie. Listen, you take care, okay? Call me if you need anything.”

“I will, Dad. Thanks.”

He cleared his throat. “All right. ‘Night, Bells.”

“Bye.”

And *that* was the call that was running through my mind as I flopped back onto my pillow at the end of the day. Michael-couldn’t-get-a-clue-if-I-taped-it-to-his-freaking-forehead-Newton. What a loser. All in all, that information was a decent distraction from all the other drama. I actually fell asleep with a smirk on my face, because some people. Just. Don’t. Get it.

The next morning, I was pleasantly surprised by Jacob waiting for me on the bench outside my dorm. He was wearing a bright yellow down coat and a black beanie. *He looks sunny*. I wondered how long he’d been sitting there.

“What’s up, Bells?” he grinned. “Haven’t had breakfast with ya in a while. Wanna join me?”

“Sure,” I said, shivering as an icy wind blew. “I’m after a bagel today. You?”

“Just a cuppa cereal and a coffee, I think. Unless they’ve got some sausage biscuits. How’d things go, yesterday? Dom okay?”

“I don’t know,” I sighed. “But Edward sat with him and just had everyone else come to their table for help. It seemed to cheer him a little.”

“Yeah. I guess he just needs the attention.” *Insightful Jacob*. “I’ll try that today, and see if I can get him to smile some.”

“Sounds great.”

Our conversation wandered from fun and pointless to classic rock to wrapping up the semester while we got our food and strolled to class. “Oh, hey,” I spoke up suddenly. “How was that study date?”

“Pretty good,” he said with a small smile. He didn’t look like he’d fallen in love, but I guessed there was still potential.

“Bella!” I was surprised by the mellow voice that I hadn’t heard in a while, and I turned expectantly, tossing my trash into the bin outside our building.

“Hey, Travis. How are you?” I tucked my hands into my pockets.

“I’m okay,” he answered, adjusting his scarf. “Things going better for you?”

“Yeah, mostly. Thanks for asking. I backed into Josh’s car yesterday, though.”

Travis’s jaw dropped as Jacob spewed his coffee onto the sidewalk right beside us. “Are you kiddin’ me, Bells?” Jacob shouted, still choking a little.

“Nope. I wish I was. Anyway, Edward and Emmett are going to handle it. It was too weird with all of the restraining order stuff, you know? And Casey was there. Do you know her, Trav?”

“I’ve seen them around together, but Josh and I don’t talk anymore. I guess I effectively ended the friendship when I testified against him.” He laughed awkwardly.

“Yeah, I bet,” I smiled gratefully. “How’s um...how are things with your Dad?”

“Actually, they’re better than they’ve been for a long time, Bella. He sort of...sees me now. It’s hard to explain, but things are more real, more honest. It turned out for the best, I guess.”

“Glad to hear it.” And I was. Travis deserved good things.

We started to say more, but Jacob interrupted. “Uh, sorry, but we’ve only got one minute before class starts, Bells.”

“Oh, man. I’m sorry. I’ll...I’ll catch you later, Bella.” Travis smiled sadly as he turned to walk away. Jacob and I headed inside.

As we dropped into our seats a few moments later, Jacob muttered out of the side of his mouth, “I love that you smashed his car. He totally deserved it.” Jacob was laughing as the professor strode to the front of the room, beginning the lecture.

When class was over, Jake said he’d see me in the parking lot in a few hours and ducked out the back exit of the building. As I walked around to the other side where I knew Edward would be waiting, I began to feel anxious about my meeting with Casey. It was just over an hour away. I’d

been able to ignore it so far this morning, but it was nagging at me now.

And then, I rounded the corner, and my eyes found Edward's. Instant peace. His mossy green eyes were soothing, all affection and strength, and I quickly ambled over and leaned into his arms. Edward, my anchor.

He buried his face in my hair and whispered, "Hey, my beautiful Bella. How are you?"

I pulled my head back and looked up at him, a smile beginning to form. "Mmm, better now."

My temple was christened with an adoring kiss. "Let's go in and find our seats," he said. He took my hand and led me into our lecture hall, squeezing my fingers gently.

Class was over too soon.

"You know all you have to do is listen, though, right? There's no pressure on you to get her out of this situation, to tell her how to handle Josh—any of that. We don't really even know what it is she wants to talk about," Edward said as we made our way over to Novack Café.

"You're right. It's just...talking about it with someone who's going through the same thing...I don't know if I'm ready for that. I'm still sort of working through all the damage myself."

"I know, Love. But you're doing so well. Just listen, and—if the conversation calls for it—share a little of what you went through. Encourage her to get help. You'll know what to say, I'm sure."

"And you'll be staying nearby."

"Absolutely. I've brought my compositions to look over for the audition."

My shoulders relaxed as I released a nervous breath and watched it billow around my face in the cold.

People were everywhere, the strange cacophony of private conversations filling the air as we stepped into the warmth of the small coffee shop a few minutes later. We ordered drinks and then headed towards the back of the café, finding two separate but nearby tables. Edward sat facing me, and pulled out his folder of sheet music. I distracted myself while I waited, by studying the sky out of my window.

"Bella?" Her voice interrupted my efforts.

"Hi, Casey." I gestured to the empty seat across from me, and she plunked her bag onto the floor and sat down.

"Thanks for meeting me." She cleared her throat awkwardly and tried a little small talk. "How are things going? You're studying to be a teacher, right?"

Ugh. I feel like I'm barely treading water here. I don't know where this conversation is headed. Still, if she's going to ask for help, that's got to be tough for her. She can't just dive right in, I guess. "Yeah...I'm an English major, but I don't know whether I'm going to teach or write. Either would make me happy. What's your major again?"

"Um, psychology. I want to be a social worker or psychiatrist. I just want to support people in difficult situations, you know?"

Edward cocked his head to the side in interest behind her. I guess he was finding it hard not to listen in. His eyes shifted to mine then, and he smiled his encouragement. "Oh," I said. "That's good." I was surprised, though. If she was studying psych, surely she had other counseling resources, other people she could go to for advice. Steeling myself for tough memories and gathering every ounce of compassion in me, I pressed on. "So, umm...you said you wanted to talk with me about Josh?"

"Yes," she said as she resituated herself in her seat and leaned in toward me. "Bella, watching you talk with Josh yesterday... it was hard to see. I guess I was wondering why you even stayed with Josh for so long. He always seemed so...moody and detached from you. And you seemed so, um, unhappy. Please, stop me if what I'm saying makes you uncomfortable. I don't want to offend you."

I shifted uneasily, the chair suddenly extremely uncomfortable. *Offend? The only thing that would offend me is that she noticed our relationship was unhealthy last year, and never said anything.* I just nodded quietly and waited, assuming that she was evidently having a hard time breaking things off with Josh, too. I felt sorry for her. That had been a terrifying time for me. It must be hard to talk about.

Again, the question crowded its way into my head, though: If she recognized that, then why was she with him in the first place?

She was waiting for an answer, her eyes searching for understanding, so I said, "Well, I think I was scared to break things off with him, because I didn't know how he would react. He was... unpredictable. I knew he'd be angry. I just didn't know what he'd do about it." Again, I assumed Casey could easily relate to that, and I wanted her to feel okay telling me she was afraid, too.

She sat back suddenly, a look of irritation marring her sweet expression. "But Bella, I think you've always just misunderstood Josh. I think that a lot of what you think happened was really, um, the way *you* internalized it and tried to deal with your unhappiness."

Wait. What?! This was not where I saw this going.

Edward's eyes flashed with anger, his jaw clenched tightly as he studied my face. I nodded to him, and he understood. He wouldn't interfere, but he packed his satchel quietly.

She was still talking, trying to diagnose and fix *me*. *My problem*. But I'd tuned her out momentarily during my silent conversation with Edward. "Just. Stop."

Casey stared at me, puzzled and irritated.

“Were you *there* when he was talking to me yesterday? Josh was abusive, Casey. He didn’t need me to understand, as long as he was in control. You need to—”

“Bella, I’m sure it wasn’t like that. He’s a perfect gentleman to me, and he never hit you. He told me that.”

“He did even worse, and when I broke up with him, he stalked me. He was convicted of assault and battery.”

“There was no evidence for 99% of that. Apparently you’ve convinced a whole crowd of people, and that’s really unfair to Josh, because—”

“No.” My chair resentfully clawed its way across the floor, drawing the attention of the other Novack patrons. I stood to my feet and looked down at her. “Did he put you up to this?”

“Of course not!” she said, completely flabbergasted by my accusation.

Sadly, I said, “Then, I’m sorry for you. I don’t owe you any explanation about why I did and said the things I did, or why I pressed charges against him. You won’t see it anyway, but…” My voice softened, and I ducked my head, speaking softly, “I hope you’ll see it soon, and that you don’t let him hurt you the way he hurt me. Stop trying to fix him and help him, and help yourself out of the unhealthy relationship you’re in. He’s playing you.”

“Bella, I…”

“I’m done here, Casey. I hope you’ll be okay. Just…watch out. Don’t keep making excuses for him.”

She hung her head, and I didn’t know whether she was more frustrated or confused.

Edward held out his hand to me, and we made it out into the fresh air before my tears came.

He pulled me into his chest, and his hands offered unspoken condolences as sobs wracked my body. It had just been too much. “Shh, shh. It’s okay, Bella. You couldn’t have known. I’m so proud of you—all those things you said.” His whispers soothed the pain little by little, and I hiccupped and sniffled towards composure.

When I was able to turn my face to his again, his compassion dumbfounded me. I wrapped myself in the stillness of his embrace, silent.

Edward and I made sandwiches in his apartment for lunch, because I wanted to hide from the world for a while. When I got up to go meet Jacob for homework club, Edward kissed me, and I felt an urgency in his lips that I didn’t understand. I pulled back and looked at him quizzically.

“Are you okay?”

Concern and indecision etched his features as he answered. “I’m sorry. I just won’t be able to see you tonight. This audition has me a little stressed. I’ve reserved a practice room to lock myself away all night following dinner. I hope that’s okay.”

“Yeah, of course. But…” I guess I was mistaken, thinking he’d practice *around* all of our usual things. *Quit being selfish, Bella.* “Well, I’m sure I’ll be fine. I was just thinking about zoology tonight. Maybe Jake’ll hang out in the lobby. It’s no big deal anyway.” But somehow, it was. I just felt unsettled.

“You’ll be all right. I’m sure of it. I’ll call you tonight as soon as I get in, okay?” He swallowed anxiously, trying to convince himself as much as me, and I realized then how much all this was weighing on him.

I mustered a smile and answered genuinely, “I can’t wait. Have a good rest of the day. I’ll be thinking of you.”

He exhaled quietly in relief and smiled softly. “I’ll try. I’m sorry this is turning out to be a tough day, Bella.”

“Ah, these days happen. We’ve got to learn to roll with ‘em, right?” I turned to go, sadness creeping into my chest.

He stopped me with his hand on my wrist. “I love you.”

“I love you, too, Edward,” I said as I closed the door.

The day wore on.

I was just going through the motions. Thankfully, most of the kids at the club didn’t notice. Only Ki-ki saw through my façade. Before she left, she tugged me down to my knees and placed her little brown hands on my cheeks, looking me square in the eyes. “Mizz Bella, I don’ know what’s da matter, but yo eyes are so *sad*. When Z and me are sad, Mawma always says, ‘You gotta decide what’s important, an’ good, an’ can make you feel better. An’ then you gotta go an’ git it.’ Maybe you should try that.”

“Maybe I should, beautiful girl. Tell your mom and Z hey for me, okay?”

“Kay. Love you!”

I squeezed her until my heart overflowed, and my eyes filled with tears. Wiping them quickly and hoping she hadn’t noticed, I told her I loved her, too.

Jacob and Seth were going to be at Ellie’s with a study group, so I left Rosalie a note in the room telling her I was in the science building for the evening. She might’ve remembered, but I thought

it was best not to leave anything to chance. Things always seemed to go wrong when I let my guard down. I stopped in for a quick bite at Home Plate on my way.

At break, I almost decided not to even leave the room. I'd brought a bottled water from my room anyway. Still, I needed to stretch my legs, so I stepped out into the lobby.

Pleasantly surprised, I jogged over to the chairs in the corner where Rosalie and Em were sitting. She smacked his shoulder, laughing as he whispered something in her ear. "Shut up," she said, smirking.

Rosalie looked up in greeting, and Emmett winked when he saw me. "What's up, Bellaluna?"

"What are you guys doing here? I didn't think anyone could come."

"E.C. called me and asked us to swing by after we dropped off Fugly Betty's car at the body shop." His face twisted as if even mentioning Josh put a foul taste in his mouth.

"Oh, you guys already found someone to fix it?"

"I know a guy," Rosalie said. "We've done a little work together, and he owes me a favor."

Emmett cocked his eyebrow at her and said, "Rosie, you are so hawt. Callin' in an I.O.U. from the dude at the body shop."

She rolled her eyes. "I think Emmett made Josh piss himself, Bells. You should've seen it."

"Are you serious? What happened?" I grinned, waiting for the story.

"Nothin' too big," Em said wryly. "Rosie was the one that threatened him. He just didn't notice me until after he'd done a little trash talkin' back. Then I was the one breathing down his neck."

"Eh," she shrugged with a smirk, "he was just acting like a royal prick when I met him to get the keys, so I told him if he said one more thing, I'd hit him again—and knock his pretty teeth out this time. As soon as he started talking, though, Em got out of his Jeep behind Josh and growled in his ear."

"Shut up! You *growled* at him?" I laughed.

"I only wanted to make him cry a little, but I guess he's even more of a wuss than I thought."

"Well," Rosie interjected, "You said somethin' else to him, too."

"Mm. I did, didn't I?" he grinned wickedly.

"What—?" I tried to ask.

“Bellaluna, My foxy Rosie, those were not words that ladies were ever meant to hear. My mama would be ashamed of me.”

Class flew by after that, because Emmett had scared Josh. Finally, a genuinely bright spot in my day.

And then my mind wandered to a pair of wide, chesnut eyes and a child’s strangely sage advice. “*You gotta decide what’s important, an’ good, an’ can make you feel better. An’ then you gotta go an’ git it.*” I decided then, that I wanted to swing by the Hopkins Center and see if Edward was still practicing. Em and Rose walked with me and left me at the door to go back to the boys’ place when we spotted the silver Volvo parked outside. It was 9:45. Edward hadn’t been exaggerating about practicing all evening.

I wandered slowly through the hallways in the back, stopping to listen at each room. Finally, I heard the strains of familiar music behind one of the thick wooden doors. Tapping lightly, I opened it and stuck my head inside the room. “Need a break for just a minute or two?”

Spinning around on the piano bench, Edward was on his feet in no time, pulling me into the room. “Perfect timing,” he said, his voice rough with relief. “I had just finished my audition pieces, and I was thinking of you.”

“I know.” I pressed a kiss to his cheek and spoke softly, “I was afraid I’d be intruding, but I heard you playing our song.”

His lips quirked into that perfectly lopsided smile. “You caught me. I just couldn’t practice any more, Love. I chose my two audition pieces, but I just wanted so badly to see you. I’m so glad you stopped by.”

Moments later, as we walked briskly back to my room enjoying the frozen scenery, I recapped Rosalie and Em’s run-in with Josh for him. “Em’ll probably tell it much better than I did,” I added, knowing I hadn’t done it justice.

“He definitely loves telling a story,” Edward agreed, the cloud of his breath surrounding his face.

“You have to find out what he said to Josh and tell me,” I whispered conspiratorially, poking his ribs. It hurt my fingers, it was so cold out. I stuffed my hands deep into my pockets.

Chuckling, he quirked an eyebrow at me and made no promises. “Maybe.”

“No, you have to!” I stopped him, tugging his hand in mine and gave him the cheesiest, most beseeching look I could muster. “C’mon. You can’t resist this face!”

“Well,” he finally acquiesced with a smirk, “Your little pink nose is pretty adorable, so I’ll see what I can do.” Taking my face in his hands, he bent down and pressed his lips firmly to mine. The contrast between the heat of his hands and lips and the wintry wind biting my cheeks carved itself into my memory.

When I shivered against him during a particularly icy blast, he breathed a smile over my face and said, "Let's run for it."

So we did. Hand in hand, we raced toward the warmth of my room, where we talked and snuggled for an hour or two more.

"Tomorrow night, after the literary society meeting," his low voice rumbled in my ear, sending goosebumps all over my body, "will you please come with me to the Hopkins Center and just sit and study while I practice?" His lips nipped at my earlobe.

"You're not playing fair. You can't ask me anything while you're doing that," I whispered.

"I'm not trying to. I want you there, since this is taking so much of my time. I'll do what I have to do, Love."

"Okay," I sighed in false reluctance.

"Good. This opportunity will mean so much more if you're with me."

The irony of his words wasn't lost on me. *"With" him. As in supporting him, but definitely not as in physically beside him. This opportunity could keep us apart for months. Am I really "with him" on this?*

Oh well, we'd cross that bridge when we came to it. For the moment, I let myself get lost in his embrace. It was too perfect to ruin with distraction.

Chapter 44

Chapter Word Count: 6002

A/N: Flemily and Aerosoldoc, you keep me goin'! Thanks~

Lovely readers, this is for you!

*I'm hopelessly sentimental
When the winter comes a storm
When the snow is on the mailbox
And the sidewalks all are gone
But the fire in the woodstove*

David Wilcox

Chapter Forty-two: Celebrations

My head hit the wall behind me with a thunk as I slumped, exhausted from trying to study on the floor of the practice room. Papers were scattered around me, a mirror of the mess in my heart.

Watching Edward play, completely focused, his body and mind almost at one with the instrument, anxiety gripped me. If anyone in the whole world deserved this opportunity, it was Edward. He was so gifted, so dedicated—music so much a part of him. But the thought of him being away from me for eight months made me feel weak.

Still, there was no other option for me. I could not—would not—ask him to stay. Since the entire group would be staying in the dorms of the campuses they visited, tagging along wasn't an option. I needed to concentrate on my studies anyway. So, if he got the place in the program, then I would bury my angst deep, deep down and pretend it wasn't there. For Edward, I would smile and say how much I wanted this for him. Because I did. That much, at least, was true.

The music ceased, and he turned to face me. "Have I told you lately I'm glad you're here?"

I rolled my eyes. "Only about a hundred times. Still," I smiled, "it doesn't seem to be getting old. I'm glad you suggested it. I'd have felt like I was intruding."

He slipped off the bench and got on his hands and knees, crawling over my chaotically arranged notes. "An intruder, you are most definitely *not*." Biting his lip and chuckling, he moved in for the kill. As I tensed playfully, he nuzzled my neck with his lips until I squealed. "Stop! Don't! I hate being tickled!"

"What are you talking about?" he said innocently and laughed into my hair.

"The tickling!" I snorted and slid down into the fetal position, trying to block his access to my neck. His hands found other ticklish spots, and my high-pitched laughter filled the room. Thank God these walls were sound proof. "Seriously, Edward! You're gonna make me pee! I can't handle—"

His hands stilled, and he gazed into my eyes adoringly. "Well, we can't have that. They'd never let me use the practice rooms again." He planted a quick kiss on my cheek, and sat back on his heels, helping me sit up. "Are you at a stopping point? I probably should have asked that *before* I attacked, huh? Sorry." He huffed in amused annoyance with himself.

"Don't worry about it. I stopped working awhile ago. I was just listening." I reached up and tried to smooth my hair. "You're really amazing, you know."

"I don't feel amazing. I feel stressed. I want this so much...it'd be so incredible. But..."

"Don't say it," I teased. "We promised last night we weren't going to lose sleep over this until we knew there was a reason to. Nothing's decided yet."

"I know." He tucked my hair behind my ear. "I just...I love you."

"I love *you*. And no matter what happens, my heart is yours."

He tugged me toward him, and I settled myself in his lap, his arms encircling me. He whispered right against my ear, "Those are my favorite words."

Two weeks later, Em and Rosalie were trying to keep me busy. We'd gone down to Eight Ball Hall, where they'd met, and were playing pool. Emmett was totally in his element, and it was fun to see. He was crazy rowdy and by far the cockiest player I'd ever watched, but Rose matched him trick for trick. She was amazing at the game.

Still, more often than not, my mind—and heart—were in Boston.

“Bellaluna, where *are* you? I thought you said you could play pool!” Em teased good-naturedly above the ruckus, as I wasted another shot.

“I’m tryin’! I just keep thinking about how his audition’s going.”

Rose looked up at me from her spot at the pool table. “It’s going superbly, because he is an excellent musician...and because he knows you’re cheering for him.” She blew a strand of hair out of her face and turned back to the table, all seriousness. “Watch this, Em. Seven ball in the left corner pocket, three in the right.” With no hesitation, she made the shot. The cue ball hit the ten and sent them both exactly where she wanted them.

The look on his face was priceless. “See why I love this girl, Bells?” Grinning and pointing at her with both arms, he shouted, “‘Cause my baby can outplay every tool in this place!” A few people looked over at us, but Emmett didn’t care. His eyes stayed locked on hers as he walked over and spoke into her ear.

Rosalie Hale blushed!

“Hellooo! You’re supposed to be focusing on keeping *me* distracted, you two.”

“You’re right, little sis. I’m sorry. I just get all caught up in her sometimes.” He nudged me with his elbow and then stood beside me, grinning. Rosalie made one more shot before she missed by a fraction of an inch. “Watch me win it right here,” he said.

He made a big show, pointing out the shots he was going to make. Two went perfectly. On the third, he aimed high and the cue ball spun, knocking the eight ball in. Disbelief was etched all over Emmett’s face. “WHAT?!”

Rosalie smirked and asked me, “You wanna go get somethin’ to eat now? It’s on Em, since I won.”

“You SO did not win, Rosie. Scratching the eight is basically forfeiting. You can’t truly claim victory this time. Tell her Bella.”

I shrugged, staying clear of their banter. Rosalie grabbed her coat and said, “Shutup, McCarty. Scratching the eight ball means you *lose*. You owe me a pizza.”

We went to eat and then went back to the boys’ apartment to watch a movie until Edward got back.

When I stepped in the door, I knew he was already there. The aroma of coffee filled the air, and quiet music drifted down the hall. The other two went into Em’s bedroom, and I tossed my coat on the couch and quickly made my way to the study, tapping on the door quietly.

“Bella?” he said.

“Yep.” Pushing the door open, I exhaled in relief. He was lounging in his chair, legs propped on the bed. He’d been reading, and to me, he looked glorious—glasses on and hair a perfect mess. I walked over and sat on the bed by his feet. “How long have you been back?”

“Only an hour or so. I stopped at your room first and then came here. I didn’t want to talk on the phone. Is it okay that I just waited?”

“Of course! I’m sorry we weren’t here, but I imagine you probably needed some time to unwind. How did it go?”

“Really well, I think. They said they were very impressed with both my pieces, but they still have three other pianists to hear next week. They’ll be in touch.”

“So, now we just wait, I guess.” I tried to sound relieved, but I hated waiting. That was the hardest part. I wanted to know what was going to happen so I could prepare myself for it.

“Well, not *just*.” He stood up, and tugged me up in front of him, taking off his glasses and tossing them on the bed behind me. He buried his hands in my hair as his lips found mine and moved against them hungrily. Wanting to be closer, I slid my hands up his chest and wrapped around his neck. He tilted my head back in his hands, tracing my lower lip with his tongue. When my lips parted, his tongue explored my mouth, firm and strong. A hand moved down to my hip, gripping me tightly, and I sighed, breathless. His kisses simply undid me.

My thumb traced his jaw, and I marveled at the strength of the muscle there as his mouth worked so intensely against mine. Warm breath caressed my neck as his lips trailed their way down to my collar. I needed to feel his skin under my hands. Reaching under the hem of his t-shirt, I rubbed my fingertips against the tight, toned muscles. He inhaled sharply and shivered beneath my touch. I pulled back slightly and looked up at him. “Too far?”

From beneath his thick eyelashes, his dark eyes gazed at me, intense. “I...I think maybe. That feels *so* good, but I don’t know if. . .” His speech ended there, but his thumb had followed my lead and was drawing small circles on the soft skin of my side. I knew what he was trying to say. That kiss had been the embodiment of all of our pent up emotions from the last two weeks. The release was incredible, but we had agreed on boundaries, and both of us knew we’d be pushing our limits if we kept touching like this, our hands wandering.

I reached for his hand, threading my fingers through his, and rested our hands on his hip. He tipped my chin up with his other hand and pressed his lips to mine once more, capturing my bottom lip between his and tugging gently. The smile that he gave me when he stood tall again crinkled his eyes. “I could never have done all this without you.”

Using my best British accent, I teased, “What? All the snogging?”

He shook his head in quiet laughter. “Well, there’s that, too. But mostly, I meant the audition. Everything.”

“Yes, you could’ve.”

“No, Bella. Not as well as I did. Thank you. Thanks for supporting me in this.”

I nodded silently.

Studying. Eating. Sleeping briefly. More studying. Snacking. Dozing off while studying.

Exam week was upon us.

On Wednesday, after Em and Rose picked my car up from her friend’s shop, Emmett and Edward both drove out to drop it off at Josh’s apartment. After they came back, Edward brooded, hanging back quietly for a while. When I couldn’t stay away any longer, I approached tentatively. He grabbed me and hugged me for all he was worth.

“I wanted to hurt him, and I don’t know what to do with that,” was all he said.

Genuinely understanding, I simply reached for his hand and led him over to the couch. He put his head in my lap, closing his eyes as I played with his hair. After some time had passed, I said, “At least Emmett got to threaten him. Maybe it was enough to count for both of you?” He shrugged.

I prompted, “You never did tell me what he said.”

With a smirk, he turned his eyes up to meet mine. “He told Josh that it would be easy to arrange a situation where you were within 100 yards of him, so that—in defense of another, of course—he could mess up Josh’s face beyond recognition, and he’d let Rosalie help.” After a moment, he added, “Tempting, isn’t it?” His eyes were cheerless, and I nodded tacitly.

I could identify with that completely. How many times had I wanted to hurt Josh somehow, to finally have retribution? And yet, the bigger thing to do was walk away. *Josh* was the one that was weak and spiteful. I was better than that, and so was Edward. Realizing that Josh wasn’t worth the ten minutes I’d been thinking about all this, I convinced Edward we should go to Ellie’s and study with the jukebox. We had a future to think about.

By Thursday night, winter break couldn’t come fast enough. Though we were all eager for the holidays and the time off school, no one was looking forward to the miles of separation. Still, Edward and I weren’t the only ones looking forward to some special time together. Angela was flying out to Washington alone, but Ben was planning to join her for New Year’s. Rosalie and Emmett were each going their separate ways until Christmas, but they planned to meet back and hide away in what Emmett was referring to as the “winter retreat.” From what I could tell, it was just the boys’ apartment on the empty campus—with lots of hot chocolate, popcorn, blankets and movies. Edward had hinted that Emmett really was planning something special for New Year’s Eve, but he wouldn’t give me any details.

I was planning on persuading him to tell me more on our three hour flight from Boston to Jacksonville. Honestly, I needed to talk about it. Anything, really, other than us. Edward *still* hadn’t heard back from the Karamazov Foundation. I was on an emotional rollercoaster, and this was one of those mornings where distraction was a necessity. He seemed to be taking it all in stride.

After checking in at the airport, we immediately went to Starbucks. Angela had given Edward a gift card and warned him that I was not a nice travel companion unless properly caffeinated. My gift had been a brightly-colored hand crocheted scarf and glove set and a new leather-bound journal. I knew I'd have no problem filling its pages in the months ahead, no matter what.

When we finally found a seat at our gate, Edward wrapped an arm around me, snugly. "I can't even *tell* you how glad I am that we're spending the holidays together."

"Me neither. But I feel so weird not being able to spend Christmas with my dad. I never expected him to suggest it." He had called the week before and told me to save my money and enjoy Christmas with Renee and the Cullens.

"I know, love, but it'll be all right. Just different."

"We *do* get every other break together..." I acknowledged.

"As well as the whole summer," Edward added.

"But it's *Christmas*." I was trying not to let my disappointment sour my attitude, but it was an uphill battle.

"Well, I'm sure it'll still be a good one. You can call him often, and Mom said she's already gotten your gift from him. It's at the house waiting for you."

I nodded, reminding myself that the reason for the change was that Edward and I were spending the break with each other. That had to be worth some sacrifices.

"Tell me more about your mom and Phil," he suggested.

We talked until the flight attendant called for first-class passengers to board. "I can't believe we're flying first class."

"Why not make the most of Dad's frequent flyer miles?" he grinned. "Let's enjoy it."

I requested a blanket and hot chocolate as soon as I was asked. Talk about service. I curled up on the seat, amazed at the room, and rested my head on Edward's shoulder.

He finally confided in me that New Year's Eve was going to be extremely romantic for Rosalie and Emmett. He had bought her a gift card for a full spa treatment at The River Valley Club. He'd gotten Alice's help to find the perfect dress, and was planning on taking her to Salubre Trattoria, an upscale Italian and Mediterranean restaurant. The grand finale, though, would be dancing and enjoying an intimate dessert picnic on the floor of the apartment, which he had great plans to transform while she was at the spa. Apparently, Em was sparing no expense. I was positive it would be flawless.

I closed my eyes and pictured the highlights of the evening. How pampered and treasured she was going to feel! Honestly, both these boys seemed to have a supernatural ability to make us feel absolutely adored. Smiling, I revisited several of the times that Edward had made me feel like the only person on earth that mattered.

“Bella, love?” A gentle nudging woke me from my peaceful reprieve. Stretching, I sat up and looked around. Edward whispered, “We’re about to land.”

“Did I sleep the entire time?” I asked in disbelief.

“Mm. We both did. I only woke up a moment before you. They asked me to put my seat up.” I smiled as he yawned and ran his fingers through the unkempt bronze mop. *I don’t think I’ll ever get over how amazingly beautiful he is.*

“I guess everything finally caught up with us. I still feel so groggy,” I said.

“Well, it shouldn’t take us long to get the rental car. We ought to get there in no time.”

“I can’t wait to feel the warm sunshine on my face. Mom said it’s been in the 70s.”

“Sounds wonderful,” he agreed, resting his eyes again.

We pulled up in front of the modest white bungalow, and Renee hopped lithely down from the porch. As soon as I climbed out of the car, she pulled me into a tight hug. “I missed you so much, baby. It’s so great to look at you.” She peeked over my shoulder at Edward, and whispered, “Sweetie, the picture you texted me doesn’t do him justice at *all*. He’s gorgeous. Is he a good kisser?”

“Mom!” Fire flooded my cheeks, and I ducked into the car to get my backpack, avoiding eye contact with any and everyone for a bit. She swatted my bottom playfully.

When I stood back up, she was grinning. “Sorry babe, I just had to ask. Nobody heard me though, promise.” She chuckled, adding, “Your face was priceless.” I kept staring at her, open-mouthed and waiting for the shock to wear off, and she teased, “Well, are ya gonna introduce me, or what?”

She walked over to him while I said, “Mom, this is Edward.”

“I’m really glad you decided to join us this year. I needed to meet this boy who’s been so good to my Bella.”

He smiled modestly. “I wouldn’t have missed it. Thanks so much for the invitation.”

Phil jogged out of the house then, and welcomed me by tousling my hair. “You look good, Bella. This guy treatin’ you all right?” He offered Edward a firm shake and gripped his upper arm with the other hand. *Why do guys do that?*

Once we got settled, Renee asked if we wanted to go walk on the beach. They lived in a fairly old neighborhood, but she said the beach was less than a mile away. “It’s not the fancy part of the beach, but I like it better. Beaches are better when they’re more natural.”

Mom and I grabbed blankets, and we ambled slowly through the neighborhood to the water’s edge. Edward and I walked down the shore awhile, our fingers intertwined. It was a wonderfully

relaxing afternoon, and, later, as Mom and I lay basking and chatting in the sunshine, Edward and Phil tossed a baseball back and forth.

I caught mom up on everything, and noticed that—more than once—she had to wipe away tears as I spoke about my relationship with Edward.

“Bells, I so wish I’d been around more. Wish I could’ve seen what was happening to you with that Josh.” Regret creased her forehead and eyes. “I *hate* that you had to go through all that...all the hurt. But I’m so glad you found this one. He sounds like the perfect gentleman. I’m glad you’ve been able to find happiness and love. More than that, though, I’m glad that he’s helped you to see the extraordinary young woman that you truly are. And that you can really trust him with your heart.” Her hand found mine and squeezed.

I told her about the Karamazov Foundation, and she smiled. “Sounds like you’re doin’ it right, though, Bella Bella. Just keep encouraging him to follow his dreams. That’ll never fail you.” She glanced over at Phil. “It took me long enough to figure that one out. When he’s able to really enjoy *his* passions and priorities, I can count on staying one of ‘em. Don’t rely too heavily on all that practicality. You’ve gotta give him wings. If it’s real, your love can pass the distance test.”

I watched Edward as he laughed at something Phil shouted. He threw the ball easily to Phil and yelled back. Once, he stumbled and fell as he jogged to catch it, but rolled right at the edge of the water and popped back up as if it were the most natural thing in the world. He looked over at me and shrugged with a grin as he began to knock the sand off of his clothes and shake it out of his hair.

Renee’s voice yanked me out of my haze. “He’s really somethin’, huh? Seriously, Bella, he’s GQ material.”

I swatted her arm and chuckled, but couldn’t disagree. “I can’t decide whether I like his eyes or his hair better.”

“Yeah, I bet that’s the *least* of your trouble,” she teased.

“...or his shoulders...or his hands...”

“I don’t want to hear about the hands. Gah! I’m still your mother.”

I blushed, knowing what those hands could do, but confessed sincerely, “I was thinking about the piano, Mom.”

“Sure you were, babe. Sure you were.”

Busy concentrating on making perfect chocolate chip pancakes and bacon for everyone one morning, I didn’t hear Edward come in behind me. Two strong arms wrapped around me and a soft kiss was planted on my shoulder. I quickly finished the pancakes that were on the griddle and then spun to face him. Though he was smiling, his eyes were uncertain.

“Is everything okay?” I asked.

He reached up and rubbed his neck, anxious. “Well, my mom called this morning.”

“Oh. Is everyone all right?”

An awkward laugh escaped his lips. “Everyone’s fine, Bella. It’s...it’s good news, I think.” There was the uncertainty again.

The ball of lead in my stomach that I’d been doing a semi-decent job of ignoring dropped to the floor. I put on my best game face. “Oh! Did you...did your mom hear from the Karamazov Foundation? Did you win?”

He smiled at me and chuckled, “Yes. I ‘won.’ They’ve offered me the piano spot. They called last night.”

“Wow!” I wrapped my arms around him and held on for dear life. This was an incredible, once-in-a-lifetime moment for him! “Edward, I am *so* proud of you. I knew you’d get it. In my heart, I knew it. They couldn’t have chosen anyone but you and still have been good judges!”

He took a half-step back and tipped my chin up, searching my eyes. “Thank you, Bella. Thank you for being happy for me. We can make this work, I’m positive.” He pulled me back into an intense hug, and I’m sure we were both praying he was right.

I’d certainly not expected for Edward to avoid me over our holiday together, but I can only describe his behavior the next few days as *attentive*. He was constantly beside me, touching me somehow. Holding my hand, playing with my hair, standing behind me with his head on my shoulder. And in the few instances where—for Renee’s sake, I’m sure—he was playing it cool, I was the one reaching out to him. I think we were afraid to let go of each other.

By Christmas Eve, we’d found a comfortable balance, enjoying and making the most of the nearness without being possessive and clingy. Who wants *that*?

That night at dinner, Renee informed us that we’d be keeping up our Christmas morning tradition: opening our presents in pajamas. It had been cute and fun when it was just Mom and I living together for all those years, but I wasn’t sure how cool Edward and Phil would think it was. Glancing over at Edward, I tried to read his face. He was focused on Renee’s explanation, but he evidently felt my perusal. Cocking his head in my direction, he waggled his eyebrows and grinned.

Phil guffawed and almost choked on his roast beef sandwich. “*Pajamas?* With *all* of us here?” Mom nodded firmly, and he said, “If you say so, babe.”

It would be a memorable experience. Of that I was certain.

Edward and I snuggled on the couch watching the old *Miracle* on 34th Street until one in the morning. Content to just be held by him, I didn’t want to get up and go to our rooms. When the movie turned off by itself, I just lay there in the cobalt glow of the television and twinkling Christmas lights, thinking about the months ahead. Without realizing it, I let out a deep sigh.

“What are you thinking about?” he whispered behind me.

“How wonderful your experience will be...and how hard it’s going to be. . . for me.” I kept my voice hushed, too.

“It’s not going to be *easy* being away from you either. You know that, right?”

“Yeah, but I’m going to have to go to all of the same places, see all of the same people, do all of the same things—*without* you.” Angry that tears were beginning to betray the true state of my heart, I hugged my arms to my chest and buried my face in his shoulder. He slid his hands down my arms until he found my hands, and laced his fingers over mine.

“I’m sorry for that, but please know that every single thing I do, every place I go, I’m going to think, ‘I wish my Bella were with me to experience this.’ And one day, it’ll be over. We won’t have to leave each other any more.”

“Promise?” I couldn’t help but hope.

“I promise.”

We finally forced our lazy, stiff bodies to unfold themselves from the couch, and make it upstairs. After a tender kiss goodnight, we each went into our own room. I changed into my PJs quickly and flopped into my bed. I was out before I knew what hit me.

As soon as the light peeked through my window Christmas morning, I jumped up and ran to the bathroom to brush my teeth and hair. I could at least make myself presentable. The aroma of coffee was wafting its way up the steps, drawing sleepyheads down to drink the liquid energy. I slid on my fuzzy slippers, immediately remembering the first time Edward had seen me in them: the night he brought me hot chocolate and threw a rock at my window. The first time he’d hugged me.

I hustled downstairs, eager to see him again and get a good morning hug. Padding into the kitchen, I saw him fixing a cup of coffee with Phil, both in their pajamas. Phil, in gym shorts, was barely noticeable next to Edward. If they hadn’t been talking, I might have missed him altogether. Edward was a scruffy, bedheaded dream. In flannel pants and his well-worn black t-shirt, he looked like he needed to cuddle in a serious way. He was running his hand through his unruly hair when he turned to wish me a merry Christmas, and I couldn’t help jogging over and hugging him.

“Good morning! Merry Christmas!” I planted a big kiss on his cheek and then hugged him again. “Merry Christmas to you, too, Phil! Did you sleep well?”

“Sure did. Have some coffee!”

“She *wouldn’t dream of it!*” my mom’s voice chimed in as she slipped around the corner. “We always make hot chocolate. If any occasion is worth celebrating, it’s worth celebrating with hot cocoa,” she giggled. “Isn’t that right, Bella?”

“Absolutely.” I gave her a bear hug. “And it has many other uses as well. It is a drink for any occasion,” I quipped.

“That explains a lot,” Edward teased, lifting his coffee mug to me in a silent toast.

When we had our drinks, mine and mom's topped with real whipped cream, we all got settled by the tree. Mom played Santa and passed out the gifts. "You get us started, Bells. Open your present from us."

Mom and Phil got me an iPhone, and a Barnes and Noble gift card...and some clothes. They got Edward a few CDs that I'd suggested. My mom rushed to explain, "We got 'em at Target, and there's a gift receipt in the bag, so if any of 'em..."

Edward held up his hand, slowing her explanation. "No, they're wonderful actually. These are some that I've really wanted. Thank you both so much."

Mom leaned back again, pleased, and winked at me. She and Phil opened their presents from us, and then she suggested that Edward and I open ours from each other while they did the same.

I'd found a beautiful leather portfolio in an antique store, and I had bought some aged parchment and drawn lines on it. "You can write your music on it," I said softly. I shouldn't have been anxious about his reaction. He was beyond thrilled. Mom and Phil looked over and chuckled as he gushed and raved about my thoughtfulness. His eyes told me he'd thank me properly later.

When I opened my present from him, though, it was as if we were alone in the room—the *world* for that matter. I could not have imagined anything more perfect if I had wanted to. In a beautifully-crafted ebony and iron frame, Edward had had four black and white photos custom-matted in a deep crimson. I hadn't realized these moments were being captured on film, so they were perfectly candid—just as I remembered them. I turned my eyes to his in silent question, and he answered, "Estelle took them. I made arrangements before we got to Scullers."

Four perfect snapshots of our first proper date. The first was Edward alone, singing at the piano. It was the moment when he'd first looked out at me and smiled. I'd never forget the perfect expression. Facing that picture was a photo of me, grinning in pleasure and utter adoration, my chin resting on my knuckles as I watched Edward on stage. The last image must've been taken when Elias was introducing himself to me, because both Edward and I were looking at the same spot and smiling genuinely. We were the happiest couple in the world in that moment.

It was the third picture that was my favorite, though—the silhouette, from behind, of the two of us during the second half of the concert. In the photograph, Edward's arm was around me, and my head was resting on his shoulder contentedly. His fingers were playing music on my arm. It was the moment when I'd said to myself, "This is it. I'm right where I belong. I am completely satisfied." In that image alone, there was a touch of color. A single red, rose stood on the table in front of us.

The pictures began to blur, and a tear splashed the glass. All I could manage was a whispered, "Perfect. It's perfect." Edward's hand cupped my cheek and wiped away the other tears threatening to fall.

Overall, we had a lovely visit with my mom and Phil. Seeing them so content together encouraged my heart. Charlie had called me after lunch on Christmas, and we'd had a

wonderful—if brief—talk. He was looking forward to seeing me over Spring Break and hoped I'd like the gift he sent to the Cullens'.

Edward and I flew out early on the morning after Christmas. Esme was planning a big dinner. The whole family was waiting for us, and we'd be opening presents together that evening after the meal. On the flight, Edward tried to prepare me for the experience, filling me in on Cullen traditions and stories from Christmases past.

When we finally made it down to baggage claim, we heard—well, I'm sure *everyone* heard—a high-pitched squeal just before being accosted by a dark-haired pixie and her lanky Texan boyfriend. Alice and Jasper took us out for lunch on the way home. She caught me up on everything that had been happening with them since they'd arrived home two days ago, and informed me of some of the highlights that I'd be enjoying with them in the week ahead. Jasper, of course, leaned back in his chair, and listened to her with a smile.

“Christmas dinner is an absolute *feast*, so I'm glad you ordered something light. I can't *wait* for you to see the tree!—you're just going to love it! You'll be staying in the guest room across the hall from my room, but not too far from Edward. Oh, there's so much I want to show you! We'll go for a walk on the shore, down to see the light house, out to Perkin's Cove, and there are *tons* of great places to shop. The party on New Year's Eve will be the best, though. I've already made appointments for us at the spa the day of...”

“Alice?” Edward asked with calm restraint. “Could you wait on the itinerary? It's a tad overwhelming.”

“Oh! Sure!” Her bell-like laughter pealed through the restaurant. “Sorry, Bella. I'm just so glad you're here to stay for a while.”

I grinned at her. “It's good to see you, too, BFF.”

As we headed out to the car after the meal, Jasper ducked his head in my direction and said in a low voice, “It's good to see ya again, Bella. It's really relaxing at their house, so don't let her uh...*enthusiasm* make you too nervous. She's been like a bee in a jar waitin' for ya.”

When we pulled into the gated driveway, I held my breath. I don't know what I'd been expecting exactly, but the grounds alone were phenomenal. The front lawn had clearly been carefully cultivated, and it was hedged in with looming fir trees. That day, though, everything was blanketed by a newly fallen snow. The house—mansion was more appropriate a term in my opinion—was what Edward called a classic Maine shingle home. There were several Cape Cod style dormers and three immense stone chimneys. I couldn't wait to sit in front of one of those fireplaces with Edward! It was expansive and yet completely inviting. A candle burned in every window, and two cobblestone pathways led up to the ends of the welcoming front porch. Carlisle and Esme were standing there holding the door open for us.

They smiled warmly and Carlisle said, “Welcome, Bella! Merry Christmas! Come inside, you guys!”

We stomped the snow off our boots, and Esme waited until he took our coats and asked, “Did you have a good trip? Would you like something warm to drink?” She hugged and kissed us on the

cheeks, inviting us to follow her into the kitchen. The scent of apples and cinnamon permeated the air strongly mixed with hints of ham, fresh baked bread, and woodsmoke. Edward led me over by a large hearth with a spit for roasting meat over the fire. No sooner than I'd sat down, Esme was back, handing me a cup of hot apple cider. "Get warmed up a little, and then we'll give you a tour so you know your way around. Please be completely at home here, Bella. We want you to feel like part of the family." Her loving smile crinkled her eyes, and I could tell she meant it.

Thankfully, Edward promised he'd show me around again later, because I'd never have remembered my way around. The layout was simply sprawling. Each room was very spacious and open, beautifully decorated, but there were so many! The thing that amazed me the most was that—even though every thing was impeccably clean and uncluttered, the house still felt very lived in and comfortable. I felt as though, no matter where I was, I could make myself at home and relax. Such a peaceful atmosphere!

We rounded the corner at the top of the stairs in the back of the house, and I heard the loud voices of sports commentators. Carlisle smiled kindly and explained, "This is our home theater. Big screen and surround sound. It's perfect for watching movies together, or just enjoying the football games on ESPN, if you like."

I smiled, "Oh, I'm not much for sports watching, but a movie on the big screen sounds fun. My dad's the sportsfan back home."

"Ho-hooo! Interception!" a familiar voice shouted. Carlisle moved aside, gesturing for me to go on into the room. "Carlisle, this thing is amazing! I could really get used to this," I heard Charlie's voice say. My dad was standing there watching a football game when I stepped in.

"Surprise, Kiddo! Merry Christmas!"

Please let me know your thoughts! I wish I could respond to each and every review, but I swamped with the kiddies. I read each and every one, and I cherish your thoughts...take a sec and tell me how you feel about it!

top

Chapter 45

Chapter Word Count: 4545

A/N: We are almost there! This is the last chapter, but I promise an epilogue, because I know you'll want it as much as I want to share it with you. FlemilyHarper, you speak my soul-language. I think your soul must be mucho similar. Thanks for your voice (and your mad beta skills).

Coven ladies, you're magical and inspiring. Aero, when my kids are bigger, I want to grow up to be like you.

Twilightzoner, thanks for joining me for the ride.

Bebes, it's time to get comfy and enjoy Maine and Christmas as much as I do!

-*-*-

*When you take my hand and lead me down the path to where we go
I come undone
Now I feel the wind and I know where its from
Its your mouth in my ear and you say come and I'm walking,
a glide in my stride
What you whispered, well it keeps me satisfied*

David Wilcox

Chapter Forty-three: A New Year

That evening, the warmth and harmony around the dinner table drew me in, and I found myself unable—and unwilling—to picture a future without the Cullen family. Watching Charlie’s eyes dance as Alice shared her favorite holiday memories only solidified my resolve. Every time he shared a joke with Carlisle or gave Edward a smile and meaningful nod, a sense of hope filled my heart. The Cullens had made my dad and me feel completely at home.

After the big Christmas meal, everyone lent a hand, making short work of the clean up. Esme informed us that she had some quick preparations to take care of, so we’d meet in the den in about an hour to exchange gifts. I heard Jasper tell Alice he wanted to play something new he’d written for her, so they headed off to get his guitar and find a quiet spot together. Charlie and Carlisle decided to spend the time watching some ESPN. When I turned to Edward, he wordlessly tugged my hand with a twinkle in his eyes.

“Where are we going?”

“To my favorite room. I’ve wanted you to see this for ages.”

He led me down a hallway at the back of the house, eager. As he was walking, he began telling me about where we were headed. “My dad showed you this room—Mom’s sun room—from the other side. The one with the wall of windows that overlook her garden.”

“Oh, yeah,” I smiled. “It seemed so simple and open.”

“Do you remember the Japanese-style screen at the back?”

“Um, yeah, but I thought that was the whole wall on that side.”

Nodding, he stopped just outside the door and turned to look at me. “It’s a sliding wall. These two rooms connect when we slide the screen out of the way. Mom keeps it separate most of the time, though, because it’s more intimate.”

He opened the door and stepped aside to let me in first. I noticed the partition on my left, but was held captive by the elegant concert grand piano in the center of the room. Its ebony lines and curves stood in sharp contrast to the latte-colored wall behind it. I imagined Edward playing his soulful tunes as Esme silently soaked in the music on the other side of the panel. He pulled me back into the moment with a hand on the small of my back, turning me to the right. His voice whispered, “Look at the view.”

Another wall, made entirely of glass, was on my right. Never had I imagined a more perfect panorama to accompany Edward's music. The Cullens' house sat atop a small cliff overlooking a private bay. I could see the rocky crags as the edge curved around and faced the window before skirting away along the edge of the ocean. The sky was just beginning to darken, and I knew that within an hour, I'd probably only be able to see the occasional whitecap in the distance, lit by the glow of the moon.

"The sunrise is the best," he said softly behind me as his hands snaked around my waist.

Leaning into his body, I rested my head on his shoulder. "Will I get to see it this week?"

"I'd love for you to, but..." he chuckled, "can you *possibly* wake up that early?"

"Hey!" I said, in mock offense. "It's winter after all, so sunrise isn't until 10:30 or so, right?"

"Right." I could still hear the smile in his voice. "But really, would you like to wake up early with me one morning?"

"Absolutely. I wouldn't miss it."

"Good," he whispered as he brushed my hair over toward my other shoulder and peppered little kisses up and down the side of my neck.

I spun in the circle of his arms, my eyes entreating. "Will you play for me?"

His embrace tightened around me, until I was off the floor and being whisked over and set down on the piano bench. It faced the window, so that the scenery could inspire anyone who sat to play. He slid onto the seat next to me and rolled up his sleeves. *I love when he does that.*

He kissed my cheek before beginning, and without looking, his fingers found their places. I was instantly caught up in their intricate dance. Though the song was familiar, Night by George Winston, I'd never watched it being played before. Lying on my bed and listening to the CD paled in comparison. As twilight began to fall, my eyes wandered to the changing landscape. When I glanced over at Edward again, he was enjoying the view out of the window, too.

"You don't have to look at the keys when you play?"

"Not for this one. I can feel it." His hands kept moving, but he turned his head in my direction, wagging his eyebrows.

I laughed quietly and looked back out toward the water.

When he finished, I thanked him with a peck on the cheek and felt his cheek lift in a smile. When we stood and turned to leave the room, he inhaled sharply, noticing a large envelope that rested against a sweet-smelling pillar candle on the table next to the door. Immediately, he reached over and picked it up. My heart clenched in pain as I read the return address: The Karamazov Foundation. Seeing it in his hands made it all so much more real to me.

He opened it carefully and pulled out the contents of the envelope. His lips moved as he read the letter to himself, smiling. As he flipped through the rest of the pages, he suddenly paused, and

his face lit up. “Bella, look! This is the itinerary—the list of music conservatories where we’ll be going and the dates we’ll be at each school!”

I couldn’t look at the paper, couldn’t tear myself away from the elation on his face. It was so bittersweet—a little disorienting for me. He was elated, and I couldn’t help but be thrilled for him. But the joy was coming at such a stiff price. Swallowing my uneasiness, I glanced over. He handed me the stack of documents and watched my face for a reaction. *What does he want to me say? What am I supposed to see here?*

“These are some pretty great programs,” I tried.

The excitement was coming off him in waves. He inhaled deeply and seemed to have to work to speak calmly. “You don’t see it, do you?”

I shook my head and searched his eyes.

“Most of these music conservatories: Mannes, Berklee, Eastman, the Curtis Institute—they’re all in the Northeast! And there are only a few weekend concerts. We’ll be able to see each other *way* more than I thought we would. I’ll be able to get back to campus sometimes, and you could maybe even come up for some of the performances! Would you? Could you come up with my parents? Or with Em and Rose?”

My eyes brimmed with tears as I tried to take in all he was saying. He’d be around. Concerts would be close enough that I could see him play. He wanted me to be there. I nodded, afraid my voice would betray me.

“We can do this!” He studied the dates, confident. “There are really only three weeks that we’ll be far away. One week in New Orleans, one in Houston, and one at the Colburn Conservatory in LA. Our last concert is at Carnegie Hall in New York. This is perfect!”

Relief opened the floodgates of my heart, and—before I could prevent it—a sob escaped. Edward’s head shot up, and he tossed the letter onto the table, scooping me up in his arms. My body shuddered, my shoulders shaking as I wept for joy. With his own eyes watery as well, he twirled me around and then stopped, settling me in front of him. He ducked his head and pressed his forehead to mine, gazing down at me tenderly. “Don’t cry, my Bella.”

Looking up at him, I hiccupped and offered a watery smile. “I’ve been so scared. I wanted this for you so much, but...I didn’t know if my heart could handle it.”

He pressed his lips to my forehead. “Your heart is much more resilient than you give it credit for, but I know exactly what you mean. I’ve been more anxious than I’ve let on, too.”

I sniffled and squeezed him tightly, never wanting to let go.

Lightly resting his chin on the top of my head, he ran his fingers through my hair, soothing me. After a few minutes, my breathing evened out, and he whispered, “Hey, Love. Let’s dry your tears before we go meet everyone by the Christmas tree. I don’t want your dad to shoot me or anything. I’m on his good side for now.”

I laughed at that thought, but I was still snuffly, and it came out all wrong...and way too loud.

“You snorted,” Edward teased.

“Shut up.” I started to dry my eyes with the backs of my hands, when my head was suddenly cupped in his hands, the pads of his thumbs wiping my cheeks.

“It was cute, though.”

“Whatever. You *never* mock a girl when she snorts. Don’t you know that?”

“I do now,” he answered with all the seriousness he could muster, which wasn’t a lot.

I smiled up at him, and before I could say anything else, his lips were on mine, making me forget everything other than the fact that I wasn’t going to have to say goodbye to him for long.

He was mine, and I was his.

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We spent the next few days wandering the nearby towns and enjoying the delicious seafood. The Cullens took Charlie and me out for lunch at a local favorite in Perkins Cove where we actually ate out on a deck over the water—in December! It would never have occurred to me, but the famous little restaurant’s porch was all zipped up in a thick transparent plastic, tall outdoor heating lamps placed next to every table. If I had any doubt about enjoying a wintry outdoor dining experience, it was gone as soon as I tasted my first spoonful of their creamy clam chowder.

When we went back to the house, all the guys disappeared. Alice and I played cards by the fire, and Esme joined us after a while. They reminded me that there was a big get-together on New Year’s Eve and suggested we go shopping one morning. I can’t usually get excited about the prospect of spending all morning shopping—or all day, as I suspected it would be with Alice—but I was in dire need of a new dress. When the men showed up again, they seemed to be in good moods all around. Everyone agreed on ordering pizza, and we spent the evening watching *A Christmas Story* in the home theater. I sandwiched myself in between Edward and my dad. Charlie and I had watched this movie every year together as one of our only “traditions.” The loveseat shook as he chuckled. “Agh, that lamp. That crazy lamp.”

Dad flew back out to Washington the next morning. Relaxation and spontaneity were the theme the remainder of the week.

On a brisk day, the sky cloudless, Edward took me out to the drawbridge in Perkins Cove, and then we drove up and down the coast, sightseeing. I asked the owner of one of the antique stores to snap a photo of us in front of his display of lobster buoys, their vividly colored stripes a cheerful background. Nothing was planned, and we were enjoying the leisurely pace. That afternoon, we did have to make one quick visit to Tom’s of Maine to pick up some sugar-free mint toothpaste for Esme. While we were there, Edward bought me one of their baseball caps.

“Wear this with pride,” he said. “Mom’ll love it. Besides, you’ll want a hat in just a second.” I pulled my hair through the hole at the back of the hat, and—at our next stop, an empty beach—Edward was right; I was intensely thankful for the gift.

The beauty of the place stirred me, and the moment etched itself indelibly into my mind. As we stood holding hands out on the rocks, worn smooth by years and years of relentlessly pounding surf, conversation was impossible, but unnecessary anyway. The icy wind howling around us, I reached up and tugged on his collar, pulling his lips down to mine. His hands grasped my hips tightly, and for a moment, he was all that existed. Too soon, our cold noses demanded that we head back to the car. As Edward led me carefully over the rocks toward the road, a few runaway strands of hair whipped around my head with every gust of wind, and I knew that—without my Tom’s hat—I’d have been blinded for sure. Edward looked like he’d lived through a tornado when we finally shut out the bellowing wind, and I wanted to tangle my hands all in his hair and kiss him again for it.

He took me to see Nubble Lighthouse, set atop a rocky isle at Cape Neddick. The lighthouse keepers actually had to take a tiny cable car back and forth to the place. We spent almost an hour climbing around the granite outcroppings in the bitter cold trying to find the best angle for getting a picture of the lighthouse. We may have kissed a little more, too. Chilled to the bone, we made it into Kennebunk for some hot chocolate, and Edward pointed out Camp David as we drove through Kennebunkport. My favorite stop aside from the coast, though, was an old, stone church up on a hill. It was one of the loveliest things I’d ever seen.

We spent the night in, reading to each other in the library and listening to music. Esme brought in some freshly baked gingersnaps and milk after awhile.

I was picking the last few crumbs from my plate when I heard Edward’s sweet, rumbly laughter across from me. “What?” I asked, all innocence.

“You.”

“I’m doing nothing more than enjoying your mom’s cookies to their fullest.”

The chuckling continued. “Oh, I know. I bet she’s got some more downstairs, so don’t lick the plate just yet.”

I shrugged, feeling playful.

Instead of continuing the banter, Edward jumped out of his chair and slid to his knees in front of me. His eyes, earnest, bore into mine. “Do you *know* how much I love you?”

“As much as I love you?”

“Watching you, being anywhere with you, doing anything. Every little thing you do is. . .”

I heard a certain favorite musician’s voice in my head. “Magic?” I teased.

“Bella, I’m serious.”

His face pled with me to hear him, but he’d just set himself up way too perfectly for this to miss the opportunity. The Police were playing their syncopated accompaniment in my mental soundtrack, and I kept on, a smile on my face. “Everything I do just turn you on? Even though your life before was tragic, now you know your love for me goes on?”

He looked down and shook his head. I knew the instant he resigned himself to my ill-timed humor. With a glint in his eyes, he agreed, smirking. “Fine, yes. Next time I try to pour out my heart to you, I’ll use De do do do, de da da da.”

“You have to admit, you walked right into that one.”

His crooked smile slid across his face, and his expression told me he did indeed forgive me. His nose found that sensitive spot under my ear, and he began humming.

“So, what were you saying?” I asked.

He pulled his head back so that he could look at my face. “That I cannot imagine my life without you.”

“I don’t want you to.”

“Ever, Bella. I want to share everything with you.” His eyes had turned from playful to smoldering.

“Me, too,” I whispered.

“Then,” his voice full of hope, “will you promise..?”

“Anything,” I surrendered softly.

“Will you...would you...?” His brow furrowed, and he suddenly kissed me *hard*.

A moment later, breathless and pleasantly disheveled, I laughed awkwardly. “Where did *that* come from?”

“It’s just...there are so many things I want to say, but I shouldn’t yet.” He swallowed quickly and searched my face for something. “How do you really feel about us?”

I couldn’t possibly be more in love with you. My answer was a simple, “Perfect.”

“Me, too.” He nodded with resolve, helping me to my feet. “I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life.”

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On New Year’s Eve, the Cullen house was a frenzy. A team of workmen arrived early to move furniture, and the caterers were due just after lunch. Alice stood as soon as she finished eating, grabbed her plate and called out on her way to the kitchen, “Bella, we need to leave in about ten minutes, okay?”

“I’ve got my stuff by the door.”

We were going to the spa for the afternoon, because Alice declared it a vital part of the party preparations. Everyone important to the Cullens was invited: families from the prep school Alice and Edward had attended, several Dartmouth alumni, Carlisle’s colleagues from work, other notable families in the area. As we drove, I heard Josh’s mocking derision. “You’re just a

nobody from nowhere. You *need* me.” Swallowing the bile that rose in my throat, I reassured myself that I was not going to be at this party tonight because I *needed* anyone. I was going to be there because Edward Cullen loved me and wanted me to be a part of his life.

Though I’d tried to keep my face a mask of serenity, Esme must have noticed my internal struggle. “Sweetie, are you nervous about tonight?”

“A little.”

“You know, you two will stand out as the classiest girls there. Edward and Jasper will fall all over themselves trying to monopolize your attention. And—as far as other people’s opinions go—you and Edward are a perfect match, so don’t waste another moment on it. All right?”

Alice chimed in, “There’ll probably be a handful of girls who hate you, but just have fun with that. They make it their sole ambition to be on Edward’s arm by the end of the night every year. He’s never given any of them a second look. Can’t stand their scheming.”

“Oh, now that’s true,” Esme snickered. “Irritating little trollops. You can go right on and make them jealous. You are here as our special guest, and I want you to have a wonderful time tonight.”

I nodded—and spent the rest of the afternoon immensely enjoying a massage and my mani-pedi while Alice gushed endlessly about Jasper Whitlock.

The gala officially began at 7:00. It was 7:30 when Alice had put the finishing touches on me. She directed me to the full-length mirrors next to her walk-in closet. She was even better at this than Rosalie! My hair was pulled into a low ponytail, its full, loose curls swinging at my back. It looked completely relaxed and unpretentious, but she’d carefully arranged every piece so that it wouldn’t dare fall out of place during the evening. The dusky gray kohl eyeliner she’d used made my eyes stand out. An understated lip gloss was the only other makeup she applied. The little black Ralph Lauren crepe sheath dress fit me like it had been tailor made, its wide, beaded shoulder straps adding a touch of elegance. Stepping into my strappy black heels, I turned, pleased with the way I looked. I felt daring, and vowed to myself that I would walk into that room with confidence.

“Well, do *you* think you look as awesome as I think you look?” Alice asked, hands on her hips.

“I feel incredible! Thank you so much. I hope Edward...”

“Don’t even say it,” she put her hand up in the air to stop me. “You’re a knockout. He’ll feel like the luckiest man alive.”

“You think?” I asked.

“I know it, Bella. Wait just a sec, and I’ll put on my shoes. We can walk down together.”

At the top of the stairs, I peeked down over the balcony and saw Edward and Jasper waiting down in the atrium. Edward was scraping his fingers through his hair, tense. There was a tall, strawberry blonde moving much closer to him than I liked. My eyes flicked over to Jasper, and

he gave me a crooked grin, silently telling me not to worry about her as he started up the stairway. Alice saw him coming and lit up.

When he crested the top step, he took her hand and twirled her, causing her crimson belted dress to flair out around her knees. He let out a low whistle.

Before he could say anything, she pressed her index finger to his lips and said, “Are you speechless?”

His mouth slid into a grin as he gazed down at her. “Indeed.”

She slipped her arm in his, and they turned to me. Jasper winked at me and said, “Don’t *you* look lovely? My boy’s been champin’ at the bit to see you tonight.”

“I have, too. Who’s he talking to?”

Alice leaned over and looked down, covering her mouth with her hand.

“That’d be Tanya,” Jasper said coolly. “And I imagine he’d like it if you joined him.”

My blood boiled with jealousy—not the suspicious kind, but the “what’s-it-gonna-take-for-you-to-step-off” kind. Sauntering confidently down the steps, I smiled as he turned, locking eyes with me. I stopped on the bottom step, waiting for Tanya to stop talking. She didn’t. She started talking faster and actually reached for Edward’s arm. Sadly for her, he simply said, “Excuse me.” Only when he actually walked away did she finally shut up.

My eyes were devoted to Edward—dazzling. Never in my life had I seen a suit worn with such perfection. I shelved the image away, so that I could spend time reflecting on his every irresistible feature later. “Bella,” he breathed. He had to take a moment to compose himself. “Ahem. Let me try this again.” He looked me over thoroughly, his eyes lingering on my shoulders for just a moment before he said, “You. Are. Absolutely. Exquisite. Do you know I love you more every time I see you?” He touched my shoulder gently and slid his fingertips down the length of my arm, taking my hand in his. With a smirk that made me feel warm all over, he whispered, “Let’s go and get these introductions out of the way, so I can have you to myself.” He led me to the door of the large room where people were mingling. Almost as an afterthought, he said so only I could hear, “Oh. That’s right. Tanya was blathering on about something.”

Turning me to face her, he slid his hand around my waist tenderly and looked at me while he spoke. “Tanya Denali, *this* is my Bella. The one I was telling you about.” I nodded at her and offered a smile, when Edward suddenly began leading me away. “Happy New Year,” he said over his shoulder.

He made me feel like absolute royalty. Alice and Esme were right about the crowd of girls who seemed to be plotting my demise, but I hardly had time to notice them, because I was too busy drowning in Edward’s eyes.

Of all the people I met, the two that were the most interesting were Sasha Denali and her other daughter Irina. I actually liked them—a lot. Sasha gushed that I was every bit as beautiful as Esme had described. Irina had apparently heard that I was studying composition and literature, so

she immediately shared that she'd studied journalism and was now a writer for a thirty-something women's magazine. She quirked an eyebrow when she saw the adoring way Edward was looking at me, and simply said, "Poor Tanya." Then it was back to telling me about her work.

Eleven thirty came swiftly. Esme casually let everyone know that we'd gather in the great room to ring in the New Year. She'd hired a small ensemble to play music, and—while many had enjoyed dancing all evening—we'd managed to fill our time with other activities. As we moved into the large hall, though, Edward gracefully maneuvered me toward the dance floor. Before I knew it, I was in his arms, swaying to the music.

Had he made a big deal out of it, or even simply asked if I'd like to dance, I'm sure I would've protested. Instead, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, he just waltzed me right into the crowd. I stumbled slightly only once, but he held my gaze and smiled encouragingly. "You move beautifully," he said. His eyes never left mine as he silently prepared me for each step. By the end of the first song, I actually felt graceful.

My heart swelled with emotion, and a laugh escaped as I lost myself in his attention.

"Are you happy, Love?"

"More than ever."

"You're dancing."

"I am," I nodded in agreement, grinning. "I think I can do anything when I'm with you."

The song ended, and another began. "Ah, here it is," he said. "They said they'd be able to play this for me." Sting's "When We Dance" was another of my favorites, and I knew I'd never feel the same way about it again.

"I thought you said you were going to use "De do do do, de da da da."

"This one suited us better, I think." His entire face was smiling down at me.

The singer's smooth tenor voice serenaded us. "*One day we'll dance and make waves; one day we'll sing our freedom. One day we'll laugh in our joy, when we dance.*" I rested my head on his shoulder as he hugged me tightly to his chest.

And then midnight was upon us. Voices rose in unison for the countdown, leading to whoops, whistles, and shouts of "Happy New Year!"

Edward kissed me gently as the celebration continued on every side.

"Happy New Year," I said, filled to overflowing.

Tilting my head up to look deeply into my eyes, he made a promise. "This year will change everything."

With all my heart, I believed him.

-*~*-

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So, I'd love to know what you thought of that...and I really hoped to hit 1000 reviews by the end. Is it still possible? I dunno...

Since we're almost at the end, though, you're running out of opportunities to let me know why this story got your attention. What is it that drew you in? Kept you reading? Made you laugh? Anything make you cry? What was your favorite scene? What did you like about their holiday together? Even if you've never reviewed before (and I know hundreds of you readers have never clicked), try it...just this once.

Talk to me...

top

Chapter 46

Chapter Word Count: 6247

A/N: Ahem. This has been a wonderful and challenging journey for me, and I'm so thankful for those of you who've joined me along the way. Faithful readers, reviewers and Niceward fans, the story obviously goes on from here. I'd love to write an outtake or a flash forward from time to time, if you'll let me know what you'd like to read about. I know there are some fun scenes, all locked away in my mind, that you'd love to get a glimpse of...:)

I could not have even begun this venture without my FlemilyHarper, beta, sister, and friend. "You make my so happy." Can you believe I finished it?

And for the fabuloso Coven ladies, you've raised the bar. Thanks for your thoughts, critiques, encouragement, and funnies.

Besotted, Princess1286, librarylady08, knqkh, irritable_grizzzly, vampPixyJAK, Shamatt0403, TRDancer, meliktes, angelnlove52, and so many others, I can't even begin to tell you how much your specific, honest reviews kept me going on here! Your PMs, too. You all rock!

Twilightzoner, some crucial, crucial stuff would be flat out wrong in the story if you weren't setting me straight. You're my legal guru.

Mkay. Done bein' all sappy and whatnot.

*And I know you'll keep on changing,
you're moving in this dance with me
I love the way we embrace the future
and keep the past a memory*

David Wilcox

Epilogue

My stomach was somersaulting. I would see Edward in three hours, and I was trying to remain calm enough to actually hear what Charlie was saying as I made my way to the truck.

“Be careful, Kiddo. I know I’ve said that a few times now, but I mean it. Seattle traffic is rough,” he advised. “Worse than those interstates on the way to New Hampshire.” Framed by the doorway of the small house, my dad stood with one hand on his hip, the other holding onto the top of the screen door. His face was full of genuine concern, evidence of the protectiveness I’d learned to appreciate.

“I will, Dad. Promise. I’m not even going to be driving downtown. Edward’s going to meet me on this side of the Kingston-Edmonds ferry and drive us in his rental. It’s a straight shot to the concert anyway—Fremont Village. But, I’ll be real careful.” I climbed up into the cab of the Beast and rolled down the window to continue the conversation.

“You got your cell phone?”

I nodded, lifting my phone to show him before setting it in my bag on the seat beside me. I wanted him to feel okay about sending me off to Seattle on my own, but the need to hit the road was tying my stomach in knots. It was difficult not to bounce in my seat. I’d *never* had this much energy at seven in the morning before.

He relaxed a little, crossing his arms over his chest and leaning back against the house. “You call me if you need anything, then, okay?”

“Okay, Dad. Love you.”

“Love you, too, Bells. Have a safe trip, and tell Edward congratulations for me. He still plannin’ to come back with you afterward?”

“Yep,” I grinned. Edward was coming to Forks.

Edward. Was coming. To Forks.

“Sounds good.” He nodded, mercifully ending the conversation. Finally.

As I backed out of the driveway, the sense of anticipation overwhelmed me. July already, it had been almost two months since I’d last seen Edward. I guess I thought I’d gotten good at saying goodbye because of all of Edward’s wandering with the Karamazov Foundation, but leaving him at the end of the spring semester was harder than either of us had anticipated.

I remembered sliding the last of Angela’s bags into the tightly packed bed of the truck and making sure the tarp was tied securely. . .

“It couldn’t be on there any better, Love.” Edward smiled. “Em and I made sure of that.”

“I know. It’s just easier if I focus on the truck right now.”

He pulled me close and wrapped me up in his arms, silently infusing me with his strength. I soaked it in, desperately praying that it would be enough for me to make it home.

“I wish you could come with me,” I said.

“Me, too, Love. But I’ve got to follow up on those offers, and all that’s all on this side of the country, unfortunately.” Elias’s record label had contacted him to discuss the possibility of accompanying some of their other artists on albums from time to time, and two of the schools had asked a few of the students to return and perform as a part of an ensemble for a special summer concert series.

“Yeah, why can’t you guys do your concerts in Seattle or something? Don’t they realize we’re tired of all the separation?” I joked. “Honestly, I’m excited for you. I’m sure you’ll be incredible—as always—”

His lips were on mine, muffling the rest of my words, and I quickly forgot what I’d been saying.

He pulled away slightly, studying my face. “I’ll be thinking of you the entire time...and counting the days until we’re together again. And I’ll try to get out there at some point.”

“Don’t tease me,” I huffed, punching him in the arm lightly.

“Never.”

Angela and Ben strolled over looking almost as forlorn as I felt.

“Get this girl out of here before I decide to stowaway in the back of that thing. Goodbyes suck,” Ben said. He tugged her hand and offered her a playful shrug.

“I’ll call you when we stop for the night,” she said.

Edward, suddenly behind me, whispered against my ear, “And you? Will you call me?”

I spun to face him and placed my hand on his cheek. His larger hand held it there firmly. “Of course,” I said.

The sadness was suddenly suffocating, and my eyes began to flood. “Bella Swan, I love you.” He spoke in earnest, his own eyes willing me to understand just how much he meant it.

“No doubt,” I breathed back. His face full of determination, Edward closed his eyes and nodded.

I swallowed thickly.

Suddenly, Emmett barreled out of the dorm to my rescue. “Bellaluna, are you STILL here? You were waiting for the encore hug, weren’t you?” I could hear the smile in his shout across the parking lot. He jogged over. “Couldn’t leave without getting’ some more Em love. I knew it. C’mere, Little Sis.” He pulled me out of Edward’s arms and twirled me around, his grizzly grip allowing no argument.

I grinned at Rosalie over his shoulder. She had followed him out to send us off. The two of them planned to stay on campus all summer and take a few extra classes. He’d been offered an

internship with a major accounting firm in New York and was determined to finish school by December and make Rosalie his wife. He wasn't going anywhere without her. I caught her shifting her gaze from me to Emmett to the 2-carat diamond that sat on her left hand. New Year's Eve had been perfect for them. A new beginning for their future together. The May sunshine hit the ring, and she wiggled her fingers slightly to watch the play of the light. A smile graced her face. Em could not have done better—on either of them.

When he set me down, I ran over to her and surprised her with a big hug. We'd never been touchy-feely friends—I doubted she'd ever been that way with anyone—but I needed to thank her for the steady rock she'd been for me during the long, lonely spring semester. I didn't know how I'd have made it without her.

"Thanks," I said, "for everything."

"Whatever, girl. I know you'd have done the same for me if Em had disappeared for weeks at a time."

"True, but I didn't have to. And I'm sure I was really terrible sometimes."

"Yeah, you were," she smiled, "but you made it. And you're stronger for it. You'll be okay this summer, too."

"I hope so. This'll be so much longer."

She waved off the whining with confidence. "You'll be back before you know it. Besides, I'll be calling you to get some ideas for the wedding."

I laughed. "Maybe Alice and Esme can help you. I'd just mess it all up."

"And I'm sure Mrs. McCarty has some ideas already. At least as far as my parents go, as long as it's expensive and well-attended, we'll be fine."

"Just make sure *you're* happy with it. Em's parents like you...I'm sure they'll support you."

"You're probably right. But I'll call you anyway. I'm sure I'll have lots of interesting stories. Have a good summer, Bells."

"You, too."

She looked over at Emmett and smirked, delighted. "I'm sure I will."

Our trip home had been a long one, but there was no end to the laughter as Ange and I caught up. Though we'd seen each other more this semester than in the fall, I had made a point of finding plenty to do that didn't involve her. She and Ben were nearly inseparable when they weren't working, and I hadn't wanted her to feel like I needed her undivided attention.

Actually, it was beneficial. When Edward was away, I focused on my studies like never before. The single-mindedness worked well, and my grades soared. And—because I stayed on top of my workload—I had zero school pressure or distractions when he *was* able to steal a few days with me.

The Karamazov Foundation required most of Edward's time, scheduling about two weeks at each of the conservatories. He went from lectures to clinics to intense rehearsals, and we talked—most nights—just as he was falling into bed, exhausted. On several occasions, he actually fell asleep on the phone. The first few times, I'll admit, I was offended. But the following weekend, he'd apologized so sincerely, all humble and embarrassed, that any lingering hurt had immediately dissolved.

Throughout the semester, as normal life went on for me—classes, all the reading, the homework club, loads of research in the library—I'd find little notes in my backpack. Em and Rose were being stealthy for him. Most were simple love notes. *I find it hard to breathe when you're not with me...only six more days.*

Once there was a five dollar bill in an envelope and a card that said, *"I bet there are warm muffins right now. Go enjoy one with a hot chocolate. I wish I could be there to enjoy them with you."*

Another time, there were two tickets to a movie I'd really wanted to see. *"Surprise. I'll pick you up at 6 for dinner."* He'd only been able to stay for that one night, but I savored every moment of it.

On Valentine's Day, there was a single, long-stemmed red rose on my desk with a hand-written card. *Absence is to love as wind is to fire. It extinguishes the small and kindles the great.*

Rose and Em drove with me to the concert in Boston and to the one in Philadelphia. I only made it to one other, but Edward saved the programs for me. The best one by far—and not *only* because it was the last—was his final performance in Carnegie Hall. Esme and Carlisle met us all in New York for the weekend. We wandered around doing the sight-seeing thing for hours while Edward was in rehearsal. Esme and Rosalie had been surprised that I'd never been to New York before, but I'm pretty sure Esme was secretly thrilled that she was the one that got to show me around. When Alice met up with us after her last exam, the three of them immediately whisked me off to some shops. The boys did. . .whatever boys do when they're waiting for the ladies to call with dinner plans.

Carnegie Hall was packed. My heartbeat, like the hooves of a team of horses, pounded in my ears. Unable to make trivial conversation with the others, I examined the theater, memorizing every detail. Edward was going to get to perform on that stage—where thousands of legendary artists had played. I sat between Rosalie and Alice, flushed and expectant. Thankfully, they understood my silence.

When the lights went down, I instinctively gripped Alice's hand. Exhaling a calming breath, I sat back and listened as the emcee described the Karamazov project and introduced the young musicians. When Edward, somehow managing to look comfortable and confident in a tuxedo, stepped out onto the stage, my heart stopped. There was a great applause from our section of the auditorium and a spattering elsewhere. I half-expected catcalls and barking from Emmett, but he must've recognized the magnitude of this performance for his friend. So, he settled for one long whistle amid the clapping.

The group began by playing as an ensemble, then in various trios and quartets. The diverse selections showcased each musician's ability, and I enjoyed the variety. The concert culminated

with each student playing a piece by a well-known composer and finishing with a composition of their own.

Edward played our song.

Silent tears spilled down over my cheeks as I sat there, melted and dumbfounded. His fingers danced over the keys pounding out the rhythms of our hearts, the melody and harmony that our souls sing to one another. It was surreal—his serenading me so intimately as hundreds of people sat listening.

In Carnegie Hall.

The earth-shattering occasion was lost on most everyone there. If Esme knew the significance of his song choice, she never said anything.

I knew I would treasure that moment until my last breath.

The concert ended with a final number performed by the entire group, and the ensemble received a standing ovation.

Later, when Edward found us in the lobby, he greeted everyone with a handshake or a hug. After he'd thanked each one for coming, he walked over to the side where I stood. Saying nothing, he took both my hands in his and simply stared lovingly into my eyes.

There was so much that could have been said, but the wrong word would have marred the perfection of the moment. Somehow, he felt it, too, so we stood there our eyes locked on one another in silent understanding.

The two weeks on campus that followed had been blissful. He had enjoyed his time with the Foundation, but his return gave me the undivided attention I'd been longing for.

Until Ange and I drove away.

The last two months I'd just spent in Forks, had been...restless to say the least. Though I'd searched for something in Port Angeles, the only work I'd been able to find was the same stupid job I'd had in high school. Day in and day out, I had schlepped away at Newton's Sporting Goods. Employment was employment though, so I did my best to be content. In our off time, Angela and I relaxed around town and at each other's houses. We made the trip into Port Angeles only on the occasional weekend for a movie when the familiarity of Forks began to drive us crazy.

Every single week, Mike Newton would ask me out, and I found his persistence annoying. It didn't even seem like his stupid hope faltered. He wore a mask of ridiculous patience, almost plastic in its irritating durability.

Still, I had weathered the weeks apart from Edward. Dismal, boring, and infuriating? Yes. But now it was over. I looked over at the clock as I sped down the winding highway. Thirty minutes from Edward. *I need it to go faster.*

I allowed my thoughts to wander for the final half hour down the same, beautiful path they'd been on. When I pulled into the Kingston-Edmonds lot, I found a parking space over by the edge. Without looking around, I yanked my backpack from the seat and slid down out of the cab. Before I could even close the door, Edward ran up, breathless. I was suddenly caught up in his arms and hugged relentlessly.

"Air..." I gasped.

Yielding, he released me just enough that my lungs could fill. "I can't let go all the way yet. I've missed you in my arms too much."

"You're so cheesy. I love it."

"Not cheese, Bella. It's the simple truth. I *crave* you."

"Hmm." I bit my lip coyly and decided to play along. "Show me."

Breathless for an entirely different reason now, I lost myself in his embrace. My hair tangled in his fingers, my mouth surrendered to his intensity. I raised my hands to cup his face in my hands, and the power I felt in his jaw was staggering. It was as if he was drawing his very life from mine with that kiss. In every sense, his body was communicating to mine clearly: "I need you to survive."

Tipping my head back so he'd have access to my neck, I sighed with pleasure. His lips trailed the line of my jaw and moved over my skin, their touch lighter and lighter with each kiss. He pressed his forehead in the dip of my shoulder and inhaled deeply. "I've missed the way you smell...strawberry and freesia."

I buried my face in his glorious hair, relishing his woody, lemony scent as well. "Your hair is so soft and wild," I said.

"I love the way your fingers feel in it. Do you remember the first time you played with my hair?" He turned his head to the side to peek up at me, his head still nestled in the crook of my neck.

I gave him a gentle peck on the cheek and answered, "Of course. The first night Rose and I came over to watch a movie. You seemed stressed after your talk with Alice. I wanted to...soothe you somehow. Like you did me. And your crazy, perfect hair was irresistible. I'd have touched it a lot sooner if I wasn't trying so hard to talk myself out of falling for you."

He smiled sweetly and stood up tall, pulling me into a hug, cradling my head in its very favorite spot against his shoulder. His chest felt firm and strong against my cheek, his voice resonating deeply in my ear as he spoke. "There were so many things I wanted to do sooner, too. But you were worth waiting for."

"I'm so glad you thought so."

"Let me look at you," he said with a smile.

He stepped back and let his eyes roam over me. "It's so good to see you, Love."

Wishing I could control the blush that flooded my cheeks, I dropped my head slightly, but I couldn't stop the grin that took over my face. "I know what you mean."

Edward looked even better than I'd remembered. He could make a simple pair of khakis and a white button-down shirt the hottest look in the world. His sleeves were rolled up to his elbows, and I reached out to trace the sinewy muscles of his forearms. "Beautiful."

"What was that?" he chuckled.

Unaware that I had spoken aloud, I felt the heat rush to my face *again*. "Erm...I said...I, um, really like your forearms."

"Hmm. Well, that's good to know."

I glanced over at him, and watched the lopsided grin creep over his face. "We'd better go. The ferry leaves soon."

"Lead the way."

He stopped next to a steel gray Hummer.

"What's *this*?" I asked.

He cleared his throat awkwardly. "It was all they had. There's a convention in town or something."

Laughing quietly, I teased. "It's a little more ostentatious than I'm used to with you, but, I'm sure people will get out of our way."

"They'd better."

After parking the tank on deck, we stood by the railing and talked as we crossed the Puget Sound. Edward was fascinated by the lush green coastlines, so different from those near his home.

He didn't have to be at the Fremont Abbey until 4 o'clock, so we decided enjoy Fremont Universe, as the locals called it. It was sort of a creative oasis in the middle of the city. We decided to eat lunch at a popular Caribbean spot, Paseo. They were famous for their Midnight Cuban, a pulled pork sandwich with fresh cilantro and garlic mayo. Messy, but delectable.

After we ate, we wandered over to Fremont Place Book Company, a tiny little book shop with a lot of character, and then down the block to Jive Time. I think we spent an hour there, and we could've spent a ton more. Searching through their huge selection of used vinyl records, flipping through the bargain bins, and laughing at the great buttons made us lose track of time. Before we left, though, we each bought a record: he got John Coltrane's Giant Steps which he swore was a must have for his collection. I found a rereleased copy of The Joshua Tree. I also got a Bonzo's Montreaux button for my backpack. Best. Drummer. Ever.

We ducked into a little coffee shop and got frapuccinos to take with us up to Peak Park, an oasis of well-tended beauty right in the middle of the village. Strolling up the hill on the landscaped trails, we found a meadow, a small woodland, and a breathtaking view of Mt. Rainier and the

Olympic Mountain range, downtown Seattle nestled right in its midst. We stood there, Edward's arms wrapped around me, and took in the majestic scenery.

"I have a blanket in my bag," he whispered. "Why don't I get it out, and we can stay up here for a while?"

"Do we have time?" I asked.

"Yeah," he said, dropping to his knee to get into his bag. He pulled out a blanket and unrolled it on the ground. "Look around and pick the best view, and we'll sit facing that way."

I considered the skyline, watched the boats in the Ship Canal for a moment, and decided that Mt. Rainier won. The blue and purple mountain range with the clouds tracing their shadowy lines over the peaks was the picture I wanted to study a little more. When I turned to tell Edward what I'd decided, my voice caught in my throat. He was still on his knee, and he was offering me a small black velvet box.

My eyes flicked back and forth from the box to his face a few times, and finally settled on his triumphant smile. I covered my heart with both hands and tried not to cry. He had said again and again that he wanted to spend the rest of his life with me. Still, somehow, I hadn't expected this now. *Is he really asking me to marry him? Not yet, Bella. You can cry in a minute.* "Is that? Are you?"

"Bella Swan, the very first time I saw you, something in me came alive. The more time I spent with you, the more certain I became that I was made to love you forever. It's the reason I exist, who I am. Everything—*everything*—about me is stronger, better, kinder, more real when I'm with you. You are the most important thing in my life, and I don't want to imagine another moment without you by my side. Will you have me? Will you be my wife?"

"Yes!" I cried. Then quietly, I fell to my knees on the blanket in front of him, and cupped his face in my hands. "Yes, Edward," I whispered. He opened the box. A large European cut diamond surrounded by what seemed like a hundred more tiny stones set in a vintage platinum band. I'd never seen anything more beautiful. It had to be one of a kind.

"It's so. . . it's perfect."

"It was my grandmother's. Mom wanted you to have it. May I?"

I nodded, tears beginning to flow freely. As he carefully took the ring out of the box, I wiped the tears away from my blurry eyes with my right hand and offered him my left. He slid the ring onto my finger and gazed into my eyes. The expression on his face could've lit up the entire city. "I've waited my whole life to find you. Thank you for loving me, Bella."

"Edward, thank *you*. You saw the beauty in all my crazy brokenness. You cried when I couldn't. You were..." The list could've gone on for ages. "...my sounding board, my punching bag, my best friend. But the most important thing I have to thank you for is being patient and gentle when I was so, so afraid. You won my heart before it was even whole enough to realize how it had happened, and I love you with everything I am."

A tear fell from his evergreen eyes and splashed onto our hands. He looked down at the ring on my finger, and I watched as he blinked his long, dark eyelashes and more tears followed. When our eyes met again, we laughed at the scene we must be making. He reached up to wipe my tears with his thumbs and pressed his lips to mine softly.

That kiss felt like forever.

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We were supposed to meet his friends a few hours later down at Fremont Abbey, a volunteer-run arts center for the Fremont Village community. Michael LaMont, Grace Koeppen, and Mei Ling Wu had been a part of the Karamazov group: Grace played classical guitar, Mei Ling the cello, and Michael—a Seattle local—was a percussionist. More than any others, it was these three with whom Edward had connected as they traveled. They had played together, often just sitting and improvising as they relaxed. Michael had suggested that they all meet in Seattle and play at the Abbey sometime.

This concert was the culmination of those improv sessions. They'd put together several pieces, and the sound was incredible. Theirs had been my favorite quartet at Carnegie Hall, and I was looking forward to hearing more from all of them.

We found a parking space just down the block from the Abbey and went in. Fremont Abbey had once been a church, and its vaulted ceilings, wide wooden beams, and stained-glass windows created an elegant ambience. The great hall was ideal for the type of intimate performance Michael had planned. There was no stage, but the baby grand piano was centered beneath one of the windows on the side wall. Three chairs with the cello, guitar and a djembe sat next to it, turned so that the musicians could all look at one another. Four rows of wooden folding chairs formed a large semi-circle around the instruments.

Edward made himself comfortable at the piano and played a few songs for me until we heard the others approach. Michael, a short wiry boy with curly brown hair, strode over with a huge smile. He gave Edward a one-armed man-hug and said, "Well? Did she say yes?"

A hearty laugh escaped Edward, and he nodded. "Michael, this is my Bella."

Michael grinned at me. "Are ya sure?"

"No doubt," I answered, looking at Edward, who was wagging his eyebrows at me.

"Good, good. I like to hear that."

The girls, who had been hanging back slightly, walked up at that point and introduced themselves. Grace, tall with straight auburn hair and an attractive spattering of freckles, seemed like the quiet, studious type. Mei Ling was tiny and energetic; she reminded me of an Asian Alice.

"Did you show her the troll under the Aurora Avenue bridge?" Mei Ling asked. "That thing was crazy!"

I answered for Edward. "No, but I've seen it before. It's massive, isn't it?"

“Yeah! Is that a real VW it’s grabbing?”

“It is! And I heard that it used to have a time capsule in it with some Elvis paraphernalia, but people started messing with it and stealing things, so they took it out.”

Grace was listening to us with a sweet smile. She walked quietly over and sat down, beginning to strum her guitar quietly.

“Ah, Seattle art. Fremont universe’s claim to fame,” Michael commented.

“Should we run through our pieces?” Edward asked, joining Grace in warming up.

“Let’s!” Mei Ling agreed.

Needless to say, the concert that night was stellar. The blend of the acoustic instruments in that hall was a mirror of the way the musicians themselves complemented each other. A few songs written by each of them were selected, and the crowd was more than satisfied. As an encore, they played “No One Is To Blame” by Howard Jones. Michael said loud enough for me to hear over the beginning notes, “This is for Bella, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Edward answered, grinning.

After the concert, while everyone was milling around and enjoying some free refreshments, I heard a few girls admiring Edward. Grace frowned, and Mei Ling bounced right over. “He’s amazing isn’t he? And he just asked our friend Bella to marry him! Can you believe it? Today! Isn’t that awesome?”

Grace and I just laughed. *That’s right. Mine, girls.*

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We didn’t get home until about one in the morning, and Charlie had the couch all ready for Edward. The house was dark and quiet, but we were completely bushed, so we agreed to get some sleep. We’d need energy to tell Charlie and Ange the following day.

As we ended a long, tender good night kiss quietly at the foot of the steps, Edward whispered, “You’re going to be my *wife*.”

A smile took over my face, and my stomach flipped. “I can’t wait.”

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I woke up way earlier than I’d expected to, but who can sleep when you get to announce to the world that you’re getting married to Edward Cullen? Not me.

Charlie and Edward were already sitting at the table enjoying their cups of coffee.

I kissed each of them on the cheek, and Charlie’s eyebrow shot up. “So, Edward told me you had some excitement yesterday.”

“He did?”

“Yeah. The concert was really great, and you got that record you like so much. Didn’t I buy you that CD back in high school?”

Relieved that the big news wasn’t on the table yet, I laughed. “Yeah, you did. But Edward is a bit of a vinyl collector, and so I got sucked in yesterday.”

“Ah.” Charlie looked back and forth between us like he was missing something.

“Dad?”

“Bella?” he responded.

“Edward-asked-me-to-marry-him-yesterday-and-I-said-yes!”

“Do *what* now?” I shot a nervous look at Edward, but he was grinning at Charlie who started laughing.

“We’re getting married!”

“Well that’s great, Bells. I’m real excited for ya, Kiddo.” He was beaming and extended a hand across the table. Edward took it firmly as Dad added, “Welcome to the family, son.”

I noticed that there wasn’t any shock. “Did you *know* already?” I asked.

“Sure I did. You don’t think I’d be so calm about it if this was the first I was hearin’ about it, do ya?” he chuckled.

“When?” I was confused.

Edward answered, “I asked him for your hand at Christmas, Bella. He said yes then, and I almost couldn’t wait. But. . . I wanted it to be perfect. Oh, that reminds me. . .” His voice trailed off, and there was a distinct twinkle in his eye. He tossed something onto the table, and it clinked over to me, blue, white, blue, white. I picked it up and laughed out loud. It was another button from Jive Time.

This one said, “De do do do, de da da da.”

“I don’t even wanna know,” Charlie sighed. He took another sip of his coffee and smiled.

I called Angela after breakfast.

“Hello?”

“I’m engaged!”

“You are not! He asked you in Seattle?”

“Up on a hill that overlooked the city and the sound. It was perfect. He knelt to get a blanket for us, and when I turned around he was holding the ring.”

“Oh, Bella. What did he say?”

I told her the gist of his proposal. “Gah, Bells. That’s perfect. He’s so right for you.”

“I know. I can’t quit smiling. My heart feels like it’s going to explode.”

“That would be unfortunate. . . and messy,” she chuckled. “So, when do I get to see the ring?”

“Charlie’s taking us to the Forks Diner for lunch. Why don’t you meet us?”

“Done. What time?”

Forks Diner, usually maintaining a dull roar, escalated into lively conversation and vociferous well-wishes. Angela gushed over the beauty of the ring until Edward turned to talk to another of Charlie’s friends. Then, she locked eyes with me and dropped her jaw, her eyes wide with a silent “look-at-that-freakin’-rock!”

I mouthed an “I know,” as Edward turned back around.

“It’s perfect,” Angela said again.

“Hey, Ange?” I asked.

“Yeah?”

“Will you be my maid of honor?”

A joyful smile lit her face. “I’d love to, Bella. Of course!”

We hugged and then sat down to talk about details. Lunch was greasy and yummy, though Edward and I both missed Ellie’s jukebox. As Charlie stood up to pay, in walked the Newtons. Mike’s face lit up, and he sauntered over to our table. His dad went to talk to Charlie over at the register.

“Bella! Dad said you took a few days off. I missed you at work. Hey, Angela,” he added as an afterthought. He clearly hadn’t noticed the ring and didn’t care about the other guest at our table.

Ange cast her eyes over at Edward, raising her brows as he pushed back his chair and stood, turning to face Mike. She beamed at me and sang a soft, “Uh-oh.”

“You must be Mike Newton. I’m Edward,” he offered his hand. Mike just looked at it, unable to form any words for a moment.

I stepped to Edward’s side and rested my left hand on his bicep, so that the ring was facing Mike. “You remember me telling you about Edward, right?”

Mike nodded awkwardly and then recovered. “Uh, yeah. Yeah, definitely. Good to meet you, man. You in town for long?”

“I’ll be staying for a while, yeah. As long as Bella will have me.” He smiled down at me, his eyes full of mischief. He was enjoying this.

I adored Edward Cullen, and it was written all over my face.

At last, Mike noticed the ring on my hand and sputtered out a weak congratulation.

“Thanks, Mike,” Edward said graciously. Charlie’s sudden laughter echoed in the diner.

All our eyes turned to the cash register, where the two men were watching us. Charlie winked at Edward as he said something to Mr. Newton.

We fumbled through the rest of the uncomfortable conversation, and then said our goodbyes and left. The Newtons found a seat and studied the menu intently.

As we stood in the parking lot, Charlie let us know he’d see us after work and began opening the door of the patrol car.

“Oh, Dad! What did Mr. Newton say that made you laugh so hard?” Edward, Ange and I all watched him turn with a smirk.

“He said he was proud of his son, standing there and talking to that red-head kid like a gentleman when he knew Mike wanted to just reach out and throttle him.”

“Nuh-uh!” Angela gasped.

“You’re serious,” I said, disbelieving.

Edward just arched his eyebrows and laughed.

“Yeah,” Charlie continued. “I told him Mike may as well accept it. My little girl is going to be a Cullen. And I may have mentioned that I thought Edward was the one with the self-control.”

“I love it,” I said.

Edward smiled humbly and said, “Thanks, Charlie.”

Angela was laughing hard as she walked to the driver’s side of her car. “Gah! Poor Mrs. Newton!” She shrugged with a smile and waved goodbye.

Edward and I laughed and walked slowly to the Hummer. “Would you like to drive?” he asked.

“Ooh! Yes. And I know just where to go.” He tossed me the keys and opened my door for me.

I drove out to Rialto Beach, where we walked for a while. The sun warmed my shoulders, and I was grateful for tanktop weather again.

A gnarled piece of driftwood the size of a tree trunk sprawled across the beach in front of us. I ambled over and sat down. Edward straddled the tree beside me and traced light patterns on my arm.

“I’ll get to fall asleep in your arms every night...and travel with you when you go somewhere wonderful to play.”

“I’ll get to wake up to you every day,” he said, pressing his lips to my shoulder. “Bella, I can’t wait to share all of that with you. Do you...”

I couldn't even let him finish his thought. "I don't want a long engagement, Edward. Is it important to you to wait until you're finished with school?"

"Actually, I'll be losing Emmett, so I'd love to find somewhere new in town with you. Do you want a big wedding?" He was asking sweetly, but I could see that he hoped to keep it uncomplicated as much as I did.

"The simpler, the better. How about a late August wedding? I'm sure with Alice and your mom's help, I could pull off something tasteful and elegant by then. It'll be small, but that's what I've always wanted."

"That's the most perfect thing I've heard all day." He threaded his hands through my hair and kissed me tenderly. "Dance with me, love." He stood and pulled me to my feet, and we kicked off our shoes. The sand between my toes, the warm sun on my skin, and Edward's arms around me were bliss.

I nuzzled into my favorite spot, and heard Edward sigh in contentment on the quiet beach. "Dance with me forever, Bella," he said softly.

I answered him with confidence. "No doubt."

So...your thoughts? I'd love for you to tell me what outtakes or flashforwards would make you happy...as long as you're willing to wait a month or two between them. Smalls, Short Son, Princess, and my Giant thank you for sharing me. Also, I'm working on a piece of original fiction now, and I'm excited about it.

I love ya all!

I hate to have to write this, but I do. The characters belong to Stephenie Meyer. Thank you Dartmouth and Scullers for letting me camp out in your fictional world for a while. Elias Bailey, thank you for being an incredible jazz musician and the type of man I could write this about. Improv = fabulous. **The story belongs solely to Shannon Carr and may not be copied, downloaded, or shared without express written permission from me, which I do not give at this time. Copyright, Shannon Carr 2009.**

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