

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

Fourteen

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Summary: *High school is brutal. It's even worse when you're not a size two. Worse than that? Having a major crush on the biggest, hottest jerk in high school. Even worse than that? Being paired up with him for a science project.*

~*~

Chapter 1.

Fourteen.

It's not a bad number.

It's not that great, either.

It used to be an eighteen so really, a fourteen is pretty damn good compared to what it was a few months ago.

It was still a big number and staring at the jeans lying on my bed, they looked pretty damn big, too.

I wasn't thin. I was moderately pretty and had more personality in my left toe than most of the girls at school had at all.

But I was a size fourteen and no one could see past *that*.

At least, the guys couldn't. Most of the popular girls couldn't, either.

Angela did, and she was popular. It continually surprised me when she hung out with me or sat with me during lunch. Her boyfriend – football safety, Ben – was one of the few guys that actually seemed to *not* make fun of me behind my back and would freely walk up to me if he saw me in the hallway to talk to me. Emmett McCarty would sometimes, too, but that was only if no one else was around to chastise and rag on him about it.

I didn't have many friends. I had acquaintances that I talked to during the day, but none of them were anything near a friend for me. It was by choice more than anything, too. I'd gotten used to being picked on and put down or betrayed by people I thought were friends – they either told secrets that I'd rather keep, well, secret or they just distanced themselves from me for I don't know what reason.

I don't know what it was about me that pushed people away. I didn't do it on purpose, but it ended up happening more often than not. Maybe I was just too... me. I was myself and I wasn't going to compromise that for anyone; maybe that was the problem. I just wasn't enough for anyone and I wouldn't compromise myself just so that I could be.

I'd gotten used to not being good enough and had done myself a favor at the end of the year last year; keep myself as far away from as many people as possible in this tiny shithole. I was off to college on the east coast next year – NYU – and if I could get through my last year at Forks High as peacefully as possible, I'd be a very happy person. The less attachments I had when I left, the easier it would be to move somewhere to start over.

I was all about starting over.

Sighing and shuffling my feet against the carpet, I reached out and grabbed the blue jeans from my bed, quickly sliding them on over my legs and wiggling into them. I buttoned and zipped them before I grabbed the long-sleeved red sweater, sliding it on over my head and looking down at myself. I sighed heavily at the small roll that showed through and shook my head, running a hand through my long brown hair and walking over to my dresser. I ran a brush through my hair a few times before setting it back on my dresser and grabbing my book bag from the floor beside it. Slinging it over my shoulder, I walked towards the door, flipping off the lights and walking down the stairs.

My father, police Chief Charlie Swan, had left for work long before I was up and about and I was thankful for the peace and quiet I got each morning. I was *not* a morning person by any means and he most certainly was. Having to deal with his chipper – well, at least, chipper compared to me – attitude first thing in the morning had never been something I looked forward to.

I grabbed a strawberry Pop Tart from the cabinet and shoved it into the front of my bag, zipping it up and grabbing my keys from the hooks by the door. I locked the front door as I walked out of the house, listening for it to slam shut as I made my way down the steps and into the light rain.

Most of the people in this town hated the rain, but I came to find that I didn't mind it. Yes, it was a nuisance and there was a serious lack of sun most of the time, but I found it oddly soothing and comforting. I'd never really liked the sun to begin with – I'd never had the body for a bathing suit and sitting out in it to ruin my skin had never really seemed like a fun past-time for me. The rain gave me an excuse to keep myself hidden.

I jumped over a puddle on my way to my truck, wrenching open the door and throwing my bag onto the bench seat as I climbed up. I slammed the door shut once I was in, smoothing my hands over my hair just in case before sticking the key in the ignition and backing out of the driveway.

I pulled into the school parking lot ten minutes later, keeping my eyes on the pavement in front of me as I drove towards the spot I always parked in. I felt their eyes on me – as they always were – and sucked in a deep breath as I shoved my truck into park and grabbed my bag from the seat.

My truck was ancient and I was the weird fat girl. I was thankful that I didn't need glasses or braces because my life would be over if I had to deal with *that* on top of weighing more than one hundred and ten pounds.

I slid from the cab and slung my bag over my shoulder, pocketing my keys and slamming the door. I kept my head down as I walked behind Jessica Stanley, Mike Newton, Tyler Crowley and Lauren Mallory to the front door of the school. They thankfully didn't give me any notice and I made it to my locker in peace, breathing a sigh of relief as I twirled the lock and yanked open the door.

I stuffed my bag into my locker and grabbed the books I'd need for my first period Chemistry class before slamming the locker closed and starting towards the classroom. I set my book and notebook onto the lab table, flipping through the back pages for the homework I'd stored there the night before. Not finding it, I groaned and slammed my book shut, shaking my head as I walked back out of the room and into the hallway once more.

Groups had formed around lockers by this time and I kept my eyes on the floor as I walked back to my own. It was always quiet over in this corner; everyone else who had their lockers near me usually went to talk to one of their friends on the other end of the hallway and for that, I was thankful. The less people I had to say anything to, the better.

I'd never been a very social person. I was shy and being in this school for my entire life had left me with no self-esteem whatsoever. I'd never been thin and everyone here knew about it. In fact, they never let me forget about it most of the time.

I could get pissed off. I could whine to my father and have him bust one of the many parties Mike Newton threw when his parents were out of town. I could do either of those things and not think anything of it, but I didn't. I was not a fighter by any means and it was easier to just deal with everything they threw my way rather than fight back. Adding fuel to an already hot fire would only make things worse for *me*.

I just wanted to get through my senior year with as much dignity as I possibly could and pissing off everyone in my way wouldn't help me with that.

I rummaged around in my book bag, getting nervous when my homework wasn't appearing in front of me the way that it was supposed to. I heard the warning bell and shook my head, yanking books out of my locker and balancing them in one hand as I searched the bottom, hoping and praying that maybe it had gotten pushed to the back when I left yesterday. When that didn't work, I huffed and shoved the books back into their spots, ripping open the front pocket of my bag and searching through that as well.

I finally found it, breathing a sigh of relief and holding it tightly in my hand as I slammed the locker door closed and locked it. The only other person in the hallway now was Edward Cullen, his hair

sticking up in every which way as he attempted to push his book bag into his locker already full of his football gear.

Apparently, he'd gotten in late.

"Son of a bitch," he hissed, pulling on the strap of his book bag and yanking back.

Papers flew out of the open top, falling effortlessly to the ground. He stood there, his chest heaving and his breathing audible as he stared at the mess he'd made with narrowed eyes.

Edward Cullen was one of the guys that tormented me on a daily basis. He was gorgeous and he knew it – which made it ten times worse. He dated whoever he wanted and never looked twice at anyone that wasn't on the cheerleading squad or wasn't within the realm of popularity. He was Mr. Perfect according to everyone in the entire school and I'd harbored a major crush on him ever since freshman year.

I hated myself for it because I didn't understand it. He tormented me and said the most horrible things to me, but there was something about him that I just... *liked*. I would see him with his sister and on the off chance that I saw him out with his parents, he seemed like a completely different person. He didn't seem like the asshole that told me I'd never be worth anything when he was with his family and that gave me something really close to hope. There had to be more to him if he could act like that with his family, right?

Either way, only a few more months and I'd be out of this place. I'd be able to forget all about Edward Cullen and the way I didn't want to feel for him in a few more months. I could start over and that was all I really wanted.

But that moment, as I watched him breathing hard and glaring at the mess on the floor, all I felt was sympathy for him. He'd obviously had a bad morning and it was only getting worse, it seemed.

Swallowing hard, I folded my homework in half and started towards him. His eyes snapped to me and they narrowed even further. I wordlessly bent down, sticking my homework under my arm and reaching for the papers scattered on the floor.

"What the fuck are you doing?" he growled.

"Helping you."

My voice was quiet and came out as a squeak, my nerves showing through as I tapped papers together on the floor before crawling over to get some more.

"I don't *need* your help."

"Sure doesn't seem that way."

"Go the fuck away, Isabella. It's bad enough that you exist; I don't need you touching my shit."

My heart twisted and I clenched my teeth together, ignoring him as I continued to pick up the papers with his neat handwriting. I was by his feet at that point, my heart hammering against my ribs when he bent down. He grabbed my wrist, hard, and I looked up at him.

Fear shot through me when I met his narrowed, hard eyes and I barely contained a yelp when his hand tightened around my wrist. I could almost feel my bones pushing against each other as he continued to squeeze my wrist, tears springing to my eyes.

"I said," he started, his voice low and almost a growl, "to go the fuck away."

I dropped his papers and he dropped my wrist. I fell backwards, cradling my wrist to my chest as I bit down on my trembling bottom lip. I looked down at it and clearly saw the red imprints of his fingers circling my wrist, knowing that there would be a bruise there by the end of the day. I placed my feet flat on the floor, pushing myself away from him and doing my best to control the tears. I dropped my wrist, grabbing my homework from underneath my arm and placing my uninjured hand flat on the floor.

"Sorry," I whispered, pushing myself to stand up once more and keeping my eyes on the floor.

"You should be, you waste of space. What right do you think you have to just touch my things?"

"I was only trying to help."

"Yeah? Well, don't. If I should ever need you for any-fucking-thing," he scoffed, "you'll know it."

I merely nodded and closed my eyes, listening as he slammed the locker door shut a few moments later and his footsteps disappeared down the hallway. I sucked in a few deep breaths, bringing my wrist up to see that the marks were only getting redder. I let a small shuddering sob escape before I sucked it in and blinked rapidly to get rid of the tears. The bell rang, signifying that first period was about to start, and I quickly walked back to the classroom. I kept my head down as I walked to my table, moving around the person sitting in the chair next to me and plopping down into my own.

"Oh for fuck's sake," I heard from beside me.

I looked over to see Edward Cullen sitting next to me, staring at me in disgust and shaking his head. I quickly looked away from him and over to where he normally sat, seeing that Jessica and Lauren were now seated at his table, snickering and pointing at me. He turned and glared at them, flicking his middle finger up at Jessica when she blew him a kiss.

I guess the memo for 'Let's Embarrass the Shit Out of Bella Swan Today' had been purposely kept from me.

As it always was.

"All right! Good morning, class," Mr. Banner said, clapping his hands in the front of the room to get everyone's attention.

I looked up towards the front, keeping my injured wrist in my lap and my bottom lip in between my teeth.

Just another day, Bella. One more day closer to graduation and getting the hell out of here. It's just one more day.

"Look to the person you're sitting next to," Mr. Banner started, holding his hands up in the air, palms facing out.

"Do I have to?" Edward asked, leaning forward on the table and resting his head in his hand.

Snickers erupted throughout the room and I clenched my teeth together again, looking down at my lap as tears flooded my eyes again.

"This will be your lab partner for the rest of the semester."

"You've gotta be kidding me!" Edward exclaimed, slamming his fist down on the table. I jumped and yelped, wanting to crawl into a hole when everyone laughed at me. "You want me to deal with *this*?"

"You will or you fail," Mr. Banner deadpanned, turning his back on us and walking to the chalkboard.

I kept my eyes on my notebook for the rest of class, barely hearing anything as we were assigned a project for the upcoming science fair that needed to be finished outside of the classroom. I listened to Edward grumble his disagreement and unhappiness with the whole situation the entire class period, my jaw aching with the effort I was using to keep the tears from falling.

I set the wrist he'd grabbed on the table at one point, shifting uneasily in the uncomfortable stool and looking over at him when I heard a sharp intake of breath coming from his direction. His eyes were focused on the marks that were quickly becoming bruises on my wrist, his mouth forming a small o and his hand flattening on the table. I quickly pulled it back to my lap and stopped trying to get comfortable after that. I didn't know what his expression meant but if he wanted to hurt me again, I didn't want to give him anymore ammunition to do so.

The bell finally rang and I was quick to gather my things, minding the pain in my wrist as I juggled the books in my arms.

"Isabella, I'm..." I heard Edward start, his voice low and quiet.

"I'm sorry that you're stuck with me, Edward," I said quickly, shaking my head. "I'll do all the work by myself if you prefer."

"No, I just wanted to make sure..."

"I'll be sure to put your name on it as well. I've got it covered." I looked up at him quickly and then squeezed by him. "See you tomorrow, I guess."

I walked out of the room and quickly down to my locker, grabbing the books I'd need for my next class and doing my best to walk as fast as I could. The day had started out badly enough and I *really* didn't want it to get any worse.

~*~

I trudged up the porch steps to the house, my book bag trailing behind me and bouncing against the steps as I walked. I unlocked the front door and walked inside, slamming it behind me and immediately starting towards the stairs.

Charlie wasn't home yet. He was almost never home when I got home and for the first time in a really long time, I was thankful that he wasn't. I didn't mind being alone in the mornings, but I really hated coming home to an empty house after school. I usually wanted someone to talk to because going through the day by myself only made me lonely.

Today, however, the silence of the house was welcomed.

My wrist was killing me. It throbbed and as the day went on, I noticed that it was even a little puffy. I didn't want to go to the nurse; didn't want to give anyone the impression that I was a wuss, so during lunch I'd bought orange juice and had let my wrist sit on the bottle the entire time. No one sat with me – Angela and Ben were nowhere to be found and I suspected that they were using the back of his newly acquired Honda wisely – so there was no one to ask me what had happened. I didn't mind; I wouldn't know what to say to them anyway.

No one would believe that perfect Edward Cullen had stooped so low to actually *touch* me. It wouldn't make a difference if they'd seen it with their own two eyes. No one would let him get into any trouble.

I made it into my room and set my book bag down by my bed, plopping down onto the mattress and cradling my wrist in my hand, resting it in my lap. It was definitely bruised and still a little puffy, but it wasn't as bad as it could've been.

I felt my eyes stinging with tears again and leaned forward, resting my feet on the bed frame and burying my face in my knees. I crushed my wrist against my chest and wrapped my other arm around my legs, letting the tears fall and the sobs sound throughout my empty room.

I wasn't a bad person. I'd done my best to be nice to everyone in our school as much as humanly possible and they just didn't care. They were so concerned with the way I looked that it didn't matter to them if we liked the same things. It didn't matter to them if our favorite bands were the same, or if we felt the same way about something that we'd heard on the news. I wasn't thin and I wasn't popular so I had to become their target.

It wasn't like I was the only heavier person in our school. Yes, it was a small school but not everyone was as thin as they were. I just so happened to be the police chief's daughter so I *must* have grown up with some superiority complex and just couldn't function in society the way *they* obviously could.

I don't know how long I sat there, letting everything that had gone wrong during the day out through the tears and the sobs, before I heard a series of loud knocks on the door downstairs. I ignored it, hoping that whoever it was would go away as I wiped the tears from my face and did my best to get my breathing under control.

But they didn't. They stood out there, pounding on the door for at least fifteen minutes and I finally huffed, annoyed. I stood up, keeping my wrist close to my chest as I rubbed the heel of my other hand in my eyes and walked down the stairs. I yanked open the door once I reached it and my breath caught in my throat as I saw Edward standing there.

"What do you want?" I asked, my voice trembling as I gripped the doorknob tightly and *wished* that my father were home.

Not that he would do anything about it, anyway. He praised Dr. Cullen and his entire damn family more than he ever praised me. But at least he would've been there and Edward wouldn't have been able to do...

Well, I don't know what he wanted to do. But either way, he wouldn't have been able to do it with my father home.

He shifted uncomfortably on the front porch, shuffling his feet on the blue *welcome* mat my father had had there for years. One of his hands was gripping the strap of his book bag and he kept his eyes down, looking at his feet as he shrugged one shoulder.

"I just thought that maybe we should start on this thing. The sooner we start, the sooner we get it finished."

The sooner you get to stop associating with me.

"I told you that I'd take care of it."

"I'm just as capable of working on something as you are, Isabella," he snapped, looking up at me and glaring. "I'm not a fucking idiot."

"I know," I said quietly, looking down at my feet this time.

"You know *nothing* about me," he growled.

I instantly shied away from him, shielding myself behind the door and trying to control the sudden flow of tears to my eyes again.

"I just thought that... since you obviously don't want to work with me that I could... you wouldn't have to..." My voice caught on a sob and I hid my face from him, working myself completely behind the door. "Can we not start this tonight?"

"Shit, Isabella, I want to..." He growled again and I flinched, my hand tightening on the doorknob. "Let me see your wrist."

"It's fine. Please leave."

"It's *not* fine because you're still being careful with it. Let me see it."

"Why? You want to make it worse?"

"No!" he shouted and I yelped, immediately reminded of chemistry class and wanting to find that hole that needed to open up in the earth *now*. "My father's a doctor."

"I know."

"How did you...? Whatever. I don't even give a fuck. Just let me see your fucking wrist. I'm not gonna hurt you."

I didn't move, my entire body shaking as I stood on the other side of the door, hiding from the guy I've had a huge crush on for four years. I never thought he'd be capable of something like this. I never thought he would hurt someone – hurt *me* – this way. I knew that I was nothing to him but I never could've imagined that he'd do something like this to a *girl*.

"Isabella, I *promise* that I won't hurt you. I just want to see it."

"Why?" I asked, my voice trembling.

"I want to make sure it's okay."

"It's fine. I told you that."

"And I told you that it wasn't."

"Will you leave then?"

"If you want me to."

"I do."

"Then I'll leave after you show it to me."

I cautiously stepped out from behind the door and pulled it open a little more.

"Can I come in?"

"Why?"

"It's getting dark out here. I won't be able to see very well."

I swallowed hard and stepped back from the door, watching as he pushed it open and walked in, closing it behind him and dropping his book bag to the floor. I held my arm out to him, my heart beating rapidly in my chest as he gently grabbed my hand. He flexed my wrist back and forth, seemingly satisfied that I didn't cry out in pain – or maybe it was disappointment that I saw on his face; I don't know – before he pressed two fingers against the bruises. I cried out and immediately pulled my hand back from him, once again holding it to my chest and biting down on my bottom lip. He stared at my wrist, one of his hands reaching up to thread through his hair and grip it tightly.

"Will you put it against your other one?" he asked softly, his eyes finally meeting mine again.

"For what?"

"Will you just do it?" he snapped.

I flinched and quickly did it, watching as his face fell slightly.

"You should uh... you should put some ice on it," he said quietly. "It won't be so puffy tomorrow if you do."

I nodded, at a loss for words. He actually seemed... *concerned*.

"Okay."

"I guess I'll go now," he mumbled, reaching down and grabbing his book bag. "We should figure out something to do for the science fair. Maybe tomorrow in class or something."

"Yeah," I nodded, looking down at my feet.

He hesitated and I looked up at him, watching as he shook his head and grabbed the doorknob, hastily pulling it open and walking out. I quickly closed the door behind him, locking it and walking into the kitchen. I pulled open the freezer door and grabbed an ice pack that Charlie used when he went fishing. I placed it against my wrist, wincing at the cold before I shouldered the door shut and started back up to my room.

Maybe there wasn't anything more to Edward Cullen after all. Maybe I just wished that there were because I really wanted there to be something more underneath the shallowness and the pretty face. Maybe I just wanted someone like him to be a good guy because there weren't very many at my school and he seemed like he could be.

Maybe I just needed to stop hoping for things. It never got me anywhere but hurt and I was *really* tired of hurting.

Charlie came home around six-thirty, explaining that they'd gotten a huge case to work on and he hadn't been able to call. He'd stopped to get something to eat on the way home and had sat down in front of the television for the rest of the night while I did my homework.

He didn't ask about the ice pack I held to my wrist. He didn't ask how my day was. He didn't ask if everything was okay when it *clearly* was not.

I wish I could be as invisible to my classmates like I was to my father sometimes. It would make my life a hell of a lot easier in the long run.

Chapter 2.

I kept my head down and my hands shoved into my hoodie pocket as I made my way up to the front of the school the next morning. I'd spent most of the morning trying to convince myself that yes, I *did* have to go to school today because when I woke up, the last person I wanted to see and deal with in my first period class was Edward.

I'd decided last night before I went to sleep that I was done liking him. Whatever I'd seen while seeing him with his family clearly was only for show and there was nothing more to him. I was the idiot that had wasted four years wishing that he'd open his eyes and see that I was actually something more than a size fourteen; I was an actual person.

Something everyone else failed to see.

I made it into the school and quickly walked to my locker, shoving my things inside and grabbing my books before walking to the classroom. I made sure that everything was where it was supposed to be this morning before I left the house so that I could avoid a scene like yesterday. The less I was where I wasn't supposed to be, the less chances I had of Edward grabbing my other wrist and doing the same thing to that.

It wasn't puffy anymore, but there were still bruises and it was a pain in the ass to shower last night. I'd managed to hit it off of every surface in the shower and by the time I crawled into bed, it was throbbing again.

On top of that, I'd had dreams of him. In one, he was pushing me off a cliff and laughing manically as I fell to the water. In another one, he was taking care of me, making sure that my wrist was okay and he'd actually...

I sighed and plopped down onto the stool, leaning forward and burying my face in my arms.

He'd actually kissed it and had apologized to me, saying that he didn't mean it and that he was just having a bit of a rough morning. He said that he'd never mean to hurt me and then he'd kissed *me*.

I guess that's why they're called *dreams*; the most impossible things can actually happen when you're lost in your head at night.

I tensed when I heard the stool next to me slide against the linoleum floor, slowly sitting up and staring straight ahead at the blackboard. I placed my hands in my lap and sat up as straight as I possibly could, slowly turning my head to look at the clock on the wall. The spiky pieces of his hair were in vision, allowing me to realize that it was definitely, and unfortunately, him sitting next to me.

It wasn't even time for the warning bell to ring yet. What was he doing here? He had a fuck ton of minions waiting with baited breath for his next word and he was in his first period class before anyone else?

I didn't count. I never did.

When he just sat there, I lifted my hand and flipped open my chemistry book, scanning through the pages so that I had *something* to do. Just sitting here with him was like a neon sign that said, "*She's pathetic! She thinks Edward Cullen would actually talk to her if she just sat here!*"

Even though I didn't.

I didn't even *want* him to talk to me. I didn't want to be his science fair partner. I didn't want to ever have to talk to him ever again. He wasn't the person I thought he could be and I'd seriously misled myself into thinking anything of the sort.

"How are you this morning, Isabella?" his soft voice, not any louder than a whisper, asked.

"Peachy."

"How's your wrist?"

I switched arms, immediately hiding the hurt one underneath the desk and draping it across my lap as I stared down at a diagram of a frog.

"It's fine," I said quietly, flipping through the pages almost frantically.

"Can I see it?"

"You saw it last night." I looked over at him quickly before looking back down at my book and shaking my head. "You don't need to see it today, too."

"I'm trying to be nice, Isabella."

"Why now? I've known you my entire life and it's taken something like you bruising me to make you talk to me? Why couldn't you have talked to me before?"

"Because you're not anyone I should be concerned about! But since we have to work today on this, I *do* have to talk to you and figured that I should be civil while doing it!"

I flinched and leaned away from him, snapping my book shut and staring down at the brown paper bag cover.

Well, at least he wasn't beating around the bush about how he really felt.

"What did you want to do for this stupid thing, anyway?" he grumbled.

"I was looking online last night and found something about a lie detector test. I thought it seemed interesting," I said quietly, shrugging.

"Fine. Great." He slid his stool back and stood up. "Did you print it out?"

I nodded and listened as his footsteps echoed in the empty room as he walked out. I slumped over my books, crossing my arms and burying my head in them again.

Just a few more weeks and I wouldn't have to talk to him about anything ever again. We'd get this project finished and could go back to our separate lives, pretending that he never talked to me and I could pretend that everything he just said to me never hurt like a bitch.

~*~

"So... did you want to come over tonight to work on this some more?" I asked, closing my book and stuffing the information I'd printed out back into my folder.

"I have practice tonight."

I nodded, stacking my books and placing my arms on the table to surround them, staring at the back of Mike Newton's head as I waited for the bell to ring.

We'd been given the entire period to get our projects sorted out so that we could get started on them. The science fair was in two weeks and while we wouldn't be dedicating every class to that project, a good portion of our future ones would be. We would still have tests to take and other homework to do, so working outside of class was crucial.

Neither of us were very happy about that. Him, naturally, less than I was.

"I'll get started on it tonight, then. I'll tell you how it's going in class tomorrow."

"I can come over after practice," he said quietly and I looked over at him as he looked around the room, obviously trying to see if anyone had heard him.

"Whatever you want to do, Edward."

"We finish around five. I'll be there around five-forty-five."

I nodded once, still staring straight ahead and looking away from Mike as he turned around to talk to Edward.

"How's it going, dude?"

Edward shrugged.

"Has she tried to like... molest you or anything? You know she hasn't ever seen any action from anyone."

I clenched my jaw and looked out the window, placing one arm in my lap and resting my chin in the other.

"No, she hasn't. I'm keeping my distance."

"Don't let her get too close. She'll sit on you. Probably crush your entire body while she's at it, too."

I sucked in a deep breath and grabbed my books, sliding off the stool and walking up to the front of the room, leaning over Mr. Banner's desk and waiting for him to look up at me.

"Can I leave a little early, Mr. Banner?" I asked, embarrassed as all hell when my voice shook.

I've never cried during school before. There had never been anything that hurt this badly that I couldn't wait until I got home at the end of the day. I'd dealt with Mike Newton and Lauren Mallory screaming out fat jokes without crying. I'd dealt with Jessica Stanley pointing and laughing at me as I got changed for gym class without crying. But in the past two days and all thanks to Edward Cullen, it was like I did nothing *but* cry over every little thing.

"Is everything all right, Isabella?" he asked quietly, his eyes darting from me to what I assumed was my lab desk.

"Yes, I just have... uhm... can I please go?"

"I suppose so. Feel better."

I nodded and offered him a shaky smile in thanks before swallowing hard and walking out of the room. I walked to my locker, breathing deeply and swallowing convulsively as I switched out my books for my next class.

What had I ever done to any of them to make them say things like that about me?

~*~

I scribbled a note to my father, just in case he came home before I made it back, and grabbed my keys and iPod from the table next to me. I placed the ear buds into my ears, pushed the button on my iPod and stuffed it and my keys into my pocket before I locked the door and walked out of the house. I jumped down the stairs, huffing out a deep breath and spreading my legs. I leaned over, stretching quickly before standing back up and starting to jog down the road.

I tried to run at least three times a week. Not only had it helped me with shedding two sizes since I'd started, it helped clear my mind a little. And after a day like today, a little clarity was something I definitely needed.

I'd managed to keep my emotions in check for the rest of the day. It also helped that Edward wasn't in any of my other classes and all I had to deal with was Jessica and Lauren, laughing and pointing and making snide comments like they always did. I'd learned very quickly how to ignore them and block them out and couldn't understand why I couldn't do the same thing with Edward.

Why did every insult he say to me or about me hurt ten times worse than anyone else? Why did it affect me more than anything else anyone had ever said about me before? None of it was anything new; in fact, it was all getting pretty old and I'd honestly stopped caring and listening to them for the most part.

What was it about him that just made it hurt so badly? It was like he'd taken a knife to my heart and had stabbed it so many times that I wasn't even recognizable anymore. I get that I was nothing to him; I was nothing to any of them. But I'd never been raised to insult the people I didn't know anything about and I didn't understand why they thought they had a right to do the same to me.

I jogged passed Jessica Stanley's grandmother's house, briefly wondering if she knew about how much of a cruel bitch her granddaughter really was.

I shook my head, concentrating on the music flowing from my ear buds as I continued down the street.

It didn't matter. Nothing mattered right now. I hadn't had a bad day at school. I hadn't had to deal with anyone that couldn't come up with original jokes of their own. I hadn't come home to an empty house and a heavy heart. And I most certainly hadn't cried because Edward Cullen had agreed with Mike Newton first thing this morning.

They didn't know me. They didn't know me and they didn't know anything that was going on in my life so them making comments like that and saying those things were not important. It didn't matter. *They* didn't matter to *me*.

Just a few more months, Bella. Graduation isn't that far away and NYU is waiting for you. You can deal with this shit for just a few more months, girl.

I turned around when I reached the street before Mike Newton's house and jogged my way back home, making it up the porch steps and once again greeted with an empty house. I set my iPod and keys on the small end table by the door, plucking the ear buds out and walking into the kitchen. I crumpled up the note and threw it away, shaking my head and sighing before I looked over at the clock on the microwave.

Five-ten. I had plenty of time to take a shower before Edward showed up.

If he showed up.

Rolling my eyes and sighing again, I made it up the stairs and into the bathroom, toeing off my shoes before stripping and starting the shower. I turned and looked in the mirror, placing my hands on my stomach and swallowing hard.

No one's interested in you, Bella. Looking like this, how could they be?

I wrapped my arms around my chest and turned from the mirror, leaning down and testing the water temperature before I pulled on the lever and hopped in.

I stepped out once I was clean and grabbed a towel from the cabinet underneath the sink, quickly wrapping it around me. I grabbed my clothes from the floor, kicking my shoes out into the hallway

and walking into my bedroom. I dropped my clothes into the wicker basket by my closet before I pulled a pair of sweatpants and long sleeved back shirt. I got dressed and towel dried my hair, running my brush through it before walking into the hallway and grabbing my sneakers. I threw them into my room and walked downstairs in enough time to hear a knock on the door.

Pulling at the ends of my shirt, I took a deep breath, bit my bottom lip and pulled open the door. His hair was wet, either from sweat or a shower, and he was dressed in the same clothes he'd been wearing during school; white t-shirt, black zip-up hoodie and a pair of dark blue jeans.

"Hi," he grumbled, shifting his book bag on his shoulder and looking down at his feet.

"Hi," I said quietly, stepping out of the way and letting him in.

He took a step in and I closed the door behind him, skirting around him and starting towards the kitchen.

"We can work in here, I guess." I snatched my bag from the floor and walked into the kitchen, setting it in a chair before I walked over to the refrigerator. "Would you like anything to drink?"

"What do you have?"

I looked behind me to see that he was awkwardly standing at the table, his bag on the floor and his hands resting on the chair he was standing behind.

"Water, iced tea, Mountain Dew and Pepsi."

"Water."

I nodded and closed the refrigerator after I'd grabbed a bottle of iced tea for myself and the bottle of water he wanted. I walked over to the table and set the bottle of water in front of him, moving my book bag from the chair and sliding in to it. I set my iced tea bottle down and unzipped my bag, grabbing my chemistry stuff and setting it on the table.

"We need at least ten volunteers," I stated, flipping open my notebook and handing him the printed out description of what I thought we could do. "Since I don't know ten people, I guess that's your job."

"You know ten people, Isabella," he grumbled, grabbing the paper and reading over it.

"Would any of them be willing to help me out?" I asked dryly, looking up at him and raising an eyebrow.

He looked at me over the edge of the paper and nodded once, his eyes trailing back to the words in front of him.

"I was thinking that we should try it out on each other first." I played with the edges of my notebook, keeping my eyes on the middle of the table. "So that we know what we're looking for."

"All right," he agreed slowly, nodding as he continued to read. "We have to write a paper, too, for this. Right?"

"Yes. I can do that if you'll get the volunteers."

"I can handle the responsibility of writing a paper, Isabella."

He glared at me over the paper and I slid down in my seat, swallowing hard.

"I'm just trying to make this easier for you," I said quietly. "The less you have to deal with me, the better, right?"

"It's a joint project," he said through his teeth. "I'm more than capable of doing more than finding fucking volunteers for this shit."

"Okay. Sorry."

"We can split the paper," he said, snapping the pages down on the table. "We'll work on it together."

I nodded and watched as he bent over to open his bag, pulling out a notebook and a pen of his own. He flipped it open to a blank page and tapped his pen on it, looking over at me. I quickly did the same, pulling a pen out from my bag and immediately writing the chart that I'd seen on the webpage.

"Do you want to go first?" I asked quietly, keeping my eyes centered on the page as I wrote what I liked.

Running. Classical music. Reading.

"I guess so."

I nodded, writing my dislikes in the second column.

High school. Mosquitoes. Sun.

I looked up to see that he was writing things down as well, briefly wondering if I'd get a glimpse of that good guy I thought he could be through this.

"Done," he said quickly, setting the pen down on his notebook and looking over at me.

I nodded and stood up, smoothing my hands over my shirt and watching as he did the same.

"We should do this on the stairs. I have to be taller than you."

He nodded and turned on his heel, walking in the direction of the front door. He stopped by it and I walked in front of him, standing on the second step and waiting for him to stand in front of me. He stuck his arm out and I swallowed hard, placing my hand on his wrist and looking at his shoulder.

"Whenever you're ready. Say a like first and then a dislike."

He nodded, shifting on his feet a little.

"I love my car."

I slowly pushed down on his arm as he said it, nodding when he was finished. He raised our arms again.

"I love you."

My breath whooshed out of my lungs and my heart cracked as I pushed down on his arm again, blinking furiously when tears immediately attacked my eyes. I nodded again and moved my hand from his arm, keeping my eyes down.

"I forgot my notebook," I managed, my voice thankfully even as I pushed by him and walked into the kitchen again.

I grabbed my notebook from the table, my bottom lip trembling and my eyes blurry as I groped for the pen I knew was supposed to be right beside it. Not finding it, a small squeak-slash-sob escaped my mouth and I dropped my notebook, slapping my hands over my mouth and closing my eyes tightly.

"Isabella?"

He was in the same room with me again and I quickly moved my hands from my mouth, sucking in deep breaths and digging my fingertips into my eyes.

"Can I ask you something?" I asked, keeping my back to him.

"Yeah. Fine. Whatever."

"Why do you hate me so much?" I breathed, pressing both hands over my heart, prepared to do my best to keep it in tact for as long as I could.

"I don't hate you..."

"What did I ever do to you?" I continued, shrugging my shoulders and shaking my head. "I've never said one bad word about you to anyone, never made fun of you when we were little and at our worst. I've never done anything to anyone to deserve the way you treat me and I don't understand."

"It's not about you..."

"Fuck you it isn't about me!" I exclaimed, turning to face him. "I'm a waste of space or I'd crush you if I sat on you, right? Isn't that what you and Mike said? I have *never* done anything or said *anything* to *anyone* about any of you and just because I'm heavier and I keep to myself, you all have the right to say these things to me?"

"It's just..."

"Just what, Edward?" I asked when he paused. "I'm just not good enough for you or your friends, right? So it's perfectly justified to make me feel this way or say those things to me because you don't think I'm good enough to talk to. I tried to *help you*." I swallowed hard and ran my hands through my hair. "I tried to be the better person because I could see that you were having a tough time and all I wanted to do was *help you out*. Instead, you grab my wrist, you bruise me and tell me that I'm a waste of space. Yeah, I'm sure that was completely justified to you."

I turned to the side, reaching up and wiping away the tears that had traveled down my cheeks during my rant.

"You can go," I said softly when he failed to add anything. "I'll talk to Mr. Banner tomorrow and see if we can switch partners for this."

"No," he said quietly, shaking his head. "We've already started..."

"Yeah, we got really far, didn't we?" I asked sarcastically, crossing my arms over my chest. "I'm sure it won't be a big deal."

"No," he said again, his voice stronger. "Everyone else has already started and no one will want to switch at this point."

"To work with you, I'm sure someone would switch in a heartbeat. Maybe you could even join someone else's project."

"And what would you do?"

"Does it matter?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"You'd be doing all the work yourself, on top of the work we'd have to get done for class. That's not fair."

"Since when have you cared about what's fair to me?" I asked, my voice low, even and monotone. "I am nothing to you, Edward, and you've made that perfectly clear."

"Isabella..."

"I don't want you here," I said, looking up at him as he once again paused. I was surprised to find that he looked almost apologetic. "I don't deserve this and this is my home. I may not be able to say anything when I'm at school, but this is my house and I don't want you here anymore."

He nodded and I watched as he reached over to grab his notebook, closing it and leaning over the chair to pull his bag onto it. He stuffed the notebook into his bag, grabbing his pen and shoving it in the front pocket before slinging it over his shoulder.

"I'll see you tomorrow," he grumbled over his shoulder as he turned.

"Yeah."

I watched as he walked out, listening as the door slammed behind him. I walked the same path, quickly flipping the locks before walking back to the kitchen and grabbing my books and bag. I trudged up the stairs and walked into my room, collapsing onto my bed and staring at the ceiling.

The worst part about all of this wasn't that I'd be going it alone for the science fair. The worst part was that he didn't have an answer to any of my questions. Yes, I'd interrupted him a few times, but he'd also started talking and had then stopped, not having anything else to say. He didn't have an excuse, he didn't have a reason.

It just was.

And I was the butt of the jokes, I got the short end of the stick simply because my mother had been a little heavier in her teen years and had passed that lovely gene on to me.

He didn't even like me a *little bit* and our project just proved me wrong about *everything*.

I couldn't wait until graduation.

Chapter 3.

I saw the white orchid hanging off the locker as I walked down the hallway the next morning, but it didn't register. Some guys were always sticking flowers of sorts into their girlfriend's lockers, just to be cute and make them screech annoyingly for the rest of the morning so I didn't think anything of it. It wasn't uncommon and it wasn't unusual for me to see at least once a week.

It was, however, unusual to see it hanging from *my* locker.

My bag fell from my shoulder and my mouth dropped open as I stared at it. There had to be a mistake. This couldn't be right. Someone got lockers switched and accidentally put it on mine.

Or someone was playing a joke on me.

I looked around the hallway, finding that everyone was staring at me as well. Biting my bottom lip, I reached up with shaky hands and pulled it down, nearly jumping out of my skin when a white note card, attached to the stem of the orchid, fell down against the back of my hand. Swallowing hard, I flipped it open, my eyes widening when I saw the handwriting.

You were right. You don't deserve any of it. Let me make it up to you.

I stared down at his words, my hands shaking as I traced over the imprint with my fingertips. Maybe it was still a joke. Maybe he had some kind of hidden camera somewhere in the hallway, waiting for my reaction so that he and his friends could laugh over it for years to come. Or maybe he was dared to do it by another one of them and wanted to see how far I'd let it go.

I took a deep breath and grabbed my book bag, slinging it back over my shoulder and opening my locker. I shoved my book bag inside and grabbed what I'd need, setting the flower carefully on top of my bag and untangling the note from it. I ignored everyone and kept my chin up as I walked towards the classroom. I slipped inside, thankful that it was empty still and walked over to my stool. I plopped down into it and rested my elbows on the table, grabbing the note card from the top and flipping it open again.

It was his handwriting. I'd only gotten a few glimpses of it when I was attempting to help him pick up the papers on the floor, but it was unmistakable.

What was he doing? What was he trying to pull? This wasn't making any sense. This couldn't be right. Since when did anything I say to anyone actually have this kind of reaction?

I looked up when the door opened, my heart jumping into my throat as Edward walked in. I stared at him as he slowly walked over to me, sitting down in the empty stool beside me and carefully placing his books on the table.

"So?" he asked softly, looking over at me.

"What are you trying to pull?" I choked out, looking down at the note again.

"I'm not trying to pull anything." I watched from the corner of my eye as he nodded and began to fidget with the edges of his textbook. "You've never done anything to me and I never really gave you a chance. I'd like to..." He sucked in a deep breath and sat up straight. "I'd like to know you."

"Who put you up to this?"

"Jesus Christ, Isabella, no one put me up to this," he sighed, exasperated. "This is something that I want to do."

"Why?"

"Because you were right."

"I have a feeling that I won't be hearing that phrase often, will I?"

"No, probably not."

I looked over at him and smirked when I saw the one on his face. I sighed and turned back to the note card, nodding once and swallowing hard.

"Fine. One chance, Edward. If you really want it, you've got it but you won't get another one."

"I got it."

"Okay."

"Did you still want to switch partners for this?"

"I guess... not," I mumbled, simultaneously hating myself for it and hoping that he meant what he was saying so that I didn't have to continue on the way I was.

If he really meant everything he said, then we'd get along just fine. The problem was, I wasn't entirely sure if he did or not. In his opinion, he might've been taking a big chance on talking to me and befriending me, but it sure as hell felt like I was the one jumping off a cliff.

"There's a party at Mike's next weekend," he said slowly. "Would you like to come?"

I looked over at him, wondering whom in the fuck he thought he was talking to. He wanted *me* to go to a party full of people that would rather trip me than talk to me and treat me like a normal human being. He wanted *me* to go to a party that I hadn't even been invited to until now with people that I couldn't stand on a daily basis.

"Are you serious?"

"Very."

"Why?"

"Are you going to stop asking me that question anytime soon?"

"Are you going to stop giving me cause to?"

"So that we can hang out," he sighed, exasperated once again. "So that I can get to know you and so that we can hang out a little."

"You want to get to know me at a crowded party with people that, as a rule of high school hierarchy, don't like me?"

"It's not like that."

"Really." I pursed my lips and arched an eyebrow at him. "So everyone isn't going to look at me like they do when I'm here and say the exact same things they do while we're here, right? Things are going to magically change because we're not in a school setting anymore?"

"I don't know! Maybe!"

"You're not stupid, Edward," I said, my voice quiet when the door opened. His head immediately snapped in that direction and I clenched my jaw. "So stop thinking the best of your friends because the lot of them *are*."

He looked over at me, shifting uncomfortably on the stool and fidgeting with his hands as Jessica walked into the classroom.

"Hi, E!" Jessica squealed, prancing over to him and leaning against the edge of our lab table. "You know, I was thinking that maybe we should go out tonight."

She popped the gum she had in her mouth, flipped her frizzy brown hair over her shoulder and giggled as if it made her more attractive somehow. I rolled my eyes and shook my head, leaning an elbow on the table and resting my chin in my hand. I stared out the window, my heart falling when I heard Edward agree to go out with her later.

He didn't want anyone else to see that we were talking, that much was plainly obvious. He didn't want us to be seen talking, but he wanted to get to know me somehow.

I listened to Jessica and Edward flirt with each other, my heart sinking further in my chest when I realized that no matter how many times I told myself that I didn't like him anymore, I still did. I was as stupid as the rest of the girls in this fucking high school and there wasn't a damn thing that I could do about it.

I didn't notice when my other classmates started piling into the room, barely listened when Mr. Banner called us to attention and definitely didn't look at Edward the entire forty-five minutes that I had to be there. I had no idea what went on and didn't know what we had to do for homework when the bell rang. I mechanically got up from my stool and gathered my books, staring straight ahead as I walked out of the classroom and into the hallway.

I passed Emmett on the way to my next class and even though he was walking with his girlfriend, he tilted his head at me and furrowed his eyebrows.

I guess I looked worse than I normally did.

I sat with Angela and Ben at lunch, but had no idea of what we'd talked about. I had no idea if they'd asked me anything because I was just on auto-pilot. I laughed when it was expected, I nodded when I had to and I spoke only when necessary.

Charlie was home when I got there and I automatically made dinner for us. He was a horror in the kitchen and if I wanted any sort of nutrition at all for dinner, I always made it. We sat in silence, as we usually did, until I declared that I was done and went upstairs to start my homework. Around five-thirty, the phone rang and I ignored it until Charlie called up the stairs that it was for me. I moved sluggishly down the stairs, offering him a small smile as I took the receiver from his hand and placed it against my ear.

"Hello?"

"Uhm, hi, Isabella."

I didn't even have enough energy to slam the phone down on him like I should have.

"Can I help you?"

"I, uhm... are you all right? You just... you didn't seem like yourself after..."

He stopped and I stared hard at the floor.

"How'd you get my number?" I finally asked.

"I know how to use a phone book. Are you all right?"

"Peachy."

"Did I do something?"

"You don't know how I act on a daily basis, Edward. How would you know that I wasn't acting like myself?"

"You were just... you don't normally zone out like that, is all. I just... Isabella, did I do something wrong?"

"Listen, Edward," I sighed, shaking my head, "if you're embarrassed to be seen talking to me then this is pointless. Whatever you seem to want to pull off won't work if you don't even want to be seen talking to me. I'm not a secret and I refuse to be yours."

"You don't understand my friends, Isabella."

"Bella," I snapped.

"What?"

"I hate the use of my full name, damn it, so stop it."

"Okay, well, *Bella*, you don't know what my friends are like. They need to... they need a warning."

"Should I wear a bright orange jump suit? Better yet, put me in a cage and smack a sign on the outside that says *don't feed the Bella*. Hell, God knows I'd lose weight then, wouldn't I?"

"I've never said anything about..."

"You didn't have to. No one ever has to." I sighed and reached up with my free hand to rub my forehead. "This is your choice, Edward. I was perfectly fine without talking to you." *In fact, my delusions of you were **always** better.* "You wanted another chance and I gave it to you. You're not doing such a great job with it so far."

"I don't know how to act with you! You're not... you're not like the rest of them and I don't know what the fuck I should do about it!"

"Take me for what I am, Edward, or leave me alone."

"I can't exactly do that though, can I? We have a project..."

"That I told you I could easily get you out of," I interrupted, running a hand through my hair. "This is *your* choice and I'm not doing anything to influence you in it."

He was quiet and I thought that he'd hung up before I heard a muffled curse. I closed my eyes and leaned back against the wall behind me, running a hand through my hair again and gripping it tightly.

"I can't come over tonight," he finally said.

"I know. You have a date."

"Do you listen to *everything*?"

"When she's standing right there and has a voice like that, it's kind of hard to miss, Edward."

He grunted and I opened my eyes, shaking my head and sliding down the wall. I wrapped my free arm around my upraised knees and bit my bottom lip.

"I have practice tomorrow night until five again so I'll come over around quarter of. Is that okay?"

"That's fine."

"I'll *talk to you* tomorrow."

"Sure."

I could practically hear his teeth grinding and smirked a little to myself, playing with the hem of my jeans.

"Bye, *Bella*."

"Bye."

I slammed the phone down in its base and hoped that it hurt his ear.

"Everything okay, Bells?" Charlie yelled from the living room, his eyes no doubt focused on whatever game he was watching.

"Everything's fine, dad." I sighed and stood up, starting back up the stairs. "Everything is just peachy."

~*~

I nearly screamed the next morning when I closed my locker door to find Edward standing behind it, his eyes darting nervously around the hallway while he gnawed on the corner of his bottom lip. I pursed my lips, raised my eyebrows and leaned my shoulder against my locker as I stared at his profile and waited for him to actually *look* at me. A minute or so later without him looking in my direction, I obnoxiously cleared my throat and coughed to cover up the laugh as I watched him jump and almost drop his books.

"I'm here. I'm talking. Hi. Good morning."

"Take some cocaine with your breakfast this morning?" I asked casually.

"What? No. Why would you think that?"

"Because you're talking a mile a minute and you're saying the same damn thing. If it bothers you that much, then go." I traced my tongue over my bottom teeth and stood up straight, looking down at the floor. "We both know that I'm not worth ruining your reputation."

"Why do you do that?"

"Do what?" I sighed, looking up at him and shaking my hair over my shoulder.

"Put yourself down like that."

"Like you don't do it."

He squared his shoulders and jutted his chin out a little.

"I won't anymore."

I scoffed at him and rolled my eyes.

"Until Jessica or Mike or Lauren show up, right? Where the hell has Tyler been, anyway? He hasn't been around to tell me I'm taking up the whole width of the hallway lately."

His face fell and his shoulders sagged.

"He says that to you?"

I looked down at my feet again and nodded.

"It's no worse than what you or anyone else says."

I shrugged one shoulder and gripped the end of my long sleeve shirt with my free hand.

"I won't anymore," he said again.

"Right," I said softly, nodding. "I started on the paper last night. Did a lot of research and found a lot of things that could help." I looked up at him again and sighed. "How was your date?"

"It was fine, I guess."

"You guess?"

"She's just... a means to an end," he grumbled, shifting uncomfortably in front of me.

"Ah."

"Yeah."

"E! Man! What the fuck are you doing over here?"

We both looked behind him to see Mike walking over to us, one of his eyebrows quirked up in amusement. He reached us and slapped a hand on Edward's shoulder, rolling his eyes at me before stepping in between Edward and me.

"I was just... uhm, we were..." Edward stuttered.

I rolled my eyes and sighed heavily, stepping out from behind Mike and clutching my books to my chest.

"We were just talking about our project," I said evenly, looking up at Edward and shaking my head at him.

"Right. Well, listen man... the party is going to be *awesome!*"

I nodded once and started towards the classroom, mentally berating myself for thinking that he'd meant what he said. I was right yet again.

"Bella!"

I stopped dead in the middle of the hallway, slowly turning on my heel to see that Edward was *walking away* from Mike and *towards* me.

It was as if time stopped. Everyone in the hallway stopped talking, stopped moving to turn and stare at Edward and then at me. I wanted to crawl into that hole I was waiting for and die because

this could not truly be happening. He *did not* just walk away from Mike fucking Newton to talk to *me*.

I was still gaping at him as he walked up to me, his head down and his eyes darting around the hallway once more.

"Are you feeling all right?" I asked, slowly shaking my head.

"Funny," he grumbled.

"I'm being serious."

"This is what you wanted, isn't it?"

"No," I said quietly, swallowing hard. "It was your choice, Edward. I never said that I wanted anything from you."

"You are infuriating."

"I've never asked you for anything. You wanted another chance."

"And you seem to want the fucking world on a platter."

I stared hard at him before swallowing hard and nodding once.

"Yes, Edward, I have everything we need for our project. Thank you and I'll see you in class," I said loud enough for everyone to hear.

I turned on my heel again and started towards the classroom, pushing through the door and walking towards the empty lab table. I set my books down and then rested my cheek on them, staring out the window and placing my arms on the table.

Edward didn't come in until everyone else did. He had Jessica Stanley wrapped around him and I did my best to ignore everything as I meticulously opened my notebook and then my textbook to the pages that were clearly written on the chalkboard. I began reading the drivel on the page as he sat down, doing my best to look engrossed in the boring world of whatever it was I hadn't remembered learning yesterday.

"You're not making this very easy, you know," he stated.

"This is who I am, Edward. Take it or leave it."

"You keep giving me that ultimatum. Do you *want* me to leave you alone?"

"I don't want to get hurt anymore." I looked over at him and clenched my jaw together. "And that's all you and your friends have done since I can remember. I'm not sorry for making you work for something that I'm scared to give away to anyone." I tilted my head up and sat up a little straighter in the chair, placing my hands in my lap. "Take it or leave it."

He stared at me until Mr. Banner called us to attention and I looked away from him. I had a lot to catch up on since I'd been so out of it yesterday and I couldn't be concerned with Edward Cullen staring holes into the side of my head.

I looked down when Edward slid a piece of paper underneath my hand, looking over at him. He tilted his head slightly before looking towards the front of the room and I sighed quietly, shaking my head as I unfolded the paper and pulled it into my lap.

I'll take it and raise you a secret that I guard with my life. I have to wear a retainer to bed because I sucked my thumb until I was thirteen.

My eyes widened and I looked over at him, crumpling the paper in my fist. He slowly looked over at me again, the corner of his mouth only slightly twitching into a smirk.

"Seriously?" I mouthed, leaning forward.

He nodded once and shrugged one shoulder, nervously licking his lips. I pursed my lips and looked towards the front again, keeping the paper crumpled in my fist as I ripped out an entire sheet of paper from my notebook.

It was less noisy that way.

I won't tell anyone.

I folded it and slid it over to him, watching from the corner of my eye as he pulled it down into his lap and unfolded it. He reached up and grabbed his pen, awkwardly writing on his lap and I shook my head. He folded it back up and handed it to me underneath the table, looking up at the board and fidgeting with his pen.

You had to use an entire sheet of paper for that? You're killing trees that way, you know.

I rolled my eyes and placed the paper on the table, grabbing my pen and shaking my head.

I just thought that you'd like to know. And I didn't kill the damn tree; someone else killed the thing and made paper out of it. You're just as guilty!

I slid it over to him, stuffing it underneath his textbook and resting my elbow on the table, leaning my chin into my hand and forcing myself to keep the smirk off my face. I looked over at him when he slid the paper back over to me, smirking openly at me.

I use my notebooks for things like schoolwork, Bella. I do not use an entire sheet of paper for a tiny little declaration.

I stared at his handwriting and pursed my lips, huffing.

I'm sure you've never had letters written to you, then, right? Jessica hasn't tried to seduce you through words? Although, I'm not sure how that would work seeing as how she can barely pass gym class.

He laughed out loud and my eyes widened as I slowly leaned away from him. Mr. Banner fell silent and I internally winced. Oh, this wouldn't be good.

"Is there something funny about this, Mr. Cullen?" Mr. Banner asked dryly from the front of the room, turning to look at him with a piece of chalk held in his hand.

"Oh, well, you know... no?" he asked, shrugging his shoulders and laughing sheepishly. "I just... uhm... I was just thinking about something."

"Uh huh," he said slowly, nodding once. "Think about chemistry, please."

"Right. Of course. Sure."

Mr. Banner turned back to his chalkboard and I relaxed a little, looking over at him. He was scribbling furiously on the paper and I briefly wondered if that was a deal breaker. I took the folded paper from him, swallowing hard as I pulled it into my lap and unfolded it.

That was mean. But completely believable. Am I still coming over tonight after practice?

She deserved it and it was the truth. I don't know. Are you?

Yes.

Okay then.

~*~

I was late getting back from my run and found Edward leaning against his car in the driveway. Looking down at my outfit, I groaned quietly before coming to a stop in front of him. I pulled my ear buds out and grabbed my iPod from my pocket, quickly turning it off and wrapping the chord around it.

"You run," he said, nodding at me.

"Yes."

"I didn't know that."

"There's a lot you don't know about me, Edward," I breathed, wiping the sweat from my forehead off on my sleeve.

"Like what?" he asked, following me as I walked up to the front door.

I pulled the key from my pocket and opened the door, pushing through it and leaving it open for him.

"Like I'm a pretty damn good cook," I stated, walking into the kitchen and grabbing a bottle of iced tea from the refrigerator as I set my keys and iPod by the door.

"And?"

And? What more did he want to know? What did it matter to him?

"And I can type eighty words per minute."

"Holy fuck."

I smirked to myself, twisting off the top to my tea and bringing it to my lips as I stared at the white door to the refrigerator. There really isn't that much to do when you're a social outcast; typing up papers and searching around online because you had nothing better to do seemed to have its perks. I'd passed keyboarding with the highest grade out of our entire class.

"I have to use the hunt and peck method," he stated and I heard one of the chairs from the table scrape against the floor as he pulled it out. "Mrs. Marcotte almost had to fail me for keyboarding because I couldn't type a single sentence without looking at my hands."

I laughed and shook my head.

"Do you want something to drink?"

"Still got that Mountain Dew?"

I nodded and wordlessly opened the refrigerator, grabbing the green can and turning around to walk over to him. I set it on the table in front of him and looked down at my clothes again, wrapping my free arm around my waist and looking down at the floor.

"I'm just going to uhm... I'm gonna go change really quickly."

"You look fine, Isa... Bella," he corrected himself.

"I look like I just got back from running. I'll be right back. I have to get my stuff anyway."

"I found a few volunteers," he offered before I could take a step. "My parents and Alice said that they'd be willing to help us out."

"Oh. Okay." I nodded once. "I'll be back."

I hadn't thought about why he was here, honestly. All that had been running through my mind was the fact that he was seeing me like *this*. Sweaty, disgusting hair, gross clothes and I couldn't have smelled too great, either.

I failed to remember that he was here so that we could work on our science fair project. The same one that had all but torn my heart out the other day when he said that he didn't even like me. I sucked in a deep breath as I walked up the stairs, swallowing hard and bursting into my room. I changed quickly, spritzed some perfume on and brushed my hair, throwing it up into a ponytail with the hopes that it wouldn't look as hellish as it had when it was down. I grabbed my book bag and walked back down the stairs, still taking deep breaths as I walked into the kitchen and sat down in the chair across from him.

"Did you want to read what I wrote of the paper last night?" I asked as I pulled out my books.

"Yeah, sure. Let me know what you want me to look up, too, please? I meant it when I said that I wanted to do half of it."

I nodded and pulled my notes and the few pages of the paper I'd started out of my folder, sliding it across the table to him. He looked at the chair next to me and moved over, sliding his books in front of him and smiling awkwardly at me as I watched him.

"It's just... easier."

"Yeah."

He read over what I'd written and I flipped back to the page I'd written my likes and dislikes on the other day, gnawing on my bottom lip as I stared down at it.

"I love you."

I reached up and began to play with my ponytail, swallowing hard and closing my eyes tightly for a minute so that I could attempt to get rid of that memory entirely. It wasn't something that I was entirely fond of and the less I had to think about it, the better off I would be.

"Your perfume smells nice," he said quietly, his eyes trained on the paper.

I slowly looked over at him, gaping at him as my hand fell from my hair and slapped against the edge of the table. I winced, crying out a little when it landed, naturally, directly on the bruises still adorning my wrist. I pulled it against my chest, gently rubbing my fingers over it in an attempt to soothe it somehow.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, fine."

He leaned forward and I flinched back as he reached out.

"I'm not gonna hurt you," he said quietly, his eyes trained on my wrist and looking something very close to agonized. "I will never do that again."

He reached out again and I let him gently grab my fingertips, pulling my hand onto the table between us. He carefully pushed back the sleeve of my shirt and I blinked at him when he hissed.

"Shit, Isabella, I'm so fucking sorry," he whispered, actually sliding his hand underneath mine and wrapping his fingers around my palm. "I didn't... I was running so late and I couldn't get anything into my locker like I should've and..." He shook his head, his eyes still focused on my wrist. "You were right about everything. You were only trying to help and I..."

"Okay, listen," I said, my voice shaking as I slid my hand from his and placed both of mine in my lap. "We'll start over, all right? We'll forget any of this happened and we'll just start over."

"I can't just forget about this."

"Why not? It's not a big deal."

"It's a big damn deal, okay? A big fucking deal because I've never... I would never touch a girl that way. I've been raised better than that and I just..."

"Because it was me," I said softly, looking down at the table. "And I'm supposed to be treated like shit by everyone."

"No. No, you're not. I had no right. None of us have any right." He leaned forward and buried his hands in his hair, groaning. "We shouldn't treat *anyone* the way you've been treated by us and it's not fair."

I sat quietly, reaching up and flicking my thumbnail against the bottom of the table as he sat completely still next to me.

"Let's just uhm... we need to get this figured out," I said quietly, grabbing the paper he'd dropped in front of him. "Let's do that, okay?"

He nodded, keeping his head down and his hands in his hair for a few minutes longer as I fidgeted with my pen or my notebook or flipped pages or did *something* so that I didn't feel so damn uncomfortable while he sat there, staring at the wood grains of my kitchen table.

I finally got him to respond to something with more than a nod and we worked for another two hours. Charlie came home, greeted Edward, said that he'd call for pizza, asked Edward if he wanted to stay and then disappeared into the living room with a shrug when Edward declined.

Again, I was invisible for the most part. It was good that I liked pizza, I guess.

Sighing, I stood up when Edward did, watching as he slung his book bag over his shoulder and kept his eyes down.

"I'll walk you out," I said quietly, watching as he nodded and turned on his heel.

I followed him to the door and he pulled it open, walking out into the porch before turning.

"It's not fair, Bella," he said softly, shaking his head slowly. "And I'm not going to do anything like that to you ever again. I'll make sure that no one else does, either."

I mentally scoffed before shaking my head and sighing as I leaned against the side of the door.

"Edward, it's not that much of a big deal."

"No, it is. No one deserves it. You, least of all." He stepped towards me and before I could react, I felt his lips brushing my cheek. "I'll see you tomorrow morning."

I stared after him as he walked down the steps and got into his car, waving at me as he pulled onto the street before he took off in the direction of his home. I placed my hand on the cheek that he'd kissed and blinked slowly at the spot his car had been in.

That wasn't normal. That couldn't be right. He couldn't have just done that. No. I'm dreaming. I *have* to be dreaming because someone like Edward fucking Cullen just doesn't go around kissing social outcasts on the cheek.

Hell, he doesn't go around kissing social outcasts in general.

"Bella? Are you going to just stand in front of the open door all night?" Charlie called from the living room.

"Waiting for the pizza guy, dad," I said absently, my eyes still glued to the spot his car had been parked in.

"Oh. Well. Okay then."

I rolled my eyes and walked out, closing the door behind me and sitting down on the first step. I rested my elbows on my knees and my chin in my hands, twisting my lips to the side and wondering what in the hell tomorrow morning would actually be like.

Chapter 4.

"Good morning, *Bella*."

I shrieked and nearly dropped everything as I leaned heavily against my truck and rested my forehead on the window.

"You need to start walking a little more loudly," I breathed, clutching a hand to my chest and taking one more deep breath.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to scare you."

I finally turned around when it felt like my legs weren't made completely out of jell-o and looked up at him.

It was wholly unnatural for someone to look that damn good in a casual outfit like jeans and a long-sleeved, red and blue striped shirt. Aside from that, it was wholly unnatural for someone who did look like that to be talking to me out of their own free will.

"Good morning," he smiled, hooking his thumbs around the straps of his book bag. "Did you sleep well?"

I reached up and he eyed my hand as much as he could before I placed it on his forehead. He growled and shook my hand off, raising an eyebrow at me as I shrugged and crossed my arms over my chest.

"Just making sure."

"I feel fine," he snapped.

"You sound it."

"This isn't easy, you know," he grumbled.

"Yes, actually, I'm very much aware of how easy it *isn't*, Edward."

I rolled my eyes and stalked by him, shaking my head and grumbling about how everyone in this damn school was a fucking moron. I made it through the double doors of the front entrance before I felt his hand in the crook of my elbow, pulling me into a random classroom off to the side.

Damn. Boy was fucking quick. Then again, he was the running back of the football team, so that kind of made all the damn sense in the world.

He slammed the door behind us and I shook myself free of him, crossing my arms over my chest and looking down at my feet.

Here it comes, Bella. I hope you weren't really banking on having anything to do with Edward Cullen for very long.

"I've never had to work for friends, Isabella. I've never had to put this much effort into making a friendship work because it never mattered to me before."

"Why does it matter now?"

"How the fuck should I know?"

I rolled my eyes and shook my head.

"If this is too hard for you and you don't want to do it, no one's forcing you. No one's making you do anything with me or for me that you don't want to do. I'm not a charity case and I don't need someone like you parading me around for I don't know what reason."

"You can't really be this dense!"

"I don't have time for this," I grumbled, shaking my head and starting to walk by him.

"You have just as much time as I have." He grabbed my arm again and stopped me as I stood beside him. "You need to cut me a little slack. I'm trying and you're not helping."

I looked up at him and stared directly in his eyes, discovering that they were a very dark shade of green. I'd only been close enough to him before to see the basics; the slope of his nose, the curve of his mouth, the sharp angles of his jaw. I'd never gotten a chance to see the color of his eyes before because he'd never been this voluntarily close to me before.

The one time he was, I was more focused on the way he was crushing my wrist with his hand to register the color of his eyes.

"Sorry," I breathed out, embarrassed to find that I was having a hard time doing much of anything.

"Don't apologize," he said softly and I could've sworn he looked down at my lips before meeting my eyes again. "Just... don't get so pissed off at me so quickly, okay? I'm really trying."

"Okay."

"We should uhm... what do you say to hanging out later? Today, I mean. After school."

"Are we going to work on the project?"

"No. I mean... just hang out for a while. Get to..." He licked his lips and my mouth went dry. "Get to know each other. Without schoolwork and other people to worry about?"

I stared at him, doing my best not to look at his lips as he licked them again.

He *had* to stop doing that or I was going to forget how to form complete sentences.

"Isabella?"

"Bella."

"Right. Bella." He shook his head sharply once, licking his lips again. "What do you say?"

"To what?"

The most heartbreakingly beautiful smile pulled his lips up and I swallowed hard.

*This is not good. Abort, Bella, **abort!***

"Uhm, yeah, sure, that's fine." I closed my eyes and shook my head. "Where did you want to go?"

"Could we hang out at your place? My family is nosy and bringing you home would only present questions neither of us really wants to answer."

My heart sunk and I nodded, taking a step back from him and opening my eyes to look down at my feet again.

Of course they would. They'd want to know why Edward – as close to high school royalty as anyone else in this fucking place – was bringing home someone like me without the excuse of homework in the way.

"Yeah, that's fine. I can meet you at the house, okay?"

"Yeah, okay. I'll be there right after you."

"We should uhm... go to our lockers before the bell rings. Wouldn't wanna be late."

I attempted at a laugh before taking a deep breath and looking up at him again. He was smirking at me and I quickly looked down at my feet again.

That smirk was dangerous. He could've asked me to walk naked down the hallway and I would've done it without a second thought.

Which would've scared a number of people and possibly scarred them for life. Including myself.

"No, wouldn't want that," he said softly, shaking his head.

I twisted my lips to the side and started for the door, jumping back again when he moved in front of me and pulled it open. I waited for him to walk ahead of me, looking up when he didn't move.

He was holding the door open for me.

Edward Cullen was holding the door open for *me*. He was holding it open for me and he was waiting for me to walk ahead of him.

I mumbled my thanks and disappeared out the door in front of him, keeping my head down and my eyes glued to the floor as I walked towards my locker. The hallway was completely silent and I heard the door to the room Edward and I had been in slam shut. At the other end of the hallway.

I was quick to shove my things into my locker and grab the books I needed, all but running into the chemistry room and collapsing onto my stool. I crossed my arms over my books and buried my head in them, trying to breathe evenly and calm my racing heart.

It was going to be a very long day.

~*~

I stared at Angela from across the table as her eyes followed Ben out of the cafeteria. We had approximately five minutes before he came back and she'd been staring holes in my forehead the entire damn time he sat next to her, rambling aimlessly about everything that no one cared to talk about. I would've jumped into his lap and kissed him had he not been attached to Angela's hip since kindergarten.

In fact, *everyone* had been staring at me all damn day. I was really surprised that I wasn't resembling a slice of Swiss cheese at this point or that I hadn't magically grown a beard because there hadn't been one single person in this damn school – even the *freshman* – that hadn't gaped at me or snorted or stared when I walked by them. I was more of a circus sideshow freak than I had been before and I'd begun to seriously reconsider this whole being friends with Edward Cullen thing. So far, it wasn't leading anywhere good.

"You spill and you do it *now*," she demanded, jamming her fingertip into the grey surface of the cafeteria table, her eyes dancing with excitement as she wiggled in her spot.

"There's nothing to..."

"Don't start with that."

"He's my partner for chemistry and we were just talking about the science fair project."

"In an empty classroom? Alone? With the door closed and locked?"

"We wanted to talk in... hey." I sat up straight and pointed at her. "What are you talking about *locked*?"

"Don't think no one tried to get in, Bella!"

"He didn't lock the door!"

"Oh, so *he* locked it, huh?"

"It wasn't locked!"

"Yes, it was. Jessica nearly had a freaking snit fit when she couldn't get in."

"Why would she think she needed to get in?" I grumbled, leaning forward and resting my chin in my hand.

"Because she's Jessica Stanley?" Angela asked, grabbing the apple from Ben's tray and cradling it in her hand. "She's a pain in the ass and has to be shoved up Edward's for as long as possible each day?"

I snorted and shrugged, nodding.

"She has a pretty good reason, though. I mean, he doesn't discourage her or anything."

"Seriously, tell me what's going on with you two," she said, leaning across the table and biting into the apple. "I won't tell anyone."

"No, I know," I said quietly, playing with my fingertips. "I just don't want to jinx anything. Especially if he changes his mind."

"Are you two dating?" she whispered.

"No!" I said quickly, shaking my head furiously. "He'd never be interested in me that way, Angela, come on." I spared a glance up at her and rolled my eyes. "You know that's not the way this works."

"Things change, Bella. People change. If Edward got away from those idiots he calls friends, maybe you two would have a chance."

I shifted in my seat, biting down on the inside of my cheek to keep the hope that was swelling up inside my chest at bay. I didn't need anything more to fuel the fire that shouldn't be there in the first place.

"Don't, Ang. Please."

She sighed as if I'd just asked her to go stand on the roof of the school and predict if it was going to be sunny tomorrow, but leaned back and nodded as she took another bite of the apple.

"We're trying to be friends. I think. I guess that's what we're doing?" I shook my head and went back to playing with my fingertips. "We're hanging out tonight."

"Where?"

"My house." I snorted half-heartedly and shook my head. "He doesn't want to explain to his parents that we're just hanging out and not doing homework. I guess I'm not allowed to meet his family unless I'm a size two."

I looked up at Angela and found that she had her head tilted sympathetically to one side, her jaw moving slowly as she chewed and I sighed, shaking my head again.

"People don't change, Ang," I said softly, trying to smile at her. "They just find new ways to work around their old personalities."

Ben chose that moment to sit down, reclaiming his spot next to Angela and wrapping his arm around her waist. He pulled her against him and grinned at the both of us.

"Am I interrupting something?"

"Yes," Angela said bluntly.

"No," I laughed when I looked up to find Ben staring openly at Angela in disbelief. "We're done."

"You better give me details tomorrow," she stated, leaning against Ben's shoulder and pointing at me with her free hand.

"Yeah. Sure."

I nodded and went back to playing with my fingertips, sighing heavily and wishing that Angela could be right; that Edward could change after so long of being a jerk.

Too bad I wasn't dumb enough to actually believe it.

~*~

I bolted out of my truck, barely closing the door behind me before I was jumping up the stairs and hastily unlocking the door. I threw my keys on the table and chucked my book bag on the floor near the stairs. Then, without knowing what I was in such a hurry for, I stood at the bottom of them, crossed my arms over my chest and picked at my bottom lip with my pointer and thumb fingers.

It had been ages since I'd had anyone over after school. Angela and Ben would occasionally come over to hang out when there wasn't anything better to do, but other than the two of them, I hadn't had anyone over to hang out in I don't know how long. I didn't know what to do.

So I walked into the living room and sat down on the couch, reaching for the remote on the coffee table and flicking on the television. I leaned back and quickly changed the channel from the sports program my father had it on and sighed, still picking at my bottom lip.

It would be weird if I didn't say I felt awkward. Sure, he'd been over here to work on our project for school, but never for anything else. In fact, I wasn't even sure how he'd known how to get to my house in the first place. Either he was stalking me or he'd been a part of the last Halloween Egg Issue my father had had to clean up first thing the next morning.

He hadn't been so excited about that.

What was I doing? This would never work. He wasn't the person I thought he could be; he wasn't anywhere *near* being the person I'd always wished he could've been so what in the hell was I thinking when I agreed to this? This wouldn't get us anywhere. We were good at arguing and making smart-ass comments to each other – when he wasn't bruising me – and that was it. We

couldn't build any sort of relationship on that. Friendship needed trust and I most certainly did *not* trust him.

I groaned and threw the remote back onto the coffee table, leaning forward and rubbing my hands over my face.

This was insane. This wouldn't prove anything. I'm sure he was very much aware of that and would have a grand ol' time telling all of his little minions everything he thought he'd be able to get from me.

He probably didn't even *have* a retainer. His teeth were fucking gorgeous. Straightest fucking teeth I think I'd ever seen. If the college thing didn't work out for him – assuming he was *going* to college – he could star in one of those toothpaste commercials.

"Bella Swan, you *are* an idiot," I grumbled, sighing heavily and standing up.

I almost jumped through the roof when I heard a knock on the door and had to sit down again, placing a hand against my chest and trying to breathe evenly. I heard another knock and stood up, swallowing hard and dropping my hand as I slowly made my way towards it. Blowing out a deep breath, I reached for the doorknob and yanked back on it, looking up to see Edward standing awkwardly in the doorway.

"Hey," he greeted, smiling nervously.

"Hey."

I moved out of the way and he walked in, looking around the hallway he'd already seen plenty of times as I closed the door.

"So, uhm," I started, stepping back to his side and pushing hair behind my ear. "What did you... what'd you wanna do?"

"Well... I hadn't really thought of that. I guess, uhm... we could talk, right?" he asked, crossing his arms over his chest and looking down at me.

"Yeah, sure. Uhm..." I motioned towards the living room with one arm and waited as he walked ahead of me. He plopped down into the spot on the couch I'd been sitting in and I sat on the other end, turning towards him slightly. "How was the rest of your day?"

"It was school, you know? Sucked. Yours?"

"Sucked, too," I said quietly, nodding.

"Did anyone... you know, say anything to you? About me?"

"Just Angela." I shook my head and looked down at my lap. "Everyone else just gave me dirty looks."

"Sorry."

I shrugged one shoulder and looked up at him again, smiling nervously at him before looking down to my lap.

"It's not your fault."

"I was the one that dragged you into an empty classroom."

"Why'd you lock the door?" I asked automatically, looking up at him once again.

"It ensured that the conversation stayed strictly between us, didn't it?"

"Well, yeah, but everyone else is thinking that we... I don't know what they're thinking, but I know they're not thinking that we were just having an innocent conversation about our project."

"Is that you what you told Angela?"

"No. I told her that we were going to hang out tonight." I watched him wince and shook my head, licking my bottom lip. "You don't want anyone else to know."

"Bella..."

"I knew this wasn't going to work," I mumbled, shaking my head again and pulling my legs up onto the couch. "Angela isn't going to say anything."

"It's not that I didn't want anyone else to know. I just don't know how they're going to take it."

"Is it at all possible for you to think for yourself?" I asked, looking over at him. "Forget about the idiots who cling to your every word for one fucking second and think for yourself? Did you ever think that maybe I'm a pretty awesome person? That maybe we'd get along well if you could just stop for one damn second to realize it?"

"They're my *friends*, Isabella," he said through his teeth.

"They're idiots, Edward," I shot back, raising an eyebrow at him.

"You're doing the same thing to them that you're accusing me of. You're aware of that, aren't you?"

I stared at him, blinking slowly and pursing my lips.

"At least I have a legitimate reason to not like them," I said quietly. "There is no reason whatsoever that they couldn't talk to me or get to know me."

"Like I'm doing right now."

"Why?"

"Why do you always have to...?" He jammed his hands into his hair before hastily pulling them back out and glaring at me. "I feel guilty, Isabella."

"Then get out," I said, looking away from him and staring at the bottom of the television stand.

I should've been used to my heart hurting so much by now, but every time he opened his mouth and said something like *that*, it just got ten times worse.

"You can't just send me away every time I say something that you don't want to hear!"

"Why?" I snapped, looking over at him again. "You have not stopped to listen to *anything* I might've said to you in the past four years so why in hell should I listen to you?"

"Because I'm here!" he shouted, pointing to the couch cushion next to him. "I'm here, trying to make it right with you! You have to give me some room to breathe!"

"Why should I?"

"Because we can't make this work if you don't give, too! I know that you're pissed and you have every right to be, but damn it, Isabella, I can't be the one to do this completely on my own!"

I blew out a deep breath and closed my eyes, resting my chin on my knees and doing my best to clear my head.

"Isabella..."

"Give me a minute," I said quietly, holding up a hand to him.

I could see his point. I wasn't making it easy for him and while he didn't deserve easy, it wasn't fair to him that I make him keep trying if I wasn't really going to. I had four years worth of anger stored up for him and his friends, but at least he finally had found the guts to make an effort with me.

"You need to understand that I *don't* understand anything," I said after a few minutes of silence. "I don't understand why I'm always the target and I don't understand why you're holding to your word on trying to get to know me." I shook my head sharply and sucked in a deep breath. "No, wait. You feel guilty. Right."

"I do," he said softly and I felt my heart twitch just that much further in my chest. "But I wasn't lying when I said that you were right and that you didn't deserve anything we'd ever done to you. I do want to know you, Isabella."

"Then you need to stop using my full name because I *will* hurt you."

I opened my eyes and smirked, looking over at him to find that he was staring at the palms of his hands.

"*Mike* is an asshole," he said, nodding. "There's no excuse for him and what he said about you sitting..."

"I get it," I interrupted, grumbling and wrapping my arms tightly around my legs.

"You're *not* that big, Bella."

I scoffed and rolled my eyes, tightening my hold on my legs and staring at the remote on the coffee table.

"You seemed to agree with him a few days ago."

"You ran out of the classroom before you could hear me tell him that he was being an ass."

I slowly looked over at him to find that he was still staring at his palms.

"What?"

"That was uncalled for." He shook his head and turned his hands over only to stare at the back of them instead. "He wanted to get a rise out of you and he got it." He looked over at me then, looking directly into my eyes. "I told him that he was being an ass."

"Why did you say that you loved me as your lie?" I asked quietly, swallowing hard and chewing on the inside of my cheek.

"Mike gave me attitude for the rest of the day and everyone else teased me about defending you. I was pissed and I took it out on you because at the time, you were the one that caused all of it for me. I took a lot out on you and I shouldn't have."

"I don't want to be your scapegoat anymore."

"And I'm going to try really hard to make sure that you aren't."

I nodded and went back to staring at the coffee table, still chewing on the inside of my cheek as I felt him shift around on the other end of the couch.

"Hey, can we start over?" he asked softly after a few silent moments.

I shrugged, picking at the hem of my worn out jeans as I nodded.

"Yeah, sure."

I jumped when he stood up and headed for the door. I raised an eyebrow at his back and rolled my eyes, sighing and resting my chin on my upraised knee when he walked out.

"Jackass," I mumbled under my breath.

Once again, I was nearly sent through the roof when I heard a knock at the door. Snapping my teeth together, I unfolded myself from the couch and walked over to the door, once again pulling it open to find him standing on the other side.

"Bella!" he exclaimed, a smile on his face.

I blinked at him. He seriously walked outside, knocked on my door *again* and...

"You are some kind of crazy," I mumbled, laughing slightly and shaking my head at him.

He shrugged innocently and I moved out of the way, letting him back into the house and closing the door behind him. I stared at the back of his head, not quite sure what I was supposed to do now that we were in the same position we'd been in a few minutes ago when he walked in the first time.

"Do you want something to drink?" I asked finally, tapping the balls of my hand against my thighs.

"Mountain Dew?"

I nodded and walked behind him to get into the kitchen. I grabbed the green can and a bottle of tea for me, turning around and heading back into the hallway. He was nowhere to be found and I peeked around the stairs, finding that he was sitting back on the couch and staring at the television. I shuffled my way over to him and handed him the can before taking my place back on the couch and twisting the top off my tea.

"What's your favorite show?" he asked, turning to look at me as he popped the top of the can.

"Grey's Anatomy, I guess."

"What's the obsession with doctor shows?" he asked seriously, turning to me and cupping the can in his hands. "They're all the same."

"In a sense," I agreed, nodding and turning to him. "The storylines are different, though. Personal lives of the characters are different and all that."

"How many times can you watch a doctor go in for surgery, though, honestly? My mother loves that show too and my father will sit with her and pick out everything they're doing wrong. She makes him leave."

I laughed and shrugged, lifting my tea to my lips and sipping from the bottle.

"The actors are pretty."

"Oh!" he laughed, nodding. "Pretty actors make all the difference."

"Usually."

"I see."

"What's yours?"

"Ghost Hunters."

I raised an eyebrow at him and he shrugged one shoulder, fidgeting slightly and tapping his fingertips against the sides of the can.

"Really?"

"It's really the only show I watch. Alice has this thing with ghosts and all that." He shrugged again. "It's interesting."

"My dad and I used to watch that all the time," I said quietly. "Now it's all sports and fishing and poker."

"The chief watches poker?"

I nodded, chuckling and biting the inside of my mouth.

"Sometimes he'll get together with some guys from the station and have a poker night."

"Here?"

"Oh, no." I scoffed and shook my head, waving at him. "He always goes to their place."

"You and your dad don't seem close." I looked up at him and shrugged, picking at the green label on my bottle. "I figured that you would be. Since it's just the two of you..."

"You figure things a lot for not knowing me that well."

"Sorry," he mumbled, looking down and bringing the can up to his mouth.

We sat in silence once again, his fingertip playing with the top of his can as I stared down at my lap in an attempt to think of something to talk about.

"You said that you cooked, right?"

I looked up at him and nodded.

"Can you make homemade macaroni and cheese?"

I nodded again.

"Will you show me?" he asked quietly.

"You seriously want me to teach you how to make mac and cheese?"

He laughed a little and nodded, shifting uneasily on the other end of the couch.

"It's my favorite and the only version I ever liked was my grandmother's. She passed away three years ago and my mom just can't..." He shook his head once and lifted the can to his mouth again. "She tries."

"All right," I said slowly, shrugging one shoulder and standing up from the couch. "I will show you how to make it."

He grinned – nearly stealing my breath – before he popped up from the couch. He looked like a kid on Christmas morning; the way his face was lit up and even the way his eyes seemed to brighten and widen a little bit.

"You really have to wear a retainer?" I asked, tilting my head to the side as I looked at his teeth.

Fuckers were all pearly white and straight and perfect.

"Yes," he laughed, nodding. "I really do. Makes me drool. Not a pretty picture."

I laughed and rolled my eyes, shaking my head as I turned on my heel and started towards the kitchen.

"Attractive, Cullen."

"Yeah, well, it's the truth."

I laughed and set my tea on the table as I pulled out two saucepans and placed them on the stove.

"Are you ready?"

He nodded enthusiastically and quickly snapped his can on the table as well, rocking back and forth on his heels.

"Well, get over here," I said quietly, waving him over as I sidestepped towards the refrigerator. "There's a bit to do."

He was standing by my side almost as soon as I said it, his hands behind his back as he watched me gather everything from the fridge and place it on the counter.

I still wasn't entirely sure what to do with him. He seemed like he meant everything that he'd said and why would he tell me something like having to wear a retainer to bed or watching a show like Ghost Hunters – two things that are definitely not high on the popularity chain – if he hadn't meant anything he'd said? I didn't trust him and I probably wouldn't for a long time, but at least this was a step in the right direction.

It had to be the right direction. I couldn't handle the wrong one.

Chapter 5.

There was something distinctly different when I walked into the school the next morning. Granted, it was Friday and there was always a different feel simply because it was the last day before the weekend. People were either making plans or fine-tuning the ones they already had and there was just a certain energy about the entire student body.

I was just happy that I had two days where I wouldn't need to see these people, have the house mostly to myself while Charlie was out fishing and be able to relax the way I couldn't during the week.

I was in a good mood, though. I'd had a pretty good time hanging out with Edward last night and the high hadn't worn off quite yet. I was still weary of him and at certain points during the night, it had been extremely awkward between us. We'd done homework while the macaroni and cheese was cooking and he'd told me that he'd asked a few of his friends to volunteer for him. We both agreed that he could do that on his own. Charlie came home around six-thirty again, humming appreciatively when he smelled the food before disappearing into the living room. Overall, while the night hadn't started off that great, it hadn't ended horribly, either.

Today, however, everything felt different somehow. It felt like I was walking to my doom as I stepped into the hallway and made my way towards my locker. Every single person turned to look at me as I walked and I quickly wrapped my arms around my waist and kept my head down. The hair on the back of my neck was standing on end and my heart was beating hard against my ribs.

What really sealed the deal, though, was when Emmett stopped me in the middle of the hallway. In front of everyone. And with Rosalie Hale by his side, looking as uncomfortable and nervous as I felt.

Rosalie never looked uncomfortable or nervous. Neither did Emmett, for that matter, and neither of them *ever* acknowledged me in front of everyone.

"Bella, why don't you come down here with me?" he asked, slinging an arm around my shoulders and steering me in the opposite direction.

I think I heard an audible gasp from everyone.

"I have to put my books away, Emmett," I said quietly, trying to wiggle out from underneath his arm.

"You can put your stuff in my locker for now."

"Why?"

"Because I want you to take a walk with us."

I sighed heavily and shook my head, thinking that he'd either lost his mind completely – which wasn't all that far from the truth, I don't think – or there had been another one of those invisible memos about me not being a diseased outcast for the day.

"To where?"

"Uhm... to..."

"The gym!" Rosalie exclaimed, grabbing Emmett's other arm and pulling us both in the direction of the gymnasium.

"For what?" I asked slowly.

"I feel like we don't talk anymore, Bella, and I want to remedy that."

"Emmett, seriously, what is going on?"

I dug my heels into the floor and was almost knocked down when Emmett kept walking. I quickly slipped out from underneath his arm and watched as they both turned to look at me.

"Nothing's going on, Bella," Rosalie laughed nervously.

Rosalie didn't *ever* laugh nervously. The woman was practically a goddess; she never had a use for nerves and usually, she never had a use for me.

I stared at the both of them before turning on my heel and starting back towards my locker.

I was still being stared at and I heard footsteps behind me. I looked over my shoulder to find that Emmett and Rosalie were trailing behind me, both of them looking slightly dejected and still really nervous and uptight. Whispers were bouncing off the walls of the eerily quiet hallway as I walked down and I swallowed hard again, nervously reaching up to run a hand through my hair.

I stopped in front of my locker, my breath completely gone as I stared at it. Cow was written in black marker across the top. *Heifer* was written up the side. *Pig* was written on the other side. And in the middle was a computer generated picture of a cow's body with my head attached to it. I placed one hand on my throat, gently dragging my fingernails down as if that would help me to start breathing again.

"Bella," I heard Emmett's voice from behind me.

I held up one hand and shook my head, my eyes still glued to the scene in front of me.

I never thought – not in a million years – that anyone would actually do anything like that. I never imagined that anyone in this school, no matter how much they disliked me, would ever go this far and stoop this low to make me feel this bad about myself.

I dropped my hand and ran it down the front of my blue sweater, dropping my other from my throat to do the same. I pulled on the bottom, trying to make the shirt longer somehow, even though it already hit my mid-thighs. Anything that would hide the small roll that showed through the fabric. In all honestly, I wanted to pull the shirt over my head entirely and if I happened to disappear while I was hiding, well, then so be it.

"Bella," Rosalie tried, placing her hand on my arm.

I flinched away from her, briefly wondering if she was in on it. She was one of them; she could've known all about it. Emmett, too. Maybe they were both in on it, maybe the person who had done it had just finished, and they needed to buy a little time before I saw it.

I didn't know what to do. I felt as though I couldn't do anything but stand there and stare at it. It didn't seem real to me. This had never happened before; why would someone do this? Why did they do any of the things they'd ever done to me in the past?

"Because you're a cow," I whispered, answering myself.

"Bella, don't believe..." Emmett started.

"Don't," I whispered, shaking my head and turning around. "Just don't."

I walked in between Emmett and Rosalie, my arms wrapped tightly around my waist and my head down. The blood was rushing in my ears and tears were filling my eyes as I walked down the hallway, roughly shoving through the double doors and back into the parking lot.

I didn't care that I'd be missing school. I didn't care about anything except for getting out of there. I couldn't stand to be in that place for one more minute and the last thing I wanted to do was have to go through an entire day with *them*.

"Bella?"

I heard Edward's voice but kept walking, my arms still tight around my waist and my head still down as I stared hard at the pavement. I didn't want anything to do with anyone right now and if last night between us had been any progress, I didn't want to risk damaging it so soon. If there was even a small fraction of a chance that Edward and I could make a friendship between us, then this would definitely not be the time to talk to him.

I was quick to get back into my truck and shove the keys in the ignition. I stared straight ahead as I pulled out of my space and started towards the entrance of the parking lot, blinking rapidly and sniffing the entire way. I pulled into my driveway and jumped out, making it into the house and up the stairs before I collapsed on my bed and buried my face in my pillow.

The tears started, the sobs came and I wrapped my arms around myself in a sad attempt to keep myself together.

~*~

I shouldn't have walked out. I should've stayed and dealt with it. Running away didn't prove anything and probably only made them all happy that they'd gotten to me.

I didn't understand what I'd done this time that had warranted that. The only thing I'd done differently was talk to Edward and that was mostly because I had to. He'd done the rest and had seemed to truly want a chance to get to know me. Why had *I* been the one to get cut down for what he'd wanted from me in the first place?

I sniffled and reached up to wipe my cheeks, staring at the wall of my bedroom and curling into the fetal position on my bed.

I didn't know what time it was. I didn't know how long I'd been up in my room. School could've been over for hours now and I wouldn't have known the difference. Hell, it could've been early Saturday morning – a quick look at my window had shown me that it was at least dark out – and I wouldn't have realized.

I sighed heavily when I heard footsteps outside my bedroom door and sucked in a deep, shaky breath, once again wiping off the tears from my cheeks with the sleeve of my shirt. I heard a knock on the door but didn't move, figuring that Charlie had gotten home and wanted to know why I hadn't bothered to come down or why I hadn't fixed dinner for us.

I didn't move when I heard the door open, waiting for him to ask me or to just leave again when he saw that I wasn't moving. A few seconds later, I heard the door close and sighed quietly, reaching up once again to push hair out of my eyes.

"Bella?"

I jumped, my eyes widening as I heard a voice that clearly did not belong to Charlie, and quickly turned onto my other side to face the door. I saw his profile in the little light from the streetlights outside my window and immediately, I tensed.

"What?" I managed, my voice rough and my throat raw. "How'd you get in here?"

"Your father let me in."

Huh. He was home. Glad he came up to see if I was all right.

"What do you want?" I mumbled, curling up even tighter in the blankets and staring blankly ahead.

"I wanted to see if you were all right."

My eyes snapped back to him when he moved, the floorboards creaking underneath his weight as he walked towards me. I kept my eyes on his dark figure as he lowered himself to the floor, resting his arms on the edge of my bed and placing his chin on his hands.

"I'm fine."

"It shows," he said softly.

I stared at him, his face partially hidden in shadows.

"I would've been here earlier," he started after a few moments of sitting in silence, "but coach kept us later for practice because it was a Friday."

"Did you have anything to do with it?"

"No!" he exclaimed loudly. "No."

We once again sat in silence and I sucked in a shaky breath.

"Who was it, Edward?" I whispered.

He sighed heavily and tilted his head to the side, one of his hands coming up and resting on my cheek. I huffed out a breath, swallowing hard and closing my eyes as he rubbed his thumb over my skin.

"Jessica and Lauren," he whispered back.

"Why?"

"Because of me." He slowly pushed his hand back and into my hair, his thumb still stroking my cheek. "I'm sorry, Bella."

I closed my eyes when I felt them water again and shook my head, turning and burying my face back into my pillow. His hand slid to the back of my head, his fingers still tangled in my hair and I did my best to keep my emotions under control.

It was bad enough that he'd caught me in my room, sitting in the dark and moaning over my bad day. It would be even worse if he saw me cry.

He kept his hand in my hair, his fingertips gently rubbing circles on the back of my head as I did my best to either smother myself or calm myself down – I hadn't quite figured out which I wanted to do more.

"What do you say to dinner or something?" he asked quietly after a while.

I slightly turned my head and his hand trailed out of my hair and away from me. I looked over at him through blurry eyes.

"Is this still guilt?" I asked, my voice shaking.

"Part of it," he said softly. "I said I wouldn't let this happen and it did."

"What's the other part?"

"The other part is that my new friend needs a friend and I'm..." He puffed out a breath and placed his hand on my back. "I'm here for you."

"This isn't just another way to humiliate me somehow?"

"No."

I stared at him and he slowly started to move his hand up and down on my back.

"I'm not really hungry."

"How about we go see a movie then?"

"It's a Friday night. Don't you have plans?"

"I did but I don't anymore."

"With Jessica?"

He nodded once.

"Edward..."

"A few days ago I wouldn't have thought anything about this," he admitted quietly, his hand still rubbing my back. "I probably would've laughed, said you deserved it and never would've given it another thought."

I sucked in a sharp breath and buried my face back into my pillow.

"A few days ago, I wouldn't have thought about how this would've made you feel because it didn't matter to me. A few days ago, I didn't *know* you."

"You don't know me now," I mumbled.

"I'm trying to. And I was hoping that you were trying to know me, too."

I swallowed hard and moved my face from my pillow, looking over at him. I reached up and flicked on the lamp on my bedside table, hissing at the sudden invasion of light. He grunted and moved his hand from my back, rubbing his eyes. I propped myself up on my elbows once my eyes adjusted to the light and stared at my headboard.

"Can I ask you a question?" I asked softly.

"Yeah."

"You... *hated* me a few days ago. How did that change so quickly?"

"I never really hated you, Bella. I just didn't think about anyone's life but my own. I never gave much thought to anyone that wasn't in my circle and I didn't think about what happened once everyone went home for the day. It's like I... I separated it, I guess. My home life is different from my school life and I just thought that everyone else did the same thing." I looked down at him to find that he was looking up at me, something very close to a pout on his face. "I just didn't think anything of it because that's the way I always was. Everything that happened in school stopped mattering the minute I walked into my house."

"You have the ability to break someone in half with an action or a few words, Edward."

His eyes moved from mine and he reached up again, sliding his hand underneath my pillow and grabbing mine. He pulled it out into the light and twisted my hand around, looking at the yellow-ish bruises that were still around my wrist.

"I know that now." He shook his head and shifted on the floor, rising up and gently covering my wrist with his other hand. "I'm trying to make it right."

"I'm really trying to believe you," I whispered, looking down at our hands. "But it's going to take more than a few days for me to trust you when I've got four years of hurt piled up."

"I know that," he said softly, nodding. "I'm just asking for that chance, Bella. You said that I had it."

"You do."

"So come out with me tonight. We can go see a movie and if you're hungry after that, we'll go out to dinner. It's a start, right? We need a start."

I stared down at him, biting my bottom lip before nodding once. He squeezed my hand before letting me go and standing up. He held his hand out to me again and I took it, letting him help me off my bed. Then, without warning, I was wrapped in his arms with his nose in my neck. I stood stiffly against him, staring over his shoulder at my wall in shock.

"I really don't deserve it." He pulled away slightly and kissed my cheek. I think my heart was on its way out of my chest. "Thank you."

"S-sure," I nodded, swallowing hard and stepping away from him.

"Will your father mind?"

"I didn't even know that he was home before you told me that he let you in."

"I'll take that as a no."

I nodded and pulled at the hem of my sweater, nervously looking around my bedroom and for the first time, realizing that Edward Cullen was *in my bedroom*. The clutter and the drawings I'd had taped to the wall since I was little were out in the open and he could now finally see all of it.

I was redecorating this weekend if he was going to make this a habit.

"I just need to use the bathroom," I said quickly, shaking my head and sighing. "You can... uhm, you can wait up here or downstairs if you want."

"I'll wait in the hallway."

I nodded once and followed behind him as he walked out. I detoured into the bathroom and closed the door behind me, leaning against it and closing my eyes tightly.

I could do this.

~*~

My face fell as we pulled into the parking lot of the movie theater and I heard Edward curse under his breath as he turned off the car.

"Did you plan this?" I asked quietly, staring at Mike, Jessica, Lauren and Tyler – wherever the hell he'd been hiding, he'd finally come out from – as they stood at the entrance to the theater.

"What? No! I had no idea that they'd be here, Bella."

I looked over at him and stared at him for a few moments before nodding and looking back out of the window in front of me.

"Can we go somewhere else?" I asked softly.

I looked back over at him to see that he was looking at me, chewing on his bottom lip thoughtfully. He looked out at his friends standing outside and then back at me once more, shaking his head.

"No. Come on."

"Edward, I don't want to deal with them."

"I have an idea."

"What is it?"

"Just get out of the car, okay? Trust me."

I stared at him in disbelief as he quickly got out of the car and stood up. I chuckled sarcastically and shook my head, throwing my hands in the air as I pushed open the door and got out.

The day really couldn't get much worse at this point, so I might as well let him do whatever it was that he was so intent on doing right now.

He rounded the front of the car and stood in front of me, keeping his eyes on mine as he reached out and grabbed my hand. I raised an eyebrow at him as he linked our fingers together and wondered if he could hear the stampede that had suddenly started in my chest right where my heart usually was.

"What are you doing?" I asked, my voice shaking.

"We're going to see a movie," he said simply, shrugging.

"You're... we're... they'll think we're on a date."

"So then I guess we're on a date, aren't we?"

I gaped at him.

WHAT?

"Run that by me one more time," I managed, circling my free pointer finger in the air and blinking slowly at him.

"Then I guess we're on a date," he said softly.

"To them, right? That's just what we'll say to... to them, right?" I stuttered, quickly looking away from him and over to the group still standing by the entrance.

Huh. I didn't know that Lauren smoked.

I closed my eyes and shook my head, reaching up with my free hand to place it on my forehead. I had more important things going on right now and I was wondering about Lauren's *smoking habits*? I had Edward Cullen standing in front of me, either taking me out on a date or getting me

all worked up just to laugh at me. Neither situation seemed very favorable to me at the moment, but at least one I might be able to handle a little better after the day I'd already had.

"Well... no."

I snapped my head in his direction and dropped my hand to my side.

"Are you serious right now?"

He merely nodded, looking down at his feet and digging his toes into the pavement.

"You're not feeling right, are you?" I mumbled.

"I'm feeling just fine, Bella."

"This is insane. You've lost your fucking mind."

"Or I found it."

I slapped my hand back onto my face and shook my head again.

"You're like Jekyll and Hyde!" I exclaimed.

"Keeping you on your toes, though, right?" he asked, gently swaying our still joined hands and laughing nervously.

"Oh I'm on something, all right," I mumbled. "Am I awake? Am I even really awake?"

"Yes, you're awake." He stepped in front of me and I immediately dropped my hand to look up at him, swallowing hard. "Give in a little, Bella, please," he whispered.

I sucked in a deep breath and closed my eyes, licking my lips before nodding.

He was trying and now I needed to as well. Friendship – or whatever the fuck we were doing right now – was a two-party joint thing and if I couldn't give in, then I'd never be able to just breathe again. And I *really* wanted to breathe again.

"This isn't a joke to you?" I asked, opening my eyes.

"I'm being dead serious right now."

"You're really taking me out on a date."

"I'm really taking you out on a date," he said, nodding and grinning down at me.

Yes. My heart had officially stopped.

"Okay," I breathed, nodding.

"Okay?"

"Okay."

"Okay," he grinned, backing away and pulling on my hand as he started to walk in the direction of the entrance. "Ignore them, all right?"

"Yeah, sure. Ignore them. Right."

"Hey." He stopped us before we'd taken more than three steps and I swallowed hard. "Just relax."

"I don't know how," I admitted sheepishly, shaking my head. "Not around you, not around them. I just... I don't know how to."

He sighed and I half-expected him to call the whole thing off, very much ready to move from him and walk back to the car. Or, if he was really that upset with me, being forced to find a payphone to call my father so that he could come and get me.

"And that's my fault," he said softly. I stared at him and he sighed again, shaking his head. "I'm so sorry, Bella."

I shrugged one shoulder and looked away from him, over towards the entrance to find that they'd spotted us and were openly gaping at us.

"We've been seen," I said quietly, looking back to him.

He looked over his shoulder and then back at me, squeezing my hand.

"Ready to start our date?"

"It's gonna take a minute to get used to that."

He laughed softly and shrugged, once again leading me towards the entrance. I took a deep breath and squared my shoulders as we approached them, my heart once again beating rapidly. I briefly wondered if all this activity to my heart could be normal or good before I shook my head once and did my best to ignore them.

"You ditched me for *her*?" I heard Jessica sneer.

"Yeah," Edward said simply. "I did."

"Are you going blind, dude?" Tyler asked, stealing the cigarette from Lauren and bringing it to his lips.

"Nope. In fact, pretty sure my eyes are wide open."

"This has gotta be some kind of charity thing, right?" Mike asked, stepping in front of him. "Dude, we've never gone down this road. There are plenty of other girls..."

"Yes, there are. I wanted to be with Bella tonight." He shrugged and I swallowed hard, keeping my eyes on the floor in front of the door and doing my best to ignore everything they were saying. Easier said than done, naturally, but at least Edward wasn't agreeing with them this time. "See you all Monday morning."

"I'm calling you tomorrow. I wanna know what the fuck you're on tonight," Mike stated, tapping Edward's shoulder with his pointer finger before moving out of the way.

"My answers won't change, Mike."

"You have," Lauren scoffed.

"Maybe so." He shrugged one shoulder and we started in the direction of the doors again. "Maybe I don't wanna be an asshole anymore."

With that, he pulled me into the theater after him and we stood in line for tickets. I didn't know what to say and kept my eyes focused on the brightly lit board with all the movies listed. His hand

was still gripping mine and I jumped when he flexed his fingers. I let go of his hand and took a step to the side.

"Hey," he said quietly, reaching out for me again. "You were just crushing my hand there for a little while."

"I was?"

He nodded and took a step towards me again, his arm slowly sliding around my shoulders and pulling me back to him. I swallowed hard and leaned against him, not having any idea what to do with my hands or how to act or what the hell I was even supposed to say.

Yes, I'd dated before. I'd had a boyfriend for about six months back in tenth grade, but he'd moved away and we both knew there was no point in keeping up a long distance relationship. We ended it; had tried to do the whole staying in touch thing but had failed miserably at it. I hadn't dated anyone since him and I'd been content with that. I'd only had a few more months to start college; maybe there was someone there that would see me for who I was.

Now I was in an alternate universe. I had to be because nothing like this *ever* happened to me. Guys like Edward Cullen did not hold my hand or put their arms around me and they *definitely* didn't take me out on dates. I had to be in some other universe because *that* would make more sense than this night had so far.

"You're stronger than you appear to be," he continued, moving up when the line did.

"Have to be," I mumbled. "Sorry."

"Me too," he mumbled back. "What do you wanna see?"

"Comedy," I said strongly, nodded. "Definitely comedy."

"You're reading my mind. Comedy it is."

He paid for my ticket, *he* bought me a box of snowcaps and a drink, *he* was the one to hold my hand all night and *he* was the one that kept an arm around my shoulders as we walked out when the movie was over.

"Are you hungry yet?" he asked as we walked outside.

I looked over at his hand dangling off my shoulder and slowly raised my own up to his. Licking my lips, I laced our fingers together and my heart fluttered when he immediately squeezed my hand. I smirked, and looked over at him to find that he was smiling down at me.

"I could eat."

"All right then," he nodded. "What do you prefer? Denny's or Friendly's?"

"Going for the big time, huh?"

He laughed and my breath caught in my throat when he leaned in and bumped his nose against my temple.

"Two of my favorite restaurants," he informed me. "If there's someplace else you'd like to go, I'm more than happy to take you there."

"No," I choked, shaking my head. "Denny's is fine."

"All right then." We made it to the car and he opened the door for me, grinning brightly when I raised an eyebrow at him. "This is still a date, Bella."

"You take all your dates to Denny's?"

"No," he said, laughing. "You're just special-er than the rest of them."

I laughed and reached out to smack his arm, shaking my head at him.

"Mhmm. Sure."

"I mean it! Half the time, we don't make it to the restaurant."

I raised an eyebrow at him and looked down at the seat, twisting my lips to the sides before looking back up at him.

"Always... the... uhm," he laughed nervously and began to rub the back of his neck, "the back seat."

"Oh."

"Yeah."

"Well," I said slowly, biting my bottom lip and shrugging. "As long as the front is safe, I guess we're good."

"It's safe. I promise."

"Okay then."

I finally slid into the seat and placed my hands on my knees, looking up at him as he continued to stand there and look down at me.

"You take things like that so... easily."

I leaned forward, splaying my hands out on my knees and shrugging.

"Should I freak out or something?"

"Most girls that I've taken on dates would've."

"Well, I'm not most girls," I said softly, looking up at him. "You're gonna have to get used to that."

He licked his lips and bent down, balancing on the balls of his feet and looking up at me.

"I wanna take you out again," he said firmly.

"Really?"

"Really. Are you okay with that?"

"Uhm." I looked down at my lap, chewing on my lips and pressing them together as I looked up at him again. "Yeah, I guess so."

"Are you sure? I'm not doing a single thing to make you uncomfortable ever again, Bella."

I barely hid the smile as I nodded.

"Yes, I'm sure. Thank you."

"All right." He nodded and smirked at me before standing up. "Denny's, here we come."

I laughed as he closed the door and leaned back in the seat, huffing out a deep breath and reaching up to run my hands through my hair quickly.

I could do this. I could do this, I could do this, I could do this. I *would* do this. Hell, I *am* doing this.

~*~

"So, uhm," Edward started as he shifted the car into park in front of my house and placed his hands in his lap. "I have plans with my family tomorrow but uh, if you want to, you know, hang out later? I could... I'd like that."

I blinked at him. He sounded nervous.

We'd spent the entire dinner learning new things about each other; he liked sci-fi novels and old black and white movies. Classical music relaxed him – which surprised me beyond words because it was my favorite type of music to listen to when I needed time to sort through everything in my life – and while he enjoyed going to parties sometimes, he mostly liked just hanging around his house. I found that he was slightly playful when he was relaxed – he had a habit of throwing fries at me when I wasn't looking at him and had even built a fort of sorts around his bacon cheeseburger with them. And he hadn't been the least bit nervous since we'd indirectly talked about the action the back seat of his car had seen. At least, not that I'd noticed. So to see him fidgeting with his hands and staring down at his lap as he asked to see me tomorrow was not something that I ever really expected.

"Uhm, yeah, that'd be nice," I said quietly, nodding and looking down at my lap as well. "Charlie will be fishing all day and probably over at Sue's for dinner so... maybe I could make us something for dinner, too? If you want, I mean."

"I am completely up for that."

I laughed and looked over at him, shaking my head as I saw him smirk in the dim light from the dashboard.

"Thank you for tonight," I started, taking a deep breath and looking back down at my lap. "I really appreciate it."

"You don't have to thank me, Bella. I had a good time."

I smirked and nodded, licking my bottom lip as I inspected the back of my hands.

"Okay. So, uhm, I'll see you tomorrow then."

"Do you want me to call before I come over? Just in case you go out or something?" I looked over at him and raised an eyebrow. He laughed and shrugged. "Angela mentioned something about seeing you tomorrow."

"Ah."

"I'll call you."

"You better."

He reached over and grabbed one of my hands, bringing it up to his lips. I swallowed hard, our eyes connected the entire time as he pressed a gentle kiss against my knuckles.

"Promise."

"Then I'll talk to you tomorrow."

He nodded and I squeezed his hand before I pushed my way out of the car, my legs not all together steady as I stood up and slammed the door shut behind me.

I'd never had anyone open my door for me before. I'd never had anyone kiss my hand at the end of the night before. Hell, I'd never had Edward Cullen ask to see me again before tonight and I'd never had the chance to really feel like maybe I wasn't such a social outcast anymore.

Chapter 6.

I jumped down the last of the stairs, bypassing Charlie as I lunged for the door and looked at him over my shoulder. He held his hands up and walked back into the living room, shaking his head and mumbling something I was sure I didn't want to hear to begin with.

It was Sunday and last night when I'd talked to him on the phone – Angela had quarantined me all day yesterday and wouldn't let me out of her sight until her mother called her home at eight thirty – Edward had said that he would be coming over early the next morning so that we could hang out for the whole day. Which I had no objections to. I didn't fully understand it just yet, but I didn't completely object to it, either.

"Hi," I greeted as I pulled open the door.

"Hey," he grinned, shoving his hands in his pockets. "How's it going?"

I shrugged, grinning.

"Not too bad, I guess. You?"

"Better now."

I rolled my eyes and he laughed, reaching forward and pushing hair off my forehead. I turned to look as I heard Charlie yell something at the television and laughed nervously, grabbing my keys.

"Going for a walk, dad!" I yelled.

I heard a grunt in response and slipped out the door, looking up at Edward to find that he had one of his eyebrows raised at me and his lips pursed.

"Walking, are we?"

"Would you rather stay in the house while my father screams at the television?"

"We could always go up to your room..."

I looked over at him, one of my own eyebrows raised.

"Not for... I didn't mean..." He laughed nervously and cleared his throat, looking away from me. I tried not to laugh at him. "Just to hang out."

"Not a good idea," I said, shaking my head. "Come on."

"Where are we going?"

I hopped down the porch stairs, rounding the side of the house and waiting for him at the fence that blocked off the backyard from the neighbors that didn't exist.

"For a walk."

"In your backyard?"

"Maybe."

I pushed through the gate and looked over my shoulder to make sure that he was still following, grinning as he shook his head and closed the gate behind him.

"Is this a top secret thing, Bella?"

"It could be if you really wanted it to be."

"You're... kind of nuts, you know that?"

I nodded and stopped as I reached the back end of the fence, waiting for him to catch up to me. He stood in front of me and I pulled back two of the wooden boards, motioning for him to go first. He stared at me, blinking and shaking his head.

"We couldn't have just walked around?"

"You wanted to know if it was a top secret mission. I guess this classifies it as one, right?"

"I... guess it does," he laughed, bending down and crawling through the open boards.

I followed after him, quickly replacing the boards before standing by his side and motioning towards a well-worn path that I hadn't had time for lately.

"Seriously, where are we going?"

"It's just a shortcut to a place where I go when I need some time to myself."

"Oh, well then." He grabbed my hand, interlocking our fingers and waving his other out in front of us. "By all means."

I laughed at him and shook my head, walking ahead of him and pulling him along with me. A few minutes and one hilarious episode of Edward screaming like a little girl when he thought he saw a snake later, we came upon the local playground. Kids were scattered on the jungle gym and running around the slide to go down one more time, their parents sitting on the benches closest to the entrance and talking about the things their children did on a daily basis.

"You come here to think?"

I nodded, pulling him towards the entrance and leading him over to a second set of swings that was in the back and not being used. I let go of his hand as I plopped into one and looked up at him as I started swinging back and forth.

"There's something about hanging around kids that clears my mind. Everything is so innocent with them."

He hummed and walked around me, plopping down into the swing next to me and gripping the chains as he looked around. Most of the kids had congregated around the wooden playhouse in the middle of the playground, screaming and laughing as they ran from one end to the other using the swinging bridge.

"It was so much easier when we were kids, wasn't it?"

I nodded, still swinging back and forth as I watched a little blonde haired boy run in our direction, a red headed girl running behind him with her arms stretched out.

"I'm gonna kiss you!" she screeched, laughing.

"That's gross! Girls have *cooties*!" he yelled back, ducking underneath a portion of the playhouse and catching her off guard.

"Yeah," I laughed, nodding. "If that was our only problem anymore, life would be a cake walk."

"I wonder where that expression came from," he stated, looking over at me. "Who really wants to walk on a cake?"

"Well, that's like saying something is as easy as pie. Making pie from scratch is really anything *but* easy."

He laughed and leaned his forehead against the chains, digging his toe into the dirt below him and pushing himself back and forth.

"Have I always been an asshole to you?" he asked softly.

"You were nice to me once when we were six," I stated, puffing out my cheeks. "I didn't have any crayons during class and you offered me your red one when no one else would give theirs up."

"Was that it?"

"Up until a few days ago? Yeah."

He reached over with one hand and grabbed mine, once again linking our fingers together and squeezing.

"We haven't made it easy for you, have we?"

"No," I said honestly, sitting up straight and squaring my shoulders. "But I've learned to deal with it as best I can."

"You shouldn't have to go through life like that."

I stared at him, biting my bottom lip.

"I won't have to in a few more months. I'll be off to college and starting over. It'll be different."

"Where are you going?"

"NYU."

"I applied there."

"Have you heard anything back yet?"

He shook his head, looking away from me and digging his toes a little more forcefully into the dirt below him.

"Not yet."

"What would you go for?"

"Journalism."

"You want to be a writer?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I'd love to be some kind of columnist or feature writer for the New York Times."

"That would be really cool."

"What are you going for?"

"Child psychologist."

"You'd be good at that."

I smiled and ducked my head a little, swinging a little more forcefully and pulling him with me. He laughed and picked up the pace on his swinging until we were both forced to let go of each other's hand for fear that we'd pull the other one completely off the swing. We both slowed down, trailing our feet in the sand and smirking at each other as we came to a stop.

"Wow! You guys went high!"

I looked over to find the blonde and redhead that were running around before, now holding hands and staring up at us in something close to awe. I laughed and hopped up, looking over at the bench to find a woman with fire engine red hair watching closely. I pointed to the little girl and then to the swing, motioning that I'd push her and she nodded, smiling slowly at me.

"Come on," I said to her, holding out my hand.

She quickly abandoned the little boy, who pouted and crossed his arms over his chest, to grab my hand. I looked at Edward and he quickly got up, holding out his hand to the little boy. He quickly smiled and bounced over to Edward, grabbing his hand as well. I laughed and walked the short steps to the swing I'd just abandoned, letting go of her hand to pick her up and place her on the swing.

"Hold on tight, okay?"

She nodded enthusiastically, her little hands wrapping as far around the chains as possible and I laughed as I walked behind her and placed my hands on her shoulders. I pushed her and she squealed, kicking her legs out in front of her. I looked over to find Edward doing the same with the boy, although he hadn't gotten the hang of pumping his legs to make him go faster quite yet. He had the basic idea, but there was no rhythm and he was going too fast for it to make much of a difference.

"What's your name?" the little girl asked, tilting her head back to look up at me.

"Look straight ahead, sweetie," I instructed, placing my hands on her back and pushing her again. "My name's Bella. What's yours?"

"Victoria! That's James." She pointed towards the little boy Edward was pushing before quickly grabbing the chain again. "He's my boyfriend."

"Oh really?"

I stifled a laugh and looked over at Edward to see that he was smirking at me, the little boy on his swing making gagging noises and shaking his head to dispute her claims.

"Yep! Is he yours?"

My eyes widened and I looked back down at the top of her head, clearing my throat nervously and pushing her again.

"We're just friends, sweetie."

"Oh. Well... friends are good."

"Yes, friends are very good."

"Victoria! James! Come on! It's time to go!"

I grabbed the chains and stopped the swing as she jumped off.

"Thanks, Bella! Bye!"

"Yeah, bye!" James yelled as he chased after Victoria.

I looked over at Edward to find him digging his toe into the sand and plopped back down into my swing, starting to push myself back and forth. I watched as he slowly did the same, staring straight ahead as his fingers wrapped around the chains and he slowly swung back and forth.

"You okay?" I asked softly, dragging the toe of my sneakers into the dirt and looking over at him.

"Yeah." He looked over at me and smiled, nodding. "I'm just thinking."

"Anything you're willing to share?"

"You're good with kids, you know?"

I nodded, looking back down at my lap and smirking to myself.

"I love kids."

"I never really thought that I wanted kids."

"No?"

He shook his head, still staring ahead of him as he pushed himself off the ground and started swinging in earnest.

"Too much responsibility... not being able to give them back to their parents when they start crying and all." He huffed out a chuckle and shook his head, looking over at me. "But maybe it wouldn't be so bad after all."

"You've just gotta find the right person." I shrugged and looked away from him, staring down at my feet as I pushed myself back. "Anything is possible then."

"You're a romantic, huh?"

I looked back at him and smirked, shrugging my shoulders.

"Had to have something to believe in, right?"

He abruptly stopped swinging and I did the same, watching as he stood up stiffly and walked behind me. I tensed, closing my eyes tightly and waiting for the worst to happen. I felt his arms sliding around my shoulders before I felt his breath on my ear as he bent down. I relaxed slightly, opening my eyes and cautiously leaning back into him.

"I hope one day that you'll believe in me, Bella," he whispered into my ear, his arms tightening around my shoulders. "I know it's not easy."

"I *am* trying."

"I know. So am I."

"I know that, too."

He kissed my cheek before standing up and I swallowed hard, blinking slightly at my feet before I felt his hands on my back, slowly pushing me forward.

"Tell me something."

I waited for the question I was sure was following that, turning slightly to look back at him when he was quiet.

"Like what?"

He grinned and I turned back around, crossing my ankles as he continued to push me.

"Ever snuck out after your father was in bed?"

"No," I snorted, shaking my head. "You?"

"All the time."

"Rebel."

"Maybe. Ever gotten drunk?"

"Once with Angela and Ben at her house when we were in maybe eighth grade."

"Now who's the rebel?"

"Still you," I stated, pursing my lips to hide the smile as he pushed me a little higher. "Ever not been able to talk your way out of something?"

"Only with my mom," he laughed. "It's like she can see through me and read my mind. Ever been in love?"

"No," I sighed, shaking my head. "How about you?"

"I thought I was once," he stated softly. "Turned out that not everything ends the way it's supposed to."

"What happened?"

"She broke up with me for someone else."

"Who was it?"

"She moved away a few months after."

I dug my heels into the dirt and turned to look at him.

"Tanya."

He nodded, shifting uneasily and sticking his hands in his jean pockets.

"Yeah."

"I'm sorry, Edward."

He laughed uneasily and moved one hand to run it through his hair, shrugging one shoulder.

"It happens."

"It sucks."

"Yeah."

I bit my lip and stood up, looking around to see that almost all of the kids and parents were gone. The little amount of sun that we'd seen today was disappearing behind the clouds and I grabbed his elbow, pulling him towards the abandoned jungle gym. I stopped him at the bottom and grabbed onto the sides, stepping up onto the bottom rung and climbing up to the top. I situated myself, my legs dangling in between the bars before looking down at him.

"You coming up?"

"I guess so."

I held on tightly to the bar I was sitting on and watched as he climbed up, getting settled next to me and holding on just as tightly as I was.

"What are we doing up here?"

"When you were little, did you ever think that sitting up here made you feel like the king of the world? You could see everything in the playground and watch everything everyone else was doing?"

"Well, no," he mumbled. "I do now, though."

I laughed and leaned over to gently bump my shoulder against his.

"I'd climb up here when someone would say something mean about me," I started softly, looking out over the expanse of the small playground. "No one else was really brave enough to sit up on the top like this, so I felt like it was my escape."

"How long have we been...?"

"As long as I've known all of you, you've been making fun of me for my weight."

"Did you ever have someone to fight for you?"

"Angela wanted to, but I wouldn't let her." I looked over at him, resting my chin on my shoulder. "It was never her battle to fight."

"It's okay to ask for help sometimes, Bella."

"I'm not dragging anyone else into this when I don't have to. Angela and Ben are their own little unit and I wasn't going to let something like her defending me cause her to be made fun of, too. She has her own life; this is mine."

"You can't always be this stubborn."

"Yeah," I grinned, laughing and nodding. "I am."

"I'll fight for you."

I snorted and looked away from him, shaking my head.

"You're going to have a hell of a time when we go to school tomorrow, Edward. Don't worry about it."

"I don't care about that."

"You won't until you're in the middle of it."

"You're really always like this?"

"Yes."

"Good to know."

"This is me, Edward. I've never compromised that for anyone and I won't do it for you."

"I don't want you to."

I nodded and looked back over to the playhouse, seeing a few children running through the doorways and laughing innocently. I looked between us when I felt his hand covering mine, watching as his fingers trailed over the back of my hand and slowly worked their way underneath my palm.

"You're not like anyone else," he said quietly, sliding his fingers in between mine. "It's hard trying to pin you down."

"That's bad, I'm guessing."

"No," he laughed, shaking his head and looking up at me. "It's different and I like it."

"Mhmm," I mumbled, nodding and looking back out over the playground.

Between climbing on the jungle gym and having a conversation about how stubborn I was, the kids and their parents had abandoned the playground and the sun was beginning to set behind the trees. I don't know how I didn't hear the kids being called or the shouts and tantrums I usually heard when they were told that they had to leave, but Edward and I were the only two left on the entire playground.

"I do!" Edward exclaimed, bumping my shoulder with his.

"Okay," I laughed, looking over at him once more.

He tilted his head to the side and pursed his lips at me.

"I mean it!"

"All right!"

"Believe me."

"I believe you!"

"Are you lying?"

"Yes."

"Bella!" he exclaimed, laughing slightly.

"I'm being honest with you!"

"Why do you think it's so hard for me to like you?"

"Because you never have before!"

His face fell and I pressed my lips together, watching as he shifted uncomfortably on the bar we were sitting on and looked out towards the playhouse again.

"I've made mistakes, Bella," he said softly. I watched the muscle in his jaw twitch. "This isn't one of them."

"At least, not yet, right?"

I laughed feebly and started to swing my legs in between the bars as I looked down at my lap.

"Hey." He moved his hand from mine and grabbed my chin, forcing me to look over at him. "I will never consider getting to know you and being with you a mistake of any kind. Believe that, okay?"

Easier said than done.

"Yeah," I said, my voice cracking. "Okay."

"Promise?"

"Mhmm."

"I wanna hear you say the words, Bella."

I huffed out a laugh and he smirked, his thumb rubbing over my chin as he tilted his head to the side and raised an eyebrow at me.

"I promise."

"That's better."

He trailed his thumb over my bottom lip and I looked away from him, watching as the sky turned to a pink color.

"Doesn't this hurt your ass?" he groaned.

I looked back over at him and laughed at the expression on his face before shrugging.

"I've got enough padding back there."

"Knock it off." He rolled his eyes and I raised an eyebrow at him. "Your ass is fine."

My face burned and I looked away again, listening to him clear his throat.

"I mean it's..."

"Stop talking."

"Yep."

"We can get down, if you want. There's a little platform in the playhouse that we can sit on."

"What time do you need to be home?" he asked as he quickly pulled his legs out from the spaces and started to climb down.

"Doesn't matter, I don't think."

I waited until he was safely on the ground before I moved, climbing down and jumping to the ground in front of him.

"Your dad really doesn't pay much attention, does he?"

"No," I sighed, shaking my head and starting towards the playhouse. "He's... I don't even know."

I heard his footsteps behind me and shrieked when he pulled on my elbow, leading me towards the big yellow slide that faced the same direction we'd been sitting in before.

"What are you doing?"

He didn't say anything and merely plopped down into the end of the slide, letting go of my elbow, shifting himself backwards and spreading his legs. I raised an eyebrow at him and he laughed, rolling his eyes before grabbing my hand and gently pulling me down to rest in between them.

"I'm watching the sunset with you," he said quietly.

My heart threatened to beat out of my chest and I quickly cleared my throat so that my voice wouldn't crack and give me away when I spoke.

"You're one of those cuddlers, aren't you?"

He laughed and leaned forward, grabbing onto my waist and pulling me backwards until my back was pressed up against his chest. His arms stayed around my waist and I bit my bottom lip, looking down at them and wondering if he could feel every little imperfection that my shirt was hiding; the stretch marks, the rolls, the way it was softer than what I'm sure he was used to.

"I never have been before," he stated. "I guess a lot of things about me are changing, huh?"

I forced myself to relax against him, placing my hands on his wrists and leaning my head back against his chest. He felt solid. I'd never been held like this by anyone else before, never had someone who wanted to sit with me like this and I couldn't say that I hated it. I felt safe and strangely secure with him like this.

"Is it considered a good change to you or a bad one?"

"Definitely a good one, Bella." His legs slid down beside mine, keeping me close and trapped in between and against him. "Most definitely a good one."

"And you'll still think all of this tomorrow?"

"I so wish you'd trust me, Bella," he said softly. "I know it's hard and I know it's gonna take time, but I really wish that you would because I mean it."

"All I can offer you is that I'm trying to, Edward."

"I know. I *know* that. I just... ugh."

I laughed and rubbed his arms, watching the pink in the sky disappear and the black begin to overtake it.

"We're getting there."

"Progress."

"Yes." I smiled and closed my eyes, titling my head slightly and taking a deep breath, his cologne filling my nose. "Progress."

We stayed there, talking about whatever came to us first, until the sun was completely set and I had to lead him back through the woods, laughing each time he squeaked when he was *positive* something furry brushed up against him. How he knew it was furry when he was wearing jeans was beyond me, but I was too busy laughing to even think of asking him about it. He held onto my hand like it was a lifeline and I swear, if I hadn't been laughing so hard at him as he tripped over the board to get back into the fence, he probably would've dropped to his knees and started kissing the ground.

Who knew that *the* Edward Cullen didn't like the woods?

"I'm glad you think this is funny!" he barked, stalking off towards the gate.

That only made me laugh harder and before I realized it, I was hunched over, clutching my stomach and doing my absolute best to stay up on my own two feet. By the time I caught my breath and looked up, I found him standing by the gate with his arms crossed over his chest.

"Are you done?"

I nodded, biting down on my bottom lip so that I didn't start laughing again. I just wasn't used to seeing the king of the school screeching like a little girl and hopping around on his toes to avoid a branch buried underneath some leaves.

"Good." He smirked and held out a hand to me. "I'll walk you to your door."

"Being a gentleman now, are we?"

He shrugged and I walked up to him, letting him lace our fingers together before he unlatched the gate and led me around to the front of the house. He stopped at the steps and I made it to the second before turning around.

"Thanks for hanging around with me today," I stated, stuffing my hands into my pockets.

"Pleasure was all mine."

"Since when did you get so proper?"

"I guess you just bring it out in me."

"Mhmm."

He grinned and stepped up on the bottom step, his arms winding around my waist and nearly pulling me off the step altogether. My eyes closed and I smiled slowly when I felt his lips on my cheek, lingering more than normal.

"I'll see you tomorrow," he said softly.

"Yeah."

"Have a good night, Bella."

"Drive safe," I managed as he stepped away from me.

"Always."

"It's gonna be rough tomorrow, you know."

"You gonna stick around with me?" I nodded and he did the same, fishing his keys out of his pocket. "Then it's all right."

"Bye."

He smiled and turned, walking back to his car and climbing in. I stood on the steps, watching as he backed out and started in the direction of his house, beeping the horn twice before disappearing completely. I shook my head at myself and huffed out a deep breath before turning and walking into the house, a slight smile on my face.

Maybe people could change after all.

Chapter 7.

Social suicide.

That's what Edward had done to himself when we were seen together at the movie theater. The Monday after that weekend had been damn near horrific. Mike, Jessica, Lauren and Tyler had cornered Edward the minute he'd walked into the school, demanding answers and just generally pissing him off.

Chemistry that morning had not been at all pleasant. He'd been beyond fuming and I did my best to keep to myself, afraid of only making it worse. We'd been given the entire period to work on our projects and had spent the time trying to think of ten people that we could use for volunteers since the ones that he'd asked before were *clearly* out of the picture. Once we figured that we could possibly ask teachers and adults that we knew outside of school, we'd mostly kept to ourselves by working on the paper, only asking each other occasional questions about something. His entire posture was stiff and rigid and his hands, when he wasn't writing something, were curled up into fists.

The teasing and the comments I usually received during the day amplified tenfold the minute class was out and I found myself practically running to every one of my classes to avoid hearing and dealing with them. There was only so much of it I could take a day and by the time lunch rolled around, I was more frazzled and nervous than I usually was. Edward had sat with us, grumbling and playing with the food on his tray the entire time as I sat nervously and tried to talk normally with Angela and Ben.

I had a million thoughts swirling through my head for the rest of the day, all focused on why I was such a curse to Edward's reputation and why Angela and Ben didn't suffer the same fate every time they were seen with me. I'd finally asked her when I caught up with her at the end of the school day and she'd merely shrugged, saying that she and Ben had never really participated in their teasing and foolishness, keeping to themselves and only speaking to those that weren't wretched trolls.

It made sense; Edward had been with the *in crowd* for as long as he'd been in high school. Angela and Ben had always been on the outskirts – popular because Ben was a football player and Angela was a cheerleader – but had never really participated in the bullshit that came with it. They were genuinely nice people that kept to themselves and associated with the others when they had to; nothing more, nothing less.

He'd had practice that night and when he showed up at my house so that we could work on our project and maybe accomplish something somehow, he had a black eye and a bandage on his chin.

If I hadn't felt bad for everything before, I sure as hell did then. What made it even worse was that he wouldn't tell me what happened, just grumbled that we should start on our homework so that, "the day could be over and he could forget about everything."

We hadn't gone out again, neither of us really having the energy to brave going out of the house for more than hunting down volunteers. We had finally found ten people, the majority of them my neighbors and teachers that were gracious enough to take pity on us. Even *they* had heard about everything that happened which was just embarrassing on so many levels that I couldn't count them all.

We'd gotten close through all of this and it made my heart beat faster every time he'd randomly grab my hand while we were working on something, keeping his eyes focused on whatever was in front of him as he rubbed his thumb on my palm or on the back. He had his moments, of course, where he'd get aggravated about everything everyone was saying and I didn't make it any better when I just stared at him and raised my eyebrow. I tended to forget that he was new to the whole social outcast thing and he tended to forget that this was nothing new to me. But when we both realized what we were doing, we found some way to distract ourselves and forget about everything that had happened during the day. Be it by watching a movie, listening to music or just talking about something completely off topic, we helped each other out.

And while I still felt like shit that all of this was happening because he chose to befriend me and stick up for me when his other friends still thought I seemed to have the plague, it was *nice* to have someone else to really talk to. I could talk to Angela and she'd do her best to understand and comfort me, but it was ten times different with Edward. He *had* changed and for once, it was nice to be proven wrong.

On Thursday, we were sitting on the floor in my living room, taking a break from our project and working on our English homework when he looked up and stared at me. I was sitting at one end of the coffee table and he was at the other, shifting and grumbling things I couldn't understand for the most part.

"Yes?" I asked, not taking my eyes off the weathered copy of *Romeo and Juliet* splayed out in my lap.

"Are you ever gonna let me kiss you?" he blurted out.

I stopped reading and looked up at him through my lashes, twisting my lips to the side.

"I wasn't aware that you wanted to," I replied softly.

"Seriously?"

"Your mom's been watching Grey's reruns again, hasn't she?"

"Bella," he snapped.

I sighed heavily and dog-eared the page I was reading, closing the book and looking up at him fully.

"Yes?"

"I'm being serious."

"And I seriously wasn't aware that you wanted to, Edward."

"Well I do."

"Was I stopping you at some point that I wasn't aware of?"

"You never... I just... ugh," he groaned, reaching up with both of his hands and burying them into his hair. "You always just... I never know what you're thinking!"

"About what?"

"About me!" he exclaimed, his hands falling out of his hair and into his lap as he looked up at me again. "Do you want more with me or do you just want to be friends...? I never know what to do with you!"

"What do *you* want with me, Edward?" I asked softly, my heart once again beating through my chest.

I'd done my best not to think of anything more with him. I'd seen the side of him that I thought could really exist and while I may have wanted more with him, may have wanted him to look at me in a different light, I wasn't going to push the little bit of luck that I'd had so far. One official date, a day at the playground, a week's worth of working on a project for school and getting to know him had only left me with the hope that we were *friends*. I hadn't been stupid enough to hope for anything more because I didn't know if he wanted that. I'd already ruined his reputation and the majority of his friends weren't talking to him; I wasn't hoping for a miracle.

"I want... more," he finally grumbled.

My heart fluttered and I swallowed hard.

"You do?"

"I thought you got that."

"You've understandably been all over the place this week, Edward. I didn't know *what* to think about anything."

"Sorry," he grumbled, shifting uneasily on the floor. "I just... this is *hard*." He chuckled and looked down at the coffee table. "I'm not used to this."

I bit the inside of my cheek and set the book on the coffee table before I stood up. I stretched briefly before walking over to him and sitting down in between him and the television console. I bumped my shoulder against his and he looked over at me, smirking sadly.

"Sorry."

"You don't have anything to apologize for," he sighed, shaking his head. "I wish you'd stop."

"It's because of me that you're in this predicament."

"If it weren't for you, we wouldn't be like this, either. I'd take this over them any day."

I barely contained the grin that wanted to crack my face and he laughed softly, reaching over and grabbing my hand. He pulled it into his lap, twisting our fingers together and looking down at it. He trailed his free hand over the back of mine, slowly dragging his fingers down over my wrist and gently over the area where my bruises were almost non-existent at this point.

"I can't apologize enough for this," he whispered, shaking his head.

"Hey, come on," I started, shaking my head and trying to pull my hand from him. "It's over and done with; you've been forgiven, Edward."

"I still did it, Bella. To you. I did it to you for no other reason than because I was having a bad day and you were... nothing to me at that point."

I involuntarily flinched and his head snapped in my direction. His right eye was still bruised and while the bandage from his chin was gone, there was still a mark that stood out against his pale skin.

"You know it's not the same now, right? You know that everything's different now, don't you?" he asked, his voice almost frantic and his hand tightening around mine. "You're so much more than that now and you know that, right?"

"Okay, my hand?" I asked, trying to pull it away from him. "Not made of steel, babe."

He whimpered and let go of my hand, leaning forward to rest his elbows on the coffee table and bury his hands in his hair again.

"Can I ask you something?" I asked softly, pulling my hand back into my lap and looking down as I played with my fingertips.

"Mhmm."

"Am I worth all of this to you?" I whispered. "Losing your friends, ruining your reputation... am I worth all of that to you?"

"Do you really have to ask me that?" he asked softly, dropping his hands from his hair and looking back at me.

"I just wanna make sure, Edward. You still have time to make it all right with everyone right now. You can go back to school tomorrow and everything can go back to the way it used to be."

"No, it can't." He sat back and turned to face me, his hands resting on my thigh. I swallowed hard and did my best to concentrate on what he was saying. "Everything is different now, Bella, and I wouldn't want that to change. In answer to your question, yes, you *are* worth it to me."

I rested my hands over his and nodded once, smiling softly.

"All right."

"Your hand okay?"

I held up the hand he'd been crushing and flexed my fingers for him, nodding. He laughed and grabbed it, pulling my palm against his lips.

"So," he started, pulling my hand from his mouth and lowering it to his lap again, "I have free reign to kiss you now, right?"

"If you'd like to, yes."

"You've been kissed before, right?"

"I was not a complete shut in."

"I just wanted to make sure!" he exclaimed, holding up his free hand. "I could've made it all fancy if you hadn't."

"Oh yeah? How?"

"I could've brought you flowers or done something really cheesy like walking you up to your front door after a date and being all awkward there."

"You won't be all awkward now?"

"Maybe a little," he smirked, slowly leaning forward.

"You gonna kiss me now?"

"Mhmm," he mumbled, nodding and smiling at me. "Is that okay?"

"I suppose so."

"Don't sound so excited."

"Would you like me to jump up and down?" I drawled, his nose brushing against mine.

"A little fanfare would be nice, yes."

I laughed and shook my head, reaching up and placing my hands on his cheeks.

"Just kiss me already, will you?"

"If you insist," he whispered, smirking as he tilted his head and softly pressed his lips against mine.

My eyes fluttered closed and I moved my lips against his, sighing quietly as he sucked my top lip into his mouth. He placed his hands on each side of my neck, his fingers tangling in my hair and his thumbs running up and down the column of my throat. I trailed my hands from his cheeks down to his chest, slightly fisting my hands in his shirt as he pressed his lips more forcefully against mine. I scraped my teeth along his bottom lip, my heart picking up speed when I heard the breathy moan vibrate against my lips. He pulled away slowly, kissing my top lip a few more times before his hands moved from my neck and I placed mine back in my lap. He sat back down next to me and I looked over at him, licking my lips and watching as he did the same.

"Deal breaker?" I asked softly when he continued to sit there in silence.

"What?" he asked, immediately looking over at me. "Fuck no."

"You were quiet."

"Thinking of... everything I've ever said to you," he breathed, shaking his head and looking away from me. "Everything everyone's ever said to you."

I sighed quietly and carefully reached up to thread my hand through his hair. He grunted and leaned into my hand, his eyes closing.

"You've gotta let it go," I whispered.

"Have you?"

"That's my cross to bear."

He grunted again and moved from me, turning around so that he was facing me completely. He placed his hands on my waist and twisted me around so that my back was to him, his legs suddenly on each side of me as he pulled me against his chest and wrapped his arms around me. He rested his chin on my shoulder and I carefully leaned into him, resting my hands on his forearms.

"You're probably the strongest person I've ever met," he said softly. "And I'm sorry that it's taken me all this time to see it."

"You've gotta stop apologizing."

"I was and probably still am one of the biggest assholes in our entire school and I made your life hell for four years. I have a *lot* to apologize for."

"You know something?" I asked, turning slightly to look back at him.

"I know nothing."

I pursed my lips at him and rolled my eyes, shaking my head.

"You're kind of making up for everything you've ever put me through right now," I stated. "You're probably very well aware that I've had this thing for you since freshman year and..."

"Whoa, what?" he interrupted.

I sighed and chewed on the inside of my mouth, nodding and reaching up to play with my bottom lip.

"Yeah."

"Seriously?"

"You've *got* to stop watching television with your mother."

"And *you've* got to stop deflecting my questions." He moved his hands from my waist and reached up to frame my face. "Freshman year?"

I nodded, swallowing hard and dropping my hand from my lips.

"After everything I... you still...?"

"I'd see you out with your family or something and I'd think that there must be something more to you underneath everything. I wanted to think the best of you because I saw something when you were with them that I didn't see in school."

"And I just... I said... I did... all of that... all this time..."

"Full sentences, please," I said softly.

He dropped his hands from my face, staring over my shoulder and I was positive that I'd said and done something wrong in all of that. He just kept shaking his head, his mouth opening and closing and I turned my back on him again. I closed my eyes tightly and began playing with my bottom lip again, two seconds away from bolting up the stairs and locking myself in my room until graduation. I could do everything from home; there would be no logical reason for me to go back to school for more than getting my homework. Right?

"Why did you help me?" he whispered.

"What?"

"Why did you even bother helping me pick anything up? Why did you...? Bella, I don't... I can't believe that..."

His arms were around me again, pulling me back to his chest and resting his chin on my shoulder once more.

"I was sure that there was more to you," I said softly. "I thought that you were different."

"And I wasn't," he whispered, shaking his head. His arms tightened around me and his legs moved in closer, keeping me nestled in tight against him. "Why did you ever give me another chance?"

"Because you gave me a flower."

He barked out a laugh that sounded close to hysterical and I bit my bottom lip, slightly worried.

"I gave you a flower and you..." He buried his nose in my neck. "A flower got me here."

"More or less," I squeaked out, nodding.

"I have never been more thankful for my mother's obsession with orchids than I am right now, let me tell you. Jesus Christ, Bella," he breathed. "I will spend... however long you want me to making up for everything you've been through, everything I've put you through."

"You don't have to."

"Yes, yes, I fucking do."

"Edward, it's not..."

"Bella, you're beautiful." I snapped my mouth shut and blinked rapidly at the television console in front of me. "And everyone in that entire school is a fucking idiot."

"Not... not everyone is..."

"Majority of them," he grumbled, his lips pressing against my neck. "You were right and I was wrong about everything and we had no right, we had no reason..." He trailed his lips up to my ear and pressed a gentle kiss against it. "I'm so sorry."

"Will you do me a favor?" I asked.

"Anything."

"Stop apologizing for stuff that's over and done with."

"Bella, I feel like..."

"I know how you feel. You've told me and you've *apologized* which is something that no one else has ever bothered to do before." I placed my hands on his forearms again, sucking in a deep breath. "That means a lot to me."

"You really don't ask for all that much, do you?"

"I never had anyone to ask anything of."

"You do now," he whispered.

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah," he laughed softly, nodding and slowly starting to sway us from side-to-side.

I relaxed against him and closed my eyes, squeezing his arm. Despite the conversation we'd just had, I felt content. For once, I didn't feel stressed out or worried about every little thing that I knew was right around the corner and it was nice to relax.

At least, it was until my father opened the front door.

"Oh, no," I grumbled, opening my eyes and looking over.

He was staring at us, completely immobile, with one hand on the doorknob and the other gripping his keys. Edward immediately moved from me and I groaned, leaning forward so that he could move his legs and presumably back as far away from me as possible. I sighed heavily and stood up, watching as he did the same.

"Edward, I think it's about time that you went home," he said, his eyes trained on me.

"Yeah, I'm uhm... I'm going." I turned to him and he shrugged one shoulder, offering me a small smile. "I'll see you tomorrow."

I nodded, watching as he gathered his books and shoved them back into his bag. He slung it over his shoulder and looked at me, his eyes flicking to my father once before he quickly leaned in and kissed my cheek. Charlie cleared his throat and I glared over at him, following Edward to the front door and watching as he bolted out of the house, waving over his shoulder before he practically

dived into his car. I closed the door and crossed my arms over my chest, staring at Charlie's feet and waiting for whatever it was that he had to say.

"What was that, Isabella?"

I ground my teeth together.

"That was me and Edward."

"What's going on with you two?"

"We're..." I only huffed, realizing a little too late that I had *no idea* what was going on. We hadn't put a label on whatever we were and I wasn't going to presume that he was my boyfriend because, really, that was almost laughable. Even after the kiss and the confession... I didn't know. And I'd never asked because at that moment, it hadn't really mattered. "We're hanging out."

"You hang out with all of your friends that way?"

"What other friends?" I asked through my teeth, looking up at him.

"That couple that you hang out with..." I raised an eyebrow at him and he shook his head, waving a hand at me. "Doesn't matter. You are not to be alone with him."

"Oh, so *now* you want to be my protector? *Now* you're concerned about what I do?"

"I am your *father*!"

"Yeah? Well you sure as hell don't act like it most of the time! This is the most you've said to me since mom left two years ago!"

"Don't you bring her into this! This has nothing to do with her!"

"You've got more interest in that damn television than you do me! You don't ask me how my day is, you didn't even come to check on me last week! I didn't know you were home until Edward said that you'd let him in! I'm just a pain in your ass and I'm tired of it, dad!"

"I'm doing the best I can, Bella! It's not easy!"

I stared at him, shaking my head and huffing out a breath. That seemed to be the theme of my life as of late.

"I have to go," I mumbled, turning and pulling open the door.

"Where?" he yelled out as I stepped onto the porch.

"I don't know! A run, I guess."

"It's dark out!"

Thank you for pointing out the obvious, father. Guess I'm just too damn stupid to see for myself.

"Yeah, well... I'll be back."

I pulled the door closed and took off down the steps, starting in the opposite direction of where I usually ran. My head was everywhere and not one single thought made any sense to me. Before I realized it, I was standing at the base of the Cullen's driveway, breathing heavily and staring up at the big white house on the hill.

Why did I come here? I wasn't sure how I got here. I knew where he lived; everyone knew where the Cullen's lived, but I wasn't aware that I was suddenly able to appear in their driveway without thinking twice about it. He was probably going to think that I was stalking him or had been the past four years because hell, I just had to go and tell him that I liked him that entire time didn't I? Just because he hadn't seemed upset about it then didn't mean he wouldn't be now. Maybe he'd changed his mind already. I mean, I wasn't even completely sure of what I was to him and I found myself pacing up and down the base of his driveway like a caged animal?

I scoffed to myself, wrapping one arm around my waist and burying my other hand in my hair. I had told him to stick me in a cage at one point, hadn't I?

Just turn around and go home, Bella. What the hell is he gonna want to see you for right now? Go home, deal with Charlie and you'll see Edward tomorrow, you over-dramatic cow.

"Bella?"

I screamed, dropping my hand from my hair as I stopped pacing, looking up to find that he was jogging down his driveway towards me. While I'd been lost in my head, the entire front lawn had lit up like a damn Christmas display and I was amazed that I hadn't seen it.

Well, there goes the idea of leaving.

"Everything okay? How'd you get here?" he breathed as he reached me, looking over the top of my head for my truck, I presumed.

"I, uh..." I licked my lips and looked down, finally feeling that my legs were tingling. "I ran."

"You ran," he deadpanned. I nodded, shrugging. "From your house." I nodded again. "Bella, that's five miles."

"Oh," I mumbled, looking up at him and laughing nervously before directing my gaze over his shoulder.

"What happened?"

"I don't... I really don't know," I marveled, looking over at him. "We had a fight and I left."

"Okay," he said slowly, reaching out for me and pulling me into his arms. "A bad fight?"

I snorted against his chest and buried my nose in his shirt.

"Are there any fights that could be classified as good, Edward?"

"I don't know. Maybe," he grumbled, his arms tightening around me and his hands rubbing my back.

Something seemed to click with me and I groaned, backing away from him and shaking my head.

"You're probably busy, aren't you? Or eating dinner? Or... doing something else that I interrupted and I just... I'm sorry, Edward. I'll just go, okay?"

"Did I say I was busy?" he asked, grabbing one of my hands and pulling me back to him. "You're fine."

"How'd you even know I was here?"

"Mom went on this security kick about a year ago and insisted that we get a camera installed at the end of the driveway for some stupid reason. Because there's such a high crime rate in Forks, you know?"

I snorted again and relaxed enough to wrap my arms around his waist, closing my eyes and burying my face in his chest again.

"Do you wanna come in and relax for a little while?" he asked after a few minutes.

"I don't wanna... your family..."

"Knows all about you," he said softly, grabbing my shoulders and gently pushing me back from him. "They want to meet you. Mom was even saying that we should have you over for dinner sometime next week."

I blinked at him.

"I'm not a secret and I refuse to be yours'," he whispered.

I stared at him and felt my eyes watering for I don't know what reason before I took a step towards him again and buried my face in his shirt yet again.

"Was that... did I... was that not something I should've said?"

"You remembered," I wailed, curling my hands into the back of his shirt.

"Well... yes."

"I... I didn't think... I..."

"Okay, come inside, Bella."

"Not like this!" I screeched, shaking my head. "I can't meet your family like this!"

"All right," he said slowly, rubbing my back. "Well... let's go sit down, okay? There's a bench right over here."

I nodded and moved from him, wiping my face on my sleeve and letting him lead me to a stone bench – of all fucking things to see in a front yard of someone's house – by the porch. I plopped down onto it and did my best to calm down, sniffing and wiping my face on my sleeve. He sat next to me and wrapped his arm around my shoulders, pulling me against him. I huffed out a breath and leaned against his shoulder.

"I'm sorry," I mumbled after a few minutes.

He kissed the top of my head and placed one hand on my thigh, trailing his other hand through my hair. "Don't be."

"I didn't mean to come here. I just... I just went and I ended up here and I'm sure I ruined your entire night with this and..."

"Stop," he whispered. "It's fine, Bella."

"What are we, Edward?"

"I told my family that you were my girlfriend," he said softly. "I thought that's what the whole purpose of the conversation this afternoon was about."

"I wasn't sure. We never said..."

"Is that what you want with me?"

"Yeah."

"All right then." He kissed the top of my head again. "Do you wanna talk about it?"

"I thought we just did."

"You know I didn't mean that."

I sighed heavily and closed my eyes.

"He hasn't been the same since mom left," I said quietly, opening my eyes and looking down at his lap. "He hasn't been involved with anything I've done since she walked out the door and I kind of just exploded on him tonight about it. It just..." I chuckled half-heartedly and shook my head. "I'm anything but invisible at school and I come home to... silence and disconnection and then he tells me that I can't be alone with you without any real reason and I couldn't..." I turned, burying my nose in his shoulder and squeezing my eyes shut tightly. "I just couldn't deal with it."

"It's been a rough week."

I snorted and he laughed, turning his body towards me and wrapping his arms completely around me.

"Understatement of the year."

"Maybe even the century," he agreed.

I sighed and nodded.

"I should probably get home."

"Come inside really quickly," he said softly. "Meet my family. I'll drive you home."

"You don't have to..."

"You're not running five miles back in the dark, Bella. That's completely out of the question."

I smiled against his shirt and nodded again, sitting up slightly and kissing his cheek.

"Thank you."

"Anytime."

Chapter 8.

I damn near skipped into school the next morning, ignoring all the looks I'd been dealing with all week and the aching muscles of my legs from running five miles the night before, walking straight to my locker like I didn't have a care in the world. While that wasn't anywhere near to true, I didn't care.

I wasn't even concerned about the fact that Charlie had grounded me for a week. I was only allowed to see Edward to work on our project and it either had to be when Charlie was home or I'd have to go over to Edward's house where his mother could watch us. Apparently, everyone knew that she worked from home except for me. Regardless, I didn't wholly regret the things I'd said to my father because for the most part, it was true. I'd take the grounding rather than apologize for the things I'd meant.

But I'd met his family. He'd introduced me to them as his girlfriend and they'd seemed genuinely happy to meet me. His younger sister, Alice – who was attending a gifted art school in Port Angeles as opposed to public school, which I envied her for – was the epitome of energy and it was obvious to see that the two adored each other. His parents, Carlisle and Esme, were extremely nice, welcoming and highly amusing; they'd offered to whip out the baby pictures and started talking about an interesting bath time ritual they'd had for him when he was younger before Edward practically jumped on his mother and clapped his hands over her mouth.

I saw what I'd always seen when I'd caught glimpses of them out and around town before; he was more relaxed and comfortable than he'd ever been in school. He was joking, laughing and enjoying every little thing anyone said – well, minus the bath and baby pictures thing – and it was really nice to see after the week he'd had.

He'd driven me home half an hour after I'd arrived and was about an inch away from kissing me goodnight when the front door opened and my father walked out, leaned back against the paneling of the house with his arms crossed over his chest, his lips twitching in annoyance. So I'd settled with a kiss on the cheek and made it into the house in enough time for Charlie to tell me that I was grounded before he disappeared into the living room for the rest of the night. I'd merely gone in there to get my books before I went up to my room and finished my homework, going to bed early.

Despite that, I was still in a good mood because when I opened my eyes this morning, I realized that I got to see my *boyfriend* at school. For the first time in longer than I could remember, I was actually excited about having to go.

I shoved my bag into my locker, smirking at the dried orchid I had hanging off the hook in the back and grabbed my books for Chemistry. I jumped when I felt arms wrap around my waist, tensing and preparing myself for whatever was coming my way before I felt him drop a kiss to the top of my head.

"Good morning, girlfriend," he said softly.

I smiled and closed my locker door, turning and looking up at him.

"Good morning, boyfriend."

He smiled and reached up to push hair behind my ears.

"How's it going?"

"Better."

"Compared to...?"

"I'm grounded." I shrugged one shoulder and watched his face fall. "We can only work on our project if we're being supervised." He raised an eyebrow and I shrugged again. "I don't know what the big damn deal is."

He sighed heavily and leaned forward to rest his forehead against mine. I wasn't able to bite back the grin that spread across my face and he laughed, shaking his head.

"What has you so happy and excited?"

"You," I answered honestly.

"Is that right?"

"Mhmm."

"What about me?"

"Fishing for compliments, are we?" I asked, quirking an eyebrow at him.

He laughed and stood up straight, his arms back around my waist as he backed me up against the locker and looked down at me.

"No more so than normal."

"You two might actually rival the two of us."

I jumped and looked over to find Emmett and Rosalie standing behind us, both of them looking a lot more relaxed and comfortable than they'd been the last time I'd seen them.

"I don't think that's possible," Edward said casually, shaking his head and stepping from in front of me.

He kept his arms around my waist and leaned against the lockers next to me, linking his fingers on my hip.

"Yeah, well, you know how we are," Emmett drawled, draping an arm around Rosalie's shoulders.

"We? No, that's all you," she disagreed, pinching his side.

He yelped and I laughed.

"I have never heard a complaint from you!"

"How can you when you won't let me breathe?" she asked innocently, batting her eyes up at him.

I laughed and Emmett huffed, pouting as he crushed Rosalie against his chest. She shrieked and began pinching his side until he whined enough and backed away from her, still pouting.

"Where are Angela and Ben?" Edward asked me, shaking his head.

"They both have study hall as first period so they got their parents to write them a note to get out of it."

He nodded, twisting his lips to the side and smirking at me.

"Lucky bastards."

I laughed and nodded, agreeing with him.

"So," Rosalie started, eyeing Emmett as he stood next to me and glared at her, "are you two going to Mike's party tonight?"

"Uh..." I started, looking over at Edward. "I can't."

"And I probably won't," he sighed, shaking his head.

"How come?" Emmett asked, slowly making his way back to Rosalie's side.

"Have you not been here all week? I'm not exactly talking to the same people anymore."

"You're talking to us," Rosalie shrugged, eyeing Emmett as he slid his arm around her shoulders. "You've always talked to us. Nothing's changed there."

"Why can't you go?" Emmett asked, narrowing his eyes at me.

"Uh," I swallowed hard and slowly stepped into Edward a little more, "I'm grounded."

"Oh, well... that sucks." He huffed and shrugged his shoulders. "Do you want to go? I'm sure I can concoct a plan to get you out of the house."

"You are *not* going where I think you're going."

"What? Babe, come on! I hardly ever get to wear my ski mask!"

"Damn good reason for it, too."

"How long have you two been married now?" I asked, laughing a little and forcing myself to relax.

"Too damn long!" Rosalie exclaimed, shaking her head at him and rolling her eyes. "He's like a damn child, you know."

"Think so, huh?" he asked, wiggling his eyebrows at her.

"Oh Jesus," Edward mumbled, leaning in and burying his nose in my shoulder. "Was there a reason you wanted to know about the party?"

"Come with us," Emmett said, looking over at him. "Come on, E, it's the last one before the big game! It's the last time we'll get a chance to relax before Coach tries to kill us during practice."

"I think my invitation was revoked."

I bit my bottom lip and looked down at my feet, hugging my books to my chest and sighing quietly. He still would've been invited had I not been in the picture. He stood up straight, his hands still linked around my hips.

"Fuck him. I just re-invited you."

"I really don't want to deal with his bullshit."

"It'll give me an excuse to smack him around a bit." He shrugged. "Come on, dude."

"You should go," I said quietly, looking over at him.

He looked down at me, both of his eyebrows disappearing into his hair and his head slowly tilting to one side.

"What?"

"You should go," I said again, chuckling nervously. "You've had a rough week and getting out with some friends is probably what you need."

"But they're not my friends anymore. Not really..."

"We're your friends, damn it!" Rosalie exclaimed, tapping her toes on the linoleum. "We invited you, you're coming and I don't want to hear another damn word about it!"

"I don't wanna go without you," he grumbled, twisting his lips to the side.

My heart fluttered and I turned to him, leaning against the lockers so that I was facing him. His arms tightened around me and he pulled me close, smirking.

"I can't go, Edward. And I probably can't see you at all this weekend unless you really want to spend all of it working on the project." He grunted and shook his head. "So go to the party."

"You're really okay with this?"

Fuck no. I'm freaking out. My heart is beating ninety miles a second and I'm terrified that you'll realize how much you miss everyone else and everything will go back to the way it was before.

"I'm really okay with this."

"I'll call you first thing tomorrow morning," he mumbled, leaning in closer to me.

"As you should."

He smiled and I sucked in a deep breath when his lips quickly met mine.

"And you said the two of *us* were bad?"

"Go away, Rose," Edward breathed, pulling back from me and brushing the end of his nose against mine.

"If I remember correctly, you two were the ones that said that to begin with," I stated, turning again and pointing at them.

I made the mistake of letting my eyes roam the hallway and swallowed hard when I found that everyone still lingering and waiting for the warning bell was staring at us. It was easy to pick out Jessica Stanley; with her jaw on the floor and her face turning a brilliant shade of red, it was almost impossible to miss her. Emmett turned to see what I was staring at and I watched as he threw his hands in the air.

"Move along! Mind your business, please and *thank* you." He turned back to us, shaking his head. "Christ."

I looked down at my feet again, tapping my fingertips against my books and swallowing hard.

"This is bullshit," Edward mumbled.

"I'm sorry," I laughed nervously, trying to take a step away from him.

"What did I tell you about that shit?" he demanded, pulling me completely against him.

I sighed heavily and looked up at him, my arms tightening around my books.

"You had a good... *life* before me."

"Bella, he was an ass," Rosalie said bluntly. "Sorry, Edward, but it's true." She waved a hand in his direction and he grunted at her. "And while he's still an ass, at least I can tolerate him a little better."

"Thanks, Rose," he said dryly.

"Deny it; I dare you." He glared at her and she smiled smugly when he stayed quiet. "That's what I thought."

"How do you put up with her?" he asked, looking at Emmett.

Emmett merely wiggled his eyebrows and I laughed, shaking my head.

"Stop apologizing," he said suddenly, as if he'd forgotten the conversation before I made a sound. "I'd do... well, I wouldn't... hell." He moved one hand from my hip to run it through his hair before replacing it, his lips pressed into a thin line. "This is what I want, right here." He squeezed me and I bit my lip. "So stop."

I nodded and he did the same, smiling at me. The bell rang and we all sighed.

"See you at lunch!" Emmett exclaimed.

"Huh?"

"Didn't you hear?" Rosalie smirked, sliding her hand into Emmett's. "We're sitting with you from now on."

She shook her hair over her shoulder, waved and began towing Emmett down the hallway.

"It's gonna be one of *those* days isn't it?" I asked, looking over at Edward.

"Clarify, please."

"The ones that make no damn sense whatsoever."

"Yes," he said simply.

He moved his arms from my waist, grabbed my books from me and smirked when I stared at him in confusion.

"Come on, m'lady," he said in a horrible British accent. "Chemistry awaits."

I laughed at him and slid my hand into the crook of his arm when he offered it to me.

"You've lost your damn mind."

"Nah. You helped me find it." He leaned over and kissed me quickly. "Thank you."

"Cheesy," I stated, nudging him.

"Complaining?"

I smiled up at him and shook my head.

"No."

"Okay then."

~*~

"I will call you as soon as I'm up and about tomorrow," he mumbled against my lips, his hands pressed against the window of my truck as he leaned into me. "Are you allowed to use the phone?"

"He'll be gone all day anyway," I sighed, tilting my head up to look at him. "So, you know, if you just happen to drop by..."

"I'm not crossing the Chief," he stated, dropping one hand and cupping my cheek. "Sorry."

I sighed dramatically and he laughed, leaning down and kissing me again.

"Have fun, okay?"

"It's all Emmett's fault, you know," he grumbled, resting his forehead against mine. "Maybe Rose's too."

"You had plans on going before..."

"Before I started hanging out with you," he said, nodding. "Everything's different now."

"Is that bad?"

"Do you really need me to answer that?"

I pursed my lips and shook my head, biting my bottom lip to keep the smile off my face. He caught it, of course, and laughed again before kissing me once more.

"You should get home," he sighed heavily, nudging his nose against mine. "I don't want you to get into any more trouble because of me."

"He's just grouchy," I grumbled, hesitantly placing my hands on his chest.

I could feel his heartbeat as I moved my hand over it, marveling at the way it was racing much like mine always did with him around. I looked up when one of his hands covered mine and smiled slowly as he worked his fingers in between mine.

"Grouchy or not, I still want to take you on that second date. Preferably before we graduate."

"You and your expectations."

"I know. Pain right in the ass, huh?"

"Understatement."

He laughed and kissed me again before stepping back from me. I sighed and let him fully link our hands together.

"Have fun tonight, okay?"

And come back to me, all right?

"I'll try. Won't be much fun without you."

"Suck up."

"But oh so true." He laughed and pulled me against him, placing one more kiss on my lips. "Talk to you tomorrow."

I nodded and squeezed his hand once before I had to let go, watching as he walked across the parking lot towards his car. We were the only two left in the parking lot, everyone else damn near flying out the minute the last bell rang in anticipation of the two days of freedom we'd all been granted. It had been a pretty normal day for me; the stares and whispers were only a little worse than normal, but not altogether something I wasn't used to. Edward had seemed tense and uptight most of the day, but he still held my hand whenever we met up in the hallway and he talked to me as he normally did, so things couldn't have been *that* bad, right?

I sighed and finally climbed into my truck, picking at my bottom lip as I strapped the seat belt across my lap and turned the key. I watched as he waved at me when he drove by and I waved back, shaking my head and sighing as I shoved the truck into gear and pulled out of the parking space.

I made it home within ten minutes, growling under my breath when I saw the police cruiser sitting in our driveway.

Normally it wouldn't have bothered me that he was home early. Today, all I could think about was that he was home early to check up on me and make sure that Edward was nowhere near me when I walked through the door. Which really only served to annoy me and I slammed my way out of my truck, throwing my book bag over my shoulder as I stomped up the steps and pushed through the front door.

"Bella, we need to talk," I heard as soon as the front door shut behind me.

I resisted the urge to scream and dropped my bag to the floor before trudging my way into the living room. The television was surprisingly off and he was sitting in the armchair as opposed to the couch where he normally sat. I sighed heavily, accepting the fact that I was about to get one hell of a lecture, and plopped into the middle of the couch. I crossed my arms over my chest, toed off my shoes, propped my feet up on the coffee table and waited.

"You were right about some of the things you said last night, Bella, but that doesn't mean that you had a right to say them to me."

I narrowed my eyes at the silent television and hunched my shoulders.

"Your mom's leaving has been really hard on me..."

"It hasn't been hard on me? It's not like this didn't affect me, too."

"Would you let me finish?" I grunted. "I don't know how to raise a teenage girl, Bella, and you're a complete mystery to me. I don't know what to do or what to say so I just thought that it was better not to say anything at all. That was wrong."

I snorted and heard him huff unhappily.

"But this is my house and you have to respect my rules."

"When have I ever *not* respected your rules, dad? It's not like we were having sex in the middle of the living room when you walked in or anything!"

"Close enough."

"Right," I grumbled, shaking my head and looking over towards the front door.

"I still don't want you to be alone with him."

"Fine."

"And if you're really going to date him, I want you on birth control."

"I'm already on it, dad."

"What?"

"One of the few things mom did before she left was take me to get them. And I know all about the birds and the bees, so please, spare me that lecture." I looked over at him, raising an eyebrow.

"Was there anything else?"

"Have you been...?" He cleared his throat again. "Have you *been with* him?"

"Oh, God," I moaned, slapping one hand on my face.

"Answer me."

"No! I haven't *been with* anyone."

He was quiet for a few minutes and I just kept shaking my head, wondering if there was any way that this could possibly get more embarrassing and aggravating.

"Are you on drugs, Bella?"

"Excuse me?"

"I just wanted to make sure."

"No, dad, I'm not on drugs. I don't smoke, I've never gone over the speed limit, I've never been suspended from school and I've been accepted into my first choice college."

"You were?"

I wasn't sure whether I wanted to cry, scream or throw things to get out my frustration. I'd purposely left the acceptance letter from NYU that I received a few months ago on the kitchen table so that maybe he'd see it and *say something*. While he hadn't said anything, I at least thought that he'd looked at it and would *know* that his daughter was moving clear across the country when she graduated. I'd even foolishly hoped that he'd be proud of me.

"Yes, I was," I said quietly, nodding and folding my hands in my lap.

"Where's that?"

"NYU."

"You are *not* going to New York."

"I'm not going to the community college."

"Well you're not going to New York, either!"

"Why not?"

"It's too far away!"

"That's the point!" I exclaimed.

"You want to get away from everyone here – including me – that badly?"

"Yes," I breathed, nodding.

We sat in silence for what felt like forever and I'd memorized every little groove of my fingernails before he cleared his throat.

"Well, I can't stop you."

"Do you even *want* to?"

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"I'm invisible to you, dad; we both know it." I laughed sarcastically and shook my head. "When I leave for college, what's it going to change for you?"

"Bella, you're not invisible to me..."

"Sure I'm not, dad." I stood up and smoothed my hands over my shirt. "Does my being grounded keep me from running or is it okay to do that still?"

"An hour. If you're not back within that time, I'm coming to look for you," he said, his voice detached as he stared down at the coffee table.

"Because I definitely deserve to be treated like a prisoner, don't I?"

I shook my head at him and ran up the stairs without waiting for an answer, fighting off tears as I changed and threw my hair up into a ponytail. I slid my sneakers on and ran back down the stairs, grabbing my iPod from the table and quickly walking onto the porch. A shaky breath escaped my lips as I stuck the ear buds into my ears and pressed the *play* button on my iPod before stuffing it in my pocket and bolting down the porch steps.

It didn't matter that I'd run five miles the day before and my legs had been protesting any and all movement all day; I needed to get out and not be around anyone. I needed time to myself and this was the only way I was going to get it with Charlie being home.

I did my best not to think about anything, jogging down my normal route and concentrating on the music flowing through the buds to my ears. Nothing but the feel of the pavement underneath my feet, the wind hitting my face and the relaxation I could only really feel out here finally started to sink in and I began to relax.

I reached the street before Mike Newton's house – the one I always turned around at – and hesitated as I reached the corner. No one would be there yet; it was doubtful that even *he* would be there yet. After all, he had to drive into Port Angeles to beg his brother to buy some beer from the liquor store he worked at so that everyone had something to drink once they arrived. I pulled my iPod out from my pocket and looked at the time, estimating I had about five extra minutes to do what I wished with and started down the street.

Mr. and Mrs. Newton were middle class business owners that put entirely too much faith in their youngest son. They often went to Seattle on the weekends to visit family for some reason or another, leaving him full reign of the two story white ranch house in the middle of town. I was absolutely amazed that word had never gotten back to them about the chaos that surrounded this house whenever they weren't around, but figured that as long as Charlie wasn't called out for something like a fight or a car crash, then it wasn't that big of a deal to anyone else.

I slowed down as I started past his house, noticing that his old Buick – the one his brother had beat to shit before handing it down to Mike when he got a brand new one courtesy of mommy and daddy Newton – was pushed off to the side of the house, one of the tires missing and the car jacked up on cinder blocks to keep it even. No one quite understood why he didn't just fix it up and sell it, but he refused. I'd heard that his parents were practically begging him to get rid of it – his mother had a beautiful garden around the back of the house and having to walk around a beat up, disgusting old car that was better off in the junk yard never made her very happy.

It was sad that I knew any of that and for the life of me, I didn't know why I remembered it.

I quickly turned on my heel, starting back in the direction of my house and sighing heavily, praying that everything would be fine when I woke up tomorrow morning.

Chapter 9.

I slowly opened my eyes the next morning and looked around my bedroom, almost afraid that if I moved too much, something would shift and my world would come crashing down around me. I didn't sleep very well last night; every single scenario running through my mind and making me crazy to the point where I'd actually started talking to myself and thinking that I should've taken Emmett up on his offer to sneak me out of the house last night.

He needed an excuse to use the ski mask and all. It would've been perfect for sneaking me out somehow. Charlie never would've known the difference and I would've been able to get some damn sleep at some point that night.

I sighed and shook my head, reaching up to rub my face before I threw the covers off my legs and sat up. I listened for any movement in the house and was thankful when I didn't hear anything.

When I got back from my run, Charlie had been back in his spot on the couch, the remote in his hand and his eyes glued to the men running up and down on the field. I'd rolled my eyes, grabbed my book bag and went upstairs to take a shower and finish my homework.

I hadn't gotten very far on the homework bit because as soon as I saw my chemistry textbook, I thought of Edward. When I thought of Edward, I thought of him going to the party. When I thought of him going to the party, I imagined him calling me the next morning and telling me that he'd changed his mind. And that really didn't leave me in the mood to do anything but stare out my window and pray that the universe held some sort of pity for me and *would not* let that happen.

I stood up, stretched and made my way to my bedroom door, pulling it open and walking down the stairs. I walked into the kitchen and a grin broke out on my face when I saw the white orchid sitting on the table. I squealed to myself and practically danced over to it, picking it up and pressing it against my nose. I looked down to see that a disc had been underneath it and picked it up, pursing my lips. Nothing was written on the front and I shrugged, the orchid still up to my nose as I started back up to my room with the disc in my hand.

Maybe Edward dropped it off before Charlie went fishing. Maybe he dropped it off last night before he went to the party – I wasn't that far from Mike's house and if he took the right roads, my house would be on the same route as his.

I shrugged, the orchid still pressed up against my nose as I walked into my bedroom and turned on my computer. I impatiently waited for it to boot up, plopping down into the seat and placing the orchid on the little space of desk in front of the monitor. When everything finally loaded, I all but ripped the disc out of the case and stuck it into the computer, impatiently tapping my foot as it made noises and hummed at me. I opened the file and grinned at the name - *For Bella* – and noticed that it was a movie.

I immediately got the same feeling I had last Friday when I walked in to school and found my locker vandalized, but ignored it and shook my head as I leaned back in the chair.

I quickly clicked on the movie file and sat back in the chair, biting my bottom lip as my heart raced and the computer screen went black. I placed my hands in my lap, sucking in a deep breath when I saw the back of Mike's house appear on the screen. My hands curled into fists, my nails biting into my skin as the person behind the camera wordlessly and quickly walked to the front yard. People were scattered all around, most smoking and still drinking as they laughed like idiots. The camera immediately zoomed in on Edward, sitting in the front seat of the Buick with a see-through blue party cup half-full of some liquid I probably didn't care to know about in one hand and what looked to be a joint in the other. My breath caught in my throat as the person behind the camera practically ran over to him and he grinned lazily when he saw them.

"You want?" he slurred, holding the joint out.

The person behind the camera didn't speak and he lifted his arm in the air in a '*your loss*' gesture before bringing it to his lips. He was wearing that red and blue striped shirt he'd been wearing a

few days ago with a pair of dark jeans and military boots adorned his feet as he crossed his ankles on the ground.

"Edward!"

He looked up and the lazy smile returned to his face when Mike entered the frame, leaning heavily against the open door of the car and poking his head through the open window.

"Tell me about Isabella Swan, dude."

I whimpered and tightening my hands into fists, not caring that I might end up drawing my own blood if I kept it up.

"Isabella *Swan*," Edward said slowly, smoke sliding through his lips. "She's not much of a swan, is she, Mike? More like the ugly duckling."

I choked and placed one hand flat on my chest, staring at the screen.

"The ugly *fat* duckling," he continued, sliding lower into the seat and stretching his legs out in front of him. "Probably never even gotten laid."

"Probably never been kissed, either," Mike piped up.

"Like the movie!" Edward laughed, the end of the joint glowing in the darkness of the car. "Although, even Drew Barrymore is hotter than Isabella."

"Her chin annoys me."

"At least she *has* one."

"Score!" Mike shouted, leaning further into the car and slapping Edward's arm. "You think you'll ever fuck her, Edward?"

"Nah. " He sat up, his head tilted to the side and his lips pursed. "I don't think I'll ever be that desperate or completely obliterated."

The screen switched back to my desktop and every inch of me felt... numb. I was gasping for breath – that much I was aware of – but everything else just became a big blur to me. All I could think about was that I was right.

He'd never changed. This was all just a joke to him. *I* was just a joke to him and I'd let him...

I clenched my teeth together and screamed through them, reaching up and burying my hands in my hair. I pulled slightly, not feeling the pain I was sure I was supposed to before I slapped one hand on the disk drive and pulled the CD out. I threw it onto my desk and grabbed the orchid, standing up and storming down the stairs.

The garbage disposal worked on and off and most of the time, I found it easier to throw things in the garbage can than to deal with the aftermath of picking out leftovers from the drain, but right now, I wanted this cut into pieces. I don't know if this was his way of breaking up with me or what he thought I should know with this bullshit, but he'd accomplished getting rid of me. Whether I was his social experiment and all of this was a great hoax designed to humiliate me and make him seem more superior to all of his friends, I didn't know.

I no longer cared, either.

I shoved the orchid down the drain and reached over to flip on the switch, watching as it disappeared. My breath was still shuddering in and out of my lungs and I was vaguely aware of the

tears that were crawling down my cheeks as I stared at the drain, but I couldn't bring myself to care. I flipped off the switch when the stem was completely gone from my sight and wiped my cheeks off, something between a growl and a sob making its way out of my mouth as I started back towards the stairs.

I was such an *idiot* to think that he could ever change; to think that anything he'd ever said to me had ever meant anything. Was everything we'd been through leading to this? This moment where I was beyond being hurt or embarrassed passed anything any of them had ever done to me before?

I stopped at the bottom of the stairs and stared up at them, my vision slightly blurry as tears filled my eyes again. I gripped the railing and placed one foot on the bottom step, shaking my head and breathing out heavily.

He hadn't completely gained my trust, but he'd been damn close and that's what pissed me off and hurt the most. I'd let my guard down more than I normally would've with anyone other than Angela and Ben and this is where it had gotten me. This is what I got for thinking that anyone else was worth any of my time and energy and this is what I got for giving someone a second chance.

I looked over when the phone rang and clenched my jaw, wiping my face off one more time before I stepped off the stairs and made my way over to the phone. I snatched it up, quickly cleared my throat and put it against my ear.

"Hello?"

"Good morning, girlfriend."

My eyes narrowed and tears fell, completely contradicting everything I was feeling.

"You don't need to call me that anymore, Edward," I said coolly, clenching my free hand into a fist and staring down at the floor. "I got your gifts this morning and everything is loud and fucking clear."

"What?" he asked quickly, his voice monotone. "What are you talking about?"

"Don't play that stupid shit with me, Edward! How *dare* you call me after that? How *dare* you *say* any of that? You... you're... I'm a *human being*, Edward, and you can't just treat me this way!"

I was shrieking at this point and only realized it when I stopped talking and the silence rang heavily in my ears. My heartbeat was erratic and I could feel every inch of me shaking as tears continued to drip off my chin.

"Please tell me what you're talking about, Bella."

"Stop it! You know exactly what I'm talking about! I don't know why you couldn't just say it to my face and break up with me that way! There was no need for this! I didn't... I've never..."

I felt my legs give out underneath me and dropped to the floor hard, realizing too late that I was a sobbing mess and he was witnessing all of it. It only served to piss me off, but I couldn't catch my breath and I couldn't do anything but clutch the phone to my ear and want to kill him.

"Bella please," I heard him beg, almost sounding sincere. "Please tell me what I did."

"You *know* what you did."

"No, I don't! Please just *talk* to me."

"How much did you drink last night, Edward, that you wouldn't remember calling me an ugly, fat duckling?" I whimpered. "Or saying that you'd never sleep with me because you'd never be that desperate or obliterated?"

"What are you...? Oh, no," he whispered. "No, Bella, no, no, no, you don't..."

"Fuck you," I whispered, shaking my head and angrily wiping my face yet again. "I'm *done*."

"Bella, listen to me!"

I placed the phone back on the cradle and stood up, trying my hardest to catch my breath as I ran my hands through my hair and started back towards the stairs. I heard the phone ring again but ignored it, keeping my eyes centered on the top step as I climbed the stairs.

What I'd feared last night had come true and it was no one's fault but my own. I'd let him in partially and all it did was get me hurt and make me more of a laughing stock around the school than I normally was. I'd let myself almost forget how cruel and heartless he could be when he put his mind to it and that was my mistake. I forgot that he could be an asshole if he ever still chose to be and of course, I ended up hurting because of it.

I made it back to my bedroom, slowly closing the door behind me and leaning against it. Everything was the same as it had been two weeks ago; I was alone and there were only a few more months until graduation left to go. I had no one to leave behind that would miss me that much and nothing but passing my classes and getting the *fuck* out of this town mattered.

Huffing out a shaky breath, I shook my head and wiped away the tears from my cheeks for the last time that day before I walked over to my dresser and grabbed an old pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt.

Edward Cullen was no longer worth anything to me, much less my tears.

~*~

My head snapped up when I thought I heard footsteps making their way towards me and I ripped my ear buds out, holding my soapy hands out in front of me.

"No!" I exclaimed. "The floor's wet and your boots are dirty!"

Charlie looked down at me, his eyebrows raised and his mouth slightly parted in something I was assuming was shock.

I was on my hands and knees in the kitchen, scrubbing the shit out of the floor because working on homework hadn't done anything but make everything worse. The cycle that had started last night when I tried to concentrate on the chemistry paper that we really needed to finish only worsened and I'd come downstairs for a drink. I noticed that the floor was filthy – along with the rest of the house – and had abandoned my homework to clean it. The phone hadn't stopped ringing and I'd eventually grabbed my iPod to drown out the annoying sound. I didn't check the answering machine for fear that I wouldn't be strong enough to not listen to the messages that may or may not have been there.

"Uh, Bella... what are you doing?"

"I'm cleaning. What does it look like I'm doing?" I snapped, huffing at him.

"Why?" he asked slowly.

"Well, if you haven't noticed, the floor was pretty damn dirty and it needed to be cleaned. I'm going to vacuum the living room when I'm done here so I hope that you don't have any games you want to watch."

"Bella, it's Saturday."

"I don't know the damn game schedules!"

"No, that's not... why are you cleaning the floor on a Saturday afternoon?" he sighed heavily, shaking his head.

"I'm grounded," I snapped again. "What else would you propose that I do?"

"Uhm, well... watch television?"

"Like there's anything I'd be interested in to begin with."

"Well then, how about you go talk to Edward?"

My eyes narrowed and my heart thumped once painfully in my chest.

"Why would I do that?" I asked through my teeth.

"Because he says he's been standing outside for the past three hours."

I felt my eyes stinging and grabbed my ear buds again, shaking my head once as I stuck them back in my ears and fell forward on my hands. Naturally, it was in between songs and I'd still be able to hear him if he said anything else.

"He can stand out there all damn night if he wants. I thought I wasn't supposed to be alone with him anyway?"

"Well... you're not technically alone with him anymore so..." I jumped when he tugged an ear bud out and glared over at him, finding that he was squatting on my *clean* floor with his *dirty* boots like I'd *specifically* asked him not to do. "He doesn't look so hot."

"I don't *care*."

"Wanna tell me what's going on?"

"Nothing's going on," I spat. "And nothing will ever be going on ever again. He can stand out there until bright and early Monday morning; I don't care."

"You were all pissed off because I wouldn't let you see him while you were alone and now that I'm telling you to go outside to see him, you want nothing to do with him?"

"Yes."

"Is this some teenage rebellious thing?"

"No, dad, it's not. Edward and I are over. Plain and fucking simple."

"Watch your mouth."

"Get off my floor."

"Go talk to Edward."

"Why does it matter to you now? You wouldn't listen to me the other day when it came to him and now you won't leave me the hell alone when it comes to him? Would you make up your mind, *please*?"

"Did you get the flower and the disc?"

I glared at him again, the edges of my vision tinted red.

"Yes," I said through my teeth. "Where'd you find them?"

"It was on the front step this morning when I left. Was it from him?"

"I'm not sure." I stuck my nose in the air and grabbed the sponge from where I'd left it when he walked in. "It doesn't matter."

"You really think so?"

"Yes, I really do."

"I hope you can live with regrets, then."

"I've got plenty of regrets, dad," I snarled, furiously rubbing at a scuff mark that had been imbedded into the floor for as long as I'd been alive.

"You're willing to add another one to that list then?"

"Why should it matter?"

"My greatest regret was letting your mother leave." I slowly looked up at him, my jaw aching from how hard I had my teeth clenched together. "I can't change that now but I could've that night."

"Dad, this is nothing like that."

"I met your mother in high school, Bella, you know that." He nodded towards the windows facing the front yard. "The floor won't go anywhere."

"Why are you pushing this so damn hard? Why are you suddenly giving me advice that I don't want?"

"I'm your dad. That's what I'm here for, isn't it?" I snorted and he rolled his eyes. "I'm trying, Bella."

"Everyone's *trying*," I mumbled. "No one can actually just *do* what they said they're going to. No one can just... *not* torture me and hurt me. No, the best I can ever get is *trying*."

"It's better than nothing, isn't it?"

"At this point, no!" I exclaimed, throwing the sponge into the bucket of water next to me as I sat back on my heels. "I've settled for the shitty end of the stick my entire life and the one time I think that I can *finally* be happy in something I didn't think I'd ever get, it gets ripped away because *he's* an asshole. So no, dad, I don't think *trying* is good enough anymore."

"I'm sorry that your life has been so terrible for you," he said dryly, standing up and brushing his hands off on his jeans. "Let me know when you need me to sign the loan papers for your school, all right? Maybe I can do that right, huh?"

I screamed out in frustration and hopped up from the floor, ripping my ear buds out of my ears once more and yanking my iPod from my pocket. I threw it haphazardly onto the table by the door and ran up the stairs, scrubbing my eyes as I made it into my bedroom. I grabbed the disc still sitting on my computer desk and slapped it back into the case before I ran back down the stairs, breathing heavily and swallowing the hiccups and tears that were building in my throat.

"Where are you going?" Charlie demanded.

"I'm going to talk to him, dad!" I yelled, hating the way my voice was so thick and shaking. "Since you seem to think he's the second coming of Christ and all!"

"Very funny, Bella!"

"Who's joking?"

I pulled open the door and stalked out onto the porch, watching Edward scramble up from his seated position on the driveway in front of his car. I shook my head and sighed heavily, sniffing against my better judgment as I made my way down the steps and stopped at the bottom. The anger I'd felt a second ago quickly disappeared and was replaced with defeat and acceptance.

"Bella, listen to me..."

"I have absolutely no desire to hear anything you have to say," I interrupted quietly, shaking my head and walking over to meet him. "I don't care what you want because it no longer matters to me."

"You're not..."

"I don't care anymore, Edward. You've made your point and your social experiment is over."

"Bella, it's not like that!" he exclaimed, his hands in his hair. "That wasn't me!"

"Yes, it was," I laughed sarcastically. "Unless you have a long lost twin brother, I'm pretty positive that was you."

"Please let me explain!"

"No." I slapped the case against his chest, nearly flinching when his hand immediately covered mine. "We are stuck together for chemistry, but I'm done with you when it comes to everything else."

"You're not giving me a chance...!"

"I *gave* you a chance and this is what I got for it. I'm done. Get off my property."

"Bella, please listen to me!"

"Leave me *alone*."

I slid my hand out from underneath his and turned back to the house, a suspicious ache in my chest as I climbed the stairs.

"I'm sorry!" he yelled out. "Bella, I'm sorry!"

"So am I! Now leave."

I slipped back into the house and sucked in a shaky breath, shaking my head and closing my eyes.

"That's not quite what I was talking about," Charlie drawled from the kitchen.

"Get off my floor," I said quietly, opening my eyes and walking back into the kitchen. "I have work to do."

"Whatever he did," he started, leaning over to hook a finger into the lace curtains on the kitchen windows and pull it back, "he wants to make it right."

"Shut *up*, dad."

"Just look, Bella."

"Will you get off my floor then?"

"I'll even leave the house again if you want me to."

I growled at him and stalked to his side, yanking the curtain from him and looking out. My face fell as I saw Edward hunched over the steering wheel in his car, his hands clasped tightly on the dashboard in front of him.

"Doesn't matter," I said, shaking my head and silently cursing when my voice cracked. "I'm done with him."

I turned away from the window, pressing my lips together as I sank back to my knees, rolled up my sleeves and stuck my hand back into the soapy bucket.

"All right," he finally grumbled and I heard him walk around me. "Why are there eighteen messages on the machine?"

"I don't care and don't you *dare* listen to them when I'm within hearing distance."

"You can't avoid him forever."

"Why the sudden interest in my life, dad?" I asked, sitting back on my heels and looking over at him. "Why now?"

"There's always been an interest, Bella, but this is the only thing I've ever had any experience in. You should listen to what he has to say."

"I already know what he's going to say."

"You can read minds now? I wasn't aware. You must've gotten that from your mother."

I glared at him.

"I thought you said that you'd leave?" I asked through my teeth.

He held his hands up at his sides, palms facing me as he nodded.

"I'm going, I'm going. If you need me, I'll be at Billy's."

"Mhmm," I grumbled before dropping back to my hands and searching for the sponge in the bucket. "I won't be going anywhere."

"If he's still out there when I get back, I'm inviting him inside."

I looked up at him through a curtain of hair as I slapped the long lost sponge on the floor with a wet smack.

"You do that, dad," I said, my voice low.

"I mean it, Bella. If you feel anything for him..."

"I feel *nothing* for him."

"I don't believe that."

"Why not?"

"You don't get on your hands and knees to scrub floors, Bella. You use the mop and you do it maybe once a month when you think of it."

"Well maybe if you—"

"I'm not complaining!" he exclaimed, his hands once again up at his sides. "I'm happy that you think of it at all! I'm just pointing it out, Bella; it's not something that you do on a regular basis."

"*Why* are you pointing it out?"

"Because you feel something for him and you're not facing whatever happened this morning."

"I'm not... go see Billy!" I demanded, motioning with one hand towards the windows. "I don't want to talk about this anymore!"

"You'll have to face it sooner rather than later, Bella."

"Well, I don't have to do it now, do I?" I started scrubbing at the scuff mark again. "I'm sure I'll be done by the time you get home."

"Think about it, Bella."

I grunted and listened as he finally walked out of the house. I heard his voice outside, obviously speaking to Edward and ground my teeth together, furiously scrubbing at the mark on the floor.

Why wouldn't it come out already?

I listened carefully to hear the door on his cruiser close, listened even harder to hear when he pulled out of the driveway and drove off down the road. I looked down at the scuff mark I'd been agonizing over for the majority of the day and leaned back on my heels again, shaking my head. I looked around at the half-cleaned floor and grabbed the sponge, once again throwing it into the bucket before I grabbed the handle and stood up. I dumped the water down the sink and grabbed the mop, cleaning up the soap left on the floor. I washed off the mop when I was finished and placed it back behind the refrigerator before walking towards the stairs. I froze when I heard footsteps on the porch and quickly flipped the lock on the door before running up the stairs and into my room. I threw my dirty clothes off before diving into my bed in just my underwear and bra, pulling my pillow over my head and willing sleep to come.

I didn't want to deal with anything anymore.

Chapter 10.

He was on my doorstep Sunday morning and I made Charlie answer it when he knocked. I hid like a coward at the top of the stairs, listening to their mixed voices but not really hearing a word as I sat ready to bolt into my room if Charlie let him in.

I couldn't deal with him just yet. I was working myself up to Monday morning and couldn't for the life of me understand why he was trying so hard to talk to me. Unless his plans had been ruined and he had more in store for me before all of this had happened, I honestly didn't know why he was still trying so hard. None of it made any sense and I hated the way he seemed to be so intent on making any of this right.

Unless he really *was* that desperate and just wanted to see how far I'd let him get with me.

But he'd alienated all of his friends – at least, I thought he had. Maybe that was all part of the joke, too. They had to make it look as authentic as possible so that I'd actually believe all his bullshit to begin with.

Ugh, I was so fucking *stupid*. I should've known better – I'd been around them my entire life. Why I thought Edward Cullen would be able to change because of things that *I* said and did was laughable and I should've *known* something wasn't right. *I should've known*.

I snapped back to the present when I heard the front door close, tensing slightly and listening carefully for an extra set of footsteps below me.

"Bella, he's gone!" Charlie exclaimed.

"Are you being serious?"

"I promise you that he's gone."

I huffed out a thankful breath and stood up, smoothing my hands down over my shirt as I made my way down the stairs, stopping when Charlie stepped in front of me. He thrust a white envelope in front of my face, my name clearly written on it in Edward's undeniably perfect script.

"Throw it out," I said, my voice low as I stared at the way he curled the end of the *B*.

"Open it."

"I mean it."

"So do I."

"I have no reason to..."

"You didn't see him, Bella. I don't think he's slept."

"Good."

"You don't mean that."

"He's caused me plenty of sleepless nights. He owes me a few."

"You're being immature."

"I'm eighteen; I'm supposed to be."

"You've never been like this before."

"Things change. People change, dad."

He merely raised an eyebrow at me and I growled at him. I hadn't told him anything of what had happened and I was only slightly surprised that he'd seemed to understand what was going on as quickly as he had. For a man who didn't seem to take any notice of what was going on in my life, he sure seemed like he knew more than I hadn't told him.

He shook the envelope in my face again and I snatched it out of his hand, stalking towards the kitchen and over to the trash can. I had it held over it, staring down at the remains of our breakfast and swallowing hard as I fingered the edges.

"I don't know what you feel for him, Bella." I heard Charlie in the doorway of the kitchen and could only imagine him leaning against the wall with his arms over his chest. "But it's obviously the same thing he feels for you. Open it."

"I can't." My voice cracked and I closed my eyes, shaking my head. "Whatever is in this will *not* make what he said right."

"It might not," he agreed. "There are two things that can happen here, Bella. Either that will explain everything or it'll explain nothing. You're too young for so many regrets and if I know you like I think I do, throwing that envelope away and not knowing what may or may not be in there will follow you around and drive you crazy."

"Dad, you don't..."

"I know the way he looked when I opened the door. I know the way you looked when you woke up this morning. Neither of you are very excited about this new development."

"He could be putting on an act, dad! Don't you *get* that?" I exclaimed, turning to face him and pointing at him with the envelope. "He could be pretending because he just wants to hurt me some more!"

"That's not what I saw this morning, Bella! I saw something very close to heartbreak on his face and if he can feel that way over losing my daughter, I have to give him some respect because he *knows* what he lost!"

"I can't do this," I mumbled, shaking my head and walking towards him. "I have homework to do."

"All right," he grumbled, moving out of my way.

I stomped back up the stairs and flung myself into my room, throwing the envelope down on my computer desk as if it had bitten me. I placed my hands over my throat, staring at it and swallowing hard before I shook my head and turned away.

Not right now.

~*~

I waited until the last possible second to go inside the school. I'd sat in my truck in the farthest corner of the parking lot, watching everyone walk inside chatting, laughing and completely unafraid to pass through the double doors the way that I was. I kept my head down when I made it inside, my stomach in knots and feeling like I was going to spontaneously combust at any moment as I shoved my things into my locker. I grabbed my chemistry books and made it into the classroom as the second bell rang, my eyes trained on the floor as I made it over to my table. Edward was already there and I could feel his eyes on me as I sat down. I looked straight ahead, noticing that Mike's head wasn't in my way as it usually was and felt a small sense of relief that I wouldn't have to deal with him today, too.

"Bella," Edward whispered when everyone was seated and Mr. Banner had started to roll call.

I ignored him, grinding my teeth as I grabbed my pen and started playing with it nervously. I managed to call out a shaky '*here*' when my name was called before tapping the end of the pen against my notebook and wiggling in my seat.

"Did you see them?" he continued when I didn't say anything.

I shifted uncomfortably in my seat again, trying to concentrate on anything but what he was saying.

"Bella, *please*," he begged.

"See *what*? Pictures of me in some humiliating pose plastered in the hallway? No, I didn't," I snapped in a whisper, still fidgeting with my pen and watching as Mr. Banner finally started the lesson I wouldn't be paying attention to.

"You didn't open it."

"Open what?"

"Did your dad give it to you? He said he would."

I closed my eyes and did my best to block him out.

That fucking envelope had taunted me all damn night. It was like I'd practically been able to *hear* it telling me to open it. As it was, I'd stuffed it in my book bag earlier for I don't know *what* reason and sitting down in class had been almost the first time I hadn't had it in the back of my mind. Naturally, he's got to bring it up and make me think that I can hear it calling me from my *locker*.

I was losing it. It was official.

"I got it," I finally whispered back.

"Why didn't you open it?"

"I had things to do."

"Bella, I'm *sorry*. You have to let me explain."

"I don't have to let you do *anything*, Edward. You won. Give it up."

"I didn't win! There was nothing to win! In fact, I'm pretty sure that I lost it all!"

"Cullen! Swan!"

We both looked up to find that Mr. Banner was staring at us, along with the rest of the class. Huh. Guess we'd raised our voices a bit.

"Sorry," Edward mumbled, hunching his shoulders.

I nodded my apology as well and quickly flipped open my notebook, the pen still held tightly in my hand as I tried to focus on the words he'd been writing on the blackboard.

The rest of the class passed without incident until Mr. Banner gave us ten minutes before the bell rang to ourselves, reminding us that the science fair was this Saturday.

"Will you come over tonight?" he asked quietly, his eyes trained on the books piled in front of him.
"We need to get everything for our project worked out."

He was right and I hated it. We still had to work out how we were going to present this when the judges and Mr. Banner came by, we still had to get all the information tacked onto the board we were going to put up behind us and we still had to figure out how we were going to explain everything when or if we were asked.

"I'll call my dad during lunch," I grumbled.

He nodded, playing with the edges of his notebook.

"Will you ever talk to me again?" he whispered.

I almost faltered, the tone of his voice nearly breaking my heart and I sucked in a deep breath, staring hard down at my books.

"I'm talking to you now."

"About anything else but the project?"

I shrugged, biting my lip and rubbing my thumb on the binding of my textbook.

"I don't know."

"Please just let me..."

"No, Edward."

"He doesn't even drive that..."

"Stop it," I whispered, my eyes filling as I memorized the doodles I'd drawn on the cover of my book.

"That was from a party about three weeks ago..."

"Stop it, Edward."

"I didn't know you then, Bella. It doesn't make it right, but..."

"Edward, *stop*."

"The boots I was wearing, I had to throw out..."

Thankfully, the bell rang and I think I was the first one up and out of my chair, practically running to the door and not caring who I knocked over on my way there.

I should've stayed home.

~*~

I pulled up behind Edward as he parked in his driveway and slowly twisted the key in the ignition, swallowing hard as I pulled it out and placed my hands in my lap.

It had been one hell of a confusing day and I just wanted it over with. No one said a word to me today – aside from Ben and Angela when I finally showed up in the cafeteria after calling my father who was all *Team Edward* these days and quickly agreed to let me go – and that on its own was

unusual. I had never gone through a school day where no one had made any kind of comment to me and I wasn't entirely sure what to do about it. There was a lot of staring and a few snickers that only made me speed up my pace as I walked by, but for the most part, no one said anything to me. I'd managed to avoid Emmett and Rosalie, not entirely sure if they wanted to talk to me anyway but wanting to cover all of my bases while I could.

I was mentally exhausted and the last thing I really wanted to do was sit in Edward's house with him as we worked on this stupid science fair project that started this whole damn mess.

*A few more months, Bella, and you're gone. You won't see him and you won't have to deal with any more of this crap that you've been dealing with. You can start over and things will be better. You'll **make** them better.*

I grabbed my bag and pushed open the door, sliding from the seat and closing the door. I met him at the front of my truck and he offered me a smile that barely lifted his lips before he started walking. I followed behind him and he let me walk in through the door first. I quickly toed off my shoes and watched as he did the same, hanging his keys on a rack by the door.

"We can work in the dining room," he said quietly.

I nodded, hitching my bag up higher on my shoulder as he walked ahead of me and into the living room.

The house on its own was huge, gorgeous and completely surreal. I'd known that it was big, but I'd never been inside before I'd met his whole family a few days ago and on a day like today, it only made me feel inferior and even dumber than I thought I'd been on Saturday. I was a joke and this was only one of the many things that had proven it to me.

"Edward? Is that you?"

"Yeah, mom!" he called out, nervously running a hand through his hair. "We're here!"

"We?"

She popped out of some doorway that had been hidden from me and I swallowed hard again, stuffing one hand in my pocket and hooking the other around the strap of my bag. Did she know what happened? Did she know anything about how her son had treated me all these years? Did she think he was justified in it?

"Oh, Bella!" she exclaimed, grinning and walking over to me. She hugged me, kissing both of my cheeks before stepping back. "Are you staying for dinner?"

"My dad actually wants me to get home at six," I lied, trying to offer her a smile. "He's gotta eat, too."

"Oh," she said, pouting slightly before nodding. "Well, all right, then. Make yourself at home. If either of you need me for anything, I'll be in my office."

"Thanks, mom."

She walked by him and reached out to squeeze his shoulder. He offered her a pathetic smile and I looked away, suddenly feeling like I was intruding on something and wishing that this stupid science fair had never even been something we needed to do.

I heard a door close and assumed that his mother had gone back to whatever it was that she'd been doing before we'd shown up, shifting awkwardly as we stood in silence that seemed to drag on forever.

"Did you want something to drink?" he finally asked.

"Water, I guess," I said softly, looking over in his general direction.

"Dining room is through there," he pointed to an archway across the room, "I'll be there in a second if you want to go sit down."

I nodded and quickly walked through the pristine living room and through the archway, looking around the equally elegant dining room before huffing and plopping down into one of the red and gold cushioned high-back chairs. I unzipped my bag and pulled out the folders and notebooks I'd been using for this project, placing them on the table and searching around in the front pocket for a pen. My fingers immediately fell on the envelope I'd stuffed in there that morning and I pulled my hand out quickly as if it had bitten me.

With my bottom lip in between my teeth, I slowly reached back in and pulled it out, running my thumbs across my name as my heart pounded in my chest. Shaking my head once, I turned it over and flipped it open, greeted with the back of what looked to be picture paper. My hands shaking, I pulled it out and dropped the envelope to the table, seeing that there was more of his handwriting on the back.

This is what I did all night, Bella.

I licked my lips and held my breath as I turned it over to find a picture of him wearing a black t-shirt, a pair of dark blue jeans and white sneakers as he sat in a corner with a beer bottle in his hands. He was staring off in the opposite direction, seemingly completely oblivious to whoever it was that was taking the picture. The red-orange date stamp in the bottom corner of the picture proudly declared last Friday's date.

It didn't make sense.

I dropped that one to the table and flipped over the other one in my hand, my breath *whooshing* out of my lungs when I saw a very impressive picture of Edward punching Mike in the jaw, his face red and his lips pressed into a tight line. Once again, the date stamp declaring it was last Friday was there in the corner.

What the hell was going on?

I dropped that one to the table and flipped over the last one, choking out a whimper when I saw him standing in front of Jessica and Lauren, one hand in the air and pointing at something with his mouth open in what I assumed was mid-yell. Stupid fucking confusing date stamp was there, too.

I didn't understand.

I dropped that one to the table as well, leaning forward and cradling my head in my hands as I concentrated on breathing evenly and tried to sort out the muddled thoughts in my head.

"Rose wants to be a photographer."

I jumped and screamed, slapping my hands over my mouth when I heard his voice behind me. I looked up at him as he carefully set a glass of water on the table in front of me, avoiding my gaze as he eased into the chair next to me.

"She takes that damn camera with her everywhere she goes and always makes sure to document everything that happens." He looked up at me then and I slowly dropped my hands from my mouth, letting them fall into my lap. "The movie that you saw was not from last Friday, Bella."

I closed my eyes briefly, shaking my head before opening them and snatching up the picture of him hitting Mike. I held it out to him, shaking it slightly and he smirked sadly, shrugging a shoulder.

"Good shot, isn't it?"

I pursed my lips at him and tilted my head. He sighed and took the picture from me, looking down at it and shaking his head.

"He said some things," he started slowly, setting the picture aside and looking up at me again, "about you."

I looked away from him, pulling my hands back into my lap and playing with my fingertips.

"It pissed me off."

I moved one hand back to the table, pushing the one of him with Jessica and Lauren over to him. He sighed heavily and I watched from the corner of my eye as he reached up and rubbed the back of his neck.

"I was telling them to go fuck themselves," he said quietly, quickly craning his neck to look around and make sure that no one heard him, I assumed. "They agreed with what Mike said about you."

"What'd he say?"

"It's not..."

"Tell me," I demanded.

He sighed heavily and flicked the picture away from him, resting his arms on the table and leaning down to rest his chin on his hands.

"He said that I must like being the prettier one in the relationship and having the upper hand with you. Said that he wasn't sure how I was going to..." He groaned and shook his head. "How I was going to sleep with you without getting sick or being crushed."

My eyes immediately watered and I looked away, staring out of the windows next to me and wanting nothing more than to curl up into a ball and disappear. I pressed my lips together when they started shaking, sucking in a deep breath and closing my eyes.

"You hit him," I whispered.

"Fractured his jaw."

"You hit him for *me*."

"Yes," he said, his voice strained.

"Is he pressing charges?"

"He'd have to tell his parents about what happened while they were away. It's amazing how many people can keep his parties a secret from his parents."

"I don't..." I shook my head and reached up to rub my eyes. "We have work to do."

"Bella, don't you...?"

"If you really want me to think about this, then you need to stop bringing it up. I need time, Edward, and I can't think about things if you're breathing down my neck."

I looked back at him and felt bad for the way his shoulders were hunched as he nodded.

"Okay," he said softly. "Can I just say one more thing?"

I rubbed my eyes one more time before I looked back at him and nodded, sucking in a deep breath and leaning back against the chair. I placed my hands in my lap and looked down at them, once again playing with my fingertips.

"I've made a lot of mistakes when it comes to you, Bella, and I said a lot of things that were uncalled for and horrible about you. I didn't know you then and it wasn't fair of me to think that I did or to think that you deserved any of that. I'm sorry, Bella."

I nodded, still staring down at my hands before I leaned forward and placed my hands on top of my books.

"Did you want to work on the paper or the board we need?" I asked, looking over at him.

"I'll work on the board," he said quietly. "Unless you want to."

I shook my head and leaned down to search around in my bag for a pen once more.

"No, that's fine. I need your part, though."

He nodded and got up.

"I left my bag in the kitchen. I'll be back," he grumbled.

I nodded and watched as he walked out, pulling a pen out of my bag and leaning over my books. I tapped my forehead against them, groaning softly.

Nothing made sense anymore. Either this was a very elaborate plan to embarrass the hell out of me and have everyone laughing at me until way after we graduated or Edward was one hundred percent serious about everything he'd just said to me and I didn't understand anything.

He'd given up his friends to talk to me. He'd given up his social status and completely ruined his reputation when he was seen with me at the movies. He'd sat alone at lunch today, in the corner of the room, staring blankly at the food that was on his tray instead of sitting with his friends like I'd half-expected.

Why? Why was he going through all of this trouble?

I looked up when I heard him walk back into the room and stared hard at him as he sat down again.

"What?" he asked, raising an eyebrow at me.

"Why?" I blurted out, shaking my head. "Why are you putting so much time and effort into me?"

"Because you're worth it," he said simply, quietly.

"This is not a L'Oreal commercial, Edward."

He slouched back into his chair and crossed his arms over his chest, staring at the table.

"I don't know what else you want me to say to you," he said quietly. "I meant everything I've said to you just now and you don't..." He reached up and ran his hands through his hair, leaning forward and resting his elbows on the table to cradle his head. "If you don't want to believe me, then you won't and I obviously can't change that no matter how much I want to. If you want time, you've got it. If you don't then I don't know what else to do. I'll leave you alone when this is done and that'll be it."

The aching I'd been feeling for the past three days got worse and I clenched my teeth together, swallowing hard as I looked down at my books again.

"Okay," I whispered.

I heard his sharp intake of breath and looked up at him, my heart beating faster when I saw that his hands were covering his face and he was shaking his head. I was at a complete loss for words, not knowing what was going on in his head or behind his hands. I noticed the faint bruising on the knuckles of his right hand for the first time and bit my bottom lip, swallowing hard.

"What do you want to put on the board?" he asked, his voice strained again.

"Whatever you think is best."

He moved his hands from his face and stared out the windows in front of him, crossing his arms on the table and nodding slowly. He shook his head once and leaned over, unzipping his bag and pulling out his notebook. He flipped it open and ripped out a few sheets, handing them over to me and snapping it closed again.

"I know that you don't want to be here," he said quietly, staring out the windows again. "If you just want to do that at home, you can go."

"Are you kicking me out?"

"No. I'm just giving you a reason to leave like I know you want to. I'm trying to make this as easy as possible for you."

"You think this is easy?" I breathed out.

He shrugged.

"It's not..." I shook my head and swallowed hard. "I feel like every part of me has just been... ripped open. Like everything I'm feeling or thinking is on display and I can't..." I closed my eyes when they filled again. "I hate feeling that way. I hate that you made me feel that way. I hate that I let you get to me and made me forget about everything you've ever done..."

"You hate me, I get it."

"I don't!" I exclaimed, opening my eyes to look at him again. "I wish I did, but I don't."

I stared at his profile, watching the muscle in his jaw twitch as he presumably ground his teeth together.

"You have no intentions of ever forgiving me, do you?" he finally asked.

"I don't know what to do, Edward."

"Are you staying?"

"Unless you really want me to go."

He looked over at me and shook his head once.

"I don't ever want you to go," he whispered before looking away from me and opening his notebook again.

We spent the rest of the afternoon in silence, only asking questions when necessary and when one of us needed to know what the other thought of the content we were working on. His mother

poked her head in at one point and when he offered her that pathetically sad smile, I almost bolted out of the house. She didn't seem upset with me at all and actually smiled at me before saying that she was going to start dinner and disappearing. I packed up my things at quarter to six and Edward walked me to the door.

"I'll see you tomorrow," he mumbled as I slid back into my shoes.

"Yeah."

"Drive safe."

"Thanks."

He nodded and I turned from the door, wrapping my arms around my waist as I fingered my keys and walked to my truck. I made it home and sluggishly walked into the still empty house, locking the door behind me and quickly walking up the stairs to my room.

I wanted to still be mad at him. I wanted to still feel justified in being mad at him and not talking to him but the truth was, all I felt was a resounding ache. I don't think I'd ever been more confused before than I had right this moment and I didn't know what to do about anything.

Chapter 11.

"You're in my way."

I looked up from my sluggish pace towards my next class and saw Tyler standing in front of me, a twisted smirk on his lips as he stood in front of me. I stared hard at him, really not in the mood for any of this bullshit today.

My head was everywhere but where it was supposed to be. I hadn't gotten much sleep the night before because I was too busy thinking about everything that Edward had told me and trying to make sense of it all. I had somehow managed to finish the chemistry paper, although I have no idea how, and had had an actual conversation with Charlie over dinner.

Chemistry in general that morning had been pure torture. Edward had been completely silent during the entire class, concentrating unnaturally hard on the notes we were copying down. He said a quick *good morning* when he first walked in and then, when the bell rang, told me that he had practice Thursday that would be longer than normal for the game on Friday so we wouldn't be able to get together to work on our project. I told him that we'd have to definitely work on it tonight to get all the details down for our presentation and he'd agreed before telling me that he'd see me later and walking out of the classroom.

I felt slightly relieved that he hadn't tried explaining anything else or tried to convince me of anything, but there was still a little part of me that felt somewhat disappointed, which aggravated me beyond reason and I'd spent my entire Economics class trying not to tear my hair out.

The entire day was one big mind fuck and I didn't like it at all. For once in my life, I was wishing that absolutely nothing had changed. I hadn't exactly enjoyed being picked on and teased by almost everyone, but at least I hadn't felt like a complete idiot most of the time, either.

"Go around me, Tyler," I grumbled.

"Well, I would," he drawled, reaching up and tapping his chin with his pointer finger. "But you're still taking up the majority of the hallway and it's rather hard to move."

I'd had enough today and I wasn't dealing with *this* on top of everything else. Something inside of me just seemed to snap as I stared at him and I couldn't control my mouth.

"Do you get off on saying this?" I asked, narrowing my eyes at him. "Does this make you feel good about yourself?"

"I..."

"Do you even realize that when you leave this school and go off to college that you won't be the badass you seem to think you are? Do you *realize* that you will get nowhere if you keep acting like this towards people?"

"What right do you...?"

"What right do *I* have?" I asked, laughing sarcastically. "What right do *you* have to say *any* of the things you ever say to me? I may not be gorgeous or skinny or whatever it takes to get into your good graces, but I am a person, same as you. Get off your horse, Tyler."

With that, I shoved by him and stalked into the empty classroom, plopping down into my seat and leaning forward to cradle my head in my hands.

"You all right, Bella?"

I looked up to find Emmett walking into the classroom and slowly pulled my arms back, letting my hands fall to my lap as I watched him sit down in the desk in front of me. My avoidance techniques had clearly failed me today.

"Fine," I said quietly, shifting uneasily in my chair.

"Are you sure?"

I nodded, staring down at my books and licking my lips nervously.

"What did I tell you about her, Tyler?"

I clearly heard Edward's voice out in the hallway and I cringed, lacing my hands together and squeezing tightly. This only added to the confusion that was my head now; Edward defending me and sticking up for me was on my list of *crazy things that had happened to me in the past three weeks and weren't getting any more normal.*

"You're still picking the cow over us, are you? What the hell is wrong with you?"

"I grew up. Maybe you should do the same. Leave her alone."

Emmett and I sat in an awkward silence and I only gripped my hands tighter together, wondering what he wanted and why he wasn't out in the hallway with Rosalie like he usually was in between classes. I didn't hear Edward's voice out in the hallway anymore and breathed out a small sigh of relief.

"I'm still one of the people that you want to talk to, right?" Emmett finally asked.

"Before I was with Edward, you didn't want to be seen talking to me either," I said quietly, looking up at him quickly before back to my lap.

"I'm sorry about that, but it's all different now. Everything's changed."

"Nothing's changed."

"He didn't do anything all night, Bella. He sat in a corner, looking at his watch every five minutes and every time I went over to him, all he did was ask if we were done so that he could go home."

"Emmett, I'm not..."

"Yes, he did say those things," he interrupted. "And no, it wasn't right. But a lot of shit has changed since then and he'd take it back if he could. He *wants* to."

"He could go back to being that person..." I started, looking up at him and shaking my head.

"If he was gonna do it, he would've done it when you told him to leave you alone. Hell, he wouldn't have sat outside your house all weekend if he was going to go back to being the person that he was."

"How do you know about all of this?"

"Who do you think he talked to?" Emmett chuckled, resting his elbow on my desk and smirking at me. "He's all torn up about it."

"He really hit Mike?"

"Why do you think Mike's been out?"

"I thought he just fractured it?"

"Now he's got it wired shut for the next six weeks and has to eat through a straw."

My eyes bulged, my mouth dropped open and Emmett laughed at me, reaching over and grabbing my shoulder. He shook me gently and I sighed.

"He really told Jessica and Lauren to fuck off?"

"That was my favorite part of the night."

"Who put it on my doorstep, Emmett?"

"Probably one of them. They're vindictive bitches and they were pissed that Edward wasn't giving them the time of day anymore."

"Makes sense," I said softly, nodding and bringing one hand up to trace the binding on my textbook. "Does Rosalie hate me again?"

"She's giving you time. I'm just an impatient bastard. And neither one of us ever hated you to begin with. Like I said, everything's changed and we're working really hard to make it up to you."

I looked up at him and smirked. He shook my shoulder again and I sighed heavily, licking my bottom lip as he dropped his hand to my books.

"Let him talk to you, Bella," he said softly. "If you don't like what he has to say and you feel the same as you do right now, then he'll back off. But let him get it out there so that you *know*, all right?"

"Why is he so concerned with making it right?"

"I'm... not at liberty to discuss that with you." I pursed my lips at him and tilted my head. "Hey, he's one of my best friends. I can't do that to him."

I sighed heavily and nodded.

"Okay, fine."

"The game's Friday night. Why don't you come?"

"I'm still grounded."

"It would mean a lot if you were there."

"It's not like he'll even know..."

"Oh, he'll know."

"How are you so sure?"

"He's developed this *Bella Radar* in the past few days."

I raised an eyebrow at him.

"What?"

"He's aware of you, Bella."

"It's not like he can ignore me, Emmett. According to Tyler, I take up the full width of the hallway, you know."

"That's not true and that's definitely not what I meant."

"Then what are you talking about?"

"It's like how I am with Rose," he sighed heavily, shaking his head at me. "I'm more tuned in to her. I know when she's in a room without seeing her enter, I can hear her over a thousand other people and whenever I'm next to her, my body is like a live wire."

"That's... that's how he is with me?"

He nodded and I swallowed hard, looking down at my lap.

"All right," I relented, holding up my hands and looking at him again. "I'll ask my dad about it tonight."

"That's all I ask of you."

"Liar."

"Yeah, well, that's *my* personal request. If he knew that I asked you, he'd probably kill me."

"How come?"

"He said that you wanted time and he's trying to give that to you. He told me not to push you."

"And that's exactly what you're doing."

"Got me what I wanted though, didn't it?"

"Mm."

"You feel anything for him, Bella?" he asked, his voice low as our other classmates started piling into the room.

I swallowed hard, clenching my jaw and staring at him. I nodded stiffly and he grinned at me, nodding back.

"Then I don't feel bad about it."

"Ass."

"Who means well," he quipped, pointing at me before he turned around to face the front. "And is trying to help out his *friends*."

"I'm a friend now, huh?"

"You always have been." He tilted his head back, looking at me upside down as I raised an eyebrow at him. "I was a sheep, Bella."

"A sheep?"

"You know... follow the leader?" I snorted and he grinned again. "Now I wanna *be* the leader."

"Oh, Lord help us all."

"You're not very funny."

"I think I'm a riot."

"You would."

I rolled my eyes and gently smacked his forehead. He scowled at me and then winked before sitting up straight.

"Friend," he mumbled over his shoulder.

I laughed and shook my head, twisting my lips to the side and looking down at my books again.

"Say it back!" he demanded, turning around to face me again.

"What are you, five?"

"Say it!"

"Friend."

He nodded, squaring his shoulders and turning back to the front. I laughed again and rolled my eyes, grabbing my pen and tapping it against my books.

"That's all I wanted."

"Shut up, Emmett," I laughed.

I shook my head and started doodling on the cover of my textbook as Mrs. Leslie called us to attention and began to take attendance.

He was giving me time. He'd demonstrated that this morning in class and he'd told Emmett about it. In fact, it seemed that Emmett knew everything and as much as it went against everything I'd ever taught myself, I found myself trusting what he said.

Another thing to add to my list of crazy shit for the day. Maybe the entire week. Or my entire life.

~*~

I pulled into the parking lot of the school twenty minutes after the game had already started on Friday night, my heart in my throat and my hands shaking as I turned the key and looked towards the brightly lit football field.

Charlie, still on his *Team Edward* bullshit, hadn't hesitated in letting me off grounding a day early when I told him what I wanted to do. He'd practically pushed me out the door as soon as dinner was finished and had even threatened to go with me when I told him that I wasn't sure if I should.

Emmett had invited me; Edward hadn't. Maybe he didn't want me there after all. Maybe they were all planning some elaborate hoax on me that would be revealed during halftime and I wouldn't be able to deal with that.

Sucking in a deep breath, I pushed open the truck door and slid down from the cab. I pulled on the hem of my shirt and fixed my jeans before stepping back and closing the door. I kept my keys in my hand as I walked out towards the field, my heart hammering in my chest when I heard the shouts and cheerleaders screaming from the sidelines. I kept my eyes on the field, walking behind the line of people sitting in those canvas camping chairs and making my way to the side of the bleachers where I stood on my toes to look out onto the field over the fence and try to see if I could find Edward.

I didn't even know what number he was. Sighing, I crossed my arms over my chest and leaned against the side of the bleachers, hoping that maybe I'd be able to blend in with the rest of the crowd and not be seen.

I don't even know what I came here for. Just because Edward had developed some kind of radar for me didn't really mean that he even wanted me here. Even if he did see me or came over to me, I wouldn't know what to say to him or what to do so really, there was absolutely no point for me to be here.

I still wasn't sure on what to do. I know what my heart wanted and I knew what my head was telling me and neither of them were ever in agreement with each other at the same time. After so long of being the butt of every joke in the entire school, it was so hard to believe that anyone meant what they said.

Angela and Ben had been the only ones for so long and now that Edward, Emmett and Rosalie had been added into the mix, it was as if my entire world was spinning in a different direction. Angela told me to give him a chance to explain a little more when I talked to her yesterday at lunch and Ben had been in agreement with her. They had both noticed the change he'd apparently made and even Ben had said that he'd been solely focused on practice instead of trying to be friends with anyone anymore.

"Whoever he was on that video, he's not that person anymore," he'd said. "I don't know what you did to him, Bella, but he's done a complete one-eighty."

Ben wouldn't lie to me. I knew that.

So why was I so fucking scared?

"Bella?"

I jumped and barely stifled a scream, quickly looking over my shoulder to see Rosalie and Alice, Edward's sister, walking up with big cups of what I assumed was soda in their hands.

"Hey," I said, forcing a smile to my face.

"Come sit with us!" Alice demanded, walking over to me and grabbing my hand. "Your ass will be numb in five seconds, but you'll be able to see better."

I looked over at Rosalie as I was dragged through chairs and people on their feet, screaming at whatever had just happened and she shrugged innocently, smiling. I sighed heavily and followed Alice, stepping up on the bleachers as she did.

"Bella!"

I looked up when I heard Edward's mother's voice, my breath caught in my throat as Alice sat down next to her, pulling on my hand and demanding that I sit between them.

"Hi," I managed, smiling awkwardly and sitting down quickly once I'd shoved my keys into my pocket.

"It's nice to see you again."

"Hello, Bella," his father peeked around and smiled at me, nodding. "How are you?"

I'd only met him once, the time when I ran to his house after the fight with my father and he intimidated the hell out of me then. This situation wasn't any better. Who really wants their son's ex-girlfriend sitting with them during a damn football game? This didn't make any sense to me whatsoever.

"Oh, I'm fine," I squeaked, nodding. "You?"

"I'd be a lot better if Emmett would get the... Yes!" he yelled, standing up and pumping his fist in the air. "Go, go, go!"

I looked over at Alice and she shrugged, sipping off her soda before she was on her feet and screaming too. I peeked around her to find that Rosalie was actually standing on the bench we'd been sitting on, her voice rising high above the rest.

"You'll get used to this," I heard Esme's voice in my ear, her hand on my arm.

"I don't know anything about football," I admitted sheepishly, laughing nervously.

"Emmett," she pointed to the uniformed figure weaving in between people with the football tucked under his arm, "and Edward. Those are really the only two you need to focus on."

"How come?"

"Because we're biased," she laughed. "And those are the only two we're really here for anyway."

I nodded and looked back out to the field, biting my bottom lip.

"He's number eight," she said into my ear. "And he's missed you."

My breath caught in my throat yet again and I nodded, not knowing what to say and thinking that coming to this was a very bad idea. She patted my arm and leaned away from me, her voice joining the rest of the family's when I numbly watched Edward run to the end of the field.

I sat with his family, watching and trying to join in whenever they screamed and jumped around. We were winning when half time rolled around and everyone started scattering once the players had left the field, the cheerleaders running out into the middle and starting to get up into some type of formation. I unconsciously held my breath, waiting for some elaborate display calling me out. When they merely started screaming about our team being better than the other, I breathed a sigh of relief and relaxed slightly.

"We're gonna go down and get something to drink," Esme stated, stretching. "Do any of you want anything?"

"No, thanks," we all said in unison.

Esme laughed and shook her head, grabbing Carlisle's hand and leading him down the bleachers.

"So, Bella," Rosalie started, leaning back against the abandoned bench behind her and setting her empty cup on the one below her, "I hear Emmett kind of browbeat you into coming."

I shrugged and laughed nervously, playing with the hem of my shirt.

"He's been pretty miserable," Alice stated, propping her feet up on the empty bench beneath her.

"I'm gonna talk to him," I said quietly, nodding.

"When?"

"I don't know."

"Tonight would be good."

"He's kind of busy."

"The game doesn't last all night, you know."

"I'm just trying to process everything."

"You know the truth, don't you?" Rosalie asked. "I gave him those pictures..."

"Yes, I know. I just... I don't know," I grumbled, leaning forward and cradling my head in my hands.

"We all make mistakes," Alice stated.

"I *know*."

"All right, enough," Rosalie stated. "Alice, come with me. I want nachos."

"You wanna come, Bella?" she asked as they stood up.

"No," I said softly, shaking my head and sitting up straight. "Thanks."

"Do you want anything?"

I looked up at them and smiled, shaking my head.

"I'm fine, thanks."

"All right. We'll be back."

I nodded and watched as they effortlessly walked down the bleachers before I ran my hands through my hair and sighed. I wish high school and crushes and feelings weren't always so damn confusing all the time.

~*~

Someone had informed Edward that I was there because as soon as halftime ended and they ran back onto the field, he was looking directly at me. I'd swallowed hard, wiped my palms on my jeans and tried my best to ignore the fact that his family and Rosalie were staring holes into the side of my head. We ended up winning the game and I watched as everyone rushed the field, hugging and screaming and laughing as Emmett held up the football and started prancing around in circles. I stayed up on the bleachers when everyone else was down there, shaking my head and laughing at him.

I stood up, smoothed my hands over the front of my shirt and spotted Edward in the crowd, laughing and slapping Ben a high-five before Emmett tackled the both of them. I laughed as the football went flying in the other direction and shook my head as I started down the bleachers. I stopped at the bottom, not sure on whether or not I should go over to them. He seemed like he was in a good mood and I didn't want to be the one to ruin that. He was with friends and his family and he was celebrating – I truly had no place there.

Deciding that I'd talk to him tomorrow, I nodded once to myself and turned on my heel, starting in the direction of the parking lot. I dug my keys out of my pocket and sighed quietly, playing with the key ring as I hit the pavement.

I *would* talk to him tomorrow. We'd get through the science fair and then I'd talk to him about everything that was going through my mind. I wanted to get everything sorted out with him and if that meant staying up half the night – oh, Charlie would *love* that – then I'd do it. He'd wormed his way into my heart at some point and damn it if I didn't want him back there.

"Bella!"

I turned, halfway to my truck, to see Edward running across the pavement towards me, the sound of his cleats obnoxiously hitting the pavement. I stopped and started fidgeting with my key ring again, sucking in a deep breath and looking up at him as he stopped in front of me.

"Hey," he breathed.

"Hi. Uhm, congrats on the win," I said nervously, biting the inside of my cheek. "You did really well."

"Thanks. Are you leaving?"

"Yeah."

"Oh. I, uh... I'm sorry that Emmett asked you to come..."

"Please don't be."

"I told him to leave you alone until... but he's just..."

"It's okay."

He nodded and looked down at the ground, shifting on his feet as he reached up and rubbed the back of his neck.

"You were... you have your family there, Edward, what are you doing out here?" I choked out a laugh and ran a hand through my hair.

"I see them all the time." He raised his hand from his neck, held it up and then dropped it again, shifting uncomfortably on his feet. "I don't see you enough."

"You see me plenty in school."

He just tilted his head at me before sighing and looking down at his feet.

"Is this... are you really done with me?"

"No," I said softly, shaking my head and wrapping my arms around my waist as I looked down at my feet. "We just need to talk."

"What about tonight?"

I looked up at him again, raising an eyebrow and he laughed nervously, reaching up to run a hand through his hair.

"You just had a game, Edward. You've got to be exhausted."

"I'm still pumped, actually. Adrenaline high. If you don't want to, that's fine. I just thought that maybe since you were already here and we're kind of already talking that we could... not stop?"

"You really want to do this tonight?"

"Tonight. Yesterday. Last Saturday morning." I raised an eyebrow at him and he shrugged, laughing nervously. "It's true."

"Okay, fine."

"Seriously?"

I couldn't contain the smirk.

"Grey's?"

"Grey's," he confirmed, sighing heavily and smirking back at me.

"And yes, seriously."

"Did you want to wait or where did you...?"

"Come to the playground," I suggested, shrugging one shoulder. "It's on Hunter Street."

"No crawling through the woods this time, huh?"

"I figured that you've had your fill of seeing imaginary snakes and feeling imaginary furry things, so..."

"I appreciate that."

"You're welcome."

"I'll uhm... I'll meet you there, then?" he asked, his hand running through his hair again.

"Yeah."

"I won't be long. Was there a certain time that you needed to be home?"

"I'll stop by my house and tell Charlie."

"I'll hurry."

I nodded, pressing my lips together and looking down at my feet.

"All right."

"I'll see you soon."

I nodded again, barely looking up when I heard a footstep on the pavement, nearly jumping out of my skin – he had that effect on me, it seemed – when I felt his lips brush across my cheek.

"Thank you, Bella," he whispered.

"Yeah," I said, my voice breaking as I nodded and took a step back from him. "Hunter Street."

"Got it."

I watched as he turned and ran towards the school, breathing out a heavy sigh before I shook my head and walked over to my truck. I climbed in and started it, driving back to my house and leaving it running as I went inside. Charlie was sitting on the couch, as usual, the white-blue light from the television shining on him as he sat up and looked over at me.

"How was the game?"

"We won. Uh, I'm gonna meet Edward out at the playground," I said, clearing my throat.

He stared at me.

"Midnight," was all he said as he leaned back on the couch.

"Thanks."

"Yep."

Well, at least we were making a little bit of progress. It was taking time and it wasn't a complete one hundred percent father-daughter relationship, but it was slightly better than it had been in the past. I turned and walked back out the house, taking deep breaths as I climbed back into my truck and started on my way towards the playground. He wasn't there yet, as I expected, and I parked on the side of the road. Grabbing my keys from the ignition, I pushed open the door and slid from the cab, slamming the door behind me and slowly walking towards the abandoned playground. My feet hit the rocks and I stopped, looking around as I smoothed my hands over my shirt. I walked over to the merry-go-round, sitting down in between the bars and hanging onto them. It creaked as I pushed myself in a circle, biting my bottom lip and sighing.

This was my chance to ask him *everything* I didn't understand and all I felt was an all-encompassing fear. I *wanted* to know the answers to everything I'd been wondering about but I was terrified that they'd be all the things I'd been thinking all along. That this was just a joke, he had only been kidding around and I meant less to him than I did before. It didn't make sense since he'd done nothing but try to get me to talk to him since all of this happened, but it was still so hard to comprehend that he'd changed *this much* over three weeks' time. It was so hard to comprehend that he'd changed this much because of *me*.

I looked over when I heard another car pull up and saw Edward parking behind me, the headlights dying out quickly and the sound of his car door slamming echoing around the quiet neighborhood. I took yet another deep breath and set my feet firmly on the ground, stopping the motion of the merry-go-round and waiting for him to appear. He did a few seconds later, wearing the same clothes he'd been wearing earlier at school and his keys jingling as they hung from his hand.

"Hey," he said softly, stopping in front of me.

"Hi." I nodded towards the empty space next to me. "Care to join me?"

He nodded and quickly sat down, dropping his keys on the space next to him.

"Can I explain it all to you now?" he asked quietly, folding his hands in his lap.

I closed my eyes and swallowed hard, letting go of the bars and lying down on the hard surface, my legs still dangling off the side. I pulled at the hem of my shirt and then as an afterthought, raised my legs and placed my feet flat on the edge.

"Yeah."

"You know that Mike throws these parties whenever his parents are out of town and I always used to go to them. It was just common knowledge that I'd go and I never disappointed. Lauren took the video; I thought she was only taking a picture. I was drunk and I was on my way to being pretty damn high and I didn't... I didn't *know you*."

"Do you think...?"

"Please just let me finish?" he asked, his voice pleading. I nodded again, keeping my eyes closed and jolting a little when we started moving. "We were just being assholes and he asked me that just because it was when we were first paired up for the project and it was a fun topic for us."

I flinched and clenched my teeth together, crossing my arms over my stomach.

"His parents bought him his BMW a few days after the party and he hasn't driven the Buick since. I had to throw out those boots that I was wearing because I'd worn them so much that I'd worn the soles right off of them. That's what I was trying to tell you in class the other day. That video wasn't from the party last Friday."

"I know that now," I said quietly. "It doesn't change the fact that you still said those things."

"I know that. I wasn't... Bella, I'm not the same person now."

"Why did that change?"

"When I grabbed you that day and I put marks on you... Jesus Christ, Bella, that was like my fucking wake up call or something. I was raised to respect women and treat them with the highest *form of* respect and to *never* put my hands on them that way."

He stayed quiet and I finally opened my eyes, staring up at the star-specked sky as I thought of what to say to him.

"Carlisle isn't my biological dad, Bella."

I slowly looked over at him, the muscles in his back as he continued to slowly push us around visible through his shirt in the dim light from the few streetlights overhead.

"What?"

"My real father abused my mother." He looked over his shoulder at me and the pain on his face nearly took my breath away. "He hit me once when I was three and that was what it took for mom to call the police on him. I said I'd never be that way to anyone, no matter what. And I..." He shook his head and looked away from me. "My first memory is of him coming at me and hitting me as I sat on the living room floor with a coloring book while my mom screamed at him and I just... I *hurt* you. I put *marks* on you like he did to me and my mother and..."

I pushed myself back, sitting up and pulling my legs from my space between the bars to settle them around him. I felt him stiffen as I pressed myself against his back and wrapped my arms around his waist, resting my cheek on his back.

It didn't make the things he'd said about me right and it didn't get him off the hook completely but it sure as hell helped me understand a lot more about him. Not everything was as perfect and as peachy in his life like he'd made it seem, either.

"Bella, it's not an excuse to get you to believe me..."

"I know," I whispered, tilting my head up and resting my chin on his back. "I know."

"I'm so sorry, Bella."

"Edward, please, you were already forgiven for that..."

"When I said those things... I... I had no right to say them. No one has any right to say anything about you and it took me hurting you to realize that. I don't deserve your forgiveness, I don't deserve your company... I deserve for you to kick me to the curb and make me suffer for everything that I've ever done to you."

"I would never do that."

"But you should!" he exclaimed, pulling my arms from his waist and jumping up to pace in front of me. "God, you *should*."

"But I *won't*."

"Why?"

"Everyone deserves a second chance."

"I've already had my second chance with you, remember?"

"*This* you hasn't had a second chance with me. *This* you is different than the guy I talked to three weeks ago."

He stared at me and I stared back, doing my best to think of anything else to say to him. I'd never expected this. I'd never expected to hear anything like this from him and wondered why his past had never been talked about before. It was a small town and people couldn't keep their mouths shut about shit like this. I shook my head once, licking my lips.

"Why didn't I know about your dad before?"

"Your father actually made sure to keep it quiet for us. The only people that knew were the neighbors that saw the cops at the house that night and the other cops that showed up with your dad."

"The neighbors didn't say anything?"

"The neighbors were Carlisle and Emmett's family."

Well, that explained everything.

"Oh," I said quietly.

"Yeah."

"You always refer to Carlisle as your father..."

"He may not be my biological father, but he's always been there when I needed him. He's more of a father to me than Edward Senior was and that's all that matters to me."

I nodded and curled my legs underneath me, staring down at my lap as I played with my fingertips.

"When did your feelings for me change?" I asked quietly. "When did you want to be with me?"

"When I came to see you after Jessica and Lauren wrote those things on your locker. When you let me get you out of the house and trusted me when I asked you to."

"Why?"

"You are such a good person, Bella," he breathed, reaching up and tangling his hands in his hair. "When I saw what had happened to your locker I just... I saw red." He chuckled darkly and shook his head. "You're funny and sweet and you've got more personality than anyone I used to call friends. You never tried to fit in, you never asked for anything from anyone, you never *bothered* anyone and all we did was torture you. You never deserved anything we ever did to you and it took that for me to really get it."

"I'm not thin, Edward. I probably never will be."

"I don't fucking care about that."

"You used to."

"I used to care about a lot of shit that I don't anymore. Bella," he said, taking one step towards me and crouching down in front of me, "you're beautiful. I meant it when I said it before and I mean it just as much now. Everything about you is beautiful and I'm *sorry* for everything."

"If I say that you're forgiven, will you stop apologizing?" I asked softly.

"Yes."

"You're forgiven."

"You're not just saying that out of pity?"

"Edward."

"I'm serious."

"So am I."

"Do you believe me about the pictures and the party?"

"Yes."

"Do you hate me?"

"What? No!"

"You should."

"Edward."

"I mean it!"

"I thought you were trying to get me back?"

"I'm just trying to make things right."

"What do you think you just did?"

"I don't know."

I couldn't help myself and snorted, shaking my head at him.

"There aren't anymore videos out there, are there?"

"I'm honestly not sure. And if there are, they are *not* recent."

"I'm sorry for not trusting you and listening before."

"I wouldn't have trusted me, either. You are not at fault here, Bella. I deserved everything you did and everything you said."

"We'll get through it." I leaned forward and grabbed one of his hands, holding it tightly in mine.
"High school doesn't last forever."

"Thank fucking God for that."

"Amen."

He laughed weakly and I smirked sadly, tugging on his hand. He stood up and I pulled him back down to sit in front of me. He slid his knees onto the platform, the merry-go-round moving slightly at the movement and he grabbed onto one of the bars with his free hand.

"I want to try again with you, Bella," he whispered, resting his head against the bar behind him. "If you'll let me, I want to try again."

"What do you think we're doing right now?"

"Sitting here while I pour my pathetic heart out to you and beg you to take me back?"

I laughed and twisted our fingers together, bringing the back of his hand to my cheek. He lifted his fingers from the back of my hand, trailing his knuckles on my skin before dropping our hands to my lap.

"I'm gonna make mistakes," he said softly.

"So am I. And we'll figure them out together, Edward. This isn't something we have to be perfect at."

"You're so much smarter than me," he whispered, chuckling.

"Yeah, well..."

His mouth dropped open and I laughed loudly, throwing my head back and then screaming when he tackled me. He hovered over me, a crooked smirk on his face as he anchored his elbows on either side of my head.

"You said it!" I exclaimed.

"You weren't supposed to *agree* to it."

"I cannot tell a lie."

"All right, George."

I laughed and reached up to place my hands on his chest, automatically moving one hand over his heart and feeling his erratic heartbeat underneath my palm.

"You make that happen," he whispered.

I bit my bottom lip and met his eyes.

"What?"

"You're the only one that's made my heart beat fast like that." He laughed nervously, looking away from me. "Whenever you're around me..."

"Bella Radar?" I asked when he paused.

"Emmett," he sighed heavily, dropping his forehead to my shoulder.

I laughed and moved my hands from his chest, wrapping them around his shoulders and closing my eyes when he buried his nose in my neck.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Anything."

"Were you ever embarrassed to have me meet your family?"

He sighed heavily and I closed my eyes tightly, swallowing hard.

"When we first had to do this project, yes," he said quietly. "The more we talked, the more I got to know you... I couldn't find a reason for it not to happen anymore."

"And then I showed up at the bottom of your driveway."

He laughed quietly and I bit my bottom lip when I felt his lips against my skin.

"Something like that."

"Was it Jessica and Lauren that put the DVD on my doorstep?"

"Yes."

I grunted and he picked his head up.

"They've been taken care of."

"You didn't fracture their jaws too, did you?"

"No!" he laughed, shaking his head. "Rose took care of it."

I raised an eyebrow at him.

"Aside from Mrs. Gold, she's the main yearbook committee person. She's also very crafty when it comes to using Photoshop."

"What would she...?"

"You don't wanna know."

"All right."

"What do you say, Bella?" he asked softly, gently nudging his nose against mine. "You wanna be my girlfriend again?"

"I *suppose* so," I sighed dramatically. His face fell and my eyes widened. "Joke, joking. Too soon? Shit. Sorry."

He laughed shakily and shook his head, closing his eyes. I moved my arms from his shoulders, placing my hands on his cheeks and rubbing my thumbs underneath his eyes.

"*Really* sorry."

He turned his head into my palm, pressing his lips to the center and raising one of his own hands to cover mine. I buried my other hand in his hair, silently counting the times his lips pressed against my palm.

"Yes, by the way."

He laughed, kissing my palm for the eighteenth time before wrapping his fingers around my hand and looking back down at me.

"I'm different," he said softly.

"I know."

"So... do I have free reign to kiss you again?"

"If you really want to."

"I really want to."

"Then what are you waiting for?"

"You."

"I'm trapped underneath you. I'm clearly not going anywhere."

"Do you want me to move?"

"No, I'm fine."

"Then stop complaining."

"Are you going to get to the kissing sometime tonight or do I need to tattoo a sign on my forehead?"

"I'm not sure I'd like that."

"Well then get to it, boy!"

He laughed, his curved mouth *finally* meeting mine.

"I've missed you," he mumbled, pulling back from me slightly.

"I've heard."

"Fucking Emmett."

"Your mother."

"*What?*"

"She said it at the game. Do you know you talk a lot for someone who supposedly wanted to kiss me?"

"My *mother* told you that I missed you?"

"Yes."

"Well hell."

"Alice said you were miserable."

He groaned and buried his face back into my neck. I laughed and wrapped my arms tightly around his neck, closing my eyes and turning my head to brush my nose against his cheek.

"Traitors."

"Were they right?"

"Doesn't matter."

"If it makes you feel any better, I wasn't so great without you, either."

He hummed and I smirked.

"That makes it a little better."

"That's what I thought."

"Think you're a know-it-all," he grumbled.

"Are you disagreeing?"

He huffed.

"No."

"All right then."

"What time do you need to be home?"

"Midnight."

He moved from me slightly and raised one arm, presumably looking at the watch I never realized he wore.

"Good," he said brightly, dropping his arm and looking down at me again. "I've got half an hour to make out with you."

I laughed loudly, quickly silenced when his lips captured mine. So we spent half an hour making out on a merry-go-round at a children's playground. He walked me to my truck when our time was up, his hand linked with mine as we talked about the science fair and what time we needed to be there to set up. Not that we had all that much to set up to begin with, but it would give us plenty of time to get the last minute details into place.

"Do you want me to pick you up?" he asked, opening my door for me.

"If you want to."

"And I do."

"Then I guess, yes."

"You can't just say yes or no, can you? Gotta make things difficult?"

"I never said I was easy."

He laughed and I groaned, pushing on his shoulder with my free hand and starting to climb into my truck. He yanked me back, wrapping his arms around my shoulders when I yelped and fell into him. I huffed, narrowing my eyes at my steering wheel as he rested his chin on my shoulder.

"I wouldn't have you any other way."

I smiled slowly and leaned back into him.

Size fourteen be damned; I'd never felt more accepted and more hopeful than I had right now. And I wasn't even scared about it. For once in my entire life, I felt content with who I was and there was nothing more that I needed than that.

Epilogue

Edward

Diploma.

Check.

Throwing of the graduation caps in the air.

Check.

Pulling off the stupid blue gown I had been forced to wear and throwing it in the nearest trash can.

Check.

Finding girlfriend of three months through crowd and kissing her amidst the madness.

Check.

An entire summer of being able to hang out with her whenever the hell I wanted.

Ch – well, almost. Charlie had forced her to get a summer job and since I wasn't going to lie around the house all summer and wait for her to get done, I got one, too.

That hadn't been his plan, I'm sure, and it probably didn't help any that I'd gotten a job at the same place that she had. We were officially employed at the Fork's Diner for the summer until college started.

Not that I knew where I was going to begin with because I hadn't gotten an acceptance letter from the only college I really wanted to hear back from. NYU apparently didn't want to acknowledge that I existed while they seemed fucking thrilled to have Bella as a student.

She hadn't stopped getting shit from them since her acceptance letter showed up in the mail and I hadn't heard a damn thing. No rejection, no acceptance; *nothing*.

I was developing a complex.

Anyway...

Emmett and Ben singing, at the top of their lungs, *I've Had the Time of My Life* as they stood at the top of the bleachers with our group of parents and random family members that had made the trip out for this shit.

Check.

Rosalie snapping pictures like her life depended on the shit.

Check.

Feet stuffed into dress shoes that were two sizes too small and were damn near throbbing after two and a half hours.

Check.

The feel of Bella's lips curving underneath mine and her hands threading through my hair as Angela announced us officially graduated over the speaker system.

Fucking priceless.

She was the first thing I thought about in the morning. She was the last thing I thought about and the last person I spoke to before I fell asleep each night. She was the reason I always had a smile on my face. She was my longest lasting relationship to date and she'd turned into my everything.

It happened quick, yes. And not everything had been fucking sunshine and rainbows, either. We'd had our fair share of ups and downs and everything I thought I'd known had been twisted and turned upside down to the point where I wasn't sure which way was up anymore.

I thought the world had ended when I was paired up with her for the science fair project. I wanted to kill Jessica and Lauren for leaving me with no other option but to sit at the only other empty table in the room. I really wanted to murder the both of them when I saw Bella walk in and sit down next to me. But then I saw the bruises towards the end of the class period and I felt sick.

I'd done that to her. I'd promised my mother and Carlisle and everyone that knew about my past that I would *never* end up like my father. Marking a woman and putting my hands on her no matter how annoyed I was wasn't acceptable by any means.

It still made me sick every time I thought about it. I'd hurt her because I was having a bad morning and she was the first person I saw that I knew I could speak to the way I had.

Everything had changed with those bruises and while I regretted everything about them, they forced me to get to know her. The guilt I'd felt had pushed me towards her and while it was a mistake to even let it happen, it also brought about the best thing that had ever happened to me.

I'd been one of the biggest assholes in the entire school just because those were the types of people that I'd hung around with. We were the golden group, the ones that could do no wrong simply because we thought we were better than everyone else. If someone didn't fit into the mold we'd created, then they clearly weren't good enough for us to hang around with. It didn't matter to any of us who we hurt by what we said or the things we did and we'd all been very happy with that.

Then Bella, with all her strength and kindness, quietly and timidly slid into my life and had changed everything, making my life a hell of a lot better. I gave up everything to be with her and I'd do it all again in a heartbeat.

"You're gonna turn this graduation into a porno if you two don't knock it off."

I grunted and pulled away from Bella, keeping my arms wrapped around her waist as I looked up to find Rosalie standing next to us, her eyes glued to the back of her camera as she looked through her pictures.

"Like you and Emmett have never tried to do the same on any other day," I mumbled.

She shrugged innocently and shut her camera off, dropping it to her side before looking up at us and grinning.

"Are you ready to celebrate our freedom and rough it?"

She accentuated her question with a shake of her hips and I heard Emmett's wolf whistle, interrupting his rendition of the song. I shook my head and sighed, smirking as Bella laughed loudly and leaned forward to rest her head on my chest.

It had been Ben's idea to go camping to celebrate our *release from prison*, as he'd put it, and it had been the best idea that we could think of. It also helped that his older brother had agreed to buy us whatever alcohol we wanted as a graduation gift. Spending the night outside with the only people I considered my real friends – with a bunch of alcohol – was the perfect way to end my high school career.

"Yes!" Bella exclaimed, nodding quickly. "Let's just get the fuck out of here, shall we?"

"I've gotta stop at home real quick. These shoes are killing me," I groaned, attempting to stretch out my toes.

"That's what you get for not listening to me and your sister," Rose quipped, pointing at me. "You needed new dress shoes and you refused."

"Fuckers are expensive, Rose."

"Sometimes you just need to suck it up and do it. And what, you didn't pack any extra ones?"

"I'm not sure of where they are," I managed through my teeth, glaring at her.

"You can't spend fifteen minutes digging around in your trunk for them? You *have* to make us wait for your dumb ass, don't you?"

"You would do the same thing, Rose, and you know it," Bella stated, pointing at her.

"Meet me at the house," she chirped, grabbing her camera and snapping a picture of the two of us.

I rolled my eyes and she shrugged, turning on her heel and walking towards the bleachers.

"You wanna come with me?" I asked, looking down at her.

"Yeah, sure. Charlie said something about just going home anyway, so this will make it easier for him."

"Bailing out on the parent party, huh?"

"Do you blame him?"

I laughed and tilted her chin up, leaning down and kissing her again.

"No."

"Me either."

We finally made it over to where our families were waiting, Emmett and Ben had stopped singing – thank *God* – and we were hugged, kissed and cried on to within an inch of our lives before we finally made it out to the car. My parents, Alice and the rest of my extended family that had made the trip were going to Rose's for the get-together of the parents and Bella was right with her prediction; a kiss to the forehead, muttered congratulations to the both of us and Charlie was on his way home.

He and I had always gotten along to a certain point and when I found out that he'd been my cheerleader of sorts after Bella had seen that video of me, I kind of wanted to kiss his feet. For the first month that we'd dated, though, he'd been excruciatingly strict to the point where he would literally sit in between us when we were on the couch. The talk of spending the night at each other's houses was worse than screaming *fuck* in a room full of nuns at first. He'd finally loosened up enough in the last month that he'd let Bella stay at our house overnight, demanding that she stay in Alice's room. If I was ever allowed to spend the night – which was rare – I was too fucking chicken to move from the couch like I really wanted to and spent the night imagining that Charlie was sitting in the dark corner with his shot gun aimed at my head.

Standing up for me or not, he was still the police chief and I was still dating his daughter.

When Bella was at my house, we just made sure not to tell him that she snuck into my room once everyone was asleep and snuck back into Alice's before the sun rose in the morning. I wasn't sure if we were really that quiet or if my parents and Alice truly didn't suspect anything.

We hadn't slept together yet. Bella had made it very clear that she wasn't ready and maybe on some level, I wasn't either. I knew that being with her would be different and it would mean more than my previous escapades. In all honesty, that kind of scared the shit out of me. Top it off with her being a virgin and my nerves were through the roof about it.

Not that we were *completely* innocent. I'd found that watching and listening to Bella as she rode out an orgasm was fucking amazing and apparently, she thought the same about me.

And maybe this was insane, but the knowledge that she trusted me enough to let me touch her where she'd told me no one else had before was pretty fucking amazing, too. After all that I'd put her through and everything that had happened between us, she still put her trust in me.

I loved her. I'd never felt this way before, not even with Tanya and while I probably should've been scared about falling so hard for someone at this stage in my life, I wasn't. I'd heard horror stories about committing to someone when you were so young – my mother and father were one of those couples – but it felt right. I felt right when I had Bella by my side and no matter what happened, as long as she was there, I was good.

My mother had told me that when it was right, I'd know it. I finally understood what she was talking about.

I plopped down into the driver's seat of the car, sliding my shoes off and groaning in relief as I stretched out my toes. Bella laughed and I looked over at her, raising an eyebrow.

"You should've worn sneakers or something," she stated, lifting her hips up and unzipping the shapeless white gown the girls had had to wear for the ceremony.

My mouth watered when I saw the black dress pants and long sleeved green t-shirt that cut down low and I quickly leaned down to grab the shoes, throwing them over my shoulder and into the back seat as I stuck the keys into the ignition.

"You try convincing Alice to let me wear sneakers and I'll be your slave."

"I thought you already were?"

I looked over at her as she threw her gown in the back, her lips twisted into a smirk and her eyebrow raised at me.

"Is that all I am to you?"

"You're so much more than that." She slid out of her shoes as well, grinning at me. "You're also my chauffeur."

"Oh, is that right?" I laughed, turning the key.

"Yes." She laughed and then leaned over the center console, grabbing my chin in her hand. "And my best friend, my protector and my boyfriend."

"I wear a lot of hats, don't I?"

"Quite a few," she agreed, nodding and kissing me quickly.

"Are they at least nice hats?"

I waited for her to buckle up and did the same before getting into the line of traffic the parking lot had turned in to.

"They're the best hats."

"All right then."

We finally made it out of the parking lot and I pulled into my driveway fifteen minutes later. Bella slid her shoes back on and I reached down to pull my socks off before I climbed out. She was grabbing the gown and my shoes from the back and I scratched the back of my head, pursing my lips.

"I'm gonna get the mail real quick."

I was a man possessed when it came to getting the mail every day. Sundays were torturous and when I wasn't with Bella, I spent most of the day pacing back and forth, watching the clock and willing it to be Monday so that I *could* get the damn mail.

This was getting insane. I needed a fucking answer.

"All right," Bella laughed, humoring me as she always did.

I threw my socks on the trunk of my car and damn near sprinted down the driveway, wincing whenever I stepped on a wayward rock. I made it to the mailbox, pulled down the door and blinked. Big white envelope. *New York* printed on the top corner and showing only partway in the slanted light.

It was here and now I was terrified.

I swallowed hard and with shaking hands, I reached in and grabbed it, ignoring the other envelopes as I stared down at *my name* printed on the center of the *big fucking white envelope*.

I slowly walked back to where Bella was standing, wordlessly holding up the envelope when she opened her mouth.

"Open it," she demanded immediately.

"I can't."

"You have to."

"You do it."

I thrust the envelope towards her and she pushed my wrist away from her, holding onto my arm.

"No."

"Bella, I *can't*."

"Yes, you can. Do it. I'm right here."

She squeezed my arm in emphasis.

"What if I didn't...?"

"You did."

"How do you know?" I demanded, glaring at her.

"It's the big one, the same as I got. You have to open it."

I looked down at it and started chewing on my bottom lip – a habit that I'd picked up from her.

"If I didn't, we have to work something out..."

"We don't have to worry about that. You got in, I can feel it."

"But if I didn't..."

"We'll figure it out, but there's nothing to worry about, Edward." She moved her hands from my arm and grabbed my face as I blew out a deep breath and met her eyes. "Open it."

"Don't leave."

Could you sound any more like a fucking wimp, Edward? Seriously? Fucking Grey's. I'm done watching that show with her; it never gets me anywhere.

"Where the hell am I gonna go? You drove me here."

I stared at her and my eye twitched before I leaned down and pressed my lips roughly against hers, trying to gain the same strength and confidence she seemed to have. She kissed me back just as passionately, her hands sliding back into my hair.

"Open it," she breathed against my lips.

"I'm nervous."

"No, really?"

I grunted and she laughed quietly, her fingers tangling through my hair as she brushed her lips against mine a few times.

"Open it, Edward."

"Kiss me."

"Will you open it then?"

"I will dance around naked if you ask me to."

"All for a kiss?"

"A kiss from you," I grinned.

"You're not getting out of this."

"I'm not trying to."

"You're a liar."

"I'm a fibber."

"Same damn thing."

"Kiss me once more and I'll open it."

"Promise me."

"I promise. Make it a good one."

"As if my kisses are anything *but* good," she mumbled, her fingers curling into fists in my hair.

"It could be my last, you know."

"You're not dying," she mumbled, rolling her eyes.

"I will one day."

"Won't be today."

"Could be."

"Oh for fuck's sake," she grumbled before crushing her mouth against mine.

I groaned quietly, wrapping my arms tightly around her waist and stepping forward to press her against the side of the car. She opened her mouth to mine, her tongue flicking out against my bottom lip before disappearing back into her mouth.

She knew that drove me crazy. She did that shit on purpose. She *was* trying to kill me.

I sucked her bottom lip into my mouth, gently scraping my teeth along it and tightening my hold on her waist. She gently tugged on my hair and I involuntarily moaned, curling my free hand into the back of her shirt.

"There," she breathed, pulling my lips from hers. "Now open it."

"You're the devil."

"Yes, I am. Open the fucking envelope, Edward."

"Let's go inside first."

"You're stalling."

"Yes."

"You're an impossible pain in my ass."

"Yes, I am."

She sighed heavily and dropped her hands to my shoulders, tilting her head and pursing her lips. I smiled and kissed her softly a few times, brushing the end of my nose against hers.

"Fine. We'd better hurry up or you know Rose is gonna start calling here every few seconds."

"And I'll turn off the ringer."

I kissed her once more before I reached behind her and grabbed my socks. I moved from her and watched as she bent down to grab her gown and my shoes from where she'd obviously dropped them without me noticing. I waited for her before I walked up to the front door, pushed through it and dropped my socks on the floor. I heard my shoes hit the floor behind me and turned to watch

as she draped the gown over the coat rack in the corner. I held my hand out and she grabbed it, linking our fingers before I led her into the living room. We plopped down on the couch and I stared down at the envelope, my heart in my throat.

"It's like a band aid, Edward."

"A very big, very expensive, life-altering band aid."

"Well... yeah."

I snorted and looked over at her, rubbing my thumb over the back of her hand. She placed her other hand on top of ours and leaned forward to rest her head on my shoulder. I sighed heavily and rested my cheek on the top of her head, swallowing hard and moving my hand from underneath hers.

"All right."

She placed her hands on my thigh and I licked my lips, my hands shaking again as I turned the envelope over and started to peel the flap back. I swallowed hard at least three times before it was open and I stuck my hand inside. I huffed out a deep breath and closed my eyes tightly before pulling the papers out.

"Open your eyes," she whispered, her fingertips digging into my thighs.

"Tell me."

"I won't."

"Do you really have to make everything so difficult?"

"Yes."

"Bella," I whined.

"Open your eyes, Edward."

"I'm..."

She moved away from me and my eyes flew open, landing on her as she sat on the floor in front of me. Naturally, my eyes were drawn to the papers in my hand and I huffed, slowly reading over the words on the page.

"Congratu – oh my fuck."

"You're in!" she squealed, her hands on my knees. "Edward, you're *in*!"

I dropped the envelope to the side and slapped the acceptance letter – along with whatever else was in that envelope – on the coffee table behind her before leaning down and wrapping my arms around her shoulders. She leaned up on her knees, pressing her lips forcefully against mine. I laughed and moved my arms, placing my hands on her cheeks as she got up from the floor and crawled into my lap, her hands curling into my shirt.

"I love you," I whispered.

She backed away from me and I slowly opened my eyes, looking into hers to find... shock. I sat up again, slowly moving my hands from her face and wrapping my arms around her waist, waiting for her reaction.

We hadn't actually said it out loud. I felt it and prayed that she did too, but neither of us had ever said it out loud before. We'd had plenty of opportunities, but it just never...

This was right. This was the right time.

And she was staring at me as if I'd grown two more heads.

"Bella?" I whispered, forcing myself to stay calm. "Say something."

I laughed nervously and swallowed hard.

"Really?" she asked quietly.

"Yes, of course."

"You... you love me."

I nodded.

"Are you sure?"

I grabbed one of her hands, sliding it over my heart. I watched her slowly curl her bottom lip into her mouth, her eyes trained on her hand as she splayed her fingers out over my chest.

"I've never been more sure of anything, Bella," I whispered, covering her hand with mine. "I'm in love with you."

"I..." She shook her head once and looked up at me again. "I love you, too, Edward."

"Are *you* sure?"

She laughed, moving her hands from my chest to wrap her arms around my neck, her mouth back on mine as she shifted and straddled my lap. I hummed and placed my hands on her waist, leaning back against the cushions once more and opening my mouth to hers.

"Positive," she whispered, pulling away from me and resting her forehead against mine.

My heart fluttered pathetically and I smiled, slowly rubbing my hands in circles on her back. This was, quite possibly, the best day of my entire fucking life.

"I think you should call Emmett," she whispered again, brushing her nose against mine.

"Why?"

"Tell him that we'll meet them there."

"What are you...?"

She kissed me then, slowly dragging her tongue over my bottom lip. I quickly responded to her, opening my mouth and twisting my tongue with hers. Then she purposely slid her hips across mine and my eyes flew open. I pulled back from her and she bit her lip, her eyes slowly opening to mine.

"What?" I managed.

"I wanna be with you," she said quietly, her voice soft and barely audible.

"You wanna...?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure?"

"Do you?"

"Fuck yes."

"Then why are you all freaked out about it?"

"I want you to be sure," I whispered, leaning forward. "I don't want you to regret anything."

"I won't regret anything," she whispered back, sliding her hands from my neck to rest on my chest once more. "I'm with you and it's not like I haven't been thinking about it." She bit her bottom lip and smirked a little. "It's right."

I breathed out a laugh, nodded and leaned forward to kiss her again, sliding my hands down her hips and onto her thighs.

"Call Emmett," she whispered, trailing her lips down to my neck.

"You gotta stop doing that, then," I laughed nervously, swallowing hard.

She hummed before pulling back and standing up. I made some sort of noise in protest and leaned forward a little more to grab her around the waist. She laughed and placed her hands on my head until I looked up at her. She leaned down, kissing me softly.

"I'll wait for you upstairs," she breathed against my lips before walking away from me.

I watched her walk away, tilting my head as I stared unabashedly at her ass as she climbed the stairs.

She really was beautiful. Every single inch of her was amazing and I loved her. I'd stopped caring about her weight around the time I took her on our first date, finally able to open my fucking eyes and see the person that she was. And the person that she was, was fucking gorgeous and everything everyone in that school should've aspired to be.

She'd lost weight – we both ran at least three times a week when we could – and she'd been so fucking excited that all of her clothes were getting too big on her. I, personally, wouldn't have cared either way, but it made her happy and that's all I wanted for her.

I hated that it used to be something that I would've wanted three months ago. I hated that I wouldn't have – and hadn't – looked twice at her before I'd put those bruises on her wrist. I was the biggest asshole I'd ever known and I never deserved anything she'd ever given to me.

But I loved her and she'd said that she loved me back so who was I to question that shit?

I snapped out of it when I heard my bedroom door close and all but jumped off the couch, dashing into the kitchen and grabbing the phone from the wall. I managed to fuck up Emmett's cell phone number three damn times before I finally got them in the order they were supposed to be in and pressed the phone against my ear, impatiently tapping my toes as I listened to it ring.

"Pick up the phone, fucker," I grumbled, pacing and casting glances at the stairs as I passed the doorway.

"Why in the fuck are you not here?" he finally answered. "We're not gonna make it there until dark now, asshole."

"We'll meet up with you later," I said quickly, immediately ceasing my pacing and grinning at the refrigerator doors.

"What the hell are you – oh!" he boomed, laughing loudly. "Go get'cha groove on, dude."

"You do know that we don't live in the sixties, right?"

"Why the fuck are you still talking to me? You've got business to attend to."

"Point," I grumbled, quickly slamming the phone back on the wall and darting up the stairs.

I stopped outside my bedroom door and blew out a deep breath, placing my hand on the doorknob and slowly pushing it open. The lights were off and I barely saw Bella sitting at the head of the bed from the light slanting in through the doorway. I was *not* a morning person and had always kept my shades closed for the entire day, too lazy to open them when I got up each morning. I was only going to close them when I went to bed anyway, so really, there was no point.

I shook my head once, licking my lips and trying to concentrate on the girl sitting on my bed. Bella had her knees up to her chest, her arms wrapped around her legs and her bottom lip in her mouth as she looked at me.

"What are you doing in the dark?" I chuckled, reaching over for the light switch.

"No!" she exclaimed.

My hand stilled over the switch and I raised an eyebrow at her.

"Care to explain?"

"I..." She sighed and dropped her legs, placing her hands in her lap. "I'm not thin, Edward. My stomach isn't all that flat, I have stretch marks and I just... I have... I'm just..."

"You do remember that this won't be the first time I see you without a shirt on, right?" I asked, closing the door behind me and carefully maneuvering around the bed and clutter I knew was on my floor.

"This is different and you know it."

I sat down next to her, sliding my hands on the comforter until I reached her legs. I grabbed her hands and slid closer to her, pulling them up to my chest and holding onto them tightly.

"How many times have I told you that you're beautiful?" I asked softly.

"A few."

I snorted and she squeezed my hands.

"You believe me when I say it, don't you?"

"I'm... Edward, I know that I'm not."

"You are to me."

She was quiet and I placed her hands over my heart, holding them there and listening as she blew out a deep, shaky breath.

"Have you changed your mind?"

"No," she breathed, her fingers curling into my shirt.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"We can wait a little longer, Bella. I'm not going to push you."

"I don't want to wait anymore. I want to be with you." She moved closer to me and I closed my eyes when I felt her breath on my lips. "I'm just scared."

I moved one hand from hers and slowly reached out to cup the back of her head, carefully sliding my fingertips over her scalp.

"Would it make you feel any better if I said that I was, too?" I whispered, leaning in to rest my forehead against hers.

"You are?"

"Yeah," I chuckled.

"Why?"

"You mean more to me than anyone else ever has."

"Yeah?"

I laughed and nodded, brushing my nose against hers.

"Hell yeah."

"That makes me feel a little better."

"Glad to hear it."

"Lights out? Please?" she whispered, turning her hand over and squeezing mine again.

"I want to see you."

"I'm not..."

"You're beautiful," I whispered, leaning in a little more and gently touching my lips to hers. "Let me show you."

"You think so?"

"I wouldn't say it if I didn't think so."

"I don't know what to do."

"I know," I smirked, moving my hand from the back of her head to cup her cheek. "Just relax, Bella. That's all you need to do."

"Will you tell me if I suck?"

"No."

"Edward!" she laughed, smacking the back of her hand against my chest.

"It's your first time, Bella," I laughed, kissing her again. "Shit isn't gonna be perfect."

"Practice makes perfect, though, right?"

I breathed out a choked laugh and nodded, leaning forward and placing my lips firmly against hers. She sighed against my mouth and her hand moved from mine before she tangled both of them in my hair and pulled me closer to her. I sucked her top lip into my mouth, reaching up with my other hand to cup her face completely.

"Just know that I'm with you because I want to be," I whispered, backing away quickly. "I'm with you because I love you, Bella."

"You're lucky that you're good with words," she laughed quietly, moving her hands from my hair.

"I mean it!" I insisted, laughing.

"I know." She traced my jaw with her thumbs. "Still true, though."

"Thanks. I think."

"You're welcome."

She wrapped her hands around my neck and kissed me again, her tongue quickly sliding over mine when I opened my mouth to hers. I moved my hands from her face, slowly trailing them down her neck and sliding them to rest just above her breasts. I could feel her erratic heartbeat underneath my hands, matching mine. I tilted my head, pressing my mouth more firmly against hers as I slid my hands down even further, listening as her breath hitched when I twisted my hands and cupped her breasts.

There was no easy way to think this; Bella was fairly gifted in the boob department. She'd once told me it was because she was heavier and I really didn't care – I was not complaining by any means. They were fucking perfect.

"More," she breathed, pulling back from me and moving her lips to my ear.

My eyes rolled back in my head and I quickly slid my hands underneath her shirt, pulling it over her head as she raised her arms. I grabbed her arms before she could cross them, placing them around my neck and running my hands down her skin.

"No hiding," I whispered, burying my face into her neck and kissing her shoulder.

I heard her swallow hard and smiled into her neck as she trailed her hands from my neck and stopped at the top button of the dress shirt my mother had forced me to wear this morning. She got through the buttons and I sucked in a deep breath as she ran her hands over my bare chest, sliding up to my shoulders and forcing me to move my hands from her as she slid it down over my arms.

I loved the feeling of her hands on me. It was like little shocks of electricity were being shot from her hands into me and I'd never get tired of that feeling. It was something that I'd never felt with anyone before and I fucking reveled in it.

I wrapped my arms around her waist again, pulling her towards me and laughing quietly as she huffed when she fell into me.

"Think you're funny," she grumbled, her lips at the hollow of my throat.

"In your words, I'm a fucking riot."

She laughed, shifting slightly so that she was straddling my lap. I ran my hands up her back, the small bumps familiar, soft and welcome under my hands as I reached the clasp of her bra. She wrapped her arms around my shoulders, her lips back on mine as she slowly rocked her hips over mine. I moaned quietly, unable to stop the automatic motion of my hips as I thrust up towards hers. She scraped her teeth over my bottom lip and I worked on unclasping her bra, my breathing labored as she continued to work her hips over mine.

I finally got her bra unhooked and she moved her arms, pulling it off and throwing it behind her. I moved my lips from hers, placing a trail of admittedly sloppy, open-mouthed kisses down her neck. She tilted her head back, her hands grabbing onto my shoulders as I leaned her back and kissed down her chest.

"Lay down," I whispered, my voice slightly husky.

She crawled off my lap and I felt the bed shifting as she moved. I waited for her to stop before I leaned over and kissed her quickly. She grunted unhappily when I pulled back and I smiled.

"I'm gonna turn my lamp on, okay?"

I waited for an answer, reaching over and placing my hand on her stomach. I smirked when I felt her muscles contract under my hand, slowly dragging my fingertips back and forth.

"Okay," she breathed.

I wanted to fucking jump for joy, but I managed to only reach over and twist the knob. It wasn't a bright light by any means, but it definitely shed enough light for me to see everything. I looked over at her, my eyes roaming over her as she lay there, her arms at her sides and her bottom lip in between her teeth.

"Not too bad, right?"

"No."

I nodded and laid down next to her, placing my hand on her stomach again. I smirked as her muscles contracted at my touch once more, slowly moving my hand up and rubbing my thumb on the underside of her breast. I felt her breath hitch and looked up at her quickly, finding that her eyes had closed, before I looked down at my hand again. We were both pale, but in comparison, she was even worse than I was. I was a few shades darker than she was and the contrast on her skin only managed to mesmerize me as I slid my hand in between her breasts.

I looked down when her hand moved, reaching up and tangling in my hair. She pulled me down, her lips rough on mine and I groaned when her teeth scraped against my bottom lip. I slid my hand down, resting on the top of her dress pants and tugging slightly. She merely lifted her hips, sucking my top lip into her mouth. I plunged my tongue into her mouth, attempting to flick open the complicated buttons of the stupid dress pants that were *not* jeans – I was a pro at unsnapping her jeans with one hand, damn it – as she pulled my lips more forcefully against hers.

"Do you have these *glued* together?" I breathed, pulling away from her and bending over her waist.

She laughed and moved her hand from my hair, pushing my hand away and quickly getting the button open for me.

"Thanks," I said simply, grabbing one of her hands and placing it on my shoulder.

"Sure."

I grabbed the zipper tab and pulled it down, keeping my eyes on hers and watching as she pressed her lips together, her chest heaving with every breath she took. She cupped her hand around my neck, pulling me back down to her and slowly moving her lips across mine. The urgency she'd expressed a few seconds before was gone, replaced with something different, something more tranquil and relaxing. I sat up and slowly moved over her, settling in between her legs as she moved them on either side of me. She reached up, placing her hands on my stomach and trailing them down to the top of my pants. I licked my lips and watched as she fumbled with the button in much the same fashion that I had with hers. I shifted in an attempt to help her and she grunted at me, shaking her head and finally managing to get the button through the hole.

"I'm getting better at it," she laughed quietly.

I laughed with her, nodding and leaning in to kiss her quickly, moving on to her neck and attaching my mouth to her skin. I felt her hook her fingers into the waistband of my pants and my heart started beating a little faster than it normally did with her around as she slowly tugged down on them.

We were really doing this. This was really happening and she really wanted to be with me. She trusted me enough to be her first and to have the light on even though she really didn't want it to be. Fuck, this girl fucking *loved* me and she was showing it in every way possible.

I kicked out of them once she had them down around my ass and leaned over her again, anchoring one hand near her head as I ran the back of my knuckles over her stomach.

"You gonna take them off anytime during this or you gonna just tease me?" she asked me after a few moments.

I snorted into her neck and she laughed, reaching up to wrap her arms tightly around my shoulders and bury her face in my neck.

"I'm getting there."

"Well, get there quicker."

"Demanding, are we?" I mumbled, dipping my head into her neck and kissing her shoulder.

"Maybe I just need you," she whispered, tilting her head and gently nipping at the bottom of my ear.

If I hadn't been hard before she said that, I sure as hell was *now*. Fuck, that was hot.

"Oh yeah?" I squeaked.

"Mm," she hummed against my skin, her tongue darting out of her mouth as she moved down to my neck.

It was absolutely fucking amazing how she could go from being shy one minute to something resembling a seductress in the next. I wasn't sure if she realized that she was doing it or what kind of effect it had on me, but either way, I fucking loved that it happened at all.

"All right," I whispered, clearing my throat and pressing my hand on her stomach once again.

I trailed it down slowly, stopping when I reached the opening of her pants. She pushed her hips up and I swallowed hard, leaning back from her and grabbing the fabric at her hips. I slowly pulled them down, leaning back as she pulled her legs up and bent her knees. I pulled them off, throwing them to the side and watching as she placed her legs on either side of me again. I groaned quietly, running my hands up her legs and stopping at the band to her short-like underwear.

"Gorgeous," I whispered, bending down and kissing her.

She moaned quietly, the sound going straight down to my crotch, and arched her chest into mine, propping one of her legs up and doing this body roll thing that drove me fucking mad. Every inch of her managed to touch me at some point during those few glorious seconds and I tightened my hands on her hips as I groaned into her mouth. She whimpered as I slid my hand underneath the leg of her panties, her kisses becoming more urgent and her hands grabbing onto my neck once again. I slid my fingers towards her center, breaking away from her and moaning as I buried my face in her neck.

She was fucking Heaven. No matter how many times I've felt her, every time was better than the last.

I slid my fingertips into her warmth, listening as her breath caught, and grunting when I realized that her panties were only going to hinder most movement.

"Off," I mumbled, pulling my hand out and grabbing the top of them.

She moved her hands from my neck before I could say anything and had them off her hips before I could even move. Hell, I don't know how she did that, but I didn't care. I quickly replaced my hand over her, slowly sliding my finger into her.

"Oh," she whimpered, her fingernails biting into my skin.

I littered kisses all over her neck, moving down to her chest as she threw her head back into the mattress. Her hands slid off my neck and I looked up when she reached above her, fisting her hands into the comforter. I licked my lips, watching as her mouth fell open as I slid my finger in and out of her.

There were no words to describe how much I loved watching her while I was touching her. Everything about her was down; her defenses, her self-esteem issues, whatever she was stressed out about disappeared and I loved seeing her like this. I loved it even more because *now*, she was naked. And every little thing that she didn't like about herself only made me love her more. The stretch marks she was so worried about reminded me that she was *real* and I wouldn't trade that for anything in the world.

I added my thumb to her clit, burying my face into her throat and pressing my lips there as she moaned. I slid another finger inside of her, trailing my lips down to her chest as she started moving her hips against my hand.

"Fuck," she moaned, arching her back.

I quickly moved down a little more, sucking one of her nipples into my mouth and pressing my thumb harder against her clit. She squeaked, her hips twisting slightly. I smirked, wrapping my tongue around her nipple and working my hand a little faster.

"Edward," she breathed, one of her hands slapping in between my shoulder blades, her nails digging in.

I scraped my teeth against her nipple, satisfied when she moaned loudly before moving my mouth back up to hers. She kissed me once before she moaned again and I felt her start to shake beneath me, her hand sliding back up into my hair as the other continued to fist my comforter.

"I love you," I whispered to her, my hips unconsciously moving slowly against her thigh.

She pulled my mouth back to hers and I curled my fingers inside of her, opening my mouth over hers as she cried out and clamped down.

Fuck, I couldn't wait to feel that entirely.

I pulled my fingers from her when she relaxed, her body falling back onto the bed from where she'd arched up against me. I smiled softly and kissed her once, anchoring myself on my elbows as I settled in on top of her again.

"Thank you," she breathed.

I laughed and shook my head before brushing my nose against hers and kissing her softly.

"There is no need to thank me."

"What if I thanked you for loving me?"

"Well then I'd just have to say ditto."

"You're not gonna get shot in some dark alley after we go to a movie, are you?"

"Excuse me?"

"You know...? *Ghost? Ditto?*"

"Oh for fuck's sake," I laughed.

"What?" she asked innocently, wrapping her arms around my waist and grinning up at me.

"You ever turn your mind off?"

"Only when you're touching me."

The playful mood she'd created about two seconds ago disappeared and I moaned, my eyes fluttering closed as she dragged her fingernails up and down my spine.

"Maybe I should... uh," I whispered, shaking my head once and licking my lips. "Maybe I shouldn't stop?"

"Maybe that's a good idea."

I felt her hands at the back of my boxers – the silk blue and yellow smiley-face ones that Emmett had bought for me a few years ago as some sort of stupid joke – and shivered as she dipped her fingertips under the band.

"Can I...?"

"You really don't need to ask," I laughed breathily, shaking my head again.

I buried my face in her neck as she pushed them down and kicked them off when she dragged them down to my knees.

It was easy to understand her insecurities about her body because I was in the middle of having my own. She'd touched me before, sure, the same way that I'd touched her, but we'd both been under the blankets of my bed and it had been dark. I hadn't thought about her seeing me when I told her that I wanted the light on and while I'd never been worried about my appearance before, she was right when she said this was different.

Then her hands trailed up my thighs, brushing over me and I forgot my damn name. I didn't care, either.

She placed her hands on my waist and I moved my hips forward a little, pressed right against her. Her breath hitched and I moved my face from her neck, looking down at her. Her bottom lip was in her mouth and she moved her hands from my waist, resting them on each side of my neck as she met my eyes.

"You ready?" I whispered.

She nodded, releasing her lip and I leaned down to kiss her, slowly pushing forward until the tip of me was inside of her. I fisted my hands in the blankets as her hands tensed on my neck and she whimpered, doing my damndest not to just keep going.

Fuck me, she felt amazing.

"Relax," I breathed out against her lips. "I'm sorry."

"Don't you dare fucking apologize," she managed, her voice broken. "I'm not."

Well, all right then.

I slowly slid into her a little more, each whimper and grunt from her that sounded uncomfortable and painful only making me feel a little worse.

"Band aid," she breathed, shaking her head.

"What?" I mumbled.

"It's just... *go*, Edward."

"I don't want to hurt..."

"It's gonna freaking hurt no matter what and this is like slow torture. Christ, just *go*."

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes tightly.

"I love you," I whispered out against her lips before thrusting completely into her.

I held still with great difficulty, my heart pounding furiously against my ribs as her fingernails dug into the back of my neck and she let out another one of those painful whimpers that stabbed at me. I kissed all over her face and her neck, waiting for her breathing to even out a small fraction.

I'd never been with a virgin before. Every girl that I'd been with had been with someone before me and I'd never had to deal with any of this before. Then again, if I had, I probably hadn't cared about them much at all.

I was an asshole. We all knew it.

This was different. This was my *Bella*.

I finally felt her retract her fingernails from my neck, listening carefully as she blew out one more deep breath before threading her hands into my hair.

"Okay," she whispered.

"You're sure?"

"Yes."

"Move with me, Bella," I whispered into her neck, slowly pulling out and pushing in again.

I pulled out and then slowly slid back in once more, my breath catching as she moved her hips up against mine.

"Like that?"

"Perfect."

She turned her head to the side and I quickly met her lips with mine, delighting in the small whimpers that I caught from her as we continued to move together. We kept it slow, our lips always touching at some point and I slowly felt my release building in the pit of my stomach after a while.

I couldn't put into proper words the way she was making me feel. Every inch of her was beautiful and perfect and I'd never felt like this with anyone else before. I'd always just wanted to be with someone for one thing and one thing alone; feelings had never been involved so much before.

I didn't find it scary. No, it was right. Everything about being with Bella and being in love with her and finding new things about her every day was right. We may have been young and we may have had to deal with shit that most adults didn't have to just to get to this point, but my heart had never steered me wrong before.

"Are you...?" I breathed out.

"Let go, Edward," she whispered, her lips capturing my top lip and sucking.

I pulled away from her, my hips moving faster against hers as I buried my face in her neck again. She wrapped her arms around my shoulders, her breathing labored in my ear and her fingertips digging into my skin.

I moaned loudly, throwing my head back as I let go. She kept moving her hips against mine as I stilled before I finally collapsed on top of her. Her hands were immediately in my hair again and I fought to catch my breath, slowly moving my arms underneath her and rolling us onto our sides. I slipped out of her, holding her against me tightly and placing my lips on her chest.

"You okay?" she asked softly, placing her other hand on my cheek and rubbing her thumb across my bottom lip.

I breathed out a laugh and slowly opened my eyes, grinning like an idiot.

"Shouldn't I be asking you that?"

"I'm... okay," she said hesitantly, nodding once.

The grin fell from my face and I moved one arm from around her, propping myself up on my elbow.

"Shit, Bella, I'm sorry."

"You're sorry for being with me?"

"No!" I shouted, my eyes widening as a million thoughts ran through my head.

How could she *think* that? My entire body had tensed the second those words left her mouth and I pulled her tighter against me.

"Then stop fucking apologizing. It had to happen and next time will be better."

I relaxed back onto my side and trailed my fingertips up and down her spine, smirking lazily.

"Already thinking about next time, huh?"

She grinned and nodded, shifting even closer to me and placing her hand back on my cheek.

"Yes."

"Did you, ah... come?"

She pursed her lips and shook her head again.

"It kind of, uh, hurt too much."

"Hm," I mumbled, leaning in to kiss her softly. "I'll be right back."

I jumped out of bed, getting my foot tangled in her shirt and forced to hop out of the room. I flung it over my shoulder once I got it off, shooting her a grin as I made it into the hallway. She laughed at me, shaking her head. I finally made it into the bathroom and quickly grabbed a few Advil pills, filling a paper cup with water before I walked back to my room – still fucking naked, might I add.

She was still lying on her side, her hands curled underneath her head and a small smile on her face.

"Here," I said softly, climbing back onto the bed next to her. I handed her the cup and the pills as she sat up, throwing her shirt back to the floor. "It should help."

"Thanks."

I nodded, watching as she downed the pills and set the cup on the nightstand.

"We should probably get going, huh?"

"If you want." I shrugged and leaned over to rest my chin on her shoulder, burying my nose in her hair and closing my eyes. "If not, we can stay here for the night."

"Rose would shoot us," she laughed, resting her head against mine.

I sighed heavily and nodded slightly in acknowledgement as I sat back from her, opening my eyes. My eyes ran down the length of her thighs and I flinched at the little spot of blood I saw there.

"Let's take a shower first, okay?" I suggested, grabbing one of her hands and starting to pull her towards the edge of the bed with me.

"Together?"

"Yeah," I grinned, sliding off the edge of the bed, my hand still wrapped in hers. "Come on, sexy."

She snorted and slid off the bed, standing in front of me and chewing on her bottom lip.

"Sexy. Right."

"Shut up," I mumbled, leaning down to kiss her. "I think you're sexy. Accept it and get over it."

"Ass."

"Maybe."

She laughed and squeezed my hand. I grinned at her and pulled back from her with a heavy sigh before leading her out of my room and back to the bathroom. We took a quick shower and I did my best to keep my hands to myself for most of it – it was her fault that she'd backed up into me, after all, and I had to catch her before she fell...

That's what I told myself, anyway. Told her that, too, and she didn't believe me either.

We got dressed and I brushed out her hair for her before I grabbed the shoes I'd been too lazy to look for after the ceremony and we got back into the car. I held her hand the entire way up to the clearing Emmett and I used to go to when we were younger to camp. They already had a fire started and I noticed that they'd even set up our tent for us.

"Gonna miss these guys," Bella sighed quietly as I parked the car next to Emmett's Jeep.

"Yeah, me too." I pulled her hand up to my lips and kissed the back of it. "Glad I don't have to miss you."

"Cheesy."

"Complaining?"

"Never."

"That's what I thought."

"Get out of the car," she laughed, pushing me away from her and opening her door.

I watched as she stood up, noticing the way she arched her back and heard her hiss a little as she did so. I grunted, shaking my head before pushing my door open and reaching in the back to get our bags for the night.

"Well it's about god damn time that you two showed your faces!" Rosalie yelled from her chair near the fire.

"Shut it!" Bella yelled back, rounding the car as I popped the trunk to get the sleeping bags and pillows.

I don't know why the fuck we brought two. It's not like I was letting her go anywhere that I wasn't and that included the sleeping bag. I wanted her as close as fucking possible; no excuses.

"How ya feelin', Bella? Stretched?" Emmett asked, stretching out in his chair and grinning crookedly at her.

"I'm not above throwing you in the fire," I stated, glaring at him as we made our way over to the small circle they'd created.

"This is just the beginning, Edward," Angela sighed, shaking her head and lifting the see-through pink cup to her lips. "He hasn't let up on it since we got here."

"So? Bella? Stretched? Wonderful? Glorious? Magnificent?"

"As a matter of fact, yes," she stated, nodding once and standing up straight.

I laughed loudly when the four of them stared blankly at her. I walked up behind her, dropping our bags to the ground as I wrapped my arms around her waist and pulled her against me. She laughed, her head falling back against my shoulder.

"Well all right then," Ben stated, clearing his throat and nodding. "Would either of you like a drink?"

"Yeah, sure."

"You're welcome for setting up your tent, by the way!"

"*Thanks*, Emmett!" Bella drawled.

"Damn. You give her a piece of ass and she turns into the sarcasm queen."

I looked over at Rose and she didn't even look up before she raised her hand and slapped the back of his head. I nodded, satisfied, before I placed a kiss on the side of Bella's neck and backed away from her to grab our bags again. We threw our things into the tent and I pulled Bella into my lap as I sat down in one of the two extra chairs, easily accepting the plastic cups Angela handed to us.

We sat around the fire for a long damn time, drinking from the bottle of Jack that Ben's brother had bought for us – the bunch of booze that we'd been planning on had clearly fallen out, but at least we had something – and finally getting around to signing each other's yearbooks. They hadn't gotten them to us in time and we'd barely had time to sign other random classmates' yearbooks before graduation started.

"Sign it!" Bella demanded, holding her yearbook and a pen that had seemingly appeared out of fucking nowhere out to Rose. "You have to, it's fucking priceless!"

Rose finally nodded, laughing as she leaned forward and grabbed the yearbook from Bella's hands, settling back into her chair and snickering.

Jessica and Lauren would forever be emblazoned topless in a collage of the senior class. I don't know how she got the pictures, who gave them to her or what she had threatened that person with, but I didn't care. It was fucking priceless and more than worth it to see Bella's reaction every time it was brought up.

"Fucking priceless," Angela agreed, laughing and leaning over to hold her cup high over the fire. "Class of 2009, baby!"

We all smashed our cups against hers and spent the rest of the night in the little circle around the campfire, rehashing the good memories that we had of each other and just basically enjoying all that we'd accomplished and everything that we'd pulled out of the four years we'd spent there. We made an oath not to talk about our college choices or anything that resembled having to separate, resolving to deal with it all tomorrow when we went back home.

Finally, we all started yawning and slurring our words in exhaustion. The alcohol helped, I'm sure, but for the most part, we were all fucking tired. It had been one hell of a day.

Bella climbed off my lap and dropped her empty cup into mine, holding out her hand and waiting for me to grab it.

"Goodnight guys," I mumbled, dropping the cups to the ground and running my free hand through my hair.

"Goodnight, lover boy!" Emmett chirped before yawning.

I waved him off, not even having the energy to say anything to him, and let Bella lead me towards our tent. She crawled in first and I zipped up the opening once I was in. I slid out of my pants and threw them in a corner of the tent, mumbling about how stupid zippers really were when I had to fight with the one on the sleeping bag. Bella laughed drowsily at me and I looked over at her, watching with rapt attention as she pulled her bra off and threw it on top of my pants.

"Don't even think about it," she laughed, pulling her pajama shirt over her head.

I sighed heavily and smirked at her before pulling my shirt off and crawling into the sleeping bag when I finally won the fight with the zipper. I grabbed one of the pillows and hastily shoved it underneath my head, watching as she squirmed into her pajama pants.

"Don't even think about it," I mimicked her when I saw her reach for the second sleeping bag.

"Excuse me?"

"Get in here."

I held up the flap of the sleeping bag and she eyed me as if I had suddenly turned into an alien.

"I can't fit in there with you."

"Yes, you can. Get in here."

"Edward..."

"I mean it."

She huffed and crawled over to me. I smiled satisfactorily at her as she crawled in beside me, extremely happy that we were pressed as tightly together as we could possibly get even without the side being zipped.

"Told you."

"Think you're smart."

"I *know* I am."

She snorted and I huffed, wrapping my arms around her.

"You're kind of evil, you know."

"You've said that a lot today."

"Yeah, well, I mean it."

"No you don't."

I smirked and buried my nose in her hair, breathing her in.

"We're going to sweat to death," she mumbled, burying her face in my chest.

"Do you care?"

"No."

"That's what I thought."

"Just thought I'd point it out."

"Mhmm," I mumbled, sighing contentedly. "Goodnight, Bella."

"Night." She tilted her head up and kissed the bottom of my chin. "Love you."

I grinned and moved my chin, leaning down to kiss her completely.

"I love you too."

I'd learned shit the hard way. It took one of the worst things I'd ever done to lead me to the best thing I'd ever had in my life. I didn't care what size she was. I didn't care about what anyone in our stupid high school had ever said about either of us because it didn't matter anymore. She'd opened my fucking eyes and for the first time in longer than I could remember, I was looking at everything in a different way. Size didn't matter to me anymore; I didn't care whether she was a size fourteen or a size four. She was mine, she was damn near perfect for me and *that* was all that mattered anymore.

Outtake 1.

Here is the first of the two promised outtakes.

"Tell me again why we're here," I said, staring at the front of Forks High School from the car.

"So that we can see how horrible everyone else looks," Edward stated.

I looked over at him, raising my eyebrow as he grinned at me.

"This place is like hell. No, it's worse than that. It's the seventh *circle* of hell."

"You're quite the drama queen tonight."

"I hate everyone in there."

"You hate Em and Rose? Angela and Ben?"

I growled at him and he laughed, reaching over and grabbing my hand. I looked back at the front of the school and scowled.

Nothing had changed. The front was just as I remembered it ten years ago. It was as if time had just stopped in this part of the world and I wasn't sure whether I wanted to be sick or enjoy the memories of first being with Edward that rushed back to me.

"This is going to be fine."

"I feel like I'm seventeen again."

"But you're not."

"Well I feel like it!"

"Bella," he laughed, leaning over to gently kiss my cheek. "You are a beautiful, successful, smart wife and mother. You are still that strong, independent woman that graduated with me ten years ago. There is absolutely no reason for you to be worried."

"These people..."

"Won't even recognize you." He grabbed my chin in his hand and turned my head, gently pressing his lips to mine. "Relax, sweetheart."

I sighed heavily and reached over with my free hand to place it against his heart. That had continued to be our thing through our entire relationship. When either of us needed reassurance, one of our hands always made it against each other's hearts and the heavy beats against our hands made everything make sense again.

I'd been dreading our high school reunion ever since we'd gotten the invitations in the mail at the beginning of the month. I'd even gone so far as to beg Edward to rip it up and forget about the whole damn thing. But he had to be a sadistic bastard and insist that we were going no matter what I said to him.

We'd stayed in New York after we graduated, having both fallen in love with all the ways that it was different from Forks. It had the added advantage of not having a single person from our graduating class follow us there. It had been hard at first, living in a cramped apartment with a half dozen rats crawling around inside the walls and no one from our family around to help us out when we needed it. We'd worked through most of our schooling and ended up with two jobs after we'd graduated, neither of us using our degrees at the time. Then Edward had gotten a call from the

New York Times at the end of March and I'd finally found a practice willing to take me under their wing. As soon as we'd had enough money, the first thing we did was find a bigger, rat-less place in a neighborhood that wouldn't give our parents anxiety attacks when they came to visit. The second thing we did was get married.

Our relationship had had its ups and downs – boys at college weren't as narrow-minded as the ones back in Forks and I'd found that having a jealous boyfriend was equally flattering and annoying as shit. Not to say that Mr. Gorgeous didn't have his own fair share of obsessed stalkers following his ass around campus, but I'd expected that. And when I didn't react the way he had – he still spent most nights in my dorm, after all. There really was no reason to get pissed off – he'd spent an entire day asking me why. I said I trusted him; he took it the wrong way and thought I meant that he didn't trust me. That was our first big fight and we spent a week without seeing or speaking to each other before I found him camped outside my dorm room one night after class with his head in his hands and an apology on his lips.

That was the end of that and now, even when we were pissed at each other, we at least still slept in the same bed. Make-up sex is a really wonderful thing, too.

It also resulted in our first child. Macie Marie Cullen was the spitting image of her father and she had the smart-ass attitude to go with it. Her eyes were mine, her hair was her father's and we absolutely adored her.

We'd been married for almost two years, living in a beautiful brownstone in the better part of the city, when I finally realized that I didn't have a damn cold. I'd called in Rose, who immediately flew in from Seattle to visit, and we'd confirmed with one of those little plastic drugstore tests that yes, I was indeed pregnant. Just to be sure, I'd of course made an appointment with the doctor and he'd only told me what I already knew. Edward and I had talked about having kids and had decided that when it happened, it happened. I stopped taking my birth control pills and we both did our best not to rush to the drugstore and buy a damn test after making love. It had taken longer than expected, but it had finally happened and now we had a beautiful four-year-old baby girl visiting with her Grandpa Charlie while we were sitting in front of the one place in the world I despised the most.

"I am not in a position to relax," I ground out through my teeth.

"You're not doing anything good for my son in this condition, you know."

His hand trailed from my chin and rested on my swollen stomach, rubbing circles and tilting his head at me. I sighed and placed my hand over his, linking our fingers and closing my eyes as I concentrated on breathing evenly.

"We don't have to stay long," he whispered, resting his chin on my shoulder and kissing my neck. "Go in, see how horrible the rest of our class looks and then we can be off."

"We promised everyone dinner tonight."

"So we did."

"You're a pain in my ass."

"You love me."

"Your mother paid me to love you."

"Is that any way to speak to the father of your children?"

"Who says the kids are yours? They could be the milkman's."

He laughed loudly and kissed me soundly.

"We don't have a milkman."

"That *you* know of."

"Macie looks too much like me." He grinned and I pursed my lips, huffing. "Maybe this baby will look just like you."

"God help him."

"Going back to that place again, are we?"

My self-esteem had been low for eighteen years of my life and Edward had made it his mission in life to raise it. It had been working well... until we pulled into the parking lot of this damn place and I went back to the same person I'd been while I was there. Pregnancy hormones didn't help this situation, either.

I'd gotten down to a size eight after Macie was born, thrilled that I hadn't kept the weight from my pregnancy and had somehow managed to lose a little more. Edward hadn't been so thrilled about it, pouting when I modeled a new pair of jeans for him and squealing that I'd never been this small in my life. He'd told me that I was perfect no matter what size I was – as he often had in the past – and had confessed that he even liked it more when I was heavier. I'd loved him for it, but had done my best to keep the weight off. It had worked for a while, until he started bringing home chocolate donuts and cheesecake from the diner in the heart of Manhattan that I fucking adored and had never been able to resist. A few weeks later, I was buying size twelve jeans, which still kind of made me happy because again, the smallest size I'd ever been before was a fourteen. I'd made him promise to stop bringing home that shit if I stopped trying to be thinner than I was and he'd agreed. Now, four years later and pregnant, I felt like a damn whale. Granted, it was for a good reason, but showing up to my ten-year high school reunion bigger than ever made me want to hide in the car for the rest of the night.

"I can't help it!" I whined, leaning over to bury my head in his chest.

"Okay, listen," he started, his arms wrapping around my shoulders, "this is gonna be a piece of cake, baby cakes."

"Baby cakes?" I grumbled.

"Don't question it."

"Can I call you cupcake?"

"You can call me anything you want if it gets you out of this car."

"In public?"

"Will you get out of the car?"

"Possibly."

"You do know that Emmett will probably tear off the car door in an attempt to get you out of it, don't you?"

"He doesn't know what car we have."

"No, but I'm pretty sure it's safe to say that we're the only two still sitting in ours."

"There are a lot of people here. It'll take him a while."

"No, it won't."

"Why did we need to come here again?"

"I already told you," he laughed, one of his hands threading through my hair. "We're gonna see all of our old classmates at their worst."

"Or their best."

"You are way too negative for your own good."

"You knew this when you started dating me."

"What do I have to do to make you see that none of it matters?" he whispered, one of his hands trailing back down to my stomach. "The only things that matter are me, you, Macie, this little guy, our friends and our families. These people haven't mattered to us in over ten years, Bella. Don't give them the satisfaction of thinking that they do now."

I breathed him in and nodded, slowly sitting back from him and placing both of my hands over his on my stomach.

"You're right."

"I know it."

I rolled my eyes and he laughed, leaning over to kiss me again.

"Stay here."

"It's not like I'm gonna go very far."

He narrowed one eye at me and I grinned at him, leaning back in my seat and watching as he climbed out of the car. I tapped my fingers against my stomach, looking down at it and slowly rubbing circles on it.

"I hope you're like your father, little guy," I whispered, smiling softly when I felt him kick. "He needs some support in keeping your momma sane."

I looked up when my door opened and smiled up at Edward, reaching one hand out and placing it in his waiting one. He helped me out of the car, closing the door behind me and wrapping an arm around my waist, placing the other on my stomach again.

"Your momma keeps your papa sane, too," he mumbled, leaning down and pressing a kiss next to his thumb.

My eyes watered and I looked up at him as he stood up straight, flinging my arms around his neck and kissing his jaw reverently.

"I love you so much," I sniffled, burying my face into his shirt.

He chuckled and wrapped his arms around me, hugging me tightly and kissing my temple.

"I love you too, baby cakes."

I snorted and stood up straight, wiping my eyes on my shirtsleeve and winding my fingers through his when he grabbed my hand.

"Cupcake," I sniffled.

"Yours."

I nodded and blew out a deep breath, squeezing his hand and looking up at the school again.

"Okay," I breathed. "Let's get this over with."

"It won't be that bad, I promise."

He squeezed my hand before leading me towards the front doors, each footstep echoing in my head as we stepped closer to the entrance.

"And if it is?" I asked, swallowing hard as I pulled him to a stop in front of the doors.

"I give you full permission to name our son Jameson."

"Done."

He leaned over and kissed my cheek as he pushed open the door for me.

"You're gonna lose," he whispered, shaking my hand from his to place it on the small of my back.

"I hope I do."

We walked into the lobby of the gymnasium and I wasn't sure whether to laugh or turn around and run back to the car when I realized that time really *had* stood still. There were a few new additions – like the snack machine in the corner and a display case on the opposite end of the room – but for the most part, everything was the same. It even still smelled the same.

"Relax, baby cakes."

I grunted and he laughed, leading me up to the table near the gym doors. I sighed as I spotted my nametag, *Swan* typed in bold letters after *Isabella*. I tilted my head at it, vaguely aware of Edward grabbing his own nametag and saying something to me.

That wasn't right. I wasn't a Swan anymore and I definitely wasn't Isabella.

"Gimmie your pen," I said, holding out one hand as I grabbed the nametag with the other.

"Why?"

"Please?"

He sighed heavily and dug the pen out of his back pocket. Ever since he'd gotten a column of his own a few years ago, he'd taken to carrying one around with him almost religiously.

I rested my nametag on my stomach – I finally found one of the advantages of being seven months pregnant at my high school reunion – and scribbled out *Isabella Swan*. I wrote *Bella Cullen* underneath it, nodding once and smiling down at it before I handed Edward his pen back and pinned the tag to my shirt. I looked at him and grinned.

"Wanna explain that?" he asked, sticking the pen back in his pocket and raising an eyebrow at me.

"I'm not that girl anymore."

"You're still you, Bella."

"I'm your wife, I've been that way for six years and I'm gonna be that way for the rest of our lives." I linked my fingers with his again. "I'm someone different and better thanks to you."

He stared at me before leaning down and kissing me forcefully. He cupped the back of my head with his free hand and I stepped into him, sucking his bottom lip into my mouth and placing our hands on my stomach.

"Fuck, I love you," he breathed as he pulled away from me.

I smiled and nodded, keeping my eyes closed as he rested his forehead against mine.

"I love you too." I squared my shoulders and he stood up straight as I opened my eyes. I looked over at the gym doors and squeezed his hand. "Let's go in there."

"There she is," he whispered into my ear, placing a quick kiss on my cheek before he stepped ahead of me and opened the door.

I took a deep breath and followed him inside, finding that the gym was only half-full of classmates I barely recognized as they stood around, talking and comparing life stories with drinks in their hands and dressed in their best classy outfits.

Not that they differed, I'm sure. I know for a fact that the majority of them still lived in the same town so the odds that they didn't all know what was going on with each other was very slim. If they wanted to pretend that they hadn't seen each other in the past twenty-four hours, hey, who was I to call them out on it?

"Oh Jesus Christ, it's about time," Rose breathed, suddenly popping up at my side and placing her hand on my shoulder. "Emmett was about to go and find you."

"Told you," Edward mumbled into my ear.

"Shut up."

"Come on!" she exclaimed, grabbing my free arm and leading us to the table they'd been sitting at.

"Bella!" Angela squealed, standing up from her chair and immediately wrapping her arms around my neck when we approached.

I laughed and hugged her back as much as possible. We hadn't gotten a chance to see everyone when we flew in yesterday afternoon, having been whisked away by Edward's parents and forced into family bonding and massive amounts of jet-lagged sleep. Rose and Emmett had shown up sometime around eight and demanded that we go out to a late dinner with them, declaring that they had first dibs with us for some damn reason that I didn't even want to know about.

Rose and Emmett had stayed close to home, relocating to Seattle and starting a joint body shop that had taken off very well. Ben and Angela had moved down to California, where Ben was a successful photographer and Angela was a publicist for a few relatively unknown celebrities. Our friends had flourished and I'd missed them horribly.

"Hi!" I squealed back, squeezing her tightly.

"How's my Godson?" she immediately asked, bending down to rest her hands on my stomach and place her ear over my bellybutton. "Everything all right in there?"

Edward laughed and kissed my cheek before he walked over to slap Ben on the shoulder and Emmett on the back of the head.

"Everything is fine in there," I assured her, plopping down into one of the uncomfortable plastic chairs when she stood up.

"How's my Goddaughter?" Rose asked, already sitting down and leaning her elbow on the table next to me.

We'd split up the Godparent thing between our friends – Ben and Angela were our as-yet-unnamed baby boy's godparents and Rose and Emmett were Macie's. All of them spoiled the shit out of her as it was and I'm sure nothing would change when our little boy showed up in two months.

"She's good. Visiting with Charlie tonight."

The relationship between my father and I had gotten better over the years. I found that I could tolerate him more when I didn't see him every day and had actually found myself missing his company while I was in college. Edward, Macie and I talked to him on the phone every Friday night at seven – Thursday nights were Grey's nights and as much as Edward grumbled and complained about it, he still sat and watched it with me – and we'd gotten along better than we ever had.

Distance, when talking about my father, had been the best thing for both of us.

"I better see that beautiful girl before you guys leave," Angela stated, pointing at me and pursing her lips.

"Promise. How's Calvin?"

"Growing up so fast," she grinned, her eyes sparking at the mention of her and Ben's only son.

He was six and an absolute gentleman. Between Angela and her manners and Ben and his need to teach his son everything there was to know about sports, he was well versed in all things that mattered at six years old. Then, of course, there were the superheroes and comic books and Disney-Pixar movies that every kid loved – when we visited, he and Macie had spent at least half of that time watching movies and then imitating everything they'd seen on the screen when it was over.

"I know what you mean," Rose laughed. "The twins are almost four and it seems like just yesterday, I was cursing at Emmett while in labor."

I laughed, clearly remembering hearing all of that. Macie was only a few months old when Rose had announced that she was pregnant and it had only taken a few months after that to find out that she was pregnant with twins. Amelia and Lillian McCarty were the most energetic kids I'd ever known. They'd definitely gotten their personalities and energy from their father, while their looks were all from Rose. The two of them were going to have their hands full when they got older and started dating.

Even though Emmett had already declared that they were never dating, much less getting older. So, you know, there was that, too.

Edward and I were Amelia's godparents, Ben and Angela were Lillian's godparents and the four of us were all godparents to Calvin. Angela had always been indecisive and had declared that we'd all share the duties of being godparents because she hadn't wanted to hurt anyone's feelings.

That was my best friend and that was the reason why I fucking adored her even after all these years.

"Are we not good enough for you, Bella?"

I looked across the table to see Ben pouting, his bottom lip shoved out so far he could probably wrap it up around his head if he so desired. I laughed and waved him over to me, holding out my arms as he approached and hugging him as he bent down.

"You feeling okay?" he asked as he pulled back and bent down in between Angela and me.

"Stressed right the fuck out."

He laughed and patted my knee, shaking his head.

"That's not good for the little man in there."

"So I've heard."

"Fuck 'em all," he grinned, standing up again and kissing my cheek. "You're gorgeous."

"I tell her that and she refuses to believe me tonight," Edward drawled, pushing hair behind my ear.

I looked up at him and scrunched my nose, sticking my tongue out at him. He laughed and grabbed a chair from the table behind us, pulling it up behind me and draping his arm over my shoulders.

We talked without interruption, Rose pointing out people such as Jessica Stanley, who had gained about sixty pounds since graduation, and Lauren Mallory, who still looked like a damn supermodel and had a huge fucking rock on her finger that resembled an ice skating rink. Mike Newton, dragging a stick-thin blonde around the middle of the floor, still looked like he had in high school. Either he'd found the cure to aging or had an amazing plastic surgeon. Tyler Crowley hadn't appeared yet, but his alcoholism had been common knowledge around Forks for about four years now, I was told. Other classmates that I barely talked to had stopped at our table to say hello, spouting on about their lives without being asked and quickly sliding away when someone else called their name.

"Edward!"

We both looked in the direction when we heard a voice that I'd tried forgetting and I cringed, placing my hands protectively over my stomach as Lauren walked up to us. She was carting around a guy that looked like he might've just graduated high school and was doing everything in her power to show off the ring on her left hand.

"Hello, Lauren," he said coolly, nodding at her. "How've you been?"

"Fabulous!" she drawled, waving her left hand at him.

I looked behind me at Rose and raised my eyebrow at her while she shook her head and rolled her eyes. I laughed and looked over at Angela, watching as she mimicked Lauren's hand movements – she was far enough out of Lauren's way that she wouldn't be noticed for a while.

"This is Gary," she continued proudly, gripping the guy's hand. "We're engaged."

"Never would've known," I heard Rose mumble.

I pressed my lips together, clearing my throat and looking down at my stomach in an attempt to not laugh at her.

"Congratulations," Edward said, coughing and reaching over to grab my hand. I looked over at him and smiled, squeezing his hand before I looked up at Lauren again. "You remember Bella, don't you Lauren?"

I raised an eyebrow when her eyes slid over to mine, her head slowly tilting to the side as she appraised me.

"Isabella Swan?"

"Hello, Lauren," I said through my teeth in an attempt to be polite.

"You still hang around with her?" she asked, crossing one arm under her breasts and jutting a thumb at me. "I thought you would've grown out of that years ago."

"They're married, half-wit," Rose drawled, slapping one hand on the table in front of her. "Have been for six damn years. Forks is not that big of a town; don't be a dumbass and pretend that you didn't know."

Angela laughed loudly, throwing her head back and resting her hands on her stomach. I laughed at her and shook my head.

"Nice to see you again, Rosalie," she said dryly.

"I wish I could say the same to you."

"Well, we have to get going," Lauren said hastily, turning on her heel before any of us could say anything more.

"Damn," Emmett mumbled. "I thought she was a moron back in high school. She hasn't changed much, has she?"

"No," I laughed, shaking my head and watching as she smacked Gary's arm as they stormed towards their table.

We continued talking, listening about all the ways our kids annoyed and amused us, briefly talking about our careers and pretty much ignoring the rest of our classmates. Jessica had meekly made her way over to us, being as polite and nice as anyone else. She'd gotten divorced from Mike three years ago, she'd said, and he'd given up the rights to their daughter. The blonde he was carting around was their former nanny and it was hard to hold a grudge against someone who had to watch her ex-husband troll around the room with someone else.

I made her sit with us and we spent the rest of the night at our little round table, sharing stories and speaking of our kids. By the end of the night, I was exhausted and more than ready to go home as opposed to the dinner we'd promised everyone else.

"You okay, baby cakes?" Edward whispered into my ear, one of his hands trailing up and down my arm.

"Are you gonna make that nickname permanent?"

"I'm thinking that I kinda like it so yeah, probably."

I laughed and nodded, leaning my head against his and smiling softly when he pressed a soft kiss against my ear.

"We're here for another couple of days," he whispered, nuzzling his nose into my hair. "We can go out to dinner with them tomorrow night if you want."

"Will they be okay with that?"

"They have to be. Plus," he started, his other hand trailing back to my stomach, "you have a pretty good excuse."

"Our son is not an excuse."

"No, but if you're tired, they'll all understand. You can't overexert yourself, baby."

"I've missed everyone," I pouted, closing my eyes.

He laughed softly and I felt his lips press against the side of my head.

"I know. I have, too. But like I said, we have a few more days and we can see them during that time. It's not a big deal."

I sighed heavily and nodded, opening my eyes and blinking a few times to readjust to the harsh lighting that gyms all around the world were known for.

"What are you naming him?" Jessica asked quietly from her spot in between Angela and me.

I looked over at her and smiled, placing my hand over Edward's.

"We're not..."

"I was thinking Anthony," I interrupted, looking up at him. "After his amazing, wonderful papa."

He looked down at me, shock clearly written all over his face. I smiled and reached up with my other hand to place it on his cheek, rubbing my thumb over his chin.

I'd been thinking about it a lot and while he'd already told me that he didn't want any son of ours named after him directly – his father was the main issue with that – I had been sitting on his middle name ever since we found out that we were having a boy. He hadn't brought up the name issue until recently and I had kind of wanted it to be a surprise. I don't know for what purpose that served, but it had sounded like a good idea at the time. And being here tonight, it just seemed like the perfect place to tell him.

"You..."

"Is that okay?" I asked softly, biting my bottom lip when he continued to stare at me.

"You are..." He breathed out a laugh and shook his head, grinning at me. "Fucking perfect for me, you know that, don't you?"

"Is that your middle name, Edward?" Jessica asked, breaking me out of the trance I'd been in.

"Yeah," he said quietly, nodding and not breaking his gaze with me. "It was my grandfather's name."

"You're okay with that?"

"I'm more than okay with that, Bella. Fuck," he whispered, standing up and pulling me up with him. He wrapped his arms as far around me as he could, burying his face into my hair. "You are... I have no words for you."

I smiled and wrapped my arms around his neck, resting my forehead on his shoulder and closing my eyes again.

"Let me take you back," he whispered into my ear, gently kissing my neck. "I need you, Bella."

I bit my bottom lip and tangled one hand in his hair, nodding and turning my head to press a kiss against his jaw.

"Yeah."

"We're gonna get going," he said quickly, looking up at our table. "Can we postpone dinner until tomorrow night?"

"You all right, Bells?" Emmett asked, tilting his head at me and draping an arm over the back of Rose's chair.

"Yeah, just kinda tired," I said, picking my head up to look at him. "It's been a long day."

"Tomorrow night for sure," Angela said, pointing at me. "We only have a few days."

"Promise," I laughed, nodding.

"Get some sleep, Bella," Rose smiled, winking at me.

I laughed loudly and nodded, moving from Edward to hug everyone, including Jessica. She seemed shocked and hugged me back tightly.

"I'm sorry for high school, Bella," she said quietly into my ear.

I grinned and kissed her cheek, standing up straight and grabbing her hand in mine.

"It's okay. We were all pretty stupid in high school."

She nodded and smiled, squeezing my hand.

"Did you wanna come tomorrow?"

"Oh, Mel doesn't do well in restaurants." She laughed sheepishly and fidgeted nervously in her seat, referencing her daughter. "Thank you, though."

"If you change your mind, we're staying at his parents' place." I nodded towards Edward. "Call there."

She smiled up at me and nodded once.

"Thank you, Bella."

"You're welcome."

"Early lunch!" Rose declared, pointing at us as I dropped Jessica's hand. "Well, not really early, but lunch! Twelve o'clock at the diner for old time's sake."

"All right," I laughed, letting Edward wrap his arm around my waist. "We'll see you then."

With another round of goodbyes and one more invite extended to Jessica, we were finally walking out of the gymnasium. It was barely nine when we finally made it back to his parent's house and my heart jumped when the only light on in the entire place was the front porch. Macie was staying with Charlie and Esme and Carlisle had a completely separate floor all to themselves.

Edward led me into the house and locked the doors behind us, leading me to his old bedroom on the first floor and closing that door behind us as well, turning to me and pulling me into his arms. He kissed me slowly, twining my fingers with his and walking me towards his old double bed. We did everything slowly; undressing each other, kissing, touching, making love to each other and whispering quiet words of adoration and love. He lye behind me when we were done, the fingertips of one hand slowly tracing circles on my stomach as he pressed soft kisses against my shoulder blades.

"Sometimes this doesn't seem real," I whispered, placing one hand on his wrist and folding the other underneath my head.

"What doesn't?"

"You, me... Macie and this baby. I never thought I'd ever be lucky enough to have this life and love like this. Be loved in return like this."

"If anything, it's the other way around," he whispered, resting his chin on my shoulder. "I didn't deserve any chances with you and you gave them to me anyway. I'm a very lucky man."

I turned over and Edward moved back a little, placing his hand on my stomach again when I'd settled in front of him.

"You gave me a chance, too," I said quietly, reaching up to place a hand on his cheek. "You didn't let me push you away and you fought for me when it mattered most."

"You were more than worth it."

"So were you. You still are."

He hummed, leaning down and gently touching his lips to mine. I laughed as the baby kicked right under his hand, rubbing my thumb over the bridge of his nose as he pulled away from me.

"Hope you didn't mind all that bouncing your momma just did," Edward stated, scooting down in the bed and placing gentle kisses against my bellybutton.

"Yeah, your papa apparently *needed* me or something," I drawled, covering his hand with mine.

"Oh, but your momma wasn't complaining now, was she?" he cooed, still pressing small kisses around my stomach.

"Your papa failed to mention that he had his tongue down my throat."

"Oh, she liked it. Don't listen to her." He looked up at me through his lashes, smirking. "She just doesn't wanna admit that I'm right."

"Your papa is hardly ever right. You'll see when you get here."

"Now that wasn't fair!" he whined, sitting up and pouting at me.

I laughed and opened my arms to him as I turned on my back. He huffed dramatically before crawling up to me and laying his head on my breast. I threaded my fingers through his hair and closed my eyes, listening to his even breathing.

"You know you and the kids are everything to me, don't you?" he whispered.

"Yes," I whispered back. "The same way that you and the kids are everything to me."

He propped himself up on his elbows, leaning down and gently touching his lips against mine again. I wrapped my arms around his neck and slowly slid my tongue out to meet his.

This was where I belonged. This was the life I'd dreamed of, and the man I'd dreamed of spending it with. Nothing in this world made sense until I was in his arms and if I could help it, I was never going to leave them. The past ten years hadn't always been easy, but we'd dealt with whatever came our way together and we made it through. Our high school reunion was only one of the many things that we'd had to deal with and we'd both made it out of there unscathed.

Ten years ago, I counted down the days by thinking of college. Ten years ago, I hardly mattered to anyone in my school. Ten years ago, my husband made a mistake and it brought us together no matter how hard everyone else was pushing us apart. Ten years ago, I fell in love for the first time and hadn't looked back since.

I wasn't a famous celebrity or anything else anyone at our reunion had bragged about that night. But I was a wife to a wonderful man and a mother to a beautiful little girl with a little boy on the way. I worked hard at my job and I loved my family. I'd say that was pretty damn successful.

Outtake 2.

This was one version of the aftermath when Edward pulled Bella into the empty classroom in chapter four; another way the conversation between Bella and Angela could've gone.

"Bella, they're dating."

My heart stopped.

"I'm telling you, if I ever saw Ben walk into an empty classroom with another girl, I would've killed them both."

"They're dating?" I breathed, placing my other hand against my stomach.

"Well... yeah. You didn't..." I looked up at her and her face fell. "Oh, honey."

"He told me... I didn't... he just said..." I closed my eyes and shook my head slowly. "I'm such a fucking idiot."

I opened my eyes, still shaking my head as I stood up.

"Bella, honey, come on. Sit down."

"I have to go," I said quietly, slowly turning around and starting for the exit to the cafeteria.

"Bella! Where you headed off to?" Ben asked as I passed him in the hallway.

"I have to go," I said again, staring straight ahead as I kept walking.

I was nearly to my locker when Jessica walked out of the bathroom, looking directly at me.

Of course she would.

I tried to walk around her and she blocked me, placing her hands on her hips and staring down at me from her view on her too-high heels that couldn't be comfortable for a full school day.

"I don't know what you think you're doing with him," she started, her voice low. "He'd never be interested in you."

"Trust me, Jessica, I'm very well aware of that."

"Then stay the fuck away from him."

"He is my partner."

"You can fix that real quick." She shook her head at me, her hair bouncing around her face. "We both know it."

"He said he didn't want me to."

"You're a joke, Isabella. You think he's being nice to you just because he's stuck working with you? You think he cares about you *at all*?"

"No," I said evenly, looking up at her. "I don't."

"He *knows* that you like him. He thinks it's funny and he tells me all about the way you fall all over yourself when he looks at you. He just wants a good grade on this. You're *nothing* to him. You're nothing to *anyone*."

"Are you done?"

She huffed and flipped a section of hair over her shoulder, crossing her arms over her chest and stomping away from me. I stood in the middle of the hallway, trying to catch the breath that had suddenly disappeared from my lungs as I stumbled to my locker. I pulled my book bag out and grabbed my keys from hook on the other side, yanking them both out and slamming the door closed. I slung my bag over my shoulder, vaguely aware of the tears filling my eyes as I started towards the double doors that led to the parking lot.

I didn't care if I'd get in trouble for not being in my afternoon classes. I didn't care if the principal called my father at the station and told him that I'd skipped out. I didn't care about anything. I needed to go and I needed to get away from this place as quickly as possible because while they enjoyed tearing me down, I wouldn't let them see it.

I had no right to be upset that he didn't tell me they were dating. I had a right to be upset that he'd lied to me about it – *means to an end, my ass* – but I had no right to be upset that he was dating her. He owed me nothing and he was free to date whomever he wanted.

He'd never date me. He'd never be interested in me the way I wanted him to be and I thought I'd accepted that. God, I thought I knew that.

I kicked at the loose gravel in the parking lot as I made it out there, wanting to scream and tear my hair out in frustration and anger and pain and every other emotion that was coursing through me. I angrily swiped at the tears making their way down my cheeks, a sob breaking loose from my lips as I rubbed my nose on my sleeve.

"Bella!" I heard his voice behind me and whirled around, glaring at him.

"Leave me the *fuck* alone!" I shouted, pointing at him. "I am *done* with you and this bullshit! I've had it!"

"What did she say to you?" he yelled, quickly running over to me. "What did she tell you?"

"I'm glad I'm a joke to you! I'm glad that you worked so hard to make me think that you'd stop this shit so that you could tell her *everything* and laugh about it! So what if I like you, Edward? What does it fucking matter? I wasn't doing anything to hurt you!" I pushed his arms away as he reached for me and took a step back. "I would never hurt you this way!"

"Bella, I don't know what you're talking about!"

"Bullshit!" I shrieked. "You're dating her! You know *everything*!"

"I am *not* fucking dating her, Bella! I'm not!" he yelled, throwing his hands out at his sides. "I went out with her the other night because I wanted to get laid. That's all she is to me! I'd never date her!"

"Then why would she say that?"

"She wants more with me but she's *nothing* to me."

"The way *I'm* nothing to you, right?" I asked, raising an eyebrow at him and running a hand through my hair. "The way I'm nothing to anyone?"

"I never said that!"

"No, you just said that I was a waste of space, remember?"

"I apologized...!"

"No, you apologized for bruising me! You never apologized for saying those things!" I looked away when my voice broke and reached up to once again wipe the tears from my cheeks. "God, you're right. You're so *right*," I whispered, shaking my head and turning from him.

I screamed when I felt his arms around my shoulders, pulling me against him. I struggled in his grasp, turning and pressing my hands flat against his chest. He only held on tighter, pulling me against him and leaving me completely unable to move.

"Let me go," I wailed, still trying to push on his chest. "Leave me alone and just let me go."

He wound one arm around my waist underneath my book bag, keeping me molded against him and pressing his cheek against mine.

"I am sorry for *everything*," he said quietly, his voice strong and quiet. "I didn't know that you liked me and I never told her anything. I never said anything like that to her and if I ever had in the past, then I'm sorry for that, too."

"You're an asshole."

"Yes."

"What did I ever *do* to you?" I whimpered, leaning into him against my better judgment.

"You were born with a police chief as a father, Bella. That was enough," he whispered and I felt one of his hands cup the back of my head.

"Don't forget the extra sixty or so pounds. Can't fucking forget those, can we?" I mumbled against his shoulder.

"Stop it."

"You first."

"I'm done. I told you that."

"I need to go," I mumbled, sniffing and trying to back away from him again.

He let me go and I kept my eyes down, wiping off my cheeks and staring at the ground.

"I'll come over after..."

"No." I shook my head and looked up, avoiding his gaze. "I need to be alone. I don't want anything to do with this place tonight."

*And I can't look **you** in the eyes at the moment. You didn't know and now you do and I can't deal with anything else right now so just **let me go**.*

"Bella, you can't just run away from everything."

"No, but I think I'm entitled to a break every once in a while."

Outtake 3.

This was how the original epilogue ended up.

I looked over at Bella as she rested her head back in the passenger seat of my car, my hand caught in hers as she absently played with my fingers and stared out the front window. She looked completely content and it was something that I wasn't altogether used to seeing from her.

Before, when I was an asshole and willingly tormented her for no reason other than because I could, I'd never seen her relaxed. It took me three fucking weeks to realize it, but she was always tense, always had her shoulders hunched and always looked down at the floor when she walked.

Because of me and my supposed friends. Because of what we'd done and said to her throughout most of her life. Because we didn't – and wouldn't – take the time to actually even get to know her for fear of breaking some sort of unspoken pact of our social circle. Because we were a group of the biggest idiots ever known to any high school in the entire damn state.

I thought the world had ended when I was paired up with her for the science fair project. I wanted to kill Jessica and Lauren for leaving me with no other option but to sit at the only other empty table in the room. I really wanted to murder the both of them when I saw Bella walk in and sit down next to me. But then I saw the bruises towards the end of the class period and I felt sick.

I'd done that to her. I'd promised my mother and Carlisle and everyone that knew about my past that I would *never* end up like my father. Marking a woman and putting my hands on her no matter how annoyed I was wasn't acceptable by any means.

It still made me sick. All of the shit I'd put her through still haunts me and weighs on my mind; it was even worse when she saw that fucking disc. I had no explanation and I had no right to ask her for anything after that. The things I'd said that night were horrible and completely unacceptable and I still don't know why or how she'd managed to forgive me for them.

"You're gonna hit the sidewalk," she said calmly.

"Huh?"

She looked over at me, smirked and then nodded out the window again. I followed her gaze and cursed, wrenching the wheel and getting back into my lane when I saw that we were about to drive up on the sidewalk and run down about fifteen people.

"Something on your mind?" she asked innocently, still playing with my fingers.

"Just uh, nervous about our presentation," I mumbled, clearing my throat and shaking my head.

"How come? We know what we're talking about."

"No, I know. I just hate getting up in front of people."

"Well, it's just Mr. Banner and a few other teachers. And since when do you hate being the center of attention?"

I quickly looked over at her and playfully narrowed my eyes. She smirked and raised an eyebrow before I concentrated on the road once more.

"Not the point."

"Mhmm," she drawled, linking our fingers together. "We'll both be fine."

"Yeah."

"I'm here. I'm not going anywhere."

My heart started its rapid beat against my ribcage and I squeezed her hand before sighing heavily.

I don't know why she continually let me in. I don't know why she did anything when it came to me. I didn't deserve any of it, that was for fucking sure. I'd done nothing but hurt her and she still found it in her to forgive and be with me.

I had no idea about who she really was before we were paired up for this. The more I hung out with her, the more I realized that I liked her. She wasn't like anyone else – conversation with her never bored me or left me wondering about her intelligence. She was smart, witty and after hanging out with her that day on the playground, watching her with Victoria and James, I was even able to see how fucking beautiful she really was.

"Neither am I," I said softly, squeezing her hand again.

"Good to know," she replied just as softly.

I bit the inside of my lip and pulled her hand up to my mouth, gently kissing the back of it a few times. She lifted two of her fingers and clamped her knuckles around my nose. I laughed and dropped our hands to my lap, shaking my head as I listened to her laugh beside me.

"Come on, it's going to be great. We're going to kick ass."

"Think so, huh?"

"I do."

"All right then."

I pulled into the parking lot of the school a few minutes later and parked, climbing out and quickly grabbing the board with all the information from the backseat. I met Bella around the front of the car, hooking one arm around her waist and stuffing the board underneath my other arm as she looked over our paper one more time and held the small step stool in her other hand.

"What do you wanna do after this?" I asked casually as we started towards the entrance to the gym.

"I was gonna go for a run. Did you want to come with me?"

When I first found out that Bella ran, I'd been surprised. She hadn't seemed like the type that would do any of that or try to get in shape. The more I looked at her, though, the more I was able to see that she'd lost quite a bit of weight over the past few years. Not only were my "friends" and I complete idiots, but we were also blind. In more ways than one, actually.

"Yeah, sure. I just need to stop at the house and get changed, though."

She hummed absently, still looking over our paper as we neared the entrance to the gym. I smirked and leaned over, resting my nose against her temple and breathing her in. She smelled like raspberries and second chances and salvation and I'd lay my life on the line for this girl if it came down to it.

I didn't expect to feel this way for her. In fact, I didn't expect to feel *anything* for her. I sure as hell didn't expect to have my heart ripped out because of the stupid shit I'd done once upon a time, either.

I guess that's why I should never put any expectations onto anything.

The past week had been nothing short of hell. The things I'd said at the party had been before I really knew her, before I knew the person she was. I'd had no right to say those things about her to begin with, but I thought I was a God of sorts. Everyone loved me, everyone should've bowed down to me, my word was final and fucking *golden*.

I was a shallow asshole and she had every right to ignore me and tell me to leave her the hell alone. I'd fucked up in one of the worst ways possible, lost the only girl in the entire damn town that had challenged me like I'd needed her to and I deserved to be ignored and shot down at every turn for saying those things.

But she was there at the game and I couldn't even be mad at Emmett like I wanted to be for pestering her about it because she was *there*. And she'd agreed to talk to me. In all honesty, I kind of wanted to hug Emmett for getting her there in the first place.

I met her at the playground and I told her *everything* that I could possibly think of. I answered her questions as truthfully as I could, silently vowing that I'd never lie to her or talk about her behind her back or do anything that I'd done in the past.

She took me back. I don't quite know why, but she did and I wasn't going to screw it up again.

I held open the door for her, smiling like an ass as she kissed my cheek and walked in ahead of me. I stood up a little straighter and pulled the board from under my arm, following her into the gym. We found Mr. Banner and he told us where to set up before he disappeared to another table and started shouting something about no fires on school grounds.

I set the board up on our table and Bella slapped the paper onto the top before sliding the step stool underneath, nodding once.

"That was easy."

"You've been watching those Staples commercials again, haven't you?"

"It's not my fault that they're still *everywhere*!" she exclaimed, holding her arms out in front of her. "You'd think that they'd come up with a new slogan by now!"

I laughed and draped my arm over her shoulders, pulling her against me and pressing my lips to her forehead. She huffed and wrapped her arms around my waist, burying her nose into my chest.

"Funny girl," I mumbled.

"I'm a fucking riot."

I laughed and wrapped my other arm around her shoulders, holding her tightly against me and smirking to myself as she turned and pressed herself against me completely. I rested my cheek on the top of her head, looking over to find Jessica and Lauren blatantly staring at us from across the room, their large project behind them on their table.

I raised an eyebrow at them and they quickly looked away, their nervous voices quickly filling the air.

Those two were the cause of almost everything bad that had happened between Bella and me in the past three weeks. They were the assholes that wrote on her locker and they were the brilliant morons that left that stupid fucking disc on her doorstep the morning after the party.

The locker thing had left me beyond livid with them and the rest of my so-called friends. They had no right to do any of that; they didn't know her. I barely knew her and even though it had only been a week at that point, I couldn't see myself doing anything like that to her. I didn't talk to much of anyone for the rest of the day and even ate lunch in my car, not wanting to associate with any of them. Every time I walked by her locker, it only pissed me off a little more. I spent half an

hour after practice had ended that night with a borrowed Brill-o pad and some kind of sparkly cleaning dust that made me gag in order to clean off the front of her locker. It was worth it when I found her curled up in her bed, looking as though the world had crashed onto her shoulders and she hadn't been able to take it.

The best decision I made that day was turning our outing into a date. It changed everything and I let myself feel the way I never had before. She wasn't like anyone else and I adored that. I wanted more time with her, I wanted to know everything there was to know about her and I wanted to be by her side for as long as I possibly could.

Yeah, it happened fast. I wasn't arguing or wishing for change on *that*. I was done questioning things that didn't make sense to me because half the time, it turned out to be the best thing for me.

"This isn't your project, is it?"

We both looked up to find Emmett and Rosalie standing in front of us, their hands clasped together and matching expressions of curiosity on their faces.

"No," I scowled.

"Close, though."

"You're not gonna like, make out in front of everyone, are you? Because I'm pretty sure you'd fail," Emmett stated, pointing at us.

"I am not gracing that with an answer," Bella stated, pulling back from me and shaking her head.

"As you shouldn't. I just saw Ben and Angela walk in," Rosalie stated, shaking her hand from Emmett's and holding it out to Bella. "Come on."

Bella stepped up on her toes and kissed my cheek before easily sliding her hand into Rosalie's and walking across the gym. I watched after her, smirking, until Emmett smacked my shoulder with more force than absolutely fucking necessary and I scowled over at him.

"What's your problem, asshole?" I grumbled, reaching up and rubbing my shoulder.

"You still gonna do it?"

He was bouncing on the balls of his feet, his hands clasped in front of him. He looked like a goddamn child on Christmas morning, waiting to open the present underneath the tree that was shaped like a fucking bike or something.

"Yes," I hissed, nervously looking over to make sure that Bella was still out of earshot. "What the hell, Emmett? You seem more excited about this than I am."

"I don't have to deal with Jessica anymore," he taunted, dropping his hands and smiling smugly at me. "Tell me you know how annoying she really is."

"I know *now*," I grumbled, crossing my arms over my chest. "I knew before, but this made it stand out more."

"Everything went well last night, it seems."

"You're kind of backwards today, don't you think?"

"Shut up and answer me."

"You're worse than a woman, too."

"I don't know how she puts up with you."

"Me either."

"I'm assuming that you don't hate me for getting her there."

"No."

"Then my work is done."

"Ask me to start calling you cupid and I will kill you," I stated, pointing at him before looking over at Bella again.

She was standing in a semi-circle with Ben, Angela and Rose, her laugh ringing over the noise of everyone else's as they talked. Both the shirt and her jeans looked like they were getting to be too big on her and I twisted my lips to the side. Apparently, she was losing more weight and if that made her happy, then fine. But I kind of liked having something to hold on to now that I knew what it was like and really hoped that she didn't lose too much more.

I never thought I'd want to be with someone who wasn't a size two. It had never been a passing thought in my mind and I'd never been attracted to anyone heavier before. Bella changed all that within three weeks and I'd never been happier about it.

"You ruin my fun."

"You worry me."

"Yeah, well, that's nothing new, is it? Dude, I'm over here."

"I know where you are."

"Then look at me."

"Why? I'm busy."

"She's not going anywhere."

"She said the same thing."

"So look at me, damn it."

I growled and finally looked over at him, raising an eyebrow.

"What?"

"Don't be nervous."

I blinked at him.

"That's all you wanted to say to me?"

"Yeah."

"How did you tell Rose?"

"We were in the middle of being horizontal."

"Oh good Christ," I mumbled, slapping my forehead and wishing I'd never even asked.

"You asked!"

"All right!"

We both looked up when we heard Mr. Banner's voice ring over the PA system we hardly ever used, to see him standing on a table with his arms out at his sides.

"Everyone to their tables, please! We will be walking around starting in five minutes. As soon as we get to you, please hand over your reports and get right into your presentations. When we're done, we ask that you hang around until we get to everyone."

There was a collective groan and Mr. Banner bent down when one of the other teachers that I don't remember ever seeing before pulled on the hem of his sports coat.

"All right, all right!" he exclaimed, standing up again. "We don't wanna deal with you on a Saturday either so you're free to go as soon as we walk away from you."

Everyone cheered and scattered. Well, everyone except for Emmett, of course, who seemed to be glued to my side.

"You gotta do it, man."

"I'm going to!" I hissed. "Now go away."

"I gotta wait for my partner," he grinned, rocking back and forth on his feet as he hooked his hands behind his back.

"Do you think this is a good idea? I mean, it's kind of public..."

"Girls love the whole grand gesture bullshit, man."

"But Bella is..."

"On her way over. Hey! Come on, Rose, we gotta get going."

I watched Emmett steer Rosalie away as soon as they were near us and I scowled at his back, swallowing the lump in my throat before turning to look at Bella. She grinned and walked around me to lean against the table, crossing her arms over her chest.

"You look like you're gonna be sick."

"Nervous."

"We can switch if you want. I can do the..."

"No!" I exclaimed loudly, my protest bouncing off the walls of the gym. I cleared my throat and smiled nervously at her, shaking my head. "No, it's fine. I'll be fine."

"You're showing that well."

"Hate presentations," I grumbled.

She dropped her arms and reached over to grab one of my hands in hers, her thumb rubbing along the back in soothing circles.

"We're gonna kick ass, remember?"

I looked down at our hands and pursed my lips, smirking and looking back up at her.

"I remember."

"All right then."

She side stepped closer to me and squeezed my hand, leaning her head against my shoulder. I laced my fingers in between hers and forced myself to relax, doing my best to breathe evenly. We stood in silence, Bella's thumb still tracing circles on the back of my hand until Mr. Banner and two other teachers who still weren't familiar to me *at all* showed up in front of us.

"Edward Cullen, Isabella Swan," Mr. Banner stated, nodding his head and checking off our names on the clipboard he held in his hands. "A lie detector test without the use of a polygraph."

Bella extracted her hand from mine and we both stood up straight, my heart beating faster than I'm sure was healthy. I barely heard her explaining everything to them, my heartbeat echoing in my ears as I once again tried to relax and pay attention. I answered automatically when I was asked a question and did my best to sound like I knew what I was talking about, but in all honesty, I had no fucking clue what I'd said. Bella hadn't tried kicking me and she didn't look *too* pissed off at me just yet, so I had hopes that it at least sounded like I knew what I was saying.

I finally snapped to attention when Bella got on the stepstool and faced me, her eyebrows raised and her hand extended in front of her.

*You can do this, jackass. You **want** to do this so suck it up, get a grip and fucking **do it**.*

I raised my arm underneath her hand, staring directly into her eyes as she wrapped her hand around my wrist, squeezing once.

"You ready?" she asked.

I nodded, licking my bottom lip and doing my best to concentrate on just her. She started in on another spiel about heart rate and the subconscious tensing when someone was telling a lie and I did my best to relax yet again.

She couldn't think this was a lie. It wasn't and I didn't want her to think that it was by any means.

"Whenever you're ready, Edward," Mr. Banner stated.

I nodded and licked my lips again, taking a deep breath and looking directly into Bella's eyes again. She offered me an encouraging smile and squeezed my wrist again.

"I love you," I blurted out.

The most heartbreaking look on her face immediately appeared and I had to restrain myself from grabbing her off the stool and crushing her against me as she pushed down on my arm. Her eyebrows scrunched together and she shook her head once, blinking slowly as she pulled our arms back up.

"Truth," she squeaked.

"Uh, was that the truth, Edward?" Mr. Banner asked, uncomfortably clearing his throat.

I nodded quickly, swallowing hard. We demonstrated a few more things, Bella still looking a little shell-shocked even when we had to switch. We were dismissed a few minutes later with a *good job* thrown over Mr. Banner's shoulder before he disappeared to the next table.

"Bella?" I asked quietly.

"Outside," was all she said as she snatched the board and step stool.

I twisted my lips to the side and followed her as she booked it out of the gym, my heart still trying to beat out of my chest as I realized that that may have been a little too much to announce to teachers and well, to her in general.

Fuck, maybe she didn't feel that way. What the *hell* had I just done?

I followed her into the parking lot, followed her as she stalked to the car and cautiously leaned against it when she did the same. She dropped the board and the stepstool at her feet, crossing her arms over her chest and looking down.

"You're not just...?" She huffed out a breath and shifted her feet. "You meant that?"

"Yes," I said softly, looking over at her.

"How can you...? Edward, it's so..."

"Okay, listen," I started, nervously running a hand through my hair. "If you don't feel that way, then fine, it's okay, I get it." I didn't *like* that I understood, but I did. I'd done a hell of a lot to hurt her over the past four years and I'd used this on her before; I didn't blame her *at all* for not being able to feel anything like love for me. "I just... a lot of shit has been put into perspective for me because of you lately and this was one of those things. I need you to know how I feel about you."

"But it's so soon!"

"When you know, you know." I shrugged and looked down at my feet, chewing on the inside of my mouth. "I don't want you to question me about how I feel for you, Bella."

"I just..."

"Losing someone has never been that hard for me. Tanya left me for someone else and I never spent that much time trying to get her back. I felt like shit, yes, but I'd never tried that hard to get her to see differently. I was pretty much over it in a few days' time, but losing you...? Fuck, Bella, it was *hard*."

"That doesn't make sense."

"You don't see yourself the way I see you," I said simply, shrugging one shoulder.

"What *do* you see, then?"

I looked over at her again and pushed off from the car, moving in front of her. I took a deep breath and cupped her face in my hands, making her look up at me.

"You are smart, funny, and compassionate. You're probably one of the best people I know. You're strong and you can stand up for yourself when it's called for. You don't run away screaming when you think you see a snake." She snorted and rolled her eyes, smirking at me. "You call me out on my shit when necessary and... fuck, Bella, you're beautiful."

"You're delusional."

"How many times am I really going to have to tell you that?" I sighed.

"About a million."

"I *mean* it, Bella."

"Edward, *I'm* not delusional and I know when someone is beautiful. I'm not one of those people."

"Who says? Who determines who is beautiful and who isn't? Who has a right to tell you that you aren't?"

"Everyone!"

"Don't listen to them! They're all mindless idiots! Bella," I sighed, leaning down to rest my forehead against hers, "you're beautiful to me. I don't want you to change, I don't want you to do anything differently. I *love* you the way you are."

"Why?"

"You really still feel the need to ask me that?"

"I'm just trying to understand."

"I just told you everything," I whispered, slightly shaking my head.

She pulled her bottom lip into her mouth and started chewing on it, her eyes darting from mine to what I assumed was my neck.

"You really...? You really love me."

"I really do."

"That's gonna take some time to get used to."

"I've got all the time in the world. I'm not going anywhere, Bella."

Her eyes finally met mine again and she raised her hands to rest them on my wrists, her thumbs rubbing the undersides of them.

"I feel something for you," she whispered. "I don't know what it is yet."

"Like I said, I'm not going anywhere. You've got some time to figure it out."

"Confident, aren't you?" she asked, smirking.

I relaxed, relief coursing through me at the sight of her smirk.

"Oh yes. It's hard to resist me."

"That's what you think."

"You're not doing such a good job of it, you know."

"Who chased down whom again?" she asked, raising an eyebrow and tilting her head at me.

"Think you're smart," I mumbled.

"So do you. You said it a few minutes ago."

"You're going to be using all of that against me at some point or another, aren't you?"

"Probably."

"Good to know."

"Isn't it?"

"Oh yes."

"So are you gonna kiss me anytime soon or what?"

I laughed and moved my forehead from hers, leaning in and pressing my lips against hers. She moved her hands from my wrists, wrapping her arms around my neck and slowly pulling me close to her. I moved my hands from her face and dropped them to wrap my arms around her waist, pulling her against me and loving the way that she felt in my arms. She wasn't skin and bones and I didn't have to worry about her ribs poking me in the stomach if I held her too tightly. She was *real*.

"You know, that *could* be considered defiling school property."

I groaned and pulled away from her, looking over my shoulder to find Ben and Angela walking towards us. Angela was quite literally skipping, swinging their hands in between them before she hopped to a stop next to us.

"It's my car, I'm allowed," I grumbled.

Bella laughed and moved her arms from my neck. I sighed and stepped back from her, grabbing the board and the stepstool.

"But you two *are* standing on school grounds so... you know..."

"Trying to ruin my fun, are you?" Bella asked, tilting her head to the side.

"Never," he grinned.

I laughed and rolled my eyes, managing to grab my keys from my pocket and unlock the doors.

"We were gonna go grab some lunch in Port Angeles and hang out for a while," Angela stated, hooking arms with Bella. "You two wanna come?"

"We were gonna go for a run."

"Oh, come on!" she whined. "Run later. Hang out with us."

Bella tilted her head back and I shrugged at her, grinning as I opened the car door and shoved everything into the back.

"It's up to you."

"All right," she sighed dramatically, lifting her head again. "We'll go."

"Where are we going?" Emmett yelled from across the parking lot.

How he could hear us and not make a sound to alert us that he was even out in the same vicinity as us amazed me. He'd always been like that; never made a damn noise when he walked. His mouth more than made up for it, though, and I'd learned that quickly. It had always been extremely hard to be drunk in our parents' houses without alerting them to it when Emmett couldn't keep his damn mouth shut.

"Who says you were invited?" Bella shot back.

I laughed loudly, stepping up behind her and wrapping my arms around her shoulders.

"I can come, right?" Rosalie yelled.

"Oh, yeah, of course!"

"Now that's just not any damn fair!" Emmett whined, shoving their project into the back of his Jeep.

"Ha! They like me better!" Rose taunted, pointing at him before gracefully hopping over to us.

"Come on guys!" Emmett continued to whine, dramatically dragging his feet as he made his way over to us. "I'm fun, you like me!"

"Whine ass," I laughed, quickly turning Bella when I saw Emmett raise his arm.

"Hiding behind your girlfriend? That's such a chick move."

"Worked, though, didn't it?"

"Seriously, I wanna come!"

"Dude, you're coming," Ben laughed, reaching over and punching his arm.

"Yes! See? Ben likes me! Come on, Ben, you can ride with me."

He grabbed Ben's arm, dragging him away from us and towards his Jeep. I laughed and buried my nose in Bella's hair, looking up as the girls made arrangements and picked out a restaurant that neither Ben nor Emmett knew about. Angela and Rose started towards Angela's car and I squeezed Bella's shoulder, placing a quick kiss against her neck before letting her go. She turned and grinned up at me, her hands immediately landing on my waist. I leaned down and kissed her again, placing my hands on her elbows.

My life had taken a very quick turn in three short weeks, but I wouldn't change anything. I'd had my eyes and mind opened by this beautiful girl standing with me and I was in love with her. I'd lost most of who I thought were my friends, but had finally figured out which ones were worth keeping around and had gained someone that was completely worth all of it.

I loved that there was more to her. I loved that she challenged me and pushed my buttons. I loved that she had never tried to be someone she wasn't.

Three weeks ago, I was an asshole. Three weeks ago, I didn't know what I was missing in my life. Now that I'd found it, I was going to do whatever I could to hold on to her and treat her the way she should've been treated her entire life.

"We'd better get going," she whispered, pulling back from me. "Wouldn't want to miss the phone call you know one of them is going to get."

I laughed and kissed her top lip before letting her go. I turned and opened the car door for her, watching as she crawled into the front seat. I closed it once she was in before jogging around to my side of the car and grinning at the brief reflection I caught in the window.

For once in a very long time, I *looked* happy. And I finally realized what it took to make me that way.

It was her.

Bigger than a size two, smarter than any of the other girls I'd ever been with and completely able to relax me by just being who she was, I owed it all to Bella Swan.

I'd lost a hell of a lot in the last three weeks but there wasn't one single thing that I'd change about any of it. People spent their entire lives trying to track down what I already felt for this girl and damn it if I was going to lose it again.

"You gonna get in the car anytime soon?" Bella asked, leaning across the seats and rolling the window down.

I grinned and pulled open the door, leaning in and kissing her quickly. She sat up and I went with her, cupping her face in my hands and keeping my lips firmly against hers.

"Oh yeah?" she mumbled when I backed away.

"Yeah."

"All right then."

I laughed and sat in the driver's seat, pulling the door closed and grabbing her hand in mine once I'd started the car. I rolled up the window and looked over at her, still smiling like an idiot as she raised an eyebrow at me.

"You feeling all right?"

"Never better."

"You worry me sometimes."

"Yeah, well, that's bound to happen."

"Drive," she laughed, pointing towards the exit with her free hand and shaking her head.

"Yes ma'am."

I raised the back of her hand to my lips and kissed it quickly before shifting the car into gear and pulling out of the parking lot.

She was worth everything I'd gone through and I'd do it all again in a heartbeat.

Outtake 4.

During the epilogue, when Bella's telling him that she wants to be with him, he got a little tongue tied, so to speak and it didn't end so well.

"You... I... it's not... we shouldn't..."

She stilled, slowly pulling back from me. I swallowed hard and opened one eye, looking over at her as she sat back, my hands sliding down her back and out of her shirt. She pulled her arms from my neck and moved from me, sitting on the cushion next to me with her head down and her hands in her lap.

"Oh," she said softly, nodding.

"Bella, I just don't want..."

"It's fine." She looked up at me and the smile on her face was clearly forced. "You should get your shoes."

"I just..."

"I get it, Edward. Go."

She looked back down at her lap, playing with her fingertips as she turned away from me. I chewed on the inside of my cheek before sighing and standing up. I walked up to my room, grabbing a new pair of socks and sliding them on quickly. I grabbed my sneakers and shoved my feet into them, wiggling my toes a little before I walked back downstairs. She was still sitting on the couch in the same position when I walked into the living room.

"Are you ready?"

She nodded and stood up, smoothing her hands over her shirt and pulling on the hem. She still had her head down and I watched as she nervously continued to finger the hem of her shirt. She hadn't done that shit in a long while; she'd gained confidence in herself over the past few months and I'd been so fucking proud of her. Now it seemed like she'd immediately taken five steps back from that and I didn't understand why.

"What's going on, Bella?" I asked softly, stepping in front of her and blocking her from walking to the door.

"Nothing. We need to go. We should go."

I reached out and pulled her hands from her shirt, my heart falling as she flinched from me.

"Bella..."

"Rose will be pissed and everyone is probably wondering what happened to us. Come on."

She wrapped her arms around her waist and side-stepped from me. I stepped in front of her again and placed my hands on her shoulders, keeping her in one spot.

"Talk to me."

"I'm fine."

"And the sky is fucking green."

She looked up but kept her face from me, looking over at the couch.

"It's nothing."

"Like hell it's nothing."

"I'm an idiot, all right? I get that now." Her breath hitched and my stomach twisted. "Let's just go."

"Why do you think you're an idiot? We're not leaving until you tell me what's going on, so you might as well just say it and get it over with."

"You don't want me," she said, her voice thick with emotion as she looked down again. "I get it."

I blinked at the top of her head.

"Excuse me?"

"Can we just *go*?" she asked, sniffing as she took a step back from me. "I want to go."

"Oh hell fucking no, we're not going any-fucking-where. You think I don't *want* you?"

"What else am I supposed to think?" she mumbled, moving one arm from her waist and reaching up to rub the end of her nose. "You haven't been laid since we started going out and I'm sure that's not something you're used to. I tell you that I'm ready, that I want to be with you and you say no."

"You're supposed to think that our friends and my family will be knocking down the door and blowing up the phone if we don't show up at Rose's soon. *That's* what you're supposed to be thinking."

"Yeah, well, I'm very good at reading in between the lines, Edward."

"After all that we've been through, you're gonna start doubting me? You're gonna start thinking that shit about me again? What the hell...? Fuck!" I yelled, reaching up and tangling my hands in my hair as I began pacing. "We're better than this shit!"

She stood quietly as I continued to pace, wanting to hit something with as much force as I fucking could because this was all absolute bullshit and it was *killing* me. How could she possibly think something like that at this point? I did nothing *but* think about finally being with her and wanting it to be more than fucking perfect for her because she deserved that shit and all she can think is that I don't *want her*?

"I don't... this is bullshit, Bella. Absolute fucking bullshit that you'd even think this shit anymore. I can't even... I don't fucking understand. Do you still think so little of me? I fucking *love you*, Bella; *I love you* and I want to be with you but now is *not* the right time. You have no... where are you going?" I demanded when I turned to find that she was walking towards the front door.

"I have to go," she choked out. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Edward, I'm so sorry. I have to..."

She grabbed her gown from the coat rack and then the doorknob. I ran over to her, wrapping my arms around her and pulling her against me.

"Let me go. I have to go."

I merely buried my face in her hair, shaking my head as she stood stiffly in my arms, her breath heaving out of her chest.

"Let me go," she whimpered.

"No," I whispered.

"I need to go."

"You need to calm down and we need to talk."

"You were right. I'm... how can you... I don't deserve you."

"You have that backwards."

"No, I don't. Edward, please, just let me go."

"I will never let you go, Bella," I whispered. "Get that idea out of your head."

Outtake 5.

Yet another version of the ending of the epilogue.

"Now what are we gonna do?"

"We are gonna go to Rose's so that we can celebrate the right way."

I grinned and leaned forward, burying my face into her neck and planting sloppy, open-mouthed kisses to her skin. She laughed loudly, her hands immediately winding into my hair as she tilted her head back. When she merely dropped her hands to my neck, I backed away, pouting a little. She laughed and kissed me quickly, gently tapping the end of my nose with her pointer finger.

"Fine," I sighed dramatically. "Hey, I wonder if your dad will let us get an apartment together off campus?"

She snorted at me, shaking her head.

"What are you on?"

"You."

"Actually, I'm on *you*."

"And I'm not complaining," I grinned.

She rolled her eyes and smacked my shoulder before standing up.

"Come on." She held her hand out to me and I quickly grabbed it, linking our fingers together as I stood up. "We have a lot to celebrate."

"We most certainly do," I mumbled, quickly kissing the side of her head as I slung my arm over her shoulders and started towards the door.

I grabbed my socks and the beloved sneakers that were always sitting by the door, sliding them both on before we walked back to the car. We made it to Rose's place in ten minutes, forced to park halfway down the road from all the cars that belonged to our respective relatives. We got out and walked up towards her house, finding that Emmett was packing more food than could possibly fit into the cooler that he'd placed in the back of his Jeep with a grin on his face. Rose was standing behind him, her arms crossed over her chest and one of her hands tapping the middle of her forehead in annoyance.

"We're never going to eat a *fraction* of that!" she exclaimed.

"You never know, baby. We could be stranded out there for *days*!"

"There is something wrong with you," she grumbled.

"You're just figuring that out now?" I asked, smirking as I walked up behind her and grabbed her sides.

She shrieked and turned around, smacking at my arms and glaring at me as she stomped over to Bella's side.

"Men are morons!"

"I'm fond of mine," Bella stated, shrugging easily.

Rose narrowed an eye at me and I stuck my tongue out at her, wrapping an arm around Bella's shoulders and pulling her tight against my side. She laughed, her hands finding purchase on my hips.

"Come on, fuckers!" Emmett yelled, jumping off the back bumper of the Jeep. "Party time!"

"Would you *shut up*?" Rose hissed, shooting nervous glances at her house. Our parents were all outside; it was easy to hear their voices mingling with each other's and I'm sure it was just as easy for them to hear us, too. "My parents will not hesitate to call Bella's dad if they hear about alcohol being within ten feet of us."

"I never said anything about alcohol!" he exclaimed.

"You did *now*!" she hissed again, reaching up and smacking the back of his head.

"You are *so* not as innocent as you lead them to believe," I laughed, wrapping my other arm around Bella and swaying side-to-side.

"Let them think what they want," she grinned. "Now let's go! Ben and Ang are waiting for us."

Emmett hollered something about freedom as he jumped into the Jeep – resembling more of a monkey than an eighteen-year old high school graduate – and Rosalie crawled in on the passenger side, leaning over and kissing him quickly.

"And they say that *we're* disgusting," Bella mumbled.

I laughed and kissed the side of her head again, quickly taking a few steps back as Emmett pulled out from the side of the road, gravel being kicked up in his wake.

"Ass," I hissed, pulling back from Bella. "You all right?"

She snorted and shook her head.

"You're like a mother hen."

"I'm..." I tilted my head to the side. "I'm not honestly sure what to make of that."

She laughed and stood up on her toes to kiss me quickly.

"Come on. We'd better get going or we'll never hear the end of it."

I sighed heavily and nodded, grabbing her hand and leading her back towards the car. We made it to Ben's a few minutes later, quickly helping them load all of their things – plus a massive bottle of Jack Daniel's – into the back of my car and we were on our way to the place Emmett and I had been camping since we were kids. It wasn't far from the back of his house and if we hadn't had so much shit, we probably would've been able to hike the trail. The road leading to the small clearing was nothing short of horrendous – potholes and rocks that had the ability to break even Emmett's Jeep if he went over ten miles an hour.

We made it there in one piece and unloaded everything as quickly as possible. The sunlight was quickly disappearing and we worked to get the three tens up while the girls went looking for the wood we'd need for the fire.

Twenty minutes later, we were sitting around the campfire with mixed drinks in our hands, blinding by the flash of Rose's camera every few minutes.

"Did you assholes sign my yearbook?" I asked, shifting on the ground when I realized that my ass was numb.

Emmett remembered the food, of course, but had forgotten the camping chairs we desperately needed. He had, however, thankfully remembered the toilet paper. After the last time we'd been here, when Rose had gotten poison ivy on her "unmentionable place," we'd been forced to remember toilet paper for fear of her wrath once again.

So that was something, at the very least, I suppose.

I looked over when Bella snorted into her drink and grinned at her.

"Sign your handiwork, did you, Rose?" I asked, raising an eyebrow at her.

"You fucking know it."

Jessica and Lauren would forever be emblazoned topless in a collage of the senior class. I don't know how she got the pictures, who gave them to her or what she had threatened that person with, but I didn't care. It was fucking priceless and more than worth it to see Bella's reaction every time it was brought up.

"Fucking priceless," Angela laughed, leaning over and holding her cup over the fire. "Class of 2009, baby!"

We all screamed and hollered, smashing our cups against each other's before drinking.

"That's kinda scary," Ben stated, dropping his cup to his upraised knee.

"That we're considered adults now? Yeah," Bella laughed, nodding.

"You mean we have to start being responsible?" Emmett asked, acting horrified before downing the rest of his drink.

"I'm not commenting on that," Rose stated, pointing at him as she reached over his lap and grabbed the bottle of Jack.

"Heard from NYU yet, Edward?" Angela asked, leaning against Ben and curling her arm around his.

I grinned and Bella laughed, nodding.

"I'm in!"

There were more screams and I was poured an insane amount of Jack, staring down at my over-full cup with a doubting expression on my face while everyone else chatted about their college choices. Ben and Angela were staying in the area and going to the community college for a few years before they'd transfer to somewhere else. Rose and Emmett were both headed to Ohio to go into technical colleges there, neither of them willing to separate from each other. Which I could now completely understand.

"You haven't even told your parents yet," Bella mumbled into my ear, resting her chin on my shoulder.

Outtake 6.

Another one...

I nodded and grabbed my acceptance letter from the coffee table before I let her lead me towards the front door. I let go of her hand long enough to slip my socks back on and pull my sneakers onto my feet before leading her outside and back to the car.

We made it to Rose's house in ten minutes, forced to park halfway down the road due to the fact that all of our families combined – minus Charlie, of course – had been invited to this.

Regardless, I pulled Bella through the house and out onto the back patio, the letter gripped tightly in one hand as I raised it high above my head while yelling to everyone that I was gonna be the newest freshman on the NYU campus in the fall. Bella laughed at me, gently pinching my side before stepping back as my family and our friends rushed up to me, grabbing at the prized acceptance letter as if they needed the fucking proof.

My mother cried all over the letter, Carlisle smacked me on the back so hard that I thought a few of my teeth had been loosened with the force, Emmett had lifted me up on his shoulders and Rose threatened to kick him if I pulled down any of her decorations. Alice was sitting in a corner of the patio next to who I quickly learned was Rose's younger cousin, Jasper, completely oblivious to everything. I would've been offended had I not caught Bella's eyes when Emmett finally put me back down, not able to keep the smile off my face.

"I'm so proud of you, kid," my mother stated, walking up next to me and winding her arms around my waist.

I tore my eyes from Bella and smiled, wrapping my arms around her shoulders and leaning my cheek on the top of her head.

"Thanks, mom."

"For more than being accepted into NYU," she said quietly, looking up at me. "You've changed so much when it comes to certain things."

"Bella," I said quietly.

She'd told me when I first started dating Bella that she'd noticed a change in me. Apparently, I was more relaxed and seemed a lot more happier than I had been in the past and it was nice to hear. I liked that my family fucking loved her and I liked that they could see how much she meant to me.

She nodded, pushing hair off my forehead and smiling brightly.

"I know, sweetheart. You be sure to tell us when you buy her ring, you hear me?"

I laughed loudly, throwing my head back and hugging her tightly.

"It'll be a while, but you'll be the first to know."

"All right," she grumbled, reaching up and pinching my cheek. I grunted and she smiled. "Your public awaits, my love."

"Yeah," I breathed, looking out over the heads of my other family members that were wrapped up in their own conversations. "It's gonna be a long night, isn't it?"

"The longest."

She kissed my cheek again and stepped away from me, reaching up to ruffle my hair. I grunted and did my best to tame it back to normal while she laughed and walked off the porch, being scooped up in Carlisle's arms almost as soon as her foot hit the grass. I twisted my lips to the side, actually hoping that one day, Bella and I would be like that when we were older.

That was before I was rushed by aunts, uncles and cousins I hadn't seen in longer than I could remember and the only thing on my mind at that point was making it out of the death circle of hugs, kisses, cheek pinches and congratulations alive and breathing.

When I was allowed to breathe after that, I made my way over to Bella while she was talking to Rose and wrapped my arms around her waist, slowly starting to drag her away.

I didn't care that we were at a graduation party for all of us; I wanted her to myself.

"I'm not done with her!" Rose exclaimed, quickly grabbing onto Bella's hand.

She laughed, turning her head and nuzzling her nose into my neck.

"Go talk to Emmett. He's been bouncing around waiting for you," she stated, laughing quietly.

I sighed heavily and leaned over her shoulder, kissing her gently. She sighed quietly, one of her hands reaching up and threading into my hair.

"You're gonna swallow her if you don't knock it off."

I grunted and pulled back from her, glaring at Rose. She smiled innocently and pulled Bella away from me, walking over to an unoccupied table towards the end of their property. Bella smirked and blew a kiss at me over her shoulder before plopping down into the seat next to Rose. I huffed and turned to find Emmett standing next to Rose's father as he barbequed the food, his arms crossed over his chest as he nodded. With one last look at Bella, I weaved between relatives and friends on my way to Emmett.

Ben and Angela showed up an hour after everyone else with red faces and Ben's shirt was suspiciously buttoned wrong. They were teased to within an inch of their lives before Angela told them all to shut up and stalked over to where Rose and Bella were *still* sitting, leaving Ben to me and Emmett.

We ate a few minutes before seven and I was finally allowed to sit down next to my girlfriend. Of course then I hadn't wanted to keep my hands to myself and she'd been slapping at me for the better part of dinner, narrowing her eyes and huffing at me every time my hand traveled over to her leg. I was pretty sure that I'd be murdered once we got into the car at the end of the night, but at that moment, I wasn't all that concerned with it.

I wanted to be near her all the time. I wanted to touch her, I wanted to be next to her, I wanted to be everywhere that she was and it was equal parts terrifying and fucking amazing. It had never been like this for me before. I'd never had the incredible urge to not let anyone else go before and I wasn't entirely sure on what to do with it.

Not that I minded it, really. It was just different.

A lot of people started piling out once they'd eaten, claiming that they had a full day tomorrow with more graduation parties. Once again, we were all hugged, cried on and congratulated before they left with promises to make phone calls in the near future that would never happen.

It was nearing eleven when I realized that everyone else was gone, sitting at a table in the middle of the yard with Ben and Emmett. My parents had taken off about an hour ago, having to almost physically remove Alice from Jasper's side and Rose's parents had disappeared to go to bed a few minutes ago. Rose, Bella and Angela were still sitting at the same damn table, their voices low and all of them leaning in as if they were planning some sort of massive crime spree.

Hell, maybe they were. All three of them were sneaky enough to pull something like that off and none of us would be any the wiser about it.

"What do you think they're doing?" Ben finally asked, leaning forward in his seat and clasping his hands around the plastic cup full of soda.

"Bank robbery," I said quickly.

"Or they're planning some massive shopping trip," Emmett grumbled, sighing heavily and leaning his elbows onto the table. "Which is worse."

We all sat up straight when the three of them stood up and made their way over to us.

"You ready to go home?" Angela asked, holding her hand out to Ben. "We've got your party tomorrow."

He sighed heavily and nodded, downing the rest of his soda and plunking it down on the table before he stood up. With more hugs and kisses on the cheeks, we watched them walk away with promises to see them tomorrow. Bella walked up behind me and wrapped her arms around my neck, her chin resting on my shoulder. Rosalie sat down in Emmett's lap, draping her arms around his neck and yawning as she buried her face in his chest. I watched as his arms immediately wrapped around her and the huge grin showed up on his face, laughing quietly and leaning my head against Bella's.

"You ready to go?" she asked quietly.

"Yeah."

I patted her arms and she moved as I stood up, stretching.

"We'll see you guys tomorrow," she stated, grabbing my hand as I dropped my arms. "Thanks for the party, Rose."

"No problem, babe." She smiled sleepily at us. "Have a nice night."

"We're fucking high school graduates," I stated, shaking my head.

The entire day had been one big whirlwind and it was finally hitting me that we would be heading off to fucking *college* in the fall. No more high school bullshit to deal with. No more of my former friends making asses of themselves and making our lives hell every chance that they could. No more petty bullshit.

At least, I hoped not. No, scratch that. I wasn't going to *let* anymore fucking petty bullshit interrupt my life. It had almost cost me the one thing in my life that I hadn't realized I was even missing and I wasn't going to let it fucking happen again.

"Yeah," Emmett nodded, pursing his lips.

"That's fucking scary," Rose mumbled, shaking her head and burying her face back into Emmett's chest.

"Yeah it is," Bella breathed, nodding and squeezing my hand.

I looked down at her and smirked, shrugging one shoulder.

"We got this."

She laughed and shook her head, gently tugging on my hand.

"See you guys," she laughed, waving as she pulled me towards the porch and through the house.

I followed after her with a half-hearted wave over my shoulder, watching her ass as she pulled me and grinning like an idiot.

She really was beautiful. Every single inch of her was amazing and I loved her. I'd stopped caring about her weight around the time I took her on our first date, finally able to open my fucking eyes and see the person that she was. And the person that she was, was fucking gorgeous and everything everyone in that school should've aspired to be.

She'd lost weight – we both ran at least three times a week when we could – and she'd been so fucking excited that all of her clothes were getting too big on her. I, personally, wouldn't have cared either way, but it made her happy and that's all I wanted for her.

I hated that it used to be something that I would've wanted three months ago. I hated that I wouldn't have – and hadn't – looked twice at her before I'd put those bruises on her wrist. I was the biggest asshole I'd ever known and I never deserved anything she'd ever given to me.

But I loved her and she'd said that she loved me back so who was I to question that shit?

"Hey, would you mind if we went somewhere first?" she asked as we reached the car, turning to look up at me.

"Where's that?"

"Would you let me drive?" I barked out a laugh and she pursed her lips. "I'll give you an address then."

"You won't just tell me?"

"No."

"How come?"

"It's a surprise."

"I'm not so sure that I like surprises."

"You'll like this one."

"Why should I trust you?" I asked, smirking as I pressed her up against the driver's side of the car.

She grinned and shook her hand out of mine to place both of them on my chest.

"Because you love me," she said quietly, biting her bottom lip.

I grinned down at her and placed my hands on either side of her on the door, nodding once before leaning down to kiss her.

"I really do," I whispered against her lips.

"That's why you should trust me."

"All right."

"Yeah?"

I laughed and nodded, kissing her once more before stepping back from her.

"Yeah."

She squealed a little and kissed me quickly before running to her side of the car and waiting for me to unlock it.

~*~

The End

~*~