



STANDOFF!

1Blue25

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Summary

Bella returns to the town where she was born to seek out her biological father. When the police take siege on the building next door, she's trapped inside her new home and finds more than she expects from five of the strangest people she's ever met. AH-AU

Please won't you be my neighbor

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A/N: Big thanks to Blackdogs for being an awesome beta.

Chapter 1: Please won't you be my neighbor

The sirens woke me long before the pounding on my door entered my stream of consciousness. Initially, I thought that some tool's car alarm had been set off and that was the annoying repetitive sound that had finally burst through into my dream world.

In the end, I was never quite sure how long Emmett had been banging on my door, but since my apartment was the closest to the front door of the building, I was probably just the first one he tried.

"Emmett! What the hell is wrong with you?" I asked after cracking open the door and staring bleary-eyed at him. The man was sweet most of the time, but he had an annoying streak. And I knew this after just one week.

"You're missing the whole thing!" He exclaimed with way too much enthusiasm for the crazy-ass hour of the day.

"Emmett, it's seven o'clock in the morning." I told him, speaking slowly so he'd be sure to understand all my words. He was like a puppy: cute, anxious to please and way too hard to train. "I worked the late shift last night, so unless someone is dying out in the parking lot, I'm not interested." I started to shut the door again, looking forward to returning to my one luxury purchase in my shithole of an apartment - the bed. My Beautyrest® Pillow Top mattress was my pride and joy and no man was going to pull me from it without at least six hours under my belt, or pajama top as it were. I smiled just thinking about slipping under the sheets and going back to sleep.

Emmett stuck his big ass foot in the door, putting a halt to my quick dismissal, and my smile disappeared. I pushed against it a few times, leaning all 125 pounds of me against the door with little effect. Yep - his annoying streak was in full force today.

"If you don't move your foot, I'm going to get my can of pepper spray and nail you in the eyes." Desperate times called for desperate measures. Emmett had no way of knowing about my mattress addiction, and while I'd been tempted to share that with him in the most intimate way possible, that was not going to happen before I got my six hours.

Fortunately, he must have realized from the tone of my voice that I meant to make good on my threat. He didn't know that the pepper spray was slightly out of reach. Ok, it was actually packed away in one of the boxes that littered the floor of my living room, but I could probably find it in fifteen minutes or less. The offending foot was removed and I shut and locked the door quickly before he got any more bright ideas. I could hear him yelling at me through the now closed door.

"There is a dead guy out here, Bells. Come look!" He pleaded with me so nicely, but I cringed at the nickname he'd given me the day I'd moved in. I'd asked him to just call me "Bella," but he insisted that "Bells" would be "our thing." I wanted it to be nobody's thing except something that Salvation Army volunteers rang at Christmas.

As I contemplated Emmett's outrageous claim, a whole range of thoughts went through my mind. How often is the average person offered the chance to look at a fresh corpse? Would I be grossed out? Would my horrible aversion to the sight and smell of blood come rushing back in an embarrassing way? This was my first time with a corpse, so I didn't have a lot of experience with tamping down the baser emotions that I felt. Perhaps I wouldn't have been so eager if dead bodies had been an everyday occurrence in my previous life in Phoenix. So, it was with part anticipation and part dread that I slowly opened the door and stuck my head out into the hall.

"Seriously?" I asked, hoping that I wasn't smiling. It was bad form to smile at a murder scene, right?

What I saw next removed any smile from my face that might have been there. I caught my first glimpse of Emmett and almost shut the door again. Being neighbors with Emmett kept my life from being dull, I'd give him that.

He was wearing just his underwear.

This might not have been so bad had he been wearing boxers. Or even tighty-whities. But no; the man had on a pair of briefs so small and tight, nothing was left to the imagination. To top it all off, they were some kind of animal print.

Emmett had a great body. He clearly worked out and I took a moment to appreciate his tight muscles, flat stomach and large package. Yes, the package was large and I spent a few brief seconds longer staring in disbelief.

He suddenly spun around and stuck his butt out, then gave it a good smack. The sound of the slap echoed in the hallway.

"My ass is pretty good too."

This reminded me why I had not entertained serious thoughts about hooking up with my hot neighbor. His mouth always ruined it. If he could have managed to look hot and not speak for a thirty-minute interval, things might have been different. But Emmett didn't know how to be silent.

I huffed, embarrassed at being caught ogling and for believing what must have been his sad attempt at seduction. He'd caught me off guard but it wouldn't happen again. I turned to go back into my apartment, hoping to forget that this exchange had ever happened.

"What?" Emmett called after me. "I saw you checking out the bod, and wanted you to have the full picture. Bells, come back. You haven't seen the dead body yet."

My door was closed again. I leaned my back against it and wondered how the other residents of the building were sleeping through all the racket. Not only did Emmett like to talk, he also talked at a much louder volume than most people. I was jealous of my neighbors' ability to block him out.

I was now more awake than I wanted to be after the man show I'd just witnessed. A part of me was still curious about the potential dead body in the parking lot. I weighed my options and decided I could tough it out with Emmett for a few minutes, just long enough to peer through the front door at whatever mess lay in wait outside.

I yanked open the door, and found Emmett on his hands and knees, trying to peek through the small crack between my door and the floor.

"I heard a thump and I wanted to make sure you hadn't fallen and hurt yourself," he explained as I glared down at him menacingly. "I was definitely not looking to see if you were taking your clothes off."

The man had no shame. I hadn't pegged him for a voyeur, but I wasn't going to waste any more time trying to figure Emmett out. I rolled my eyes and stepped

around his inert form on the floor. "Emmett, get up off the floor," I called over my shoulder as I descended the three steps to the interior landing that opened to the front door of the building. "Go put some clothes on while I check out this dead body of yours."

The bottom stair creaked as I stepped off it. The apartment building was old so its creaks, moans and groans weren't a surprise. I think it was built before Columbus supposedly "discovered" America. The carpet was smelly. My bathroom had one of those over-the-tub thingies that I'm convinced hid a pink-tiled, moldy bathtub. We didn't have central air. I had to buy one of those window a/c units for my bedroom. Not that Forks was anywhere near as hot as Phoenix had been, but still, the humidity was killer in the summer.

My point is, the building was ancient. The newer construction apartments I'd checked out when I'd first arrived were open and airy. They smelled good. They were also ridiculously expensive. I couldn't figure who they were marketing towards, because it wasn't like Forks was a hot bed of employment opportunities. I'd been lucky to get the job at the canning factory. And that was only because I'd reluctantly dropped my name.

The building was split into six apartments - two on each of the three floors. My apartment was on the second floor. I'd insisted on having a second floor apartment for security reasons. No need to make the random burglar's job any easier. Emmett lived on the first floor, right underneath me. I guess he didn't have to worry about anyone prying open his windows in the middle of the night. I was pretty sure he could take care of himself.

The front door to our building was an entire sheet of glass. A small number 4 was etched into the top half of the door. There were eight buildings total in our little apartment community. I'd balked at first when the management company tried to place me in this building. Four was not my lucky number. Too many things had gone wrong that were associated with that number. I avoided it like the plague.

I'd been told this was the only available second floor apartment. Since my resources and time were limited, I'd sucked it up and signed the lease for building 4, apartment 4. Yeah, I should have known better.

I found out on my second day here that the managers were lying pieces of shit. The neighbor across the hall, Rosalie, told me that she knew for a fact that two of the other buildings across the parking lot were completely empty on the second floor.

I'd been duped into this building because they considered it to be an upgrade and could charge an extra \$30 a month. Assholes. When I'd called and complained, Tyler, the head of the management company, told me that the other apartments were being renovated. They weren't available for immediate move-in. I still think he was lying.

On this particularly early Saturday morning, the sun was not shining. The birds were not chirping. It was, however, not raining, which was a major improvement over the past week.

No one had told me that Forks was the rainiest place in the entire freaking universe. I was beginning to get a sense of the reasoning behind my mom's sudden and abrupt departure twenty-five years prior. But, I was made of stronger stuff. I had a mission, and I was going to stick it out until it was accomplished.

For the time being though, I was going to find me a dead body.

I scanned the small parking lot, just beyond the door, in search of anything resembling a body. I found several bodies in fact, but they all seemed to be among the living.

Our parking lot had turned into a command post for the entire police force of Washington State, or so it appeared to me. I counted no less than fifteen state police cars, two ambulances, an armored bomb squad truck, two military-looking vehicles with "SWAT" written on the side, and two smaller police vehicles with "Town of Forks" emblazoned across the side.

These last two vehicles took the breath from my lungs. I immediately pressed my back against the wall, trying to hide behind the thin strip of drywall that bracketed the front door. Anxiously, I craned my neck to peer through the door and out into the parking lot. I tried to be as covert as possible, like Angelina from *Mr. & Mrs. Smith*. I had a feeling I looked more like that kid from *Harriet the Spy*. I hoped to God that none of the scurrying law enforcement types could see me. I was just not ready for a confrontation.

There were a lot of people to sort through; at least thirty men and women. From what I could tell, they had the building diagonally across from ours blocked off. I hadn't seen so much firepower since the last time I'd woken up in Vegas...but that was another story for another time.

"Holy hell, Emmett, what's going on?" I yelled, not even aware if he was within earshot. It didn't matter. There was some serious shit going on outside and I needed

answers. I searched the parking lot frantically for the promised dead body, but didn't see it anywhere. I could only assume that it had been removed already.

"Isn't it awesome?" Emmett said, directly into my left ear. I could tell that he was standing too close to me simply by the volume of his response. I turned to tell him to back up and give me some space, but as soon as I saw him my jaw dropped open. Like a good boy, he'd actually listened to my suggestion and gone to his apartment to put some clothes on. He was wearing what looked to be some kind of robe, but...oh...lovely.

"Emmett, for the love of God, put some pants on," I groaned as I crossed the landing to sit down on the steps leading up to the second floor. I covered my eyes with both my hands, like I was getting ready to play a game of adult peek-a-boo. I'd peeked enough at Jungle Boy and his boo already.

"I'm mostly covered," he told me, looking down at his outfit and shrugging. "Besides, I didn't want to miss any of the action."

I shook my head in disbelief. My neighbors were so...strange. "Was there even a dead body in the parking lot?" I asked, keeping my face covered.

I heard him shuffling his feet and I knew I wasn't going to like his response.

"Well, there could have been," he explained. "I just wanted someone to come out and watch it with me. You were resisting and it was the only thing I could think of at the time."

I peeked between my fingers and watched him staring at his feet. He really wasn't a bad guy. He seemed lonely sometimes, which was strange because he was so extroverted. As much as I wanted to be pissed at him, I couldn't.

While I contemplated Emmett and the environs that I'd moved into, I heard a door open and shut on the floor above mine. I'd only met one of my upstairs neighbors so far. His name was Jasper and he worked from home. He said he was a writer, which made me jealous. I pictured him with tons of free time, lots of money, and the ability to travel whenever he wanted. From what I could tell, the reality didn't match up with my mental picture.

Sure enough, his blonde head appeared through the railing that separated his floor from mine. His eyes were bloodshot and his hair was a mess. Despite all that, he was gorgeous as always. His mouth was too big for his face, but it only made him that much more kissable. He had high cheekbones, and really should have been a

model. He was tall and not too thin and not too big. He was practically perfect. It was a shame he was gay.

His eyes finally focused and locked onto mine. His mouth spread into a wide grin at the sight of me. Jasper and I were cool.

"Hey, Bella. What's going on?"

"I don't know," I answered truthfully. Now that Emmett had confessed to making up the dead body in the parking lot, I was even more confused than before as to why the building across the way held so much interest for the police. "There's a crapload of cops out here," I told him, nodding towards the front door so he could check it out himself.

Jasper skipped, yes, skipped down the stairs. He looked dead tired so I don't know where he got the energy from.

He stopped at the bottom of the stairs when he saw Emmett. Emmett of the no pants. Now, I'd never had any gay friends before, but I kind of expected Jasper to react in some way to finding a half-naked man in the hallway. Hell, I had. I may not want to hit that, but I can appreciate it from an aesthetic point of view.

But other than a raised eyebrow, Jasper had no reaction. He nodded to Emmett and then pressed his gorgeous face up against the glass to get a better view of the law enforcement activities.

I took a moment to appreciate the view that Jasper had presented by turning around. He had a great ass. He was wearing navy blue gym shorts, which really should be illegal for men outside of the gym because they were practically pornographic. I'd been a good girl moments before when he'd descended the stairs and *not* checked out what he was packing. After seeing his caboose, I couldn't keep myself to that promise any more. His top half was covered by a gray t-shirt, but when he leaned against the door I could see the flex of his back muscles. I swear my womb twitched a little, which was ridiculous considering my body had little chance of seeing any action from Jasper.

"Something major's going down across the street. Lots of firepower out here. They're strapping on bullet proof vests now too," Jasper said with authority. So far, Jasper had not been a source of enlightenment but I was more inclined to listen to his thoughts on the matter than Emmett's. I think he'd told me that he wrote books about the Civil War, so that made him some kind of expert on weapons, right? I was still waiting for him to turn around, but got distracted by the sound of another door

opening and closing.

It was Emmett's first floor neighbor. I groaned and rolled my eyes when she bounced up the steps. Alice was an aerobics instructor. She had an endless amount of energy. She also liked to get up early and sing at the top of her lungs.

Unfortunately, our walls were pretty thin.

"Hey guys!" She called out, excited to see our little group gathering. I got the feeling that she wanted us to all to be more friendly and neighborly. I didn't do neighborly so well. Or friendly either. Unless you had a penis and a great body. Then, I could probably muster up a smile and a civil word or two.

Alice only met 50% of the qualifications, so I gave her my fake smile when she bounded up the stairs to the front door. She was obviously on her way to teach the denizens of Forks how to shake their thangs. I'm pretty sure she wanted me to come to one of her kickboxing classes, but I had no interest in that. Though the stripper class had sounded interesting...

This morning, she was wearing a pair of ultra-mini red shorts, a tiny black tank top, and her trainers. Alice called them her trainers, not me. They looked like plain old sneakers to me.

Emmett had untied his robe by this point and was posing against the banister. The man, apparently, needed to get laid. Alice smiled in his direction, but it was just her regular friendly smile. "Looking good, Emmett," she told him on her way to stand next to Jasper.

Alice saved her man-eating smile for the gay man at the door.

"Hey, Jazz," she purred seductively, "What's going on?" She raked her eyes up and down his body, and I noticed with jealousy that they lingered in the vicinity of the package. He still hadn't turned around for me to make my own perusal.

Jasper regained his Queen status in my head by taking a step away from Jane Fonda. He cleared his throat nervously and looked back up the stairs towards his apartment longingly. "The police seem to have blocked off our parking lot. Looks like it may be some kind of standoff."

"Ohhh..." Alice purred yet again. She reached out and placed her hand on his bicep. "It's a good thing we've got a big, strong man like you in here to protect us."

Emmett cleared his throat and moved to stand on Alice's other side. It seemed he couldn't take a little competition. "I used to work security, you know. I think I can handle any thugs that happen to come our way."

I swear to God he actually leaned forward and flexed his muscles, like he was competing in the Mr. Universe contest. It was a little ridiculous.

Alice sniffed and turned her back on Emmett. "That's nice," she told him over her shoulder. She went back to feeling up Jasper's muscles and making him extremely uncomfortable.

I heard a door being slammed open on my floor, and I knew we were all in trouble now. I thought I was protective of my beauty sleep. Rosalie brought bitchiness to a whole new level. She did not like loud noises, did not like being disturbed, and did not like our postal carrier, for some strange reason. I'm sure there were other things on her hate list, but any of those three things sent her into hysterics.

I quickly stood and moved out of the way of the tirade that was coming. I figured that I would be safe standing on the stairs leading down to the first floor.

I was wrong.

"What the fuck is wrong with you people? You're out here, making a fuckload of noise, on a *Saturday*, when you know I don't get home until almost four in the morning. I've had fucking three hours of sleep! Who should I fucking castrate first?"

Rosalie liked to say 'fuck.'

Jasper, smart man that he was, backed away quickly and shook his head. He clearly was not going to take the blame for our early morning chat session. Alice huffed and checked her manicure for any chips. I tried to stay hidden on the first floor, but I saw Rosalie's eyes flick over me and narrow, so I backed even further away from the approaching storm.

Poor, sweet Emmett became her first victim. I could understand his reluctance to back down. Emmett had a major jones for Rosalie. It was sad, actually. I'd seen his attempts at flirtation with her, and she always blew him off and insulted him. Always in that order. I'd personally witnessed this strange mating dance no less than fourteen times over the past week.

Emmett puffed out his chest and stood to his full height. Emmett was a tall man, but Rosalie was tall as well. They would actually make a cute couple, if either one of

them suddenly turned normal.

I watched his eyes darken and smolder as he looked down into her face. He hadn't even done his standard rack check yet. "Hey babe," he told her, his voice dropping impossibly an octave. I felt my own knees go weak at the combination of his voice, eyes and display of testosterone.

"You," Rosalie sputtered, tapping her finger hard against his bare chest. "I knew this was all your fucking fault. Why don't you take your steroid-addled brain and park it inside your apartment for the rest of the day." It was obviously not just a suggestion.

I felt a little bad for the guy. He was clearly smitten, and Rosalie had some man-hating issues to resolve. I decided to step in and help the guy out.

"Actually, Rose, I think we can blame the state police for this morning's disturbance." I hitched my thumb out the door to the circus going on outside.

For once, Rosalie was speechless. Even her favorite F-bomb couldn't save her vocal numbness.

Well, it was nice while it lasted anyway.

"Fucking douchebags. They are always messing up my beauty sleep. Must be nice to have such a cake job that involves ruining the lives of innocent citizens everywhere..."

I'd actually heard this speech before. It was the same speech she'd given me about the mailman. I could only guess that it extended to all government employees.

I watched as all four of my neighbors crowded around the door, trying to figure out what was going on in the parking lot. And there was that number again: four. Fucking four. I was caught up in my bad memories of four, so it was no surprise that a little thing like a tap on my shoulder scared the crap out of me.

I screamed and probably jumped ten feet. When I came back down, I clutched my chest and tried to calm the frantic beating of my heart. I turned around to face my attacker, because I wasn't going down without a fight, when I came face to face with a god.

Yeah, I'd been drooling over Emmett and Jasper for the past week, but they were nothing compared to the man who stood before me now. He was sheer perfection.

Green eyes. Great hair. His face was chiseled, fucking chiseled. He was wearing a t-shirt and jeans, but even through the material of his shirt I could make out that he was built.

I could only hope that the Greek god had come to rescue me. I would have followed him anywhere.

Jasper and Emmett looked like members of the freak show in comparison.

I stared at him for a moment, just drinking in his perfection. Thankfully, my reflexes kicked in and I didn't even have to think about the smile that spread across my face or the way that I pretended to bashfully lower my eyes under his penetrating gaze. Unfortunately, my brain had forgotten about the bedhead and dragon breath I had yet to attempt to tame. I'm sure this probably counter-acted my other attempts to make a good first impression on this man, but I was past the point of caring.

He smiled at me pleasantly, then flicked his eyes to the others standing at the door. They could have been screwing each other senseless at that point, and I wouldn't have known the difference.

"Hi," he said, his voice like honey. "What's going on?"

That had actually been everyone's question for the past hour, and we still didn't have an answer.

"Hey Edward," Emmett responded, tossing him a cursory glance before returning to his position standing as close to Rosalie as he could get.

Edward. His name was Edward. Ed. Eddie. Edarooni. Ed, my personal sex god.

He stood in between Jasper and Emmett while they explained what they knew about the situation. I watched as his head nodded and turned between the two of them while they talked. Not only was he hot, he was a good listener too.

Ed clasped his hand on Emmett's shoulder and complimented him on his smoking jacket.

Huh. I'd thought it had been too short to be a bathrobe.

Ed turned back around and his eyes zeroed in on me. I suddenly wished I wasn't wearing Rainbow Brite pajama pants and a pink t-shirt.

His eyes twinkled as he briefly looked me up and down. He had a smile on his face when his eyes returned to mine.

I'd never been so happy to be sized up before. I think I lost about 100 gazillion feminist points in that brief moment. Oops.

Ed extended his hand and I placed mine in his. His palm was pleasantly warm and strong.

"I'm Edward. You must be our new neighbor." When I pulled my hand back, I trailed my fingertips against his palm. I swear I saw him shiver a little.

"I'm Bella. Apartment four."

Ed smiled and stuck his hands into his pockets. "Six," he told me. Like I couldn't deduce which one he might be in. I hoped he wasn't one of those guys that thought all girls were dumb. We'd have problems if he was. I really didn't want to have problems with him.

"So, it looks like we may be stuck here for a while," he told me.

I couldn't stop the smile that spread across my face at that news. "Yeah?" I replied brilliantly. Phil hadn't paid for two years of college for nothing. My verbal skills were beyond description. Communication problems aside, I suddenly didn't mind the possibility of being stuck anywhere so long as Ed was there to keep me company.

"Yeah." Ed smoldered at me a moment longer. "Well, I've got some things to do. See you later."

I watched him bound up the steps two at a time. I heard his footsteps cross the hall and then the soft click of his door.

Well, that was disappointing.

A/N: Please review and let me know what you think! This story is a little different for me. Bella is on a journey so you may not like her at first. Give her a chance - everyone has a reason for the way that they act. Also, don't get hung up on "Ed." That doesn't last for too long. Thanks.

Game On

A/N: Chapter two for your perusal. Just an interesting tidbit: each chapter is written to last about one hour (give or take), ala 24. I'm sure that's where the similarities end. I've never watched 24, but I know the basic premise.

Disclaimer: I don't own Twilight.

Chapter 2: Game On

I examined my closet, trying to decide what to wear. I use the term closet loosely. Yes, there was a small vertical hole in the wall. Yes, one would find my clothes in the hole. However, the entire space took up no more room than my entire body, well maybe two of me, and my clothes were still in the boxes that I'd packed them in before leaving Phoenix.

Have I mentioned that it's only been a week?

Neighbor bonding time had come to an end after Ed's departure. I didn't have it in me to pretend to ogle after Emmett and Jasper anymore. The Greek god from upstairs had burned so hotly that my other neighbors were lost in the residual retinal blinding. And then he'd abandoned me. It didn't seem fair somehow.

Jasper had gone back to his apartment to write, Alice had pouted after him, and I'd left Rosalie and Emmett arguing in the stairwell.

Classic case of foreplay. I wondered how long she was going to make him wait.

The weatherman had promised another hot day, so I pulled out a pair of shorts and a tank top. I was going for as little clothing as possible in the hopes that my own personal Adonis would come and knock on my door. A girl can always dream.

I turned on the news, hoping to find an update on the situation outside. I flipped between the three major networks, but I wasn't surprised that nobody was talking about the cop parade just outside my door. Our local news came out of Seattle, and what the hell did they care about a little town called Forks?

I grabbed some cereal and had just reached into fridge for the milk when I heard a knock on my door.

I smiled in anticipation. It seemed like tall and sexy couldn't keep away after all. I quickly fluffed my hair and bit my lips, just to make them a little darker and fuller. I struck my best pose and opened the door.

"Hey..." I said nonchalantly, praying that he wouldn't notice that my heart was beating wildly against my chest. I barely knew the guy and my body was already doing weird things when he came near.

Unfortunately, my visitor wasn't Ed. Jane Fonda had come to visit instead.

My shoulders slumped and I let out the breath I'd been holding in. "Oh, it's just you," I told her, not even trying to hide my disappointment.

Alice skipped inside my apartment and I closed the door behind her. Maybe she and Jasper had something in common after all. Other than they both liked to sleep with men. I watched her gaze skim over the small living room and then the kitchen on her right.

"Sorry, but I'm not Edward," she said as she continued to examine my apartment like she was the building inspector.

I knew that my intentions had been obvious in the stairwell, but I'd hoped that Ed would be the only one to notice my subtle attempt to lure him inside my web. All the other weirdos had seemed too wrapped up in the action outside to take notice of me and my future conquest.

Alice's home inspection had moved on from the lack of curtains and bare walls to an examination of my sparse furniture. I'm sure that the layout of her apartment was exactly the same, and there was nothing else interesting to look at in my apartment. *I just moved in*, I kept reminding myself. I refused to allow the fitness girl to make me feel bad about my living space.

"I love what you've done with the place," she said, pasting on a smile at the last possible moment. She was a liar. A bad liar to boot. I hated bullshit.

"No you don't. I can tell by the look on your face. It looks freaking awful, but it's good enough for now." I was defensive and I hated that I'd let her see that. I pursed my lips, mad at myself *and* her.

"Ok," she replied, cheerfully. I searched her face for any signs of sarcasm, but she seemed guileless. She carefully sat on the edge of my ratty sofa and nodded her head in time to a beat that only she could hear.

I sighed and leaned against the far wall, next to the TV.

"So...Jasper's pretty cute, right?"

Oh - we were going to talk about boys. Like we were in the seventh grade. Alright.

"Yeah. I saw you checking out the goods. Impressive?" It was time to let the real Bella out. Men had only one purpose for me. I wasn't about to pretend to gush over his dreamy hair or pretty eyes.

"Definitely," she said with a wink. I angled my head at her in surprise. Alice was a study in contradictions. I expected her to get all pissed off at my frank discussion of the man's junk, using her sweet and innocent act to pretend like she hadn't pictured him naked and riding her hard. Instead, she'd just spit out what she was thinking. I liked this side of her a lot more than Miss Goody Two Shoes.

"What about Emmett?" There was a method to my madness. I figured I could slowly work up to the neighbor that I was really interested in and she wouldn't know the difference. My fingers twitched against my thigh. Patience and I hadn't spent much time together.

"I'll let you discover that for yourself," Alice said, shaking her head. "Give him another week. We've all seen Emmett naked at one point or another."

I groaned and pictured him in his cougar pants again. I didn't mind the nudity so much as the reminder of my continual bad luck. It figured that I would pick the apartments with the nudist living right below me. Back in Phoenix, I'd lived above a comic book shop and there'd been only one other tenant living there. We'd not said one word to each other for the entire year I'd lived there. It had been heaven, or so I thought.

I waited, hoping that Alice would offer up the information on our third contestant without me having to say anything. I clicked my tongue against the roof of my mouth as I counted the seconds that passed by. I sneaked a look in Alice's direction and immediately got pissed off. She sat on my freaking sofa with her hands folded in her lap, staring at me with the biggest smile I'd seen on her face yet. The bitch knew my game and had probably known all along.

I sighed in defeat. I was going to cave first after all. Damn impatience. "What about Ed?" I asked reluctantly. To make matters worse, I almost giggled when I said his name. Bella Dwyer did not giggle over men. I was not going to start with Ed the god from upstairs.

"Ed?" Alice asked in confusion. It must have clicked a second later because her smile widened. "Yes...Ed," she said before a small giggle escaped from her lips.

I stared at her, pursing my lips. What was I missing? I couldn't figure out what was making her laugh, but before I could think about it any further, Alice had moved on.

"*Ed* is a mystery," she said, with that same giggle. "He wears these baggy jeans that hang off his butt..." The smile on Alice's face was replaced by a look of disgust. I couldn't tell if it was because of his choice in jeans or because she couldn't get a read on his hidden attributes. I knew which way I was leaning.

And just like that, my brain farted and I had a billion thoughts that were completely unfamiliar to me. I didn't usually care about getting to know the men who passed in and out of my life, so these questions that started to form freaked me the hell out. Who was Ed? What kind of books did he read? What was his favorite band? How did he like his eggs? Did he read the sports or the comics first? Where did he grow up? And most shocking of all: did he have a girlfriend?

With so many foreign questions flitting around, I was sure my brain was going to shut down completely and I'd be left sitting on the floor in a slump with drool coming out of my mouth. I really, really didn't want that so happen so I searched the far reaches of my brain for the usual questions I asked about guys: Does he work out? What kind of car does he drive? Is he loud during sex? Is he an ass or a boob man?

I focused all my attention on Alice and blurted out the one question that seemed the most important. "Does he have a girlfriend?"

I gasped and snapped my mouth shut. Shit - I hadn't meant to ask that question. Don't get me wrong, I didn't mess around with men who were taken, but I also wasn't looking for a relationship myself. I liked to keep things light. Fun. Sexerific. My question seemed to imply that I was looking for just the opposite and I scrambled to fix my slip before Alice took it the wrong way.

"I just wanted to know if there was any competition, I mean." I crossed my fingers and hoped that she wouldn't decide to start planning our double wedding anytime soon. I snorted at the thought of me getting married. Not going to happen. I decided that a quick change in topic was needed.

"So, what's Jasper's deal? Does he have a boyfriend?" Smooth, Bella. Smooth.

Alice, however, disagreed. She immediately started coughing and I realized that she must have sucked in the piece of gum she'd been chewing. I jumped up and ran to the sofa, patting her a few times awkwardly on the back. Actually, I wasn't sure that was the right thing to do, but she started breathing again after a minute so I figured that I hadn't fucked her up too badly.

When she stopped coughing long enough to breathe, she shot daggers at me. "Boyfriend? You think Jasper's gay?" Her mouth hung wide open like it was the most ridiculous suggestion ever.

"Well, yeah. He just gives off that vibe. Plus, he hasn't stared at my boobs once." I tried not to let my feelings be hurt about that, but dammit, I was proud of my girls.

"Maybe that's because he's a gentleman," she said with a hint of anger in her voice.

Right, and I'm Santa Claus.

I pictured Jasper as I saw him earlier, standing in the stairwell. Men were always the same, either looking at my boobs or my ass. Jasper had done neither. There was only one explanation for that. I felt the need to remind Denial Girl that she'd already made an attempt on the man and failed. "He was scared of you, earlier, when you rubbed all over him like a cat."

Alice rolled her eyes. "He may have caught me and my last boyfriend entertaining ourselves in the laundry room a couple months ago."

"Alice, ew..." I needed to remind myself to take some Lysol down there the next time I had laundry to do.

"Like you've never...anyway, James may have been slightly handcuffed to the pipes, but I assure you that he was at no time in any real pain or discomfort."

The picture had become much clearer. Alice was freaky.

"Regardless, I think Jasper likes the peen." This conversation had become ridiculous. I wondered how soon I could kick her out without seeming rude. Well, that hadn't ever stopped me before.

"You're wrong. He's sensitive and shy and special and he will be mine. I can feel it in my bones," Alice said, standing to her full height. She was like a little Napoleon, clutching her chest and lamenting over a lost victory.

I rolled my eyes at her dramatics and pushed myself off the wall. Time for the little dictator to go. As I passed the window that overlooked the parking lot, movement in front of the building under siege caught my eyes. One of the many men in uniform was taking slow, deliberate steps towards the building with his hands out.

Alice was forgotten as I stepped closer to the window. The air conditioning unit sat in the lower half of the window so only the top half was open. My partial view wasn't good, but it was enough to convince me that the man grasping the bullhorn to his mouth and gesturing to the building looked familiar. There was something about his stance or the color of his hair - I wasn't sure. My heart started beating wildly and my breath caught in my throat. *Shit - I wasn't ready for this.*

I barely registered Alice as she came to stand next to me. She went up on her tiptoes and craned her neck to see what had me so enthralled. With a huff, she turned to me and shook her head. "That's not your father."

My mouth dropped open and I pulled my gaze from the man in the parking lot. I gaped at Alice with wide eyes.

"What do you know about my father?" I asked skeptically, swallowing the lump in my throat. I hadn't told anyone, and I mean no one, about my real purpose for moving to Forks. I'd barely admitted it to myself.

"Please," she scoffed, walking away from the window and towards the door. "You look just like him."

This was news to me. I knew virtually nothing about my biological father. I placed my hand on the a/c unit to balance myself. I suddenly felt ill.

"And," she sniffed, turning away from me and putting her hand on the doorknob, "he's friends with my parents. We've known all along that he had a daughter named Bella. When I met you, the pieces fell into place."

A part of me wanted to hug her and ask her to tell me everything she knew. The more sane part, the part of me that spoke the loudest in my head, said to act like I didn't care.

"That's great. But what makes you think I'd be so interested in meeting him?" It was the reason I'd moved to Forks, but why did this girl have to be the one to figure that out? I was still trying to sort through my crazy, spur-of-the-moment decision.

"I can just tell. I'm very good at reading people." She turned the doorknob and

pulled the door open. In my mind I saw her stepping out into the hall and in the process, I would lose this first, tiny connection to the man who had fathered me but never known me. It scared the shit out of me.

"Wait! Where are you going?" I regretted, again, seeming so needy, but I couldn't just let her leave now. I swallowed a gulp of air and admitted something that killed me to do it: I needed her. I didn't like needing anyone. Especially not since the argument with Phil.

Alice turned back and looked at me. Her mouth settled into a line as she saw me holding onto the a/c with one hand, biting the hell out of my bottom lip and scanning the room like little green men were descending and trying to conduct an anal probe. I felt exposed, like I'd just admitted that I liked to watch Jeopardy and that I found comfort from the automated banking line voice because it sounded like my mom's. I braced myself for the mocking barb that was sure to come my way.

"We can see the parking lot better from the front door. I thought we'd get an update on the bullhorn guy from Emmett." She spoke softly, and said not a word about my mini-breakdown.

The breath I released was probably audible all the way to Canada. I closed my eyes briefly to regain my composure and put my game face back on. Alice hadn't attacked, but that didn't mean she wouldn't. Some bitches were sneaky like that. They waited until your defenses were really down and then they got you even harder.

I dropped my hand from the window and took a deep breath. "Yeah, that makes sense. Let's go," I told her brusquely. I stalked across the living room and pulled the door the rest of the way open, ignoring Alice the entire time. We were not friends. We were not going to be friends. She just needed to figure that shit out.

I stomped down the steps loudly, expecting to find Emmett keeping guard over the parking lot activities but he was nowhere in sight. Alice followed close behind and we took up watch together in front of the door. We could hear the man with the bullhorn now; he seemed to be attempting to negotiate with whomever was holed up inside the other building. We both heard the word "hostage" tossed around a few times and we stared at each other in horror. The situation just went from bad to nightmarish.

"I wish they would come over here and tell us what's going on," I said as we eyed the police officers. They were all intently watching the second floor window of the building. It was driving me crazy that they were keeping us in the dark. You'd think

the good citizens of Forks deserved to get some answers when they found their parking lot filled with the po-po.

"I could always call my parents," Alice said, casting me a side-long glance. "They could probably get in touch with Chief Swan. He's out there, you know. In the parking lot. That's his car parked next to the dumpster. The one marked 'Chief.'"

She was egging me on and I wasn't going to take it anymore. I didn't give a shit if he was the freaking POTUS. I wasn't going to be bullied into doing something I wasn't ready to do.

"You need to back the hell off," I told her quietly. Quiet bitches were always the scariest bitches. "If I want to meet him, I'll march my cute little ass out there and do it myself." My words sounded brave when I said them out loud, but on the inside I was more shaken than a James Bond martini.

Alice narrowed her eyes at me and stuck her finger in my face. I knew I'd been right not to trust her and her over-friendly attitude. "There's a reason that you haven't sought Charlie out yet, even though you've been in town for a week. It's the same reason you act like a bitch and the same reason that you've ogled every man in this building. You're scared. So, don't act like I'm the one with the problem when I'm just trying to be nice and help you out. I may be small, but I teach kickboxing for a living and I can knock you the hell out."

She turned on her heel and marched up the steps, away from her own apartment, and knocked on Rosalie's door. She practically vibrated with anger and it had the undesirable effect of making me feel bad. She was right and that just pissed me off. She had my number and that's what scared me most of all.

Alice had given up on Rosalie's door by this point and was stomping down the stairs towards her own apartment. She ignored me as she went past, but I didn't care. I preferred it that way. I cast my eyes up towards the third floor, wondering if I should try knocking on Ed's door, when I heard a loud gasp from downstairs. I stepped to the edge of the landing and peered down to see what Alice was going on about.

I bit back my laughter when I discovered the source of the disturbance. Emmett had Rosalie pressed against the rear wall, next to the door for the laundry room, and they were attacking each other with their hands and mouths. That didn't take so long after all.

Alice fiddled with her keys, trying to escape into her apartment unnoticed. I took a

step back to do the same, but the damn creaky floor gave me away.

Rosalie's eyes popped open at the sound and she gave Emmett a mighty shove. She stared over his shoulder at me and Alice and I desperately wished to have magical powers so I could apparate into my own apartment. I wanted no part of whatever screeching fit she was going to unleash. I felt frozen in place, and apparently Alice felt the same way. Maybe Rosalie was the one with the magical powers.

"You fucking moron!" She yelled at Emmett, giving his wide chest another push for good measure. "I told you not to fucking touch me! Leave me the fuck alone!"

I watched her storm past Emmett, who stared after her with a grin, and come right towards me. I backed away from the edge of the landing and pressed my back up against the front door. At that moment, the most violent threat seemed to be inside my building rather than in the one across the way. She stomped up the steps, her hair swinging behind her, and into *my* apartment. She slammed the door behind her and all was quiet once again.

Alice climbed the steps and joined me on the landing. We both stared at the closed door, waiting for it to slam open again after she had realized her mistake. Emmett chuckled from behind us.

"She is one hell of a woman," he told us.

Alice and I stared at each other for a moment, our own disagreement momentarily forgotten. This exchange was way better than the shit that Alice and I had been arguing about.

I turned to Emmett with a smile on my face. "I'm proud of you, big guy," I told him with a punch on the arm.

As usual, he ruined the moment by continuing to speak. "There's always room for one more, Bells. I'm a man of many talents." And then he winked at me.

"Ugh. Emmett. No." The man was hot, but disgusting. How many girls did he need to chase after at one time? Besides, I'd never learned to share very well. I wasn't going to start with Cougar Pants.

As I stepped away from Emmett and out of range of his large paws, I noticed with satisfaction that he'd thrown some shorts on. Finally. However, the smoking jacket was gone and his bare chest was on display yet again. He must wax all his body hair,

because his chest was as smooth and bare as a baby's butt. The shorts rested low on his hips, and I wondered just how dedicated he was to hair removal.

My wandering mind was interrupted by the sound of my door being wrenched open and Rosalie screeching, "Get the fuck in here already!"

I jumped a little at her outburst, I'm ashamed to admit. I didn't like being intimidated by my neighbor. I was going to have to do something and soon to let her know that I wasn't going to be pushed around. I glanced at Alice and she only shrugged her shoulders. I guess we were both going to act like sheep for a little while. That led me to picture Rosalie as Little Bo Peep and my spirits were instantly lifted. She'd look funny as hell in white bloomers, a bonnet and a huge bow on her ass. With a quiet "Baa," I followed Alice as she skipped inside, then closed and locked the door behind me. I didn't trust Emmett not to follow us in, thinking that we were going to offer him an orgy.

Rosalie looked nothing like Little Bo Peep as she sat in the middle of my living room, on the floor, with her legs bent Indian style and her arms resting upon them, facing up.

Alice and I stood side by side staring at her in astonishment. "Is she meditating?" Alice asked me in a whisper.

"I guess," I replied, with a disgusted look on my face. Who actually did shit like this? I'd met a lot of fucked up people during my formative years in Palm Beach, but not once had I found one of the morons that I'd been forced upon meditating on the floor in Phil's trophy room. Why were all the people in my building so messed up?

Rosalie breathed in deeply through her nose and then released a long, drawn-out breath through her mouth. Her eyes remained closed but it seemed like she was staring at me and Alice anyway. "I'm channeling my anger," she said slowly. "Sit down and shut up before I unleash it on you instead."

I took a step forward, determined to let the bitch know that I wasn't going to be talked to like a piece of dog shit in my own living room. Alice placed a hand on my forearm to hold me back.

Alice turned her face to the side so Rosalie couldn't hear her. "Let it go," she murmured. Her fingers tightened slightly on my arm. "She's had a tough year."

So had I, but you didn't see me bossing people around like I owned them. Alice must have seen the protest forming on my lips. "This will be good for all of us," she

said, releasing my arm and stepping forward to join Rosalie on the floor.

I stood watching them for a few minutes. They sat facing one another and Alice had soon mimicked Rosalie's exact position. They seemed so completely different to me: one short and dark, the other tall and fair. Yet, in my mind, they were the same. They both represented something that I'd yet to find and wasn't sure that I wanted. I was almost afraid that it was too late for me.

I shook off my melancholy and attempted to refocus my mind. I had one goal in moving to Forks: to meet my father. But, there'd been something else nipping at my heels when I'd driven out of Phoenix ten days ago. Something that had weighed on my mind but I'd never been able to get a handle on. Something that told me that I was unhappy for a reason, and until I found that reason, I would continue to be a miserable bitch.

So, I made a decision. Instead of yelling at the chicks on my floor to get the fuck out, I did something completely unexpected. I took the ten steps into my living room, lowered myself to the floor, and crossed my legs over each other. I studied Rosalie's pose for a moment and held my arms out like hers. I closed my eyes and tried to clear my head. I was tired of thinking about all the things that bothered me and I just wanted to escape for a few minutes. My mind had other ideas. I'd hoped for images of meadows, crystal blue waters, and puffy white clouds, but my mind gave me visions of Ed instead. Ed in the shower. Ed washing his car. Ed watering the lawn. I had no complaints, but instead of slowing my heart rate and breathing, it sped them up instead.

We stayed like that for at least ten minutes. I had a particularly enjoyable fantasy of Ed and me having sex in the shower that I was determined to make a reality. I just needed to get the man wet and soon. I peeked at Rosalie to see if we could wrap things up this decade, but she was still doing her deep breathing thing. I could only guess that Rosalie had a lot of anger to channel. A few minutes later, she finally unfolded her body and opened her eyes.

"What you saw downstairs isn't going to happen again," she told us calmly. "Emmett is not the kind of guy I want to get involved with."

I frowned at her then, wondering what was so wrong with Emmett besides his tendency to act like a 15-year-old. She made it sound like he wasn't good enough for her.

"You should give him a chance," Alice said in his defense. I nodded my head in agreement. "He's not that bad once you get past the public displays of nudity,

goofiness, and peeping tom ways."

I hissed at Alice. She wasn't doing a good job at selling him on Rosalie. I wasn't sure why I was so interested in seeing the two of them hook up. I wasn't invested in either of their lives, but they just seemed to make sense together. Like me and Ed, for example. He was hot, I was attracted to him, so we made complete sense together. For at least a little while. And that was all I needed.

"Emmett seems really sweet," I chimed in. I didn't have very much else to offer in way of a character recommendation.

"Yeah, well, you don't know him," Rosalie said standing up suddenly and staring down at me. "He's had the same dead-end job for three years, he acts like an idiot, and all he does every Saturday night is drink beer and watch porn. It's pathetic."

"It could be worse," I said, standing as I felt my ire rise. I was six inches shorter than Rosalie, so I still had to stare up at her. I'd dealt with plenty of statuesque blondes before and the height difference this time wasn't going to make me feel any less inferior than it ever had. "He could bring a different girl in here every weekend and pretend like they're the only one for him. He could fuck his co-workers in the stockroom and then laugh about it ten minutes later with his buddies. He could get his dates so drunk that they barf all over his dick when he asks for a blow job. So, don't tell me that Emmett is pathetic. Don't say that he's not good enough for you. You. Don't. Know. Shit."

I turned away, not wanting her to see the pain in my eyes or the surprise on my face for blurting all that out. Half that shit I'd blocked but it had come roaring back with a vengeance with her complaints about Emmett. Emmett may not be the cream of the crop, but he wasn't the bottom of the barrel either.

I heard Alice stand up and I cringed, waiting for whatever they were going to say. Pity, laughter, disdain, disappointment; I'd seen it all. I didn't want to hear what form their words would take.

My savior came in the form of a yelp of pain from the hallway. "Ow!" Emmett exclaimed from just outside my door. I didn't know if I was relieved or annoyed for the distraction. Either way, I needed an excuse to stop feeling sorry for myself. I yanked the door open and found Emmett sprawled in the hallway. Ed stood to his side, shaking his head back and forth.

"How many times have I told you that you're going to get in trouble for that?" Ed asked, apparently oblivious to my entrance to their little scene.

Emmett glared up at Ed and his mouth formed a tight line. "I just wanted to see what they were doing," he said, like it was a natural thing to crawl around on the floor outside your neighbor's apartment to try and peek between their door and the floorboard.

"You either need to cut out your peeping tom activities or I'm going to..." Ed said, the rest of his sentence muffled as he leaned over and offered his hand to Emmett.

Emmett grudgingly took his hand and allowed Ed to help him up off the floor. He swatted at the knees of his shorts to remove the dust he'd probably collected from spying on us. I wondered how long he'd been out there, trying to stare into my apartment. I then wondered just how well he could hear us. We had all said some things that Emmett didn't need to hear.

"Go ahead," Emmett said, calling his bluff. "I'm sure he'd love to hear about your..."

"What the fuck is going on out here?" Rosalie interrupted, pushing past me and into the hall. She stared at Emmett and Ed both like they were...well, like they were the mailman. She hated the mailman. The poor guy trembled like a leaf every time he came into our building to deliver the mail to our row of boxes just inside the door. I'd seen one encounter between the two of them since I'd moved in and I wish I'd been able to avoid it. He'd tossed her two envelopes at her like they were on fire and ran out the door. Rosalie was probably a worse threat to him than a rabid dog.

Ed was immediately forgotten as soon as Emmett heard Rosalie's voice. "Hey babe," he said taking a step closer to her. "I was just looking for you."

I rolled my eyes and looked at Alice. She must have gotten bored with the events unfolding in front of us because she was staring at the steps to the third floor like they led to the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. There was only one thing upstairs that held any interest for Alice and I groaned softly as I realized that she was getting ready to make her move. I felt...bad...for her. Odd, I didn't usually care what dumb shit other people did. Now, watching Alice lick her lips and smooth her top and shorts, I felt like I wanted to find a way for her to avoid the disappointment that waited for her in apartment number five. I watched her slink around Ed, Emmett and Rosalie as she continued to explain to Emmett why he shouldn't ever bother looking for her again. Alice swiftly climbed the stairs and disappeared out of sight. I sighed and shook my head. No help for it. Alice was going to proposition Jasper. I hoped he let her down like the gentleman she thought he was.

"How are you?" A honeyed voice asked me quietly from my left. I turned and found

Ed's green eyes peering intently down into mine. I smiled up into his face, happy that he'd finally sought me out.

"I'm good," I told him, eyeing his biceps again. I was dying to get him out of his clothes.

He gave me a little half-frown as his eyes scanned my face. "I was just curious, since you're new to town, and you've found yourself in this potentially dangerous situation. I thought maybe you would like to talk about it; maybe I can reassure you that this is not normal behavior from our neighbors. Our little community is usually pretty peaceful and quiet." He gave a quiet laugh.

Maybe I'd placed too much faith in the law enforcement officers of the great state of Washington, but it hadn't occurred to me that I should be concerned for my well-being. All the dangerous activity was in the building diagonally from ours so we seemed out of reach. And surely, someone would have alerted us if we weren't? As for it being a regular occurrence, my mother had told me very few things about the town where I'd been born and spent my first four weeks, but she had told me once that the crime rate was so low she'd been convinced that my dad would be out of a job at any minute. Just one of many reasons that she'd left.

However, if it got me closer to Ed, I'd pretend to be scared. "I am a little worried about the men with guns I saw on top of the building right across from us," I told him, releasing my breath jaggedly.

"Really?" He asked, placing his hand on my elbow and guiding me down the stairs to the front door. I would have preferred to have been guided upstairs and into his apartment, but the feel of his large, warm hand on my body had rendered me slightly speechless.

We both scanned the building across the parking lot, and there sat a man with a serious-looking gun aimed at the building next door. "Snipers," Ed told me, caressing my elbow as he spoke. I sighed in relief. Maybe seducing him wouldn't be such a major undertaking after all.

I smiled up at Ed and studied his jaw while he studied the rooftops of the other buildings in our complex. "You seem to know a lot about police standoffs," I said when he turned his attention back to me.

"Big bro watches a lot of TV," Emmett replied from behind us. I turned around and found Rosalie standing at his side with her arms crossed, tapping her foot. They unfortunately didn't seem to have settled their differences.

I arched my eyebrows in confusion as Emmett's words registered. I hadn't realized that these two were related. I glanced back at Ed for confirmation.

"Half brothers," Ed told me with a smile.

That made more sense. They didn't look anything alike, and there seemed to be a bit of animosity between the two of them.

"Aw, Edward, quit denying me all the time. We grew up together," Emmett whined.

"Be that as it may, we are still just half brothers."

Emmett shuffled over and wrapped his arm around my shoulder. He smiled down at me, and I discovered that he had a dimple. I closed my eyes to block it out. Dimples were so my thing and I did not want any more distractions from Ed.

"Do you know what my first word was?" Emmett asked. I shook my head. I was still struck speechless from the force of the dimple. "Wawa." I frowned in confusion. "I couldn't say Edward, so I called him Wawa for the longest time. I love my brother, even if he's too chickenshit to say it back."

"Half brother," Ed stated again. I was beginning to rethink my plan to sleep with this guy. Who would deny their own brother? Plus, he seemed a little uppity. That was not my thing.

Rosalie had apparently had enough. She stepped forward and lifted Emmett's arm off my shoulder. Both Emmett and Ed took a step back and Rosalie squeezed into the space they left behind.

"We should get out of here," she told me perfunctorily. "I'm hungry and I want to get some breakfast."

"We can't," I reminded her, with a quick glance in Ed's direction. "We're blocked in." I had checked earlier to see if my car was actually stuck in the parking lot, and it was. The bomb squad truck had taken up residence right behind my shitmobile.

"Do you really think that would stop me from leaving?"

She did look slightly crazed. I had a bad feeling about this. I cringed at the thought of Rosalie laying into the police officers outside. I wasn't anxious to have any part of that. Plus, Ed was here and we had just made some excellent progress.

"I don't think that's such a good idea, Rosalie. It looks like it's pretty dangerous out there," I told her, giving her the same look of fear that had worked so well on Ed.

It did not work so well on Rosalie. "I said, let's get out of here," she replied through clenched teeth.

Okay. I wasn't going to fight her over going out to breakfast. I glanced at Ed, wanting to shore up some plans with him for later, and gleefully noted the look of disappointment on his face. I wasn't the only one who didn't want me to leave.

Emmett suddenly shoved his way in between us and the door.

"You can't leave," he said, his arms spread out wide across the expanse of the door.

"The cops came by earlier and said that we couldn't leave the building."

I scanned his face, trying to decide if he was telling the truth. I'd picked up some pointers over the years on spotting liars, but it was hard to tell with Emmett.

"That's ridiculous. If we were in danger, they would have come and evacuated our building by now," Rosalie protested, beginning to look a little greenish. I took a step back, wondering if she was getting ready to blow chunks.

"I don't know what to tell you," Emmett said, looking at her with concern. He must have noticed the same thing I had. "But when someone who's holding an assault rifle tells me to get back inside and stay there, I tend to listen."

"This is asinine," Rosalie groaned, stepping around Emmett and climbing the stairs to her apartment. Her door clicked shut quietly, leaving me alone with Ed and Emmett. Emmett stared after her for a few minutes before turning and heading down the stairs to his own apartment.

And I finally got my wish. I was alone with Ed. Emmett and Rosalie were forgotten as we stared at each other, neither one of us holding back the smiles that spread across our faces. He took my hand in his and gave it a little squeeze.

"Do you want to go upstairs?" he asked.

Like he didn't already know my answer.

A/N: I think this chapter shows a little better where things are headed. Lots more of Edward next chapter. Lots.

I'm on twitter now, if anyone's into that. The link is on my profile. I posted a picture of my burnt dinner the other night...yummy and exciting. Who can pass up the chance to see that?! Also, the effervescent Sunfeathers started a thread on the Twilighted forum for Standoff! You should come by and say hello. I'm searching for a picture of Rob that I think captures Edward's essence in this story...I'll post it there once I find it. The link for that is also on my profile.

Any East Coasters out there? You should recognize Edward's nickname. That makes me laugh. I have an ongoing argument with my work husband about which is better - Wawa or Sheetz. I love Wawa, though Sheetz has awesome chicken salad.

My awesome beta is Blackdogs. My awesomedator is Kallie.

Thanks for reading and please review!

Quiet on the set

A/N: For anyone who wondered, Wawa is a convenience-type store, like 7-11, but it's way better. They make sandwiches and other yummys, plus they have good coffee and a fun self-serve milkshake machine. It's Hoagiefest right now, so you can get a hoagie (or sub as we call them around here) for \$2.99. I think the cheesesteak hoagies are on special right now. But if you want a really good cheesesteak or sub, I would actually recommend a whole other sandwich shop. But that's just my personal preference.

Please note that I am not receiving any compensation from Wawa for pimping them out. I'm just a fan. I am also just a fan of Twilight, so I'm not getting paid for writing about SM's characters either.

Chapter 3: Quiet on the set

Ed and I stood in the hallway outside the door to his apartment. I'd considered running up the stairs to show him just how eager I was to accompany him there, but I resisted the urge. I hoped I wouldn't have to resist my other urges for much longer.

He dug his key out of his pocket and arched his eyebrow at me. "I could actually use some help with a project I'm working on. I think it would benefit enormously from a female perspective. Are you game?"

There were a few games I wouldn't mind playing with him, but none of them seemed to be what he was referring to, so I kept those thoughts to myself. I nodded my head instead and he smiled in response. It was a brief smile, with a hint of embarrassment around the edges of his mouth. I wondered what he could possibly be hiding that he would be embarrassed about. He seemed so normal. I'd met plenty of guys who were the exact opposite: privileged deviants who should have been embarrassed about what they had or did but weren't. I wouldn't mind giving normal a try for once.

He led the way into his apartment and I took a look around. Ed's living room was much more crowded with furniture and stuff than mine. He had a sofa and a TV, but they were squeezed together along the wall in front of the window. A large bookcase took up the wall to the left. The rest of the living room was sectioned off by a large green curtain. It stood about 8' high, and was supported by what looked like PVC pipes at either end.

"What's your curtain hiding?" I asked as I ventured forward slowly into the room. Here must be what Ed was embarrassed about. Curtained off areas in apartments weren't normal. It could have been hiding almost anything: illegal weapons, body parts, drug paraphernalia. None of the thoughts that passed through my mind were conducive to me staying and playing fun naked games with Ed.

Ed jiggled his keys in his hand for a moment before stuffing them back into the pocket of his jeans. "That's my office. I do a lot of work from home," he said nervously.

"What kind of work do you do?" I asked as I took a step towards the curtain. I was venturing into dangerous territory. He was being evasive and I was being stupidly curious. But much like the proverbial cat, I was counting on my satisfaction to keep me safe.

As I examined the curtain, it occurred to me that I was a little annoyed with myself because I wasn't usually so curious about the men I got involved with. Ed seemed to be the exception. There was something about him that threatened to suck me in. It was exhilarating and scary all at the same time. I wasn't sure how to act in such a situation so I was going to just hold on tight and see what happened.

He crossed the living room and joined me next to the curtained-off area. I looked up at him and he crinkled his nose, like he'd smelt something bad. "My job's kind of boring," he said, looking down at my right shoulder instead of directly at me, like he was ashamed to look me in the eye.

I snorted. "It can't be any worse than mine. I work at the canning factory." I studied his chest for a moment, the faint outline of his pecs a distraction from what we were talking about. My fingertips itched to trace the muscles, but I curled them into a fist and let my arm rest at my side instead. "Come on...tell me," I pleaded with him quietly. His gaze had moved from my shoulder to my face and I got lost in his eyes for a moment. They were an intense shade of green that seemed to darken as we stood staring at each other. I let out a breath, and it was shakier than I had intended. I looked away first, a little freaked by my reaction.

Ed shook his head finally in response to my question and laughed. His laugh broke whatever spell had just weaved its way around us. It was a weird, high-pitched sound that I normally would have mocked, but on Ed, it was just...cute.

"I'll just have to guess then," I told him as I glanced at the green curtain and then back at him again. I took my time looking him up and down, from his Nike sneakers, baggy Alice-hating jeans, and plain gray t-shirt. I really had no idea what he would

do for a living, but I was going to stick with my gut feeling about him. He was a normal guy with a normal job. He was abnormally gorgeous and inexplicably lived in my ratty apartment building. He was probably a librarian or a teacher, but I didn't want to start the ball rolling with boring jobs. I wanted to mess around with him first.

"You've got a nice body," I said, catching his slight blush as he looked at my shoulder again, "so you could definitely be a professional skateboarder."

"No," Ed said with that weird laugh again. I'm pretty sure I stopped breathing when I pulled my eyes off the freaky green curtain and onto his face. His freaking eyes twinkled. Like he was a magical elf or something. What was it about this guy? If I wasn't careful, he was going to mesmerize me with his eyes and then he could do whatever he wanted to with me. On second thought, maybe that wasn't such a bad idea after all. I shook off the elfin charm and concentrated on the game instead.

"Cab driver," I guessed again.

"Nuh-uh."

"Glass blower."

"You're getting slightly ridiculous now," he said, looking at me sternly.

"No hints. I can figure this out." I felt silly and light-hearted playing this little game with Ed. I wasn't usually so playful, but I seemed to have thrown out my usual playbook. "Clockmaker."

"Bella..." He groaned at me. I liked the way he said my name.

"Coroner."

"Yes, Bella, that's it. I'm the city's coroner. I have a corpse spread out on the table behind the curtain. Wanna take a peak?" He was sarcastic and funny and it was turning me on.

"Um...oh! Professional calligrapher." My guesses were becoming more and more ludicrous, but I couldn't help it. I was having fun teasing Ed. His feathers were ruffled and he kept fidgeting, trying to get them all back into place again.

"You're close," he said after a moment, his fingers lightly grabbing hold of the green curtain next to us. I watched as he rubbed the fabric between his fingers. I

wondered what it felt like. Would it be soft like a bed sheet or slick like a shower curtain?

I blinked away thoughts of Ed, me, his bed and/or shower. *Soon enough.*

"Really?" I asked, combing my mind for what we'd been talking about. *His job* - oh yeah, right. What the hell kind of job was close to a calligrapher?

"No. But almost all your guesses have started with the letter 'c', which means you're on the right track," he told me.

After that helpful hint, I almost expected him to pull out a pair of thick black frames and a pocket protector. It was a good thing that Ed was gorgeous or I'd be making up an excuse about having to clean out my fridge right about now. I was ready to move our little game to the bedroom, but he seemed content to discuss the letters of the alphabet. I was losing interest and that was the last thing I wanted to happen. Despite my sudden boredom, I found myself spouting out the first thing that popped into my head. Something from my childhood before my fourth year, back when it was just me and my mom.

"'Big C little c what begins with C?'" I quoted, immediately wanting to slap my forehead in embarrassment. *Really, Bella? What is wrong with you today?*

"'Camel on the ceiling. C...c...C'." Ed recited right back to me, without missing a beat. Like we'd practiced it or something. I paused, trying to collect my thoughts. This morning had just taken a very strange turn. I didn't usually hook up with guys that I had anything in common with. It was just better that way. Nonetheless, it didn't give me that panicked feeling like I thought it would.

"I'm impressed," I said, cocking my head to the side and sizing him up with a new appreciation. Maybe nerds weren't so bad after all. "You remember your Dr. Seuss." Never mind that it had been one of my favorite books when I was kid, back when I had still been allowed to be a kid. *Fuck - I didn't want to think about that now.*

"I used to read to my brother all the time when he was little. So, can I tell you my job now? I'm afraid you're going to be disappointed." Ed's smile was gone now and his mouth settled into a flat line. He really did seem upset, like I was going to think less of him or something. Like my opinion actually mattered to him. That would be a first. I couldn't remember the last time my opinion mattered to anyone. I felt this strong urge to reassure him.

I placed my hand on his forearm, inexplicably wanting to touch him, and not just

as a way to rev his engine. I felt the wiry hairs on his arm brush against my palm and the heat of his body radiate up through my hand. His arm was strong and it made me feel...comforted. I stared at his arm for a moment. I wasn't used to all these fucking abnormal feelings. It was doing a number on my head. Maybe I was PMSing. I managed to peel my eyes off his arm and back at his face. I caught him staring at my hand on his arm too. I'm glad I wasn't the only one mesmerized by the sight. I slid my hand down his arm, over his thick wrist, over the bone that stuck out to the side there, and into his hand. I linked my fingers with his and breathed out. This was closer to what I was used to. His fingers were long and twitched against mine. Again, I felt...comforted...but I shook it off.

"Not possible," I finally replied quietly. "I can tell just by looking at you that you must do something really interesting and exciting. It just oozes out of you." The words coming out of my mouth were my usual bullshit, but I actually meant them when I said them to Ed. He did seem really interesting and exciting. Not like he rode a motorcycle and started bar fights every weekend, but like he actually freaking lived his life and had something to show for it. That was exciting, especially to me who had very little to show for the twenty-five years I'd been alive. All I had was a ratty apartment and a shitmobile.

Ed must have sensed that I was done playing. He tugged on my hand and pulled me around the side of the green curtain. As we cleared the curtain, I got my first peek at what was hidden behind door number one and made Ed so nervous and embarrassed.

A small digital camera was set up on a tripod and aimed towards the curtain. The tripod sat on what was possibly the messiest desk I'd ever seen. Ed also had two monitors on the desk and various other electronic equipment that I couldn't even begin to identify. I looked back towards the curtain to where the camera was pointed and discovered that he also had a stool placed right in front of the curtain.

"Do you make home movies or something?" I asked, taking a step towards the desk. I was a little surprised; moviemaking was more exciting than anything else I'd guessed so far. But, I was a little concerned about the types of movies he would be making in our seedy little apartment building. I glanced back at him, trying to figure out if he was a porn peddler in disguise, but it was too hard to tell.

Ed smiled and I felt relieved. Porn peddlers didn't smile like they were boy scouts, right? He walked behind the desk and flipped a couple switches and shuffled some papers around the desk. I hadn't seen him this excited about anything so far. I kind of wished he'd show that much enthusiasm about seducing me. There was still time for that though.

"That's just a hobby," he told me, pointing towards the video camera. The smile on his face and glint in his eye told me that it was a serious hobby. "I'm actually a CPA - that's how I pay the bills." He pointed towards a large stack of books that rested on the floor next to the desk, presumably because there wasn't any room for them on the desk. I glanced at the titles and they were all about tax codes and dividends and general financial type stuff that I didn't care about.

"Oh." I'll admit it: I was disappointed. Despite my proclamations of wanting to try normal for once, the reality of it was bitter in my mouth. Like day-old coffee, I felt compelled to spit out the normal and suck down a giant pot of weird and swish its familiar sweetness around in my mouth for a while. However, I was determined that Ed's Starbucks was just what my chocolate-covered swizzle stick had been looking for.

I pushed my shoulders back and walked towards the desk. "So, what's the camera for?" I peered inside the camera lens and then at the buttons on the side. It looked to be a good model. Douchebag Mike and Peckerhead Eric had cameras that were top of the line, but then again, they'd used their equipment for something different. Or so I hoped.

Ed was quiet so I chanced another look at him. He looked embarrassed. Shit - I really hoped that I wouldn't have to come up with a nickname for him too. I really didn't want to have to think of him as Ratbag Ed from now on. Fortunately, his next words made me feel better.

"I run a web show every week, you know, on YouTube?" he said hesitantly. He wasn't even looking at me anymore. A pile of shit on his desk was apparently the most interesting thing in the room.

"Seriously?" I didn't know anybody who actually did that. "What's it about?" *Please don't let him say twats, cocks or orgies.* Instead, I hoped for my cup of coffee and something boring like taxes or how to hide your money outside the U.S.

Ed, however, had a little swizzle stick in him after all. "The Mariners."

I cocked my head and examined him a little closer. Usually, I could spot the jocks without any problems. Emmett, for example. I could tell that he loved football. Probably played it in high school, but now he just worshiped the demon box on Sundays in the fall. I will admit that baseball fans are harder to spot. The game is more about numbers than sheer physical domination, though there are those who will argue that hitting a ball that is coming towards you at 90 mph with a thin stick is one of the most challenging things that an athlete can do. People like my

stepfather, for example.

I decided to test him a little, see how serious his addiction was.

"What do you think about Hernandez?"

Ed's eyes widened and a smile broke across his face. I suddenly saw that he and Emmett were actually brothers after all. He didn't have his brother's dimples, but their smiles were exactly alike. One half of the mouth slid up, parting the lips in the process. The bottom lip extruded just the tiniest bit. The smile reached all the way up the face, stretching out the cheekbones and arching the one, dark eyebrow above an eye so full of mischief, you wanted to spank it and send it to detention.

Where Emmett's version made me want to drop my panties and bend over, Ed's smile had a different effect. The vision in my head was so clear. A lightning storm. A darkened room. Candles spread around, their flickering lights competing with the flashes of light from the storm outside. Our bodies entwined, slickened from the heat of the room and the fire raging between us. And that smile, the same one that was making me pant a little even now, was looking down upon my face as he murmured my name over and over and I held onto his shoulders for dear life.

"Bella?" Ed waved his hand in front of my face. "Are you ok?" The smile was gone, replaced with a look of confusion and uncertainty.

I shook my head to clear the vision. *Soon*, I whispered to my now-throbbing lady parts.

"Sorry," I laughed nervously, trying to show that I had a little Starbucks in me too, if I tried hard enough. "I think I blacked out for a moment."

Ed sat down on the stool that stood in front of the green screen. "That's ok. I was only rattling off statistics and my opinion on his arm."

I pouted, and dug my right toe into the carpet. I caught the cut of his eyes down to my legs. And just like that, I decided that play time was over. I had an agenda and it involved more than talking with my baseball-loving CPA.

I walked towards him slowly, exaggerating the sway of my hips. "If you're interested," I told him, emphasizing the last word, filling it with innuendo, "I could probably score you some tickets to the home stand against the Red Sox." As much as it would kill me, I would call in a favor from my stepfather if it meant I could get naked with Ed. I tried not to think about how out of character that was for me.

The smile that crossed his face reminded me why I was willing to go out of my way for him. "I'm definitely interested," he said while watching my forward attack with extreme interest. As soon as I was close enough, I put my hands on his knees. Through the denim of his jeans, I could feel the bone and sinew underneath. I was so looking forward to finding out what this man looked like naked.

"Just say the word," I told him, leaning in so he could take a peek down my top. "And they're yours." *Both of them.*

"The thing is, Bella," Ed leaned forward too, so our heads were only separated by inches now. "I already have season tickets."

I huffed and leaned back. Ed had been teasing me. I didn't know whether to throw a fit or be turned on by it.

"Tell me what else you know about the Mariners," he said leaning back on his stool again. I stood a few feet away, arms crossed, holding my boobs up and out prominently. He was going to make me beg.

"I know that they spent too much on their payroll this year to have such a shitty record."

Ed smiled again, but this time it was calculating. As if I'd just gained points for rattling off what Phil had been harping about the last time I'd made the mistake of calling home to talk to Mom.

"Do you think Beltr  will win the Gold Glove again this year?"

I sighed and tapped my foot. There were so many other things that we could be doing other than discuss baseball. Especially Phil's team.

"He should. He's not afraid to dive and everyone knows that he constantly plays through his injuries." *Can we please have sex now?*

"Bella, I am really impressed with your Mariners knowledge. This just solidifies that my instincts were right. You should come on my show. It would be nice to have a woman's perspective."

I snorted. "You just want me to wear something skimpy and be eye candy."

"You are so much more than eye candy. Though, an outfit similar to what you're wearing today would be perfect." His eyes raked the length of my body and I felt a

bead of moisture slip down between my breasts. The things this man said...

"Is it hot in here?" I asked, honestly wondering if he had any a/c at all. I didn't hear the hum of the window unit.

"We're on the top floor, and since heat rises...well, you can figure it out. Plus, my unit busted this morning." He nodded towards the living room window and the non-functioning a/c unit.

"Ahh..." I was still too overheated to explain the sheen on my skin. It was only 9:30 in the morning. We would need to wrap this up before the sweltering heat of the afternoon arrived. Though, if a storm rolled through, that would alleviate some of the humidity.

"Think about it, Bella." Ed stood and crossed the carpet until he stood in front of me. "You're beautiful, you're smart, you don't intimidate easily...I think you'd be perfect."

I was still processing the "You're beautiful." He may have said other words after that, but I was left smiling dumbly at him now.

"We could do a screen test, and you can see how everything works," he said, grabbing my hand and leading me towards the stool.

My stomach was gurgling at the prospect of being on camera. That, or because I'd never gotten the chance to eat my cereal earlier. "I don't know, Ed."

We stopped halfway towards the stool. He turned and stared down at me. The elfin magic was gone from his eyes. His mouth had fallen into a flat line. If I had known him better, I probably could have gauged his exact mood. Since I didn't, I'd have to guess that he looked angry. But quiet angry. Just like a quiet bitch, a quiet angry is the worst to come across. When he spoke, I felt a chill go down my spine. "Edward," he said, dropping my hand like he'd suddenly discovered that I had swine flu. "My name is Edward."

Shit - had I really made that horrible of a mistake? "Oh, sorry, I just thought that you went by Ed..." I trailed off, watching as he stared through me for a few moments. I wondered what he was thinking about, but the moment soon passed. As quickly as his twinkle had disappeared, I saw a tiny spark re-ignite and Ed...Edward was back.

"Come on, I want to show you how everything works." He grabbed my hand again

and led me to the stool. I breathed a sigh of relief that we'd hurdled that bump without any injuries. I don't know why his opinion mattered to me at all. I was here for a quick fuck. I should be able to call him anything I want so long as he's getting laid.

He spent a few minutes positioning me on the stool, then he took my chin in his hand and turned it from right to left. He seemed to like the left side better, so he turned my head and shoulders so my left side would be facing the camera.

He pointed towards a small screen on the desk that I hadn't seen earlier. "You can watch yourself there. I'll just be on the other side of the desk, alright?"

I nodded my agreement and tried to hold still. That single drop down my shirt had been joined by a few friends and I felt like I needed to notify my girls of an imminent flash flood warning.

I watched Ed...fuck, I mean Edward...cross the small distance between the stool and the desk in two strides and switch on the camera. A small red light appeared, and he nodded to me to begin.

"What do you want me to say?" I shifted my eyes to the monitor, just to check out how I looked. "Hey! How did you get Safeco Field behind me?" I turned around to see if it was a projection, but the screen behind me was still a blank wall of green fabric.

"I use 'PowerDirector'. It's an awesome application. Works just like magic. So, tell me who needs to be cut from the team." He pasted on his serious face again and I groaned.

I rattled off a few names, those that Phil had been complaining about the loudest. We spent a few more minutes chatting about the team and their inability to win games this year.

I'd finally had enough of the baseball talk though.

"Hey, Edward, why don't you come join me on this side of the camera? We'll see how we look together." I patted the small stool that I was perched upon, which clearly did not have enough room for the both of us. I tried not to preen because I'd gotten his freaking name right this time. Crap, I'd been calling him "Ed" in my head all morning. Would he flip out completely if I slipped again?

He glanced at the monitor once before shrugging and walking around the desk. I

scooted my butt over on the stool to make room for him.

He sat and perched on his half of the stool. I wiggled around a little, trying to make sure that I wasn't going to fall off, and also as an excuse to bump up next to "Don't-call-me-Ed."

Once we were settled enough that I thought we wouldn't crash to the floor in an embarrassing heap, we both turned our heads to look at the monitor. I realized that I was slouching so I straightened up some, and then turned my head so it was facing Edward more.

"We do look good together," I said, trying out my picture perfect pout for the camera.

Edward nodded and muttered something unintelligible. I continued to look at the two of us on the monitor. We were an interesting combination of contrasts and similarities. He was tall, I was short. My hair was long, dark and curly. His was short, straight, and not so dark. His shoulders were wide and his chest broad, whereas my shoulders were bony and thin, and well, my chest was broad too, just in a different direction.

I watched on the monitor as Edward removed his arm from its awkward position caught in between us and wrapped it around my shoulders instead. This was definitely more like it. I settled into his side, trying not to bump my hip too hard against his.

Edward turned his head away from the monitor to look at me. I peeled my eyes away from the gorgeous picture we created, and arched an eyebrow in his direction.

His face revealed nothing of what he planned to do next.

His other arm, the one not wrapped around me, sneaked around and grabbed my legs underneath my knees. In one fluid motion, he picked me up, planted his ass firmly on the stool and me on his lap.

I squeaked - just a little. His display of strength and finesse had aroused me yet again. Plus, I could feel a host of enticing bumps and ridges underneath my butt. I wrapped my right arm around his back for support.

I could have pretended to be outraged, I could have demanded that he let me down, but his actions fit so perfectly into my own plans that I did neither.

"What are you doing?" I murmured to the bottom of his chin, which was prominently in my line of sight now. I could tell that he hadn't shaved that morning. His whiskers were growing in a rainbow of colors. I could see brown, blonde, red, and, yes, even a gray hair or two. I wanted to rub my hands against his face, feeling the sandpapery texture of it against the ridges of my fingers.

"We fit better in the frame this way," he responded. I looked around his chin and realized that he wasn't looking down at me adoringly, as I had hoped. His green eyes were intent on the monitor.

There are times in your life when you make momentous decisions. Sometimes you realize that's what you're doing and you end up being filled with nerves and it ruins the entire experience for you. Other times, you make a decision that changes the whole course of your life, only you didn't even know it at the time.

For me, this was one of the latter types of decisions. What I did next changed my whole life. Luckily, I didn't know it then or else I would have been a lot more nervous. As it was, I proceeded how I usually did in my youthful innocence: balls to the wall.

I put my finger on Edward's chin and pushed down until his eyes were on me instead of the monitor. I wanted his complete and undivided attention.

"We'd probably fit together a whole lot better if we weren't wearing any clothes," I whispered, finally running my fingers along the stubble that I'd been admiring.

Edward's hands pulled me tighter against his body. He had one hand on my upper thigh and the other wrapped across my back, resting on my waist. His fingers squeezed both places tighter and I felt it like a white hot brand.

His eyes darkened and swirled and his grin, the one I'd decided was going to be the death of me, threatened to break out across his face.

"Is that a fact?" He said, gulping visibly and fighting the grin, yet running his fingers enticingly along the edge of my shorts.

"Yes," I told him. I ran my fingers across his jaw bone and along the edge of his ear. The outer edge was crinkly and I liked the way it felt. I ran my fingers across it again and he let out a hiss.

"Uh," he stammered looking away from me and towards the door like he wanted to run away. *What the fuck was going on?* I could feel his dick pushing into my hip, so I

knew that he wanted me. Why did he look like he'd rather be anywhere but here with me?

"Edward..." I whispered, clutching him closer and hoping that I could calm whatever panic seemed to be sweeping through his mind. "Just kiss me."

He seemed to be having an internal argument. While he continued to face the direction of the door, his hand slipped underneath the hem of my shorts and took a big handful of my ass. He gave it a squeeze and I jumped in surprise. It had been a while since I'd been with a man, and I was pretty sure that I had gushed like Old Faithful in response. I squirmed a little, a tad off-balance by his strange behavior, but my world righted again when he turned away from the door and leaned his face down towards mine. I grabbed a handful of his shirt and waited what seemed like hours for him to kiss me.

Mr. CPA-let's-talk-about-the-Mariners-Don't-call-me-Ed took his sweet time. His mouth was finally inches away from mine, but he seemed resolute in his decision to not move any closer than he was.

I felt his breath across my mouth. The heat of his skin radiating against mine. "Edward..." I whispered his name again, trying to close the small gap myself.

The man was a control freak, I decided. He finally moved forward that extra centimeter and pressed his full lips against mine. He rubbed them back and forth against my lips gently, and I felt the heat radiate out from the points where we touched, racing across my skin to set my entire body on fire. I tried again to lean closer, to kiss him the way I wanted to, but he only chuckled at my attempt.

"Ah-ah-ah," he chastised against my lips. I could feel the movement as he talked and it sent tingles across all my nerve endings. "I think we should try this my way."

I tried leaning my entire body forward this time, hoping to catch him unawares. Unfortunately, his hands were like iron vices on my ass and hip.

He continued to place the lightest of kisses on my face. "Bella, don't make me restrain you."

Oh, God. I melted at the thought of me, him, and a pair of handcuffs. I became boneless and relaxed in his arms, asking him without words to do whatever he wanted to do with me.

His large hand was still secure on my ass, and I felt his fingers minutely rubbing

against the skin there. "Your bottom is perfect. So smooth and soft."

My mind caught on the word "bottom." Who calls it that? I let it go though, since his fingers were still caressing it so nicely.

He nibbled along my jaw to my ear and I felt his tongue snake out. He licked the small lobe and then sucked it into his mouth.

"Your skin tastes delicious," he told me, nibbling his way down my neck towards my collarbone.

I moaned and squirmed again. I could tell by the increase in pressure against my butt that things were finally heading in the right direction. And I needed this. My life had been so strange since Phil had cut me off, I hadn't had much time to take care of my baser needs. I'd been too worried about feeding myself and keeping a roof over my head. A good, long fuck sounded delicious. It sounded even more delicious now that Edward was involved.

Edward the delicious nibbled back up my neck and latched onto my lips again. This time it was neither light nor gentle. He bruised his mouth against mine, as if he was trying to punish me. He sucked and bit at my lips until I couldn't take the assault anymore. I opened my mouth and darted my tongue out, licking his bottom lip as it pressed against me.

His control completely snapped. Whatever force that had been holding him in check dissolved. He pulled me impossibly close against his body and met my tongue with his own. His invasion was overwhelming. I felt like waving a white flag - I was completely ready to surrender.

While his mouth had been distracting me, his hands had been busy down below. The one that had held a handful of my ass was now desperately working the button to my shorts. His hands were unsteady which was making the process difficult. He finally fit the slippery button through its slot and I heard the rasp of the zipper as he lowered it. His hand reached inside and pressed against my abdomen, right above my pubic bone. His pinky was the only part of his hand that ventured down below the top edge of my panties, but I felt it like it was an army of fingers, sent to scout ahead of the invading troops.

"You're soft here too," he whispered against my ear. "The things I want to do to you...I'll start with your mons veneris."

I panted against his neck, trying to wrap my mind again around his words. My

whositwhatsit? I guess I didn't care what he called my lady parts, so long as he paid them some special attention. It was still unnerving. I felt like we spoke different languages.

All that was forgotten when his hand started sliding down my stomach, right exactly where I wanted him to be. Every breath I took pressed against his hot, large hand. I felt completely surrounded and at his mercy.

Unthinkingly, completely overcome with the heat he had generated in my body, I called out his name. "Ed," I said, pushing up against his hand, trying to hurry him along.

Sadly, that was not to be. Instead, I discovered what happened if I slipped and called him "Ed" again. Before I could blink, I was off his lap and standing morosely next to the empty stool. Edward was on the other side of the desk, running his hands through his hair and pointedly not looking at me.

"I can't do this," he said quietly.

I couldn't see his face, so I didn't know if he was angry or what, but I was pretty fucking confused.

"What did I just miss?" I asked, rearranging my shorts and fastening them back up. I was quickly gearing up for my own version of mad bitch, regardless of whatever mood Edward was trying on for size.

"I'm sorry," he told me, manning up and looking at me instead of the top of his desk. "You're really quite lovely, this is just too fast."

I laughed, a loud barking sound of which Phil had always disapproved. "Isn't that my line?"

"I like you Bella, it's just that I've made certain decisions recently and it just seems best if we try to get to know each other better before we, uh, fornicate."

I blinked. Once. Twice. Thrice. "Did you just say 'fornicate'?" He made it sound so dirty. Like we should be ashamed. Fuck that. I stalked past him and around the edge of the green curtain, leaving him and his latte-disguised-as-coffee self behind.

I heard him curse under his breath and I faltered slightly in my path towards his door. That was all the advantage he needed. "Bella, wait, please don't go. I didn't mean to insult you. I just want to know you better. Is that so bad?"

I traced his path across the apartment by the vibrations in the floor. He came and stood behind me, not touching, but I could tell he was close enough that if he wanted to he could. I felt so very off about this entire experience. Any other guy, and we would have been done by now. Each having gotten the orgasm we'd been seeking and now trying to find a way to depart each other's company without massively insulting the other. An hour into my experience with Edward, and I had no orgasm in sight. Just a steamy kiss, some groping and a prudish man who wanted to take his time and get to know me. What for? What would be the point in getting to know me? I turned on him, suddenly angry.

"Why don't we just forget this ever happened?" I seethed at him between my teeth. I could get Emmett to scratch my itch. I'd bet Cougar Pants wouldn't push me away if I went down to his apartment and let him put his hands in my shorts. Fuck, ok, so my pride stung a little. I'd never been rejected before - not for this. Sex was the one thing that had always gone my way. A little flirting, some fun naked times, and I was done. Why was Ed...fucking Edward being so difficult?

"I don't think I can forget," Edward said, placing his hand on my shoulder.

I froze under the weight of his hand, feeling...just feeling. I didn't like it, but I was powerless to shake him off. My breathing sped up as I started to panic. My eyes frantically searched the room, looking for a way out, but I was stuck. Every expletive I knew flashed through my brain as the dam burst and I word vomited. "I don't do this. Ever. Get to know people. It's just better if we fuck and move on."

Edward was silent behind me but his hand remained on my shoulder, anchoring me. The panic receded some after my outburst, but I was really freaking nervous to hear his response. I was glad he was behind me though. It was easier than having to look him in the eye.

"Bella, I don't fuck and move on. Ever." He tripped over the word "fuck" like he'd never used it before. That finally made me smile a little.

"So, I guess we have a problem then," I said, shifting under the weight of his hand. The panic I'd felt before was slowly receding but I didn't feel very calm yet either.

"Only if we let it be a problem," Edward said. His hand slid off my shoulder and down to mine, where he interlaced our fingers. "Let's try something different. You pick out a movie from my DVD rack, I'll grab some snacks, and I'll let you sit on my lap while we watch the movie together. I promise to grope you a few times, maybe steal a few kisses, and we'll talk."

I looked back at him over my shoulder. His smile was back and I tried very hard not to flip out. I wanted to be the kind of person who could actually try something different with him. Maybe it wouldn't be the butt-fuckery that I thought it would be. "Your plan sounds an awful lot like a date," I replied as I allowed him to spin me so I faced him instead of the apartment door, and my freedom.

"Good. I'd like to take you out on a date. This can be our warm-up."

I tried not to panic again as he led me towards the bookcase and the promised DVDs. I didn't date - not anymore. It was too complicated and more importantly, I didn't want or need a relationship. I was finally self-sufficient and I was more than a little happy with the freedom I'd found being out from underneath of Phil's thumb. I did what I wanted, when I wanted. A man in my life would mess that up, and that was not why I'd moved to Forks. My only goal here was to try to buck up the courage to seek out the man who'd fathered me. Case closed.

I shushed the tiny voice in the back of my head that said differently.

I took a deep breath and refocused on Edward's intentions. It wasn't a real date. I could suck it up and spend some time with Edward. He wasn't difficult to talk to, and I was willing to bet that we would spend just as much time making out as conversing or watching whatever movie I picked out. I scanned the titles distractedly as Edward remained by my side, still clutching my hand. "I thought you were in charge of snacks," I said, not looking at him and trying to ignore his looming presence.

"I've changed my mind," he said, gripping my hand harder and pulling me close. He turned me gently so I couldn't ignore him any further. My breathing hitched as I caught the look on his face. This man wanted me. I could feel it in the stiffness of his limbs. The way his chest moved in and out erratically. The way his mouth lowered towards me not at all slowly like the first time he kissed me.

I tilted my head to accept his kiss. I wasn't sure what had changed his mind so suddenly, but I wasn't going to question it. Unfortunately, fate had other plans. Right at the moment before his lips met mine, a loud explosion rocked our apartment building, rattling the floorboards and the windows. This scared the crap out of me and I lost my balance. My hands shot out trying to grab onto Edward's shoulders, but I somehow managed to tumble us both towards the sofa behind him, pulling down one of the shelves of DVDs along my way. Edward landed on the sofa, emitting an "oof", and I landed partially on top of him, and the avalanche of movies landed on my back.

Before I could even begin to assess the damage, I was flipped and found Edward's face suddenly looming over mine. "Are you alright?" he asked, checking our intertwined limbs for any damage.

"I landed pretty much on top of you so I'm alright. Do you have any damage to report?"

"None except my pride. What *was* that?"

The vibration that had scared and jolted us had me a little freaked out. I'd managed to forget that there were thirty or so heavily armed policemen outside. Now, I feared for the structural integrity of the building.

"Earthquake?" I asked, knowing there was only an outside chance of that actually being the cause.

"We should go check it out." He untangled his legs from my own and stood. I thanked him as he extended his hand down to pull me up off the sofa. We stood looking at each other goofily for a moment. Surprisingly, I was actually sad to see our pseudo-date come to an end before it could begin. That was new and different, and not altogether too unpleasant. I was showing progress in an area I'd never thought needed improving. My encounters with men had always occupied a space in my brain that seemed to be beyond improvement just as they were. Since my move to Forks, I felt more willing to explore any changes that made me feel different though. What I'd been doing before hadn't worked and for the first time, I was open to considering that maybe my "fuck 'em and leave" policy maybe wasn't so perfect after all.

My dumb smile stayed on my face while Edward and I picked up the fallen DVDs and returned them to the shelf. He brushed his legs free from the dust that had gathered, and then he brushed mine too for good measure. I'm pretty sure his hands lingered longer than necessary on my thighs, but neither of us said a word about it. We'd both made our positions clear: I was comfortable with him touching my thighs anytime he wanted and he was determined to pretend like he didn't want to. We'd figure it out eventually. One of us would have to cave, and I was willing to bet that it would be him.

"There, now we're presentable," he said when he was done feeling me up. We started walking towards the door, but Edward snapped his fingers and turned back towards his desk. "I forgot something, I'll meet you outside."

I nodded and made my way to his apartment door, ready to snap at who or

whatever had just interrupted my first date-like experience in four years.

A/N: Blackdogs is my awesome beta. You are the wonderful reader who is going to review. Please?

I'm on twitter. The link is on my profile. There's also a forum to come and say hi (it's been quiet there this week...too quiet.)

Thanks for reading!

My halfbrother's keeper

A/N: Thanks to all who have reviewed. Many of you commented about Edward's vernacular...it will come up again.

Disclaimer: I don't own Twilight.

Chapter 4: My Half-Brother's Keeper

The hallway was quiet. A little too quiet for my peace of mind. I ventured down the two flights of stairs with only my dull footsteps against the carpet to keep me company. When I got to the front door, Emmett was not at his post. I wondered if he was still moping over Rosalie, and I felt a little sorry for him. He didn't deserve the way she talked to him and I felt good for standing up for him earlier. I was still surprised that Emmett wasn't on watch. He was the most interested in the proceedings outside out of all of us.

I took a peek outside, and it looked like organized chaos across the lot. Smoke billowed slowly out of the second floor windows. It wasn't black smoke, like you would expect to find if there was a fire. It was white.

"Could have been some type of chemical bomb," Edward said from my right shoulder.

I turned quickly at the sound of his voice. That was the second time he'd snuck up behind me and caught me off guard. I was going to have to stay alert around him. "Would it have shaken our building like that?"

"If it was composed of the right chemicals. See how it's dissipating into the air? The smoke will burn away in a few minutes and we should be safe again." He placed one of his hands against the metal door frame and leaned in closer to look around the corner of our building. "Look - the fire department's here, but they're not even bothering with their equipment. We should be safe."

"Why would the police throw a chemical bomb in there?" It didn't make much sense to me, but I'd take his word for it. I didn't know any differently.

Edward relaxed his stance against the door and turned towards me, his hip leaning against the door frame now. "They're probably trying to force the

perpetrator out of the apartment. If he does have a hostage, then the police are going to be the most concerned with keeping him or her safe at all costs. The right type of bomb might force them out due to lack of oxygen. If the police really know what they're doing, they'll use a bomb infused with a sedative that will just incapacitate the perp and his hostage, but without causing them any harm."

The more I talked to Edward, the more impressed I was with him. "You seem to know a lot of stuff. I'd bet you're great at Jeopardy."

Edward crinkled his nose as he scanned the parking lot. "I remember most of what I read, that's all. And I did attempt to audition for Jeopardy once, but I didn't make it."

"Really?" I asked enthusiastically. I probably would have seen him on the show if he'd made it. Jeopardy was my guilty pleasure. Nobody knew that I liked to curl up on the couch each night with my dinner and watch it.

His cheeks reddened as his eyes continued to dart around the parking lot. "Yeah, it was back in college. Emmett put me up to it."

Now I was completely intrigued. I was fascinated by his relationship with his brother, and he'd just given me a terrific opening to delve further. "Did he triple dog dare you?" I asked teasingly.

Edward laughed his weird giggle and turned to face me. "Pretty much. I went to UW for college, and he ended up following me there for his freshman year. I was on the Quizbowl team and Emmett got it into his head that I would do really well on Jeopardy. I think he just wanted the chance to come with me to LA for the taping. We argued over it for a while, then he threatened to call our father if I didn't take the online test. So, I took it and waited to hear back, but they never called for an in-person audition. That was the end of that. Honestly, Emmett was more upset than I was."

"Does he do that a lot- threaten to call your dad?" I asked, finding myself sucked into the mysterious Edward/Emmett relationship. I hadn't been this curious about anyone in years. It was unsettling.

"More often than anyone his age should." Edward admitted.

We stood staring at each other for a few minutes, each lost in our own thoughts. I wasn't sure what else to ask about his brother, and he didn't seem anxious to offer any other details. The quiet got to me fairly quickly and I began to wonder about our

neighbors.

"Where did everyone else go?" I asked. How had they not felt that explosion? I thought for sure that the rest of the crazies in our building would have wandered out by now.

"I believe that Emmett and Rosalie are working out their differences downstairs," Edward said, looking towards the direction of Emmett's apartment.

"Seriously? It's about time." This new development wouldn't be a cure-all for Rosalie, but it should soften some of her rough edges for a while. "What's their deal anyway?"

Edward crossed the landing and sat on the top step leading down to the first floor. "I'm not sure about Rosalie, but Emmett's been in love with her for at least six months."

"Really?" I was surprised only that he'd been chasing her for so long. "He must really like her."

Edward chuckled and ran his hand up and down his arm, like it was soothing him. "He swears that she's 'the one'."

"Odd that he's been trying to jump in my pants for the last week then, if 'the one' is living right across the hall from me." Really, it didn't bother me that much. We'd both been flirting with one another for the past week but now that I'd found Edward, my interest in him had poofed away.

"I, for one, am glad that he did not succeed." He was staring at his arm now, his hand rubbing back and forth across his forearm. I remembered the feel of it from earlier when I touched him there; the heat of his skin and the taut muscle underneath. I was convinced that he didn't have a bad body part on him.

I sat down next to him on the top step, my back to the railing so I could keep an eye on the parking lot. "I'm glad too. I'm sorry we were interrupted earlier." I put my hand on top of his, both to stop the repetitive movement of his hand and to replace his with my own.

I needed to touch him. It was hard to explain, but it was like I was a set of kindling, waiting for the fire to take hold and consume me. Without Edward's heat, I would continue to sit and wait, never fully realizing my potential. I'd never met anyone who'd had this effect on me before. I was beginning to realize just how

unique Edward was.

Before I could analyze his specialness any further, he looked up and smiled at me under his impossibly long eyelashes. They were dark and thick and provided the perfect fringe for his green eyes. Whatever I'd been thinking was erased away.

"I'm sorry our date ended before it started too. I'd like to take you out for real sometime," he said, looking hopeful.

Even the pretty couldn't stop my chest from tightening at the image that his words brought to mind. A date - with Edward. I could do worse, but the lack of oxygen to my brain was telling me that I should run screaming from him and cut my losses while I still could. Instead of doing all that, I changed the subject.

"I'd like to hear more about you. Tell me about growing up with Emmett. Are you from Forks originally?" I still couldn't wrap my brain around the fact that the two of them were blood relatives. They seemed so different.

He seemed pleased with my question, and I sat up a little straighter under the look of satisfaction he sent my way. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad getting to know him. Nobody died just listening to another person's life story. And so long as I kept him talking, I wouldn't be expected to reciprocate. Cause, that's where the line was drawn. My life was not something that anyone needed to listen to.

With a sigh, Edward leaned his back against the wall so that our knees were touching. "I'm not from Forks originally. I was born in Chicago. My parents were both born and raised there. My mom died of cancer when I was two, so I don't remember too much about her."

My hand flew up to cover my mouth. "Oh, God, I'm so sorry." I had hoped to keep our conversation light. Cancer was definitely not light.

Edward shrugged. "It's ok. Like I said, I was young. It's hard to miss someone that you didn't even know was supposed to be there."

"But you probably did know, on some level, that she was gone. She'd carried you, fed you, cared for you, seen to your every need. I think even a two-year-old would notice when their mother just suddenly wasn't there anymore."

"I find you completely surprising." His head cocked to the side and he looked at me as if he were seeing me for the first time.

"What do you mean?"

"I just didn't realize that you would have so much depth."

I stood angrily, staring down at him from my full height. It wasn't much, but it still put me a good foot above his head. Edward had just said the absolutely worst thing that he could ever say to me. The fuckers in Palm Beach had thought the same thing and spent every day of the painful fourteen years I spent there making sure I knew it.

"Why? Because I didn't finish college and don't have a fancy job? You think I'm just some dumb twit who couldn't possibly have any original thoughts?"

I was mad now. My fists were clenched at my sides and my legs were shaking from it. I had apparently inherited my father's Irish temperament. From what Mom told me those few times she'd mentioned him, Charlie Swan had been quick to anger too.

I just couldn't get over the idea that this guy had judged me so harshly, and so quickly. I thought we'd been getting along. I should have known though from his uppity attitude. He thought he was better than me. I turned on my heel to head up to my apartment. I was itching to slam the door behind me, knowing the solid thud of wood meeting wood would be a satisfying balm to my anger.

Edward grabbed my hand before I could even take a step, and I tried to shake him off.

"Let go," I hissed at him. This guy was such a jerk.

"Please don't go. I'm sorry. I didn't mean it the way it sounded."

I was a sucker for apologies. They were the one thing that had any effect on my anger: it was like popping a balloon, the way my ire deflated almost instantly.

I wasn't going to let Edward know that though.

"Yeah, well, you should be. Sorry, that is." I crossed my arms across my chest and stared out the door. The smoke had stopped pouring out of the windows and the police had calmed down since I last peeked outside. They'd returned to their positions behind their cars and armored vehicles.

"What I really meant to say is that there aren't a lot of people who realize that it

did affect me - losing my mom even though I was so young. My father was - distraught - for several years afterwards. For a while it was like I'd lost both my parents."

Looking at Edward, I was hard-pressed to know his actual age. I'd put him somewhere around my own twenty-five years, maybe a year or two older. But now, I was trying to figure out how Emmett fit into the picture. They couldn't be more than three years apart, yet Edward said that he was two when his mom had passed. Add to that his father's apparent long mourning period and something was kind of fishy.

"How old were you when Emmett was born?" I asked quietly, hoping like hell that I wasn't crossing the line with my line of questioning. I didn't usually ask people personal questions so I had no idea of what was too much.

Edward's lips pursed and he looked away for a minute. Apparently, I had crossed the line.

"Three and a half," he said, and I turned to find his hard green eyes boring into mine. Daring me to question it further.

"Your dad found a new wife rather quickly then, didn't he?"

"No," he said and stood. "He found an old friend from high school who helped ease some of his pain. Unfortunately for my dad, she got pregnant, my dad flipped out, she went back to Forks after her Christmas break and gave birth to Emmett. We didn't follow until two years later."

I shook my head trying to process all the information I'd just been given. "So you didn't even meet your brother until you were five years old?" That might explain some of the 'half-brother' shit he'd been spouting.

Edward shook his head and moved to stare out the door. "My father was very angry for a very long time after the death of my mother. He was furious when Esme told him she was pregnant. He refused to accept responsibility or acknowledge the child as his. For almost two years, I listened to him moan and rant about her and her son. Even at such a young age, it had an effect on me."

I looked at Edward through a new pair of eyes. He wasn't the only one guilty of judging someone based on a few hastily made misconceptions. I'd labeled him as uptight and stuffy after knowing him just a few hours. There was no way I could hold a grudge against him for doing the same to me.

"That must have been tough. Losing your mother and your father. Gaining a brother, but not being allowed to see or talk about him."

Edward glanced at me out of the corner of his eye and nodded his head, but just barely. "I only understood the basics. But I could hear my dad arguing with my grandmother at night about it. Esme and Emmett's names came up a lot. I was extremely curious about these people they kept talking about, but I wasn't allowed to say their names in front of my dad. Sometimes Grandmother would take me on her knee and tell me things about them when Dad was at work. She had faith that he'd get his head straightened out and do the right thing."

"It took him two years to 'do the right thing'?" I wasn't a proponent of getting married just for the sake of a child, and this family debacle had trouble written all over it.

"Well, more like four. We took a trip to Forks the summer I turned five. To finally meet Emmett face to face. Dad knew that the child was his. It was his anger that made him accuse Esme of treachery. I fell in love with Esme from the start. She was beautiful, and kind, and made great chocolate peanut butter cookies. I was ready to move right in, even if it meant having to put up with a little brother that I'd been taught to dislike."

"Is that why you give him such a hard time now? Do you still dislike him?" I was surprised at the lengths some parents went to in order to poison their children's minds against others. Sometimes it was whole groups of people. In Edward's case it was his brother. In my own case, it was my biological father. Phil had never been a fan of Charlie.

My question must have amused Edward because he finally tore his eyes away from the building across the parking lot and smiled down into my own. "No. That dislike wore off a long time ago. But, we're brothers, so I have to give him a hard time. It's how he knows I still love him."

"Half-brothers," I reminded him.

Edward realized his slip and smiled even wider. "Yeah, half-brothers."

"Did you move here right away then? After you met Esme and Emmett?"

"No. Dad wanted to take things slow. He discovered, or more precisely remembered, why Esme had been such a good friend to him for all those years. The friendship grew into something more over the next few months and Dad finally

proposed. They've been married for twenty years now. It was the best decision Dad ever made. Esme's terrific. She's never treated me as anything less than her own son."

I blinked back a few tears at that admission. My own step-father had taken great delight in reminding me of my less than stellar patriarchal lineage. Phil had adopted me, yes, but his role in my life had been more supervisory than fatherly.

"You're lucky, you know. Some parents resent the children their spouses bring to a marriage."

I watched as Edward's gaze raked my face, where he no doubt saw my horrible attempt at masking the hurt behind my words. My face was like a soap opera: it told the most hard to believe stories and you couldn't help but watch it, fascinated as to what would happen next.

"Is that what happened to you, Bella?"

Luckily, the thrill that threatened to go through me at the sound of my name on his lips was cancelled out by the look of concern on his face. It was hard to feel arousal at the same time someone felt sorry for you.

"I don't want to talk about it," I hedged, crossing my arms over my chest.

Edward took a step closer to me, still with that look of concern. It was going to be my undoing. I felt a few cracks form in my façade and that panicky feeling was creeping back too. "I can understand that," he said. "Sometimes, it's too difficult to talk about the things that bring us so much pain. Other times, it's actually a relief to let them out. It eases the burden on your soul."

"I can't do this, Edward," I whispered. He took another step closer and pulled me into the comforting warmth of his arms. I pressed my face against his chest and stared at his bicep while his hand ran soothingly over my hair. He didn't say anything else, not that he needed to. It was up to me how we would proceed.

I wasn't used to sharing my story with people. I'd buried that when I'd left Palm Beach for good. My year in Phoenix had been blissfully peaceful in that regard. No explanations were necessary for why I'd been shuttled off to boarding school, even though my mom and stepdad lived five miles away. Why Phil never spent time with me, trying to get to know me better. Why he hadn't shown up for my swim team championships, my dance recitals or even my high school graduation. Best of all, nobody asked why I'd been forced month after month for eighteen freaking years to

stand before my stepfather and give him an accounting of my expenses, accomplishments for that month, and my five year plan. What five year-old had a five year plan? I'd felt more like an employee than a daughter, and he'd never done anything to make me feel differently.

I started to tremble as these thoughts raced through my head, and I was glad for Edward's strong arms wrapped around me. I took a shaky breath and did something I hadn't done in forever. I talked about my past.

"I was four when my mom remarried, and I don't remember my biological father at all. Phil adopted me, I took his name, but I never really felt like a part of the family. Phil's a few years older than my mom, and it wasn't until I got older that I realized she was his 'trophy wife.'" I cringed saying that phrase out loud. I'd thought it in my head for years, but never really actually told anyone that. "My mom is so much more than that though. She's smart and vibrant and funny - she is so fucking funny. I think she got scared after she left my dad and Phil came along and he was safe and easy to get along with. Somehow, after a while though, they clicked. They're still married, in case you were wondering."

It surprised me every day of my life that they were still married. I thought for sure that as soon as I took off, she'd get her divorce and get out and be Renee for the rest of her life. Strangely enough, it seemed like she and Phil had fallen in love somewhere along the line. So long as he kept her happy, she could keep being his stupid trophy wife.

Edward did the strangest thing next. He lifted my chin with his finger and stared down at me with his big green eyes. His mouth lowered and met mine, but it was only a whisper of a kiss. It wasn't a sexual overture, but it wasn't a friendly handshake either. It was an acknowledgement that we did after all have something in common, other than our mutual physical attraction. An admission that maybe there was something more between us than just those initial judgments and feelings of lust. I don't think a man had ever kissed me not hoping to move to the next base, but Edward seemed content just to stand there with me in his arms. For the first time in forever, I didn't feel so alone.

When Edward pulled back, I wasn't ready to let go. My mouth followed his across the small space between us and I felt his lips pull into a grin. "I like you," he said, taking a step back and putting more space between us.

I frowned at the distance, but did a happy dance inside my head at his words. I thought I liked him too, but I wasn't ready to admit that to him. When was the last time I'd told anyone that I liked them? And not in a romantic way, even just as a

friend. I could count on one hand the number of people I'd considered friends over the years. Phoenix had not offered up a bounty of those people, and that was probably part of the reason I'd found it so easy to leave behind.

He caught me off-guard in the middle of trying to think of a way to tell him that I might be able to like him too. "What happened to your dad?" he asked.

Such an innocent question, but it sent a shiver of fear down my spine. I froze in place, like my feet had grown roots that had busted down through the concrete of the landing and implanted firmly into the soil. It made me mad that I had this reaction to just the mention of my father. I was here to meet Charlie Swan. To face the man who had scared my mother out of town, never to return again. He was the one person on the planet I wasn't ashamed to admit that I was curious about. I had so many questions for him, but I didn't know what my reception would be. Charlie was a mystery, like a big pile of knotted ropes, waiting for me to untangle and straighten out. I just needed to figure out where to start.

I was glad then for the space that Edward had given me. I walked away from the front door and up the steps to the hallway between Rosalie's and my apartments. I sat down on the floor and waited for Edward to join me. He followed a few seconds later, but didn't make any comments about me, the floor, or my weird behavior. If he wanted to go out on a date with me, he was going to have to get used to the swizzle stick of weirdness now.

Effortlessly, he lowered his long limbs to the floor and sat in front of me, our knees touching. He watched me as I gathered my thoughts, wanting to explain my family history as quickly and painlessly as I could. "My dad's here," I began, nodding to the parking lot behind him.

Edward turned and looked, but snapped back immediately. "Where?" he asked, his eyes wide with curiosity.

"I'm not sure, but according to Alice, he's out in the parking lot somewhere. He's the police chief." Edward had lived in Forks for a while, minus his years away at school, but I didn't know how well acquainted he might have been with the police force. I didn't have to wonder for long.

"Charlie Swan's your dad?" He stared at my face and then my hair, and then he leaned in closer to stare at my nose. I felt like a modern art painting being put on display for the first time. Edward couldn't seem to figure me out.

"You do look like him," he said. I watched his hand move in slow motion towards

my hair, of all things. My frizzy, untamable, unwashed hair. I tried to back away, but wasn't quick enough. "He used to have hair like this, when I was a kid," Edward continued, rubbing a lock of frizz between his fingers. He didn't seem disgusted by it though. He smiled as he examined the strands between his fingers. "He's mostly bald now," he said, his smile growing larger.

I leaned towards him as he spoke, more anxious than I wanted to admit to hear anything that he could tell me about Charlie. Edward's thumb surprised me when it brushed across my cheekbone. "I see him here, too," he whispered, so close now that I could feel his breath blow across my face. "And here," his forefinger brushed down the length of my nose.

I panted while I waited for him to continue. Weirded out that I was turned on while we discussed my father, but I didn't want him to stop. "What else?" I asked, pushing forward so I was on my knees now.

"I don't know," Edward said at last, a little crease forming between his eyes. "I've never had the pleasure of dealing with him in an official capacity, but I've seen him around town. I'm sure I've spoken to him on occasion, but nothing stands out at the moment." He paused, and I rocked closer. "I didn't know he had a daughter."

With a sigh, I sat back and away from Edward's hypnotizing ways. "I've never met him," I admitted, twisting my nose in disgust. "He never tried to contact me after my mom left. I'm not sure what their arrangement was, but it seemed to be a clean break. No calls, no contact, no ties." *Not even me.*

"That must have been painful," he said, watching me carefully.

"Not really. I never knew him," I snapped. We were headed into dangerous territory, but I didn't think Edward realized that.

"Kind of like I never knew my mom?" His fingers grazed my knee and I jumped up off the floor and out of reach.

"That's totally different. You *did* know your mom, for a little while at least. I was barely out of the womb before my mom took off. I have no memories of him. No evidence of his existence. No cards or letters to show that he had any interest in me." I started to shake as the thoughts that I always tried to hide began to bombard me.

When I was a teenager, I'd thought about Charlie Swan a lot. A LOT. I'd wondered what my life would have been like if Mom had toughed it out with him instead of

running off. The conclusion that I'd always come to was that Charlie Swan hadn't wanted me. If he had, he would have found a way to stay in touch. He wouldn't have allowed Phil to adopt me and take his name. He'd done none of that, so he must not have given a rat's ass about the daughter his sperm had created.

And that was the real reason I was so panicked about the prospect of seeking out Charlie. How dumb was I to think that he would *want* to see me after all this time? It was his rejection that I feared the most. What was worse than being rejected by your own parent? Coming to Forks would be my first and last venture into masochism. I had to know one way or another though. I couldn't continue my life as it had been, and there was something stopping me from going forward. A brick wall, built by my own hands, kept me back. I was going to have to tear down the wall, brick by brick, to get through. And meeting my father would probably tear down at least half of those damn bricks.

One thought was very loud in my head, louder than the other doubts and insecurities: What if he hates me?

"He won't hate you," Edward said as he stood and started walking towards me.

My eyes grew wide as he advanced, embarrassed that I'd voiced something I'd met to keep private and unsure as to what Edward meant to do.

"You don't know that. He never sent me birthday cards or Christmas presents. He never suggested coming to see me. Hell, for all I know he hasn't even talked to my mom since we left." I shook as Edward pressed me back against Rosalie's door. He towered over me, his arms like a cage around my body.

"Are you so sure of your mother's innocence in all of this? Maybe she played a role too," he said softly.

I stared at his chest, trying to deny his words. "She wouldn't have done that," I insisted.

"People do strange things, especially when they're hurt or scared. I think you should talk to Charlie and hear what he has to say. I'll help you, after all this commotion outside is over. We'll invite him over for dinner, and you two can get the chance to meet and talk."

An image of that popped into my head. Edward sitting on my second-hand sofa, a plate of Kraft mac and cheese balanced on his lap. A man whose face I couldn't see sitting next to him, wondering aloud why I didn't know how to cook.

My palms started to sweat and I suddenly felt caged in. "Let me go, Edward," I told him, but his arms tightened around me instead.

"It will be fine. He's just a man, no different from any other XY chromosomal being. I think it's important that you do this. Let me help you." He spoke to me so sweetly, nicer than anyone had ever been to me in years. And it scared the shit out of me.

I slipped out of his hold and scurried across the hall to my door. I pressed my back against it, my hands poised to push me off and away from Edward at a moment's notice. "I don't need your help. Just leave me the fuck alone," I seethed at him. I didn't need anyone's help anymore. Phil had made it abundantly clear that I was useless and completely incapable of handling my own problems. Well, I'd proved him wrong. And I wasn't going to give him a reason ever again to doubt that I could hold down a job and pay my own bills. I would handle this Charlie issue without Edward's, or anyone else's, help.

His arms slowly lowered as his eyes raked over my body. I'm sure I looked like a cornered lion at the zoo, but it didn't matter. I just needed him to give me my space.

"If you change your mind, you know where to find me," he said at last, his voice a monotone. Without another word, he turned and walked up the stairs to his apartment. The click of his door was the only other sound I heard.

Left alone in the hallway with a replay of what I'd said and done, I uneasily released the breath I'd been holding. Edward had been trying to help me. It wasn't easy for me to accept help anymore. At my job in Phoenix, I'd never asked for help from any of my co-workers. It had been my first real job and Phil's words hung over my head like Winnie the Pooh dressed as his dark little rain cloud. My life was not a waste. I knew how to tie my shoes by myself. I could figure out how to balance a checkbook. And I did not need Alec's help getting the boxes down from the top inventory shelf. He was a whole other bundle of fuckdom though. One that I didn't want to think about.

It made me feel weak to admit that I couldn't do something by myself. I would find the courage to talk to Charlie. It would happen. I just didn't need people forcing him down my throat and telling me what to do. When I was ready to face the rejection that I was afraid of seeing on his face, then I would hunt him down. Today was too soon. I'd only been in Forks a week. I'd given myself several months here before I imagined that I'd be ready to move on. *Months*. Not days. So, Edward could just chill the hell out.

I turned and dug my keys out of my pocket. There was no use hanging out in the hallway by myself anymore. A thought nudged in my brain though. I stared at the number "4" on my door for a moment, trying to figure out what was bothering me now. And then it hit me. Edward hadn't been upset with me for not wanting his help. He didn't need to chill out - he was already fairly chill. He'd only gotten upset after I'd bitched out at him. *Fuck*. So, now I felt bad. I'd lashed out at him, pushing him away because I needed to prove that I was a big girl. Instead, I'd only proved how much of a whiny brat I actually was.

I thudded my head against the door, realizing what I needed to do; I was going to have to apologize. *Shit*. I huffed and shoved my keys back into my pocket, walking slowly up the steps in a pathetic attempt to put off having to eat my crow.

Outside of Edward's door, I paused to gather my courage. I decided it was best just to hurry up and get it over with, but before my raised fist could connect with his door, the one behind me opened and I heard someone step out.

"Whatcha doing, Bella?" Alice asked as she bounded over to where I stood.

I blinked at her a few times as I looked between her and Jasper's apartment door. Jasper's door that she'd just passed through.

"What have *you* been doing?" I countered, wondering if she'd done the impossible and gotten Jasper to switch teams after all.

"Jazz and I were connecting," she responded. Her voice had a dream-like quality, like she'd just announced that she was made out of cotton candy and peppermints. Her eyes told a different story. She was not happy about something.

"He turned you down again, didn't he?"

"Not entirely," Alice said, as she did a little twirl in the middle of the hall. Was she freaking Ballerina Barbie now? Who was this girl? "We kissed," she added in a whisper.

My mouth fell open and I watched her spin around the hall for a few seconds. Then, reality returned and I realized she was a spin master of the tenth power. "You mean that you kissed him."

"Oh, Bella. It doesn't matter who initiated it. All that matters is that the spark is there and you have to admit that he's not gay," she growled at me. She was more Hanoi Jane than "go for the burn." Still, I wasn't intimidated.

"I don't have to admit shit. I could go in there and kiss him right now, but that doesn't mean that he wants to sleep with me."

"He was so soft and gentle," she said breathily, ignoring me entirely. "He wrapped his arms around me and held me close. It was like my best dream come true."

I stared at her in surprise. Had Jasper really returned her kiss...and held her close? What the hell? I would have bet good money that he was a cock knocker.

"Why the hell aren't you still in there then?" I asked, waving my hand in the general direction of Jasper's door.

And there was that look again. The same one she had when she came out of his apartment that said that all was not right. She stopped twirling and her shoulders slumped in defeat.

"I don't know," she said, flailing her arms in the air. "He pulled away and asked me to leave, said he had a deadline to meet. It was like he shut himself off. I'm so confused." Her arms fell to her side in a final flounce and I watched all her fucking energy suck back into her small body, like a black hole.

What the hell had Jasper done to her? I immediately felt bad for snapping at her and for trying to convince her that Jasper could have no interest in her. I never would have guessed that Alice would look so demolished after his rejection though. Fuck - this was exactly why I didn't get involved with people. Too many feelings, too many emotions, and too much room for hurt.

"I'm sorry, Alice. Men can be turds sometimes," I said, not feeling fucking adequately qualified to deal with a friend in need. *Friend?* Shit, when had I started thinking of Alice as a friend? She was annoyingly perky, abundantly pesky, and absolutely, positively petrifying. Did I really want to think of her as a friend? I wasn't sure, but Alice didn't give me much time to think about it.

She leaned in and kissed me on the cheek. "Thanks, Bella," she said before turning quickly and lithely hopping down the stairs.

I listened to the thud of her hops until they were no more. Our exchange had left me itchy. I wanted to take a loofah and rub off the tingling of my skin. I felt fucking exposed again.

"That was nice of you," Edward said from behind me. I turned around quickly and found him leaning against the doorframe.

Before I could reconsider what I meant to do, I shouted at him, "I'm sorry I snapped at you earlier!" My lips clamped shut as soon as the words had escaped. I felt like giving a timeout to my malfunctioning filter. I hadn't meant to apologize straight out like that. I meant to...shit, I wasn't sure anymore what I'd meant to say or do.

"You're a good person, Bella. You're just afraid to show it. But, you can't hide it from me." Edward pushed away from his door and started advancing towards me. I took a tiny step backwards, afraid of the intensity I saw in his eyes. "I see you clearly, more clearly than you're comfortable with. So, I understand when you snap and say things hurtful. I think you're going to discover that my patience threshold is set fairly high."

We danced our strange tango until my back was pressed up against the wall, next to Jasper's apartment door. The building was silent again, save for the sound of my breath leaving my lungs. Edward loomed over me, caging me in again, but this time I didn't feel trapped. I felt free. Free to run my fingers through Edward's hair, which I did. Free to press my chest against his, which I did. And free to lean in and press my lips against the stubble on the end of his chin, which I did with a smile on my face.

I pulled back slightly and stared into his eyes. "I think you may be good for me," I whispered before kissing him gently on the lips. We stood like that for a while, slowly reacquainting our mouths, like we had all the time in the world. Edward kissed his way down my neck and I leaned my head back, moaning quietly. His hands dug into my hips and pulled me close, which put my stomach in contact with his dick. I rubbed against him, dying to get even closer.

I panted against his shoulder as my body prepared itself to be boarded. It didn't matter that we were in the middle of the hallway or that there was some hostile criminal in the building across the parking lot. All that mattered was Edward, me, and whichever way we could find to make our naked parts fit together.

I pushed against his chest and smart man that he was, he started walking backwards towards his apartment, lips never leaving my neck. We bumped up against his door because I got distracted when he bit the soft spot between my neck and my shoulder. Edward reached behind him and turned the knob, and we tumbled into his apartment together.

I pushed the door closed behind me and leaned against it. I stared at his swollen lips and the look of desire in his eyes and my mind failed me again. My fucking filter turned on and I had a brief moment of conscience leak through.

"Are you sure?" I asked him. I wasn't sure anymore that I wanted this to be a one-time thing. We'd spent the last hour getting to know each other way better than anyone I'd known on the whole freaking planet, and it scared me. I couldn't just fuck him now. It would mean something if I had sex with him, and I didn't know how to handle that.

It was his fingers that did me in. They tiptoed up my arm, from my wrist to my shoulder, and it sent tingles all over my body. And not the kind that made me want to bust out my loofah either. The kind that made my lady parts sing.

Edward leaned down to kiss me, and just as our lips met, a loud sound echoed throughout the building, like an enormous electronic meltdown. His TV snapped off, followed by his computer equipment and the humming of the refrigerator from the kitchen.

It was quiet. Eerily quiet. Until the yelling from the parking lot began.

A/N: A huge thanks to Blackdogs who is the greatest beta ever. I'm on twitter...come see what I'm tweeting about. Sometimes I give away hints about chapters that I'm working on. You can also come say hi on the Twilighted forum.

Please review!

Scared Stupid

A/N: Thanks for waiting patiently for this chapter! I swear that I've been busy writing this whole time. In fact, I have three pieces to prove it.

I submitted entries for two contests on ff. One called "**Devil's Pitchfork**" for the Tattward and Inkbella contest and another called "**Crash**" for the Love Through Lemons contest. Both are linked on my profile. If you get a moment, I would love it if you would read and review those as well. "Crash" is pretty short - less than 5,000 words and a true one-shot. "Devil's Pitchfork" is a bit longer, but it will most likely turn into my next full-length story. So, if you want a preview of what's coming next, check that one out.

Back to Webward and Bella: They were just interrupted prior to what could have been a very steamy moment...

Chapter 5: Scared Stupid

"What's going on?" I asked, clutching Edward's arms tightly. We'd just been moving in a very interesting direction and I was not happy to have been interrupted, yet again. The fates had not been on my side all day.

"I think the police cut the power," Edward said, moving towards the window that overlooked the parking lot. I held tight to his hand as we both peered over the top of the a/c unit and down onto the street below. The vantage point was horrible; a thick, knobbed tree blocked most of the parking lot from view. We tried to peer through the leaves, but it soon became obvious that we were wasting our time. "We have to go back downstairs again in order to see anything."

I laughed dryly. "At least my ass is getting a good workout today." It wasn't the kind of workout I'd hoped for, but I'd take it.

Edward's mouth puckered as his gaze shifted to the ass in mention. "I have no complaints about your bottom," he said appreciatively.

"Why do you call it that - 'bottom'? I've never had a guy call it my 'bottom' before."

Red tinged his cheeks again, in that adorable way of his. "I can't think of a better word to describe what is arguably one of your best body parts. Why you'd prefer to

equate it with a long-eared mammal is beyond me."

I smiled, amused not only by what he said but the way he said it. He was very proper, and I didn't know why I liked it so much. Maybe it was just a nice change from the men I used to hang out with.

"How do you know?" I asked as we stood and stared at one another, already forgetting that we were supposed to be heading downstairs together.

"How do I know what?" His eyes were trained on mine, mesmerizing me yet again. Despite the fact that he'd pushed me away earlier, I could tell that he was ready now to participate in whatever I might suggest. I'd merely been looking for a quick fuck before. Now, I was breathless at the thought of getting naked with him. Perhaps even repeatedly. It wasn't nearly as frightening as I'd thought it would be.

"That my 'bottom' is your favorite body part?" I took a step closer and wrapped my hand around his neck to bring his head down to my level. When his ear was next to my mouth, I blew across the tip and watched him shiver, despite the heat and humidity of the day. Maybe I had him mesmerized as well. I sucked the lobe into my mouth gently and scraped my teeth across the skin, savoring his taste. When I was sure that he was completely distracted, I whispered into his ear, "You haven't seen my boobs yet."

I released my hold on his neck and walked backwards towards the door. Edward stood where I left him - hunched over, eyes glazed and unseeing. I liked teasing him. We would have so much fun in bed together. I was amazed at how quickly my thoughts about Edward had changed.

My hand found the doorknob behind me and I quickly turned it and left the apartment. Edward would follow me. Probably not until after he calmed the massive erection I'd seen pushing against the front of his jeans. Emmett and Jasper had nothing on him.

Back on the first floor, I could hear Emmett and Rosalie talking now. They were definitely in Emmett's apartment, but they seemed to be fighting. Admittedly, I was disappointed. I had hoped that Cougar Pants would straighten her out and she'd be his submissive little tiger kitten, leaving the rest of us, and the mailman, free from her fury. That didn't seem to be the case.

With a sigh, I looked out the front door. The yelling we'd heard earlier was immediately explained. The man with the megaphone was back and he was yelling instructions towards the perp, as Edward had called him. A truck from Clallam

County PUD was parked in front of our building, and two orange-vested workers were being screamed at by a red-faced police officer. I felt like shaking my fist at them in a display of unity; the fuckers had interrupted my latest opportunity for some hot sexin'.

Edward stomped loudly down the steps, and I smiled at his efforts. I was positive he did it because I'd mentioned how quiet and sneaky he was. He joined me at the door and we watched the various exchanges in the parking lot for a few minutes. For some reason, I was charmed by the idea of a slightly inept utility force. Not that I enjoyed having the power in our building shut down in the middle of our freak heat wave, but it was good to see other people fucking things up for once.

Edward wrapped his arm around my shoulder and I leaned into him, allowing myself to enjoy the comfort that he offered. The etched number "4" on the door looked back at me mockingly and I stuck my tongue out at it. Something good had come from building number 4 after all.

Both of our heads turned as the screeching from Emmett's apartment grew louder. It didn't sound like wild sex either. It sounded like Rosalie was well and truly pissed. I rubbed my forehead in frustration. Her appearance in the hallway was a given, and I wasn't looking forward to being bitched at any time soon. I nudged Edward to get his attention; I was going to suggest a continuation of the pseudo-date from earlier. Rosalie's voice stopped me dead in my tracks.

"You're a fucking pervert, you know that, right? I can't believe I fell for your stupid lines." Rosalie stormed out of Emmett's apartment, Cougar Pants hot on her heels. Both of them looked way too agitated for people who had supposedly just rocked each other's world.

"I'm not a pervert," Emmett exclaimed, tracking Rosalie across the hall. "I didn't know that was on there. I was just catching up on the latest episode."

Edward and I stepped back to the opposite wall to give them some privacy. Neither one of us wanted to get in the middle of World War Rosalie, but their argument was too interesting to run away from completely.

"You are a fucking bad liar. This is exactly why I never wanted to go out with you. I *knew* you would be like this. You come into the bar, looking for a good time, hitting on the servers and bartenders because you think they're easy. Well, guess what? You are so wrong." We watched her finger poke into Emmett's bare chest a few times. Emmett stared at it too, but more in confusion than anything else.

"What are you talking about? I only came in to the bar that one time to see you. I never went back because you yelled your crazy head off and threatened to cut off my boys and put them into the blender. Christ, Rosalie, I'm really attached to my boys." His hands reached down to cover the boys in question.

"I've had your number from the start," Rosalie said, ignoring the protective stance that Emmett had taken. "You think life is just one, big happy time, but it's not. Some of us have responsibilities. Some of us don't have time to sit around and watch porn all day long. Some of us work shitty jobs just so we can take care of other people. I don't have time for you or your little games, Emmett Cullen. Stay the fuck away from me. I mean it this time." She was breathing heavily, like a dragon that would at any second breathe fire onto its victim. Emmett was about to become flame-broiled if he didn't take a step back.

I was surprised when Emmett did step back, but even more surprised by the look on his face. He'd been so easy-going that I never thought he could get worked up over anything. Apparently, he could get worked up over Rosalie.

"You think you know me so well, but you don't," he told her angrily. He began to walk in a circle around her, their eyes never breaking contact. "You may think that I'm a screw-up, but you're wrong. You think I'm going to work at Newton's for the rest of my life? I've got goals and ambitions, just like anybody else."

Emmett stopped right in front of Alice's door with all three of us as his captive audience. I was glad they hadn't noticed me or Edward. I felt like an intruder, but Edward's arms were locked around my body. He seemed extremely interested in whatever revelations Emmett was about to make.

Emmett blew out a breath, and he instantly looked calmer. When he spoke again, his voice was much quieter, which caused me and Edward to strain closer to hear his words. "I signed up last week to join the EMT program at the college in Port Angeles. My dad always said..." He paused, clearing his throat. "My dad always said that I've got great people skills and a strong desire to help others. I didn't have the grades to go to medical school like him, but this is something that I can do and still recognize his work at the same time." He paused again and frowned at Rosalie, a small crease forming between his eyes. "I never took you for someone who put a lot of stock in titles or material things, but if that's what I have to do to get your attention, then..."

His words trailed off, and Emmett stared at his bare feet as his statement hung in the air. I turned and looked at Edward, who looked just as surprised as me.

"Did you know?" I whispered into his ear.

"No," he replied, his mouth twitching. I could tell that he wanted to say more, but he seemed to have lost his words at his brother's announcement.

"Shit, Emmett, why do you have to make it sound like that?" Rosalie asked, her voice shockingly quiet. "I have a sister to support. She's almost done with college - I don't have time to mess around with random guys."

"I'm not a random guy," Emmett insisted.

"No, you're not," she said, stepping forward and brushing her hand across his thick curls. "But, I can't get distracted. My job is important and I need to keep my priorities straight."

"What are you saying?" Emmett asked, stilling her hand in his hair with his own.

"You're very distracting," she said in a whisper, pushing Emmett back towards his apartment. I couldn't hear the rest of what she said, so I looked at Edward questioningly. With a cocked eyebrow, he took my arm and guided us quietly to the edge of the landing to hear them better.

I was immediately sorry that we had. Rosalie had Emmett pushed up against his door, her forehead pressed to his. They spoke quietly, and I still couldn't make out what they were saying. I was sorry because we were obviously intruding on a very personal moment. I couldn't see Rosalie, but the look in Emmett's eyes said it all. He was completely in love with her. It shone out of him like a spotlight with Rosalie as the featured performer.

I turned away, a gasp escaping my throat. No one had ever looked at me like that. Like I was the center of their world. Like I was the only thing that mattered. All the men I'd been with...not a one had looked at me like I was special or important. The thought threatened to knock me to my knees. How had I gone twenty-five years without ever finding love?

Edward's arms held me up as pulled me back from the edge. "Hey, what's wrong?" he whispered.

I shook my head, grounding down on my teeth. What was I supposed to say to Edward? *Hey, I just realized that no one has ever loved me?* How pathetic is that? It was the last thing I wanted to say to him especially. We were on the cusp of something...I didn't know what but I'd already taken the time to get to know him. I

didn't want to mess that up with all of my head-fuckery. "They look really happy," I finally said between my teeth.

Edward stared at my face, clearly not believing what I'd just told him. He wasn't going to get me to say anything else though. My lips were sealed around that shit.

"Let's go upstairs," he whispered, tugging on my arm. I nodded my head, anxious to be away from Cougar Pants and his kitten. We made it as far as the first step before the floor creaked underneath us. We heard their footsteps across the first floor and knew that we'd been caught.

Rosalie spotted me, and I laughingly thought that she would be less of a bitch after her interlude with Emmett. "Bella!" she exclaimed, storming up the steps, her blonde hair flying behind her like a flag on a warrior's banner. She spotted Edward behind me on the landing and immediately started shaking from her anger. "Do you know what he did?" she asked, her eyes ablaze.

At first, I assumed she meant Emmett. However, her eyes were glued on Edward. And she looked like she was ready to punch him. I turned and looked at the man standing behind me, and he looked frightened. He didn't seem to have any idea what she meant either though.

"What's going on Rosalie?" I asked, wondering if I needed to step in front of Edward in order to protect him. I wasn't going to let her chew him up like she did the mailman. I hadn't had my way with him yet and I needed all his body parts intact.

"I caught Emmett watching a video of the two of you on YouTube. You move pretty fucking fast, Bella," she said with a sneer.

I'm pretty sure I stood paralyzed for several moments as what she said sunk through my thick skull. I didn't understand at first what she meant - why would I be on YouTube? But, Edward's "just a hobby" hit me upside my head hard and I turned on him angrily.

"You were filming us?" I asked, itching to shove him hard until he hit the glass door behind him. That fucking number 4 on the glass winked at me in delight. Just like always, it was bringing me bad luck. "How could you do that?"

"I didn't mean to," he said, holding his hands out in front of him defensively. "It was an accident."

I narrowed my eyes until all I saw was him. "How do you accidentally load a video to YouTube? You are such a creep."

"I thought..." he stammered at me, but I didn't give him time to finish his pathetic little thought.

"I can't believe I thought you were different!" I shouted at him, giving in to my urges and pushing against his chest. My puny shove was as effective as using a feather to push a rock out of the way. "Why would you do that?"

"Bella, please listen to me. I didn't mean to post it to YouTube, and I wasn't even sure that part of it had been recorded," he pleaded with me.

"I've known some messed up people, Edward, but you take the grand prize. Hail Edward, King of all Fuckery!" I mockingly bowed before him, eyeing his junk with thoughts of punching him there.

Edward must have noticed, because he took a step back. "Bella, this is just a misunderstanding. If you'll calm down and be rational for a moment..."

"Calm?" I asked, willing my voice not to screech. "I can be the fucking Atlantic the night the Titanic sunk. I choose not to be calm around you, so don't tell me what to do."

I turned and stomped up the steps to my apartment, pausing just outside the door. I was angry, but if I was truthful with myself, I was also hurt. The pain that sat inside my chest reminded me why I didn't get involved with people. In the end, they always just fucked you over. Edward had tried to pass himself off as a cup of coffee, and he'd fooled me completely. He trumped my swizzle stick of weirdom. Edward was a fucking Grande Cinnamon Dolce Frappuccino with extra whipped cream. I had only had myself to blame for not recognizing it earlier.

Squaring my shoulders, I let myself into my apartment and shut the door quietly. Some of my anger had escaped and the hurt was taking over instead. I slid down the door and sat on the floor with my back against it. Pulling up my knees, I rested my head on them and allowed my brain to attempt to decipher the latest crappery I'd gotten myself into.

I never should have let Edward's fake sweetness cloud what I knew about men. He was like a packet of Equal masquerading as sugar. Pretending to be just as good as the real deal but failing miserably. It was my own fault for falling for his act. Who cared if he'd taken the time to listen to me talk about my past without being

judgmental? Or encouraged me to meet my dad when he knew I'd yet to find the strength to do it on my own? In the end, he'd just screwed me over, and the feeling inside my chest just made it that much worse. Because I'd begun to trust him a little. Because I'd hoped that he would be different. Because I wanted to believe in him. All of that just made me the worst kind of fool.

What bothered me the most was that I kept getting everything in my life wrong. I'd thought that dropping out of college had been the right thing to do, but that only pissed Phil off royally. It wasn't like he'd ever thought that going to college was the right thing for me to do anyway. For some reason, he'd thought to turn me into some sort of southern deb, but that had never been a realistic goal. I hate wearing dresses, dancing, and trying to be charming to people I find shallow and fake. Phil's world of privileged society just did not mix well with me, or I it.

However, my mom had convinced me to stay home after my brief stint in the world of academia. We'd palled around Palm Beach relaxing and spending time together, just the two of us. I'd let her drag me to a few of her bridge club outings and in return she'd gone to Karaoke night at Alistair's Pub with me so we could sing our duet of "Twist and Shout". We always brought at least one poor sap to his feet for a standing ovation. My life with my mom had been fun. It was the times that I'd been subjected to Phil's ridiculous demands that my life had been shitty.

I'd gotten things wrong again when stepdaddy dearest had ordered my presence in his Trophy Room two years after my departure from Florida U. My future plans were not up to his levels of perfection and I was ordered to begin my search for a proper husband to "take me off his hands." As if a husband was what I'd needed at the age of 22. As far as I was concerned, going from Phil's house to some other asshole's house was the worst plan ever. Our fight that day had been loud and nasty and I'd stormed out with what belongings I could shove into my duffle bag. I'd set off in my convertible and quickly discovered that I couldn't live in a motel in Ft. Lauderdale for very long without a job.

That first year away from my mom and Phil had been horrible. I'd never been taught how to care for myself and I'd desperately tried to prove that I could figure it out on my own. I'd made mistake after mistake after mistake. The wrong job in the wrong part of town led to having my radio stolen from my car. The wrong roommate led to repeatedly listening to her having sex with her boyfriend in the bed next to mine. The wrong men led to threatening phone calls and being pushed around. My mom had begged me to come home, but I'd had my pride. I could stand on my own two feet and I would.

I'd eventually tired of Florida and decided on a whim to drive to Arizona, where

my mom was from originally. I sold the convertible and bought the same shitmobile that I still owned. In Arizona, things had gotten better. I'd found a stable job and an actual apartment to live in instead of a motel room. I'd been more selective about the men I'd hooked up with. I paid my bills on time and only bounced a couple checks. I'd finally felt like an adult.

I realized now that I'd made mistakes there too though. I'd worked at a grocery store but hadn't spent much time getting to know my co-workers. In fact, they seemed stranger than my current neighbors, and that was saying something. My biggest mistake had been letting Alec fuck me in the stockroom on our lunch break. It had seemed fun and exciting at the time, but I'd wanted to bash his head in when I overheard him bragging to his buddies about how he'd nailed me against the wall. The size of my boobs and the tightness of my cunt had been the biggest points of discussion, with the other four members of his fan club deciding that they would bang me as well.

And that was the first time I'd really questioned the choices I'd been making. Not just with men, but with how I acted around people. I felt like there was something missing from my life. Other people seemed happy. I'd see families come into the store with smiling faces and I always wondered what their secret was. How did they manage to get their lives right and find something to smile about every day? I struggled just to paste a fake smile on my face for the customers that came through my line. Fuck actually being happy - I couldn't even be fake happy.

It was then that I'd started thinking about Charlie Swan. I wondered if he was still alive. Wondered if he was still in Forks. Wondered what would happen if I tried to find him. And suddenly, I didn't feel so lost anymore. I didn't feel like a complete loser without a life plan. Didn't feel like I would commit suicide if I had to dig deep for that smile that I was supposed to wear on my face. Best of all - I felt hope.

Leaving Phoenix had been quick and easy. Quit my job, packed the car and drove straight through. And now, I lived in the town where my dad lived. I worked in the factory that my step-dad owned. And I slept underneath the apartment of probably the sexiest man I'd ever met. The mistakes I'd been making recently seemed to be fewer but more painful. I didn't want to be wrong about Edward. I wanted him to be the cup of joe I'd thought he was. The ache in my chest got worse as I thought about all the walls I'd let down for him. It was hard being proven right in this instance; it's just better to keep people out because all they do is hurt you.

My ass was sore from sitting on the floor for so long so I decided that the best remedy was to crawl onto my Beautyrest® and sleep away my grumpies. My knees cracked as I stood and I felt all the stress I'd been carrying around for the past few

years settle down into my joints. I sighed as I rubbed my knee gently. I just wanted something in my life to go right for once so some of this extra weight I carried around would ease off for a bit. My weariness was more than any twenty-five year old should have.

I started to walk away from my door when I heard the clomping of a pair of shoes down the steps from the third floor. They paused outside my door and I held absolutely still. I was equal parts frightened and hopeful that Edward had come by to talk to me about what had happened earlier. I swallowed something thick down my throat that felt a lot like my pride. I wanted to spend more time with him and it was possible that I could be willing to listen to his explanations now. It took a lot for me to admit that though.

Instead of a rap on my door, I heard a pair of muted voices carry through the wood. I didn't hesitate long before I pressed my ear to the door so I could try to figure out who was out in the hallway. I recognized Edward's voice right away and it only took a moment longer to realize that he was talking to Jasper.

"She frightens me," I heard Jasper say as I pressed my hands on either side of the door for balance.

Edward's reply was muffled so I pressed closer, insanely curious about what they were talking about.

"I know, but it's the way she looks at me...like she's going to devour me," Jasper said.

"Is that a bad thing?" I heard Edward ask, insanely happy to hear his voice again, even if he wasn't talking to me.

I heard their feet shuffle against the carpet and I was afraid that they were moving out of range. Thankfully, it seemed like Jasper was just shifting nervously in response to Edward's question. "Yes?" he replied, making it a question instead of a statement. "Edward, she told me that she knew seventeen positions from the Kama Sutra by heart. And that she's a swallower. And that she wasn't opposed to bringing in a 'friend' if we wanted to try that some time. She's scary. I've never had a girl talk to me like that before. Maria was very reserved and we never, ever talked about sex."

"What?" Edward asked, his voice full of disbelief. "You two never discussed fornication?"

I snorted at his word choice. The man was straight up weird, but I kind of liked that about him.

Jasper was speaking again so I concentrated on his lower tones. "She was a sweet girl. When we made love, she never made a sound either. I only knew she came because she told me. I think Alice will be a screamer. I know I haven't lived here all that long, but that's the vibe I get from her."

My mouth twisted into a grimace as I pondered the ramifications of their discussion. First of all, it seemed like I was wrong: Jasper wasn't gay. He didn't like the peen. Jasper liked the pussy, so long as the pussy was quiet. Second of all, Jasper was positively frightened of Alice. Now, that I could understand. Alice had already proven that she was freaky. And by the sound of the way she talked to Jasper, he was now aware of it too and scared unstiff.

Edward spoke again, in that patient, polite tone of his. I tried very hard not to smile at the way it made me feel. "Jasper, what's the real issue here? Alice is a nice girl. She may be a bit bolder than you're used to, but that shouldn't stop you. Maria left three months ago. Maybe it's time you tried dating again."

Jasper's voice was quiet and I had to strain even harder against my door to hear him. "I don't think I'm ready. Maria....she....I'm not sure I could take anything serious now."

"Who said serious?" Edward asked. "Take Alice out to dinner. Take her to a movie. Take her to that civil war exhibit in Seattle that you want to go to. Take things as slowly as you want. Just don't pass up a good thing because you're scared. Fear only brings pain and disappointment. At least if you're trying something, you have a better shot of finding something that makes you happy. Jasper, you deserve to be happy. I consider you to be my friend, and I hate to see you moping around."

I didn't hear Jasper's reply but I did hear the pair of them stomp up the steps and into their respective apartments. I thought about what Edward had said. About avoiding life just because you were afraid. In some ways, that fit me. I was afraid and I was ready to make a change. I wanted to smack the fear around and make it my bitch. I wanted to move forward with my life and just finally figure it all out.

Now that I knew that Jasper wasn't a teapot, I saw Alice's whole future brighten and expand. I felt bad for cockblocking her before, but there's really no point in chasing after a peen that wouldn't even get hard at the sight of your boobs. I needed to make it up to Alice. She needed to know about these developments and I was just the girl to tell her.

I pulled open my door and marched out into the hall, my feet filled with purpose. I took the steps quickly, passing by the front door and glancing out into the parking lot. The man with the megaphone was still in the same general position, speaking loudly towards the perp in the other building. The PUD workers were working on a metal box that sat on the ground between our two buildings. Our power was still off and I hoped that they would be able to fix it soon. It was past 11:00 and it was starting to get hot since we'd lost our air conditioners. They did not want to see Rosalie suffer through an afternoon without cool air. I thought about trying to warn them but dismissed that thought quickly. I needed to get to Alice.

Despite my determined walk from my apartment to hers, I knocked hesitantly on her door. I'd never spent much time bonding with other girls, and intentionally seeking one out so we could discuss men was completely foreign to me. I'd gotten most of my advice on how to deal with men from *The Real World*, *Big Brother*, and *Rock of Love*. It seemed like a silly idea for me to try to help Alice, but there I was anyway. Perhaps Bret Michaels' opinion on bare kitties would have some relevance in our conversation. Then again, maybe not, but I was prepared regardless.

Alice answered my knock with a towel wrapped around her head and a new shade of green nail polish on her toe nails. "Bella!" she exclaimed, her welcome warmer than I had expected. "I'm so glad to see you. Come in." She grabbed my arm and pulled me inside before I could blink. Alice moved fast.

At first glance, Alice's apartment was not what I'd been expecting. On second glance though, it made perfect sense. Everything was pink. The walls, the sectional sofa, the frou-frou rugs she'd thrown down on top of the beige carpet. All different shades of pink. And then there were the doilies. Big ones, small ones, lacy ones, knit ones, all in varying shades of pink. They covered the end tables and sat on top of the entertainment center. She even had them on the floor, underneath the table legs. I felt like someone had tossed me into a giant fishbowl filled with Pepto-Bismol. Her reaction to my bare and color-free apartment now made perfect sense. Hers was decorated and accessorized to the nines in feminine plush. Mine screamed prison bitch.

"Can I get you something to drink?" she asked, all politeness and hospitality. I asked for a beer because, really, it had already been one of those days. She tsked out of the side of her mouth but returned a few moments later with a Yuengling. She saw my questioning glance. "It's Jasper's favorite," she told me with a shrug. I didn't bother to ask how she knew that. Some doilies were better left unturned.

I let the brew slide down my throat with a sigh. I needed the liquid courage to get through my first girl-bonding session. Stalling for time, I nodded towards an easel

she had set up by her front window. "Do you paint?"

Her quizzical expression instantly turned to one of glee. "I do! Come see what I've been working on. It's just about done." She led me over to the easel and turned it so I could look at the canvas she had propped up. "It's the view from First Beach, down at La Push. Right after a storm, the waves have this magnetic, disastrous pull to them. They churn white and gray, with brief hints of blue, but it's almost like you can hear the ocean calling to you. Begging you to drift out to sea, amongst the rocks and waves and current that will pull you to your death. It's difficult to capture all of that with just oils and canvas, but I try."

She was actually way too modest about her talent. The depth and color that she'd given to the water and the sky made the painting seem so real. I'd never been to La Push, but from her painting I felt like I was standing on the log-strewn beach, the wind blowing my hair back off my face, the taste of the salty surf in my mouth and the sound of the waves crashing down ferociously in front of me. "It's beautiful," I told her reverently.

Alice grabbed the edges of the canvas and unlatched it from the easel. She held it out to me with a shy smile on her face. "It's yours then."

I shook my head. "Oh, I can't accept that. I'm sure you had a purpose in mind when you painted it."

She shook it at me more forcefully this time. "Not at all. Besides, I have like twenty of these sitting at the bottom of my closet. I'm just excited that you like it. Think of it as a housewarming gift. Your walls need something, and this will be just the thing."

I hesitated - I couldn't remember the last time anyone had given me a gift just because I said that I liked it. It felt too much like an obligation that would have to be repaid at some point. I'd been trying very hard for the past few years not to owe anyone anything. I was afraid of what Alice would want me to do in return.

Somehow, Alice knew my exact thoughts. She lowered the painting a fraction and the expression on her face softened. "How about a loaner, then? You can bring it back at any time, no questions asked."

A loan, something that I was just borrowing and would return at some later date. Nothing owed or expected in return. That, I could do. I gently took the rectangular canvas from her hands and smiled. "Thanks," I said, both for the loan and for understanding why I couldn't take it outright from her.

I set the painting on the floor next to the door and joined her on the pale pink sofa. Not surprisingly, I sunk down about ten inches into its fluffy, cushiony perfection. I was going to have to roll off the edge when it came time to leave. Alice eyed me with curiosity as I picked my beer up off the lacy doily she'd given me to use as a coaster. I still hadn't told her why I'd stopped by and she'd been pretty patient about waiting for me to speak up.

I cleared my throat and clasped my hands together. It was time to gossip.

"I overheard Jasper talking about you to Edward in the hallway," I began, sneaking a peek at her out of the corner of my eye. She'd gone still as soon as I'd mentioned the J-word and she was completely focused on our conversation now. Her usual state of constant motion had disappeared, like she was a Jack Russell that had just spotted a squirrel. I was afraid that she would tear Jasper apart just like the dog would the squirrel, but it was a risk I was willing to take.

"I may have been wrong about Jasper's sexual orientation, and I'm sorry for insisting that you were the last person on the planet he would want to have sex with." She still didn't top his list, but we would get to that in a moment.

Alice grasped my knee, her grip strong and commanding. "Tell me every word that they said," she said slowly. It felt like her one hand had me pinned to the sofa, as if she were afraid that I would jump up and run away. She was a tad frightening in her Jasper craze, but it would take more than that to send me screaming out of her apartment.

I repeated most of their conversation for her, glossing over the parts where he discussed how truly frightening he found her. She nodded approvingly at Edward's suggestions for dates and frowned at the part about the ex-girlfriend.

"Why would anyone leave Jasper? He's handsome, sweet, smart, polite, sexy as hell and the greatest kisser on the planet." Alice paused in her recitation of the wonders of Jasper. "That woman sounds like a complete moron. Well, her loss is my Jasper."

She stood quickly and unwrapped her short hair from the turban. It looked almost completely dry to me and I frowned in discontent and jealousy. My hair took forever to air dry after a shower. She ran her fingers through the black locks and headed towards her bedroom without another word. I followed her simply because I didn't want to be left alone with all the pink.

Alice's bedroom was exactly what I expected. Pink leopard print everywhere. At

least 100 pillows on the four-poster bed. Bottles of varying sizes and colors on the bedside table. Candles on every surface. Alice's bedroom served a purpose and she didn't care who knew. She emerged from behind the doors of her cherry wardrobe with a freaking feather boa wrapped around her neck.

"Alice, what are you doing?" I asked in disbelief. I'd just explained about Jasper's breakup and his reasons for being hesitant, and she'd emerged wearing a black satin corset with matching panties, thigh high boots and the previously mentioned boa. I had no idea how she'd changed so quickly, nor did I want to know.

"I'm going to see Jasper, of course." She bent over to pull open the bottom drawer and I looked away quickly. Thong. I didn't need to see that much of her teeny ass, ever. "Now that I know my effect on him and that he is, actually, into girls, there's no reason to wait. You may want to invest in some ear plugs," she said straightening and closing her wardrobe doors. She now had a matching silk robe wrapped around her outfit and I sighed in relief.

"You didn't listen to a word I said. He wants to take things slowly," I complained as I followed her back out to the living room.

She turned on me with a scary glint in her eye. "He just thinks that's what he wants. Once he sees me in this," she pulled open the robe so I could see all her assets again, "he's not going to want to wait. I've been patient. There's no reason to hold back anymore."

She turned on her boot heel and headed towards her door. She was about to make a horrible mistake and I couldn't let her do it. Both of them would end up getting hurt, and for the first time, I actually cared about what happened to someone else other than me. "He said you're scary," I called out right before her hand reached the doorknob. Alice paused and I breathed a sigh of relief. I just needed her attention and I was disappointed that I'd been forced to tell her the whole truth. I was afraid that her feelings would be hurt.

"All your come-ons and sexual innuendo are too forward for him. He prefers girls who are more sedate and like to wait." Her shoulders fell and I was afraid that I'd gone too far. I didn't want her to give up entirely. Just know not to rush him. "I really think he likes you, though. Let him take you to the movies or to dinner or to that nerdy exhibit he wants to go to. Just, don't jump him the first chance you get. Maybe, let him make the first move."

I shifted my feet, feeling nervous about dispensing advice on men. My Bret Michaels teachings hadn't come in handy after all, but I felt pretty good about what

I'd said to her. If I was honest with myself, it was advice I should probably take to heart too. But, I wasn't ready to dig that deeply into my own psyche. One messed up bitch at a time.

"What if I ask him to dinner?" she asked, turning away from the door and tightening the belt on the robe.

I smiled, a little satisfied with my ability to dispense advice. "I think that would be ok. Just...let him drive and don't grab his junk in the car or anything."

Alice nodded thoughtfully before heading back into her bedroom. I sunk back onto the sofa and awaited her return. When she came back, she wore a knee-length pink skirt with a white tank top and a white short-sleeved button down shirt. Compared to all the other outfits I'd seen her wear, she looked as exposed as a nun.

We sat for a while and chatted some more about Jasper. I pacified her by listening to all his stunning qualities again, barfing a little in my mouth but allowing her the opportunity to gush. Things were going well until she wanted to talk about Edward.

"So," she said with an exaggerated wink. "How does he 'measure' up?"

I groaned at the bad pun and also because I had no idea. "We had a fight," I admitted. My anger at him had deflated already, but it still stung to think that he'd filmed us on purpose.

"I heard pieces of it," Alice confessed as she rearranged the doilies on her coffee table. "Did he really record the two of you...together?"

I huffed and leaned back against the sofa, crossing my arms over my chest. "That's what Emmett said."

"You haven't watched it?"

"The power's been out this whole time."

Alice clucked her tongue. "And you're taking Emmett's word for it? You probably haven't realized this yet, but they love to tease the shit out of each other. He could have been making it up just to see Edward's face turn purple."

I allowed my hopes to rise for just a moment before they fell again. "Edward didn't seem surprised or accuse him of making it up. Besides, Emmett was too fixated on Rosalie to worry about his brother."

Her head bopped side to side as she thought about what I'd said. "Well, that kind of makes sense then. It wouldn't be the first time," she said nonchalantly.

I sat up and clenched my hands into fists. "Oh, yeah? How often does he post videos of himself with girls on line?" My temper was threatening to snap at Alice's allegations. I couldn't believe that I'd fallen for Edward's nice guy routine. I was going to rip his balls off the next time I saw him...

Alice grabbed my arm before I could roll off the sofa again. "That's not what I meant. Calm down already. What I meant was that he's posted videos accidentally before. He's a smart guy, but his techno skills need some improving." She laughed quietly to herself as I relaxed back again. "You should have seen what he posted last time. I don't know what possessed him to record it, but he had choreographed an entire dance routine to that baseball song they always play during games- 'Take me out to the Ballgame'. I mean, he had a costume and the music playing full blast and twists and hops. Bella, it was fantastic. When he posted it, Emmett howled for an hour over it. Woke up the whole building, Rosalie included, and made us all watch it together. That time, Emmett waited two days before telling Edward that it had posted. You lucked out this time. At least Edward pulled it from the site before the power went out."

I gasped as I realized something crucially important. "Alice, he didn't. Edward didn't pull the video. Emmett didn't tell him until after the power went out. Fuck. Fuckity fuck fuck." I rolled quickly this time and landed on my feet. "It's been out there this whole time for his nerdy little friends to watch. That's just fantastic news. Now, I'm going to be the slutty laughing stock of this town." I wanted to die. And then I wanted to knee Edward in the balls. And then I wanted to smash his camera to bits. Ok, maybe I'd do that first.

I stormed towards Alice's door, my plan at the forefront of my mind. Imagine my surprise when I yanked open the door and discovered Edward standing there, fist raised as if he were ready to knock.

My eyes narrowed at him and I grabbed the collar of his shirt with a surprising amount of force. "You..." I seethed at him. Edward gulped.

A/N: Thank you for reading! Please let me know what you think. Much thanks as always to my beta Blackdogs. She's been working overtime beta hours for the past week and she just makes my writing so much better.

I'm on twitter if that floats your boat. There's also a forum on Twilighted if you want to come say hello. Or share your favorite Rob pictures. Or any other eye candy you may have.

You Can't Hide Forever

Disclaimer: I don't own Twilight.

Chapter 6: You Can't Hide Forever

I dragged Edward into Alice's apartment by his shirt collar with an amazing amount of force. Perhaps all the moving I'd done the past weekend had increased my upper body strength. No matter, Edward was deposited next to the door and I closed it behind me with a thud.

He looked around Alice's living room and nodded politely to her in greeting. Alice sat on her sofa, riveted by our exchange. I didn't care who witnessed Edward's comeuppance. Maybe I should follow his lead and have it recorded and posted online for the entire world to see.

He turned back to me and I ignored the pleading that I saw across his face. "Bella, I'd like to talk to you. Please let me apologize...I can explain what happened with the video. I don't want you to think that this one incident is indicative of my true nature, because it's not an accurate representation at all."

His well-worded apology went in one ear and out the other. I only cared about one thing at that moment. "Take it down, Edward," I said, gripping the cotton of his shirt tighter. "I don't care how you do it, but take it down off YouTube. I don't want all twelve of your little baseball friends watching it on repeat, using it to jerk off."

His face scrunched in confusion. "I already took it down. That was the first thing I did."

My grip loosened some. "Really? How? The power's been out this whole time."

Edward's hands gripped my elbows as my hands slid off his collar and down his chest. "I used my laptop. I have a wireless card through my phone provider." His fingers lightly traced the curve of my arm in an attempt to further soothe my inner bitch. And hot damn if it wasn't working. "I swear that it was an accident. I thought I marked the video as private. I never should have uploaded it in the first place without watching it first, but I was anxious to get back to you." One of his fingers found the inside of my elbow and it was like he'd found my on/off bitch switch. My anger lessened even more.

"I would have burst through the police line outside and hustled down to the library to pull the video if I hadn't been able to get access from my apartment." Edward stepped closer, trapping my hands between our bodies. His voice dropped so that Alice wouldn't hear. "I don't want to share you with anyone."

Between his caresses, puppy dog eyes and pretty words, the last of my anger seeped away. His apology seemed sincere and he had removed the video almost immediately. Coupled with the fact that this was something he had accidentally done before, with himself as the butt of the joke, I only had one option left: believe him and move on. I hoped he realized how much faith I was putting in him. It left me feeling exposed, and that was not something I had experience with. I tended to cover everything up, all nice and tidy-like.

I decided to show him how much I appreciated that he didn't want to share me. I scratched my nails along his chest and stretched up on my tiptoes until our lips met. Our kiss was wet and all too brief. A quiet cough from the other side of the room reminded us that we were acting out our video with a live audience this time. Edward grasped my hand in his and turned around to face Alice.

"Um...we're going upstairs now, Alice," I said, cutting Edward off from what I'm sure would have been some banal pleasantries. "Think about what I said before about the thing with the thing." I didn't want Edward to know that I'd overheard him and Jasper in the hallway. I was all for letting Jasper and Alice work things out on their own, but I also wasn't against making sure that things went Alice's way. My involvement in the process could be left out of it entirely.

Alice nodded at me studiously and Edward and I left her apartment quickly, my loaned painting in hand. I showed it to Edward as we walked up the steps and he took hold of it to examine it closer. "I have one of hers hanging in my room," he said handing it back. "She did a whole series on the forest on the south side of town. Shadows and light are her forte."

I was continually amazed by Edward. It seemed like not only was he pretty freaking smart, but he had this endless capacity for kindness and the ability to know just what to say to make people feel good about themselves. I didn't have much experience with any of that, so I was slightly in awe of him. Not to mention, his eyes were twinkling elfishly at me again and I could barely form words when he did that.

We paused on the landing and I took his hand more firmly in mine, wanting his complete attention. "You're a good person, Edward. You're different from any other guys I've known. It's hard for me know how to act around you. I just...wanted you to know that." It was a small confession, but I felt like I needed to share it with him. I

knew I wasn't perfect, especially compared to the god standing next to me, and I wasn't quite sure why Edward was wasting his time with me when I was such a mess.

He cradled my face in his free hand, his thumb rubbing along my chin gently. "That's the thing. You don't have to act around me. Just be you. I like you, Bella. We've both got some baggage that we need to work through but I think we have a lot of potential."

See what I mean? How was I supposed to compete with his awesome use of the English language? He said sweet shit like that to me and it just rubbed along the rough edges that had already been exposed and I felt completely useless and open and just free to be germified. It was frightening, but Edward's smile and the weight of his hand in mine made it less so.

"Ok," I replied, and really it was the best I could do. He kept staring at me intensely, but it was more I could take from him right then. An unusual bout of shyness swept over me and I turned away from his gaze to stare out the front door.

Outside, the heat of the day was taking its toll on the police officers. The ones who weren't on the front lines of the action had sought out shelter amongst the trees that lined the edges of the parking lot. A few stood to our right, taking deep gulps of water bottles that were passed around. The PUD workers were wiping beads of sweat from their foreheads as they attempted to fix our electrical malfunction. I stared at the front door of our building longingly, wondering if we'd be shot if we propped it open to allow some of the air inside to circulate.

"Are you hungry?" Edward asked as I pulled the edge of my tank top away from my stomach, trying to move some cool air around my body.

I looked at Edward, how his gray t-shirt molded to his chest in the heat, how a slight sheen of perspiration dotted his forehead, how he kept licking his lips as if his mouth was dryer than the Sahara. I was hungry, but probably not how he meant. I was hungry for Edward.

"Yeah, I am," I finally replied. My perusal hadn't gone unnoticed but he was trying to ignore the batting of my eyelashes and the way I was unsubtly bending at the waist to give him a more unobstructed view of my ta-tas.

"I have some hand-sliced turkey in my fridge. We could make sandwiches."

His suggestion was sweet, but his apartment had been sweltering two hours ago.

A river of sweat ran down my back at the thought of how hot it was up there now.

"My apartment's closer," I suggested instead.

"Alright," he said easily and I breathed a sigh of relief. What I didn't mention was how much I loved my bed and the increase of joy I would have at seeing him naked against my sheets. I'd been fantasizing about that all morning and despite his earlier protests, Edward had been giving me signals that he was ready to go too.

When I opened my apartment door, I was not happy to find how stuffy it was. It felt like I was walking into a room full of cotton balls. I stuck my tongue out at the bad taste of the stale air and immediately walked over to the window to pry it open. If the stupid utility workers didn't get there act together soon, I was going to sic Rosalie on them. Edward helped with the kitchen window and I stood in the middle of the two, hoping to get some air from the cross breeze. Shame there was no breeze at all.

I heard the tap running in the kitchen and realized that Edward was taking care of me, yet again. A frown settled on my face as I stomped into the kitchen. Hadn't I been clear before about not needing people to do things for me? He held a glass of water out to me as I turned the corner and I took it from him less than graciously.

"I can get my own water," I snapped.

Edward's lips pursed as he leaned against the counter. "I know you can. I was just helping. It's not a federal offense."

He must have mistaken my earlier display of over-heatedness as a symptom of dehydration not horniness. I let him hang on to his delusions for a while longer. I'd show him soon enough why I was so hot and desperate to take off my clothes. It wasn't just because it was 1,000 degrees outside.

I drained the glass he'd given me and placed it into his outstretched hand. He refilled the glass and watched as I drained the second one just as quickly. His eyes watched me with concern. "You should sit down. Tell me what you want to eat and I'll make it for you."

I'd started to walk back out to the living room to crash on the couch, but stopped before I took two steps. "I don't need you waiting on me. I'm capable of making my own lunch." I headed towards the fridge to pull out my favorite jelly but Edward was quicker.

"You're capable of more than you know," he said, blocking my path to the fridge. "But, I want to do this. Please let me make you lunch."

His request went against everything I'd been trying to do for the past two years. I'd been taking care of myself without any outside intervention and I'd taken a lot of pride in that accomplishment. I didn't like how he kept insisting on doing things for me when I could do them myself. I tried to walk around him, but he stepped in front of me to block my path. I stepped to my left but Edward was quicker and he cut me off there too.

"Edward, let me by. I'm going to make a sandwich and if you're lucky, I'll give you two pieces of bread so you can make one too." He was being pesky on purpose. His eyes glinted with mischief again but I could tell that he was going to be very stubborn about this.

Instead of continuing our fun little game, he leaned against the fridge, cutting it off from me completely. "Let's compromise. We'll make our sandwiches together. Teamwork will make it go faster. That way, I can keep my eye on you and you don't have to feel like you have to call me Jeeves."

I rolled my eyes at his exaggeration but agreed after a moment's hesitation. Standing next to Edward was not a chore, and we worked quietly and efficiently while making our sandwiches. He dug out the strawberry jelly from the fridge and I ripped open the bread bag. He retrieved the peanut butter from the cupboard and I pulled out two knives from the drawer. We were like an assembly line with high precision timing and accuracy. Or not. Edward spilled jelly on the counter and I may have tossed breadcrumbs his way when his back was turned. In the end, the kitchen was a little messier and we had two horribly disfigured sandwiches, but we were both smiling.

I managed to beat him to the couch and took the good seat. Poor Edward didn't realize until he sat next to me that there was even a good seat or a bad seat. His end of the couch sank underneath his weight, the springs creaking in protest. When he was settled, his knees were almost at chest level. I laughed at him around my sandwich and he gave me one of his arched eyebrow smiles.

I wasn't used to having fun with a guy, so this was another in the long list of unusual experiences of the day for me. We chatted and laughed while we ate our lunch, and it felt good to just let everything go for a while. I felt relaxed around Edward and it was a very nice change of pace.

When he was done eating, he wiped his mouth with the paper towel I'd handed

him earlier and turned so he could face me on the couch. The couch squeaked and I laughed behind my sandwich. I don't know why, but I thought it was hilarious that he'd ended up on the bad end of the couch. Maybe because people like him didn't usually get the bad end of anything. From my higher perch, I felt pretty freaking royal. Edward, my loyal subject, sat beneath me, as befitted him. The absurdity of our reversal was comical.

What wasn't absurd was the rapid rise of needing I felt shiver across my skin as his eyes flitted over me. I'd been mad at him earlier, but I was more than ready to move past that. I watched Edward's tongue dart out to lick up some peanut butter from the corner of his mouth and I decided to dive in and step our progress up a notch. Without any warning, I leaned forward and licked the corner of his mouth for him, catching the edge of his tongue as it retreated back into his mouth. I tasted Edward, the peanut butter, and the rough stubble on the edge of his lip. The combination made me a little crazy and I may have thrown my person at him, full speed ahead. I hurtled across the couch, hoping that I wouldn't bounce off him like a trampoline.

Fortunately, Edward proved to have quick reflexes and he caught me. What I'd forgotten was that he was sitting on the bad side of the couch and our combined weight was more than its ancient springs could take. With a load creak and a thump, the final springy spring gave out and we collapsed inside the couch, our limbs flailing in the air as we tried to right ourselves.

Edward's hand ended up on my boob and my head landed face first on his bulge. All in all, it wasn't too bad of a position to be in. Edward seemed to disagree. His bulge had barely bulged before I was lifted through the air and replaced onto the opposite end of the couch. His hands left my body like he'd been stung and we were back to not touching and not any closer to my bedroom.

I pouted as I watched Edward try to stand up to take a look at the couch. Actually, watching him try to pry his long body out of the indentation where he'd been sitting was pretty fucking funny, but not funny enough to bring me out of my pout. His knees were up to his chin now, and he kept trying to hoist himself out using the arm rest, but he couldn't seem to get a good grip on the frayed material. If he hadn't tossed me off him like I'd been made of poison ivy, I might have felt more inclined to help him. Maybe.

With a final tug, he managed to pull himself out. He ignored me but examined my ancient box of death like he was studying for the Jeopardy test again. I was a little disappointed. I was pretty sure we'd been making good progress in heading towards the bedroom, but now he was totally ignoring me. I didn't like being ignored.

"Whatcha doing?" I asked as he pulled off the seat cushion and poked at the not-so-springy party underneath.

"I was trying to determine the seriousness of your couch's damage. I thought I might be able to repair it myself, but unfortunately, I don't possess the skills. Please, allow me to pay for the repairs." Edward finally looked at me and I realized what he was really doing. He was avoiding me because he was afraid - of me. For some reason. Not because we'd broken the couch and he thought I was mad at him. But because I'd been giving him signals for the past fifteen minutes that I was ready, again, to get naked with him. And that's why he was acting like the crappy couch was the most interesting thing in the room and not me.

"Edward, I don't care about the couch. Don't worry about paying to have it fixed. I can get another one from Goodwill."

He stood and backed away from the couch, and me. "I insist. I will not take no for an answer."

"What's really going on here? One minute you look at me like you want to devour me, the next you're tossing me aside and changing the subject. You said this morning that you want to take things slow, but then you kiss me like you can't breathe if I'm not on top of you. What the hell, Edward?" I stood from my couch throne with all the grace and dignity I had left. It wasn't much, but it was the best I had. It would have to do.

He shoved his hand into his thick mop of hair and looked away from me towards the door. Just like earlier, I thought he was going to make a run for it. Instead, he turned back to me and breathed out heavily. "I had a bad experience a couple months ago," he said, his words coming out haltingly like he was forcing himself to admit it.

"It doesn't seem fair to judge me by whatever experience you had that was so bad," I said, then wanting immediately to recall the words. He pursed his lips when he looked at me in disbelief. It was the one time I agreed with him completely. We were all guilty of using our past to judge other people, myself included. "Sorry," I said quietly, looking away from him. "It's just...I don't want to be compared to anyone else. I want you to just judge me based on my own merits."

He stared down at his sneakers as he scuffed them across the carpet. "You make a good point, but I'm not sure that's ever possible. We are the sum product of our experiences. I have to use the knowledge that I possess to make sense of the world around me. My knowledge tells me that it's not a good idea to jump into bed with a

woman I've just met. Things end...badly."

I stepped around my small coffee table and tugged on his hand, letting it drop when he didn't immediately clasp his fingers with mine. "Tell me," I said. I needed to know about whatever it was holding Edward back. If I could make sense out of whatever was making him hesitate, then maybe I could make that hesitation go away. He'd already shared so much with me, but I felt like I needed this additional piece to understand him better as well. I liked that we were getting to know each other better.

He looked at me shyly, his eyes barely visible through the fringe of his eyelashes. I felt a little giddy that he was sharing another one of his secrets with me. I felt like a member of his private club or something.

"Maybe I should start at the beginning," he said, glancing around the room.

I followed his gaze, wondering what he was looking for when it hit me: seating. We needed somewhere else to sit now that the couch was unusable. I knew just the place. "We could go sit in my room," I suggested sweetly.

Edward's arm reaching in front of me broke my trance. He shook his head at me as he pulled the back cushions off the couch. "Let's keep this conversation on neutral territory." He pushed the coffee table out of the way and placed the cushions on the floor in front of the couch. He folded his long body down onto the cushion and waited expectantly for me to do the same.

With an exaggerated sigh, I plopped onto the other cushion and leaned my back against the couch. Edward mirrored my position and we stretched our legs out in front of us. When we were finally settled, I nudged my shoulder against his. "So, the beginning..."

He cleared his throat and looked at me out of the side of his eye. "I already told you about my dad and Esme, how we moved here." I nodded and he continued. "Well, there was a bit of an adjustment for us all after we started living together as a family. I was just starting school for the first time and I had a pesky younger brother who liked to follow me everywhere. Esme was great - she cooked dinner for us every night, packed my lunchbox every day, helped me with homework. I thought she was the best. My dad was working a lot, trying to build his reputation up at the new hospital. For the most part, I thought we were all pretty happy."

"You weren't?" It all seemed fucking perfect to me. I'd lived at boarding school for most of the year so my mom had never packed me a lunch. But, this wasn't about

me. It was about Edward, and I was doing my best to listen.

"Sometimes at night, I would hear them arguing. I never knew what about - it was just raised voices, cupboards being slammed, heavy footsteps along the floor. I was scared." Edward played with the hem of his shirt while he talked, sneaking glances at me every so often. It was sweet to see him nervous for once.

"Did you think they were going to get a divorce?"

"Yes, and I didn't want to leave Forks. Even though Emmett was annoying, it was fun having a brother to play with. And like I said, I adored Esme. So, I decided that I needed to be extra good to make sure my dad and Esme wouldn't have any arguments about me. I worked extra hard at school. I was friends with everyone in my class. I helped the teacher out during recess so she would call home and tell Esme what a good job I was doing."

"Did it work? Did the arguments stop?" I was having a hard time believing that his parents would have been arguing about him. There was no explaining the mind of a little boy though.

He laughed quietly. "No. It was ridiculous for me to even think that. But, I didn't know any better and I didn't have a better plan. So, I kept on my course of action until it became routine. If I was supposed to do something, I did it. If I was told to stop doing something, then I stopped. It's really quite amazing how children are influenced. One small comment or action will have long-lasting, life-altering effects. If I hadn't decided when I was six that I wanted to be 'good' then I might very well have turned out very differently. According to my grandmother, my father was always getting into trouble when he was a kid. I'm seen as something of an anomaly."

Edward was absolutely an anomaly - but not how he meant. Not only was he fucking gorgeous, he also had this insane ability to just open up and share himself. I already knew that he was a "good guy," I just never realized how long he'd been acting that way. The reasons why were kind of ridiculous, but I couldn't blame him. I'd wanted parents just like that when I was growing up and I would have done weird shit too to make it happen.

"They eventually stopped fighting though, right?" I asked, staring at his long fingers in awe.

"Yes. I can't be sure without asking them directly, but I think they argued about my father's long work hours. Eventually, he cut back on the seventy hour work

weeks and the fights seemed to go away after that."

He looked at me then and I wanted to hug him, which was completely surreal to me. I, Bella Dwyer, wanted to offer comfort to a man. Just comfort. This wasn't a way for me to wrap my body around him. I just wanted him to know that he wasn't alone. I held back though, because I knew if I got even a small whiff of Edward's scent, I would fucking attack him and I didn't want to be rejected before we even got to the reason why he kept pushing me away.

"By the time I got to high school, I was probably what you would call a 'nerd'. I aced all my classes, was on the chess club, student government, played on the baseball team. I did all the right things that students were supposed to do to prepare for college. That didn't leave much time for girls," he said, looking shyly at me again.

"I can't believe that the girls in your school were that blind. You're gorgeous. I would have trapped you in a corner of the library and had my way with you," I told him bluntly.

"I didn't say I didn't have any time for girls. I had a few girlfriends during high school, but they all had similar goals and aspirations to my own. Anyway, I'm going off track. Girls were not the priority for me. I wanted to get into a good college and I figured my life would fall into place after that. My freshman year at UW, I met the first of my serious girlfriends. Her name was Angela and she was very sweet. We were together for two years. Next was..."

"Edward, stop," I sat up on my knees and turned to face him. "I don't want to hear about all your girlfriends. Please, no one wants to hear the nitty gritty about all the girls who have come before. Just tell me about the last one." I resisted the urge to slap him upside his cute little head. I had no interest in his lovey dovey tales of yore. I had no intention of telling him about all the other men who had come before him. That sounded horrible when I said that out loud in my head, but it was the truth. I hadn't been very discerning, but I was working on that.

He pulled his knees up and rested his hands on them. "Alright. The last girlfriend I had was Tanya. We met at the bar where Rosalie works. She challenged me to a game of pool that I allowed her to win."

I'm sure my face was turning green and steam was spouting out my ears. Did he do this with all the girls he went out with? Describe in detail all the other girls he'd dated? "Edward, for the love of Julia Child, can we please skip ahead?"

His cheeks reddened at my outburst and I felt like shit for it. I shifted uncomfortably on my cushion under his scrutiny. My fingers suddenly became very interesting as I couldn't look him in the eye anymore.

"Right," he said, clearing his throat. "Well, first of all, she liked to call me 'Ed'. I asked her not to, but she ignored my requests."

The light bulb that went off at that announcement had the brightness of a searchlight. I'd called him Ed before I'd known better and he'd reacted not very nicely. It explained why he'd been so pissed earlier. I wouldn't want any reminders of a bad ex like that either.

Edward's eyes cut to my face and I shrugged my shoulders impishly. I hadn't known ahead of time or I wouldn't have called him Ed. I could tell he wasn't angry though. "Second, we rushed our physical relationship," he continued to explain patiently. "She seemed like a pleasant girl that first night, and even for a few days after. But then her true colors began to come through. She began to show up at my office unannounced to make sure that I was where I said I would be. She would fly into a tantrum at the grocery store if they were out of her favorite brand of soy milk."

I rocked back on my knees as he spoke. "Can't blame a girl for wanting the right kind of milk," I said, trying to relieve the tension some. Any thicker and I was going to cut into it and take a bite.

"She also despised Emmett. She thought he was a fool and a complete waste of a human being."

"What? Emmett may not be the sharpest crayon in the box, but he's sweet and very likeable. What's wrong with her?" Yet again, I was being forced to defend Emmett. What was it with chicks who wanted to talk nasty about him? "Well, I guess it doesn't matter anymore. You dumped her right away of course."

Edward tapped his finger on his knees. "I wish I had been that smart about it. I had already made a commitment to her that I felt needed to be explored to its fullest. I couldn't end it just because of a few mistakes on her part."

I pushed his shoulder and he shifted to the side a little. Not enough to make me feel any better. "Are you kidding me? She insulted your brother, she insulted you, and she sounds like a colossal bitch. Why would you waste your time on that?" I was pissed, but not at him. Edward seemed to have good intentions but he had no idea what to do with them.

"It wasn't that simple. Don't you see? I was still trying to be that 'good' boy from my childhood. It's all I know. You don't give up on a relationship just because of a few bumps. I figured that we just needed time to work things out and get to know one another better."

"How long did it take?"

More knee tapping. His eyes slid to mine and the embarrassment of his answer was written across his face. "Six months," he replied.

"You stayed with that bitch for six months? Edward..."

"That's why I've wanted to take things slowly with you. It made sense to get to know you better before we take that next step."

I stood up, not believing the garbage coming out of his mouth. "You're comparing me to *her*?" I screeched. I may not have been the most pleasant person ever, but I did know enough not to stalk someone at their office, throw a hissy fit over milk or insult someone's brother.

Edward stood too, towering over me as we stood toe to toe. "No, I wouldn't do that. But I did decide after Tanya that I wouldn't do that again. Rush a physical relationship before I took the time to get to know the person. No matter how attracted I am to that person. How much I want to kiss her and hold her and taste her."

We were almost touching and it was killing me that we weren't. The outrage I'd felt for him earlier eased some as we stood toe to toe.

"Edward, what have we been doing all day?" I asked softly, my voice lacking the indignation I'd felt moments earlier. "You already know more about me than I've told anyone in a very long time. Trust me when I say I don't get any bitchier. You've already seen me at my worst. And I already know more about you than anyone I've ever slept with. I don't understand what's holding you back." I moved my hand to place it on his chest, but Edward was faster. His hand wrapped around mine and it hung in the small space between us.

"I'm afraid," he finally admitted, his eyes wide and pleading.

Fear, I understood. I could work with fear. Because I was afraid of things too. "Don't be," I told him softly, swaying towards him like my body was being sucked in by his magnetic pull. "We will be so good together...don't you feel it?" I sure as hell

did.

"Bella," he whispered my name so sweetly, his head lowering towards mine. "I do feel it. And I want to be with you, but I'm concerned about what comes next."

"I can't see the future, Edward, but I do know that I'm not going to spazz out on you after we sleep together." I paused, weighing my next words carefully. They were sticking to the back of my throat so I pushed them out all at once. "I want to spend more time with you. Not just because you're freaking hot, but because you're an awesome person and you make me want to be worthy of your awesomeness."

Again, I felt vulnerable. I should have known to trust Edward with all that vulnerability.

His eyes warmed to a liquid green as he held me tighter. "I think I can see the future, because I already see you being worthy. Bella, I want you."

I wanted to do a happy dance as the last of his doubts seemed to drift away. I breathed out, releasing all the anxiety from our talk and held still as I waited for his lips to touch mine. I sighed right before he reached my lips. "Edward," I whispered back, moments before impact. "I'll treat you right."

I wrapped my hand around the back of his neck, wanting to pull him down hard and fast for my kiss. Edward wasn't having any of it. I felt the strength of his body through my hand as he resisted my tug. I swore I felt his smile against my mouth.

"If you want to treat me right, we're going to have to take our time," he said.

I growled low in my throat. I couldn't believe that he was doing this to me again. I started to pull back, pissed as hell that he was denying me, just like he had earlier, when his hands slid onto my waist and held me completely still. I searched his eyes, wondering what was going on. "What are you doing?" I asked, confused yet again by his mixed signals.

"Taking my time. We have all afternoon and I want to make this last," he whispered right before he leaned forward and pressed his lips to mine. Just like earlier, his lips teased mine lightly. It was the barest of touches, so much so that I wondered if it even counted as a kiss. He continued his easy swipes across my mouth like he had nothing better to do for the rest of the weekend. I shouldn't have complained, but I felt like we'd been building towards this all day and I couldn't take any more teasing.

So, yet again, I tried to tug him closer to me so I could plunge my tongue inside, devouring the taste of Edward. Yet again, he resisted and I growled against his mouth, and I knew he felt the vibrations from it this time. He pulled back slightly and licked his lips. Tasting me. *That was so fucking hot.*

He saw the confusion on my face and his features softened in understanding. "It will be better this way," he said as his thumbs slipped underneath my tank top and across my bare skin. "Trust me."

I took a deep breath and stared into the green depths of the sparkling, elfish mischief that I'd been admiring all day. Could I trust him? He'd made a mistake earlier with the video, but he'd owned up to it and even had been committed to bust through the police in order to fix it. I'd never known anybody who would do something like that for me. Ever. So, yeah, for the first time, I felt like I could trust him - with this at least.

"Ok," I agreed, sliding my hands into his hair again. I wasn't sure how far he was taking this, but I'd follow him. I could only hope and pray that the path led to my mattress in the other room.

We kissed languidly for a while and I allowed Edward to take his time. The man could kiss. He only introduced his tongue to mine after I started pulling hard on his hair, but it was so worth it. He rubbed his tongue along mine like we were shaking hands, but in a very friendly I-want-to-get-naked-with-you kind of way. I loved how his mouth tasted. All peanut-buttery and smooth and I just wanted to taste more of him.

His hands stayed, frustratingly, in neutral territory. They were underneath my top, but always at my waist. He slid them around to my back and his fingers rested just above the edge of my shorts, never dipping below. But he rubbed my skin like he was trying to shine a penny. It felt fucking fantastic and I was amazed how much a little stroking on the waist could turn me on. I kept trying to rub my upper body against his, but he had an annoying little hip twist that he used to pull himself away from me.

I decided to play dirty so I slipped one of my hands out of his hair and down his neck. My fingers flitted across his throbbing pulse and down to his collarbone. His t-shirt covered most of his chest so I didn't bother with trying to caress his bare skin. Before he could figure out my destination, I unerringly found his nipple and circled it with my finger. Edward gasped into my mouth and I swallowed his air like it was the last I would ever breathe.

"Bella," he groaned as he pulled away and pressed his mouth next to my ear. "That feels...so good."

I knew it did. I also knew that he was going to like what I did next. I pinched his lovely little nipple and earned another groan. *Fuck...* it sounded like his nipples were as sensitive as mine. I couldn't wait to see how sensitive they would be together.

"Do it again," he hissed into my ear and my knees nearly buckled. This is what I wanted to hear from Edward. Him begging me to bring him pleasure.

He planted some wet kisses along my neck as I pinched his nipple with more pressure this time. I loved the feel of his little nub between my fingers. I wanted to touch him without the layer of clothing between us, but hesitated to pull his shirt up and out of the way. These rules were different from any I'd ever encountered and it was frustrating. I wasn't used to being unsure when it came to sex and it had me totally off balance.

Edward sensed my hesitation and he pulled his mouth off my neck to whisper, "Pull it off."

Holy hell, I didn't need to be told that twice. I had that t-shirt off and tossed across the room before he could change his mind. I smirked at his look of surprise.

"I adore your sense of style," he said before reaching for me again.

I had lost the ability to speak about three seconds before when the afore-mentioned shirt came off. Edward was ripped. As in, twirl the r around your tongue because that's how freaking hot he looked, ripped. Muscles everywhere, but not so much that I would feel self-conscious about my own lack of muscular definition. He just looked like he could bale some hay or lift a few small, yet heavy, farm animals around. I have no idea where the farm-hand fantasy was coming from, but there it was.

In the meantime, Edward had attached his mouth to my neck and was slowly licking his way down it. I also realized that my hands were pressed on his now naked chest and my fingertips were sending me all sorts of interesting information. For example, his skin was hot, like a lava flow. His chest was covered in soft, curly hairs that I found ridiculously pleasing.

I found his nipple again and explored it more thoroughly this time. It was still puckered from my earlier attentions, surrounded by a host of tactile bumps. My thumb, in particular, like to brush across it, pushing the very tip of his nipple back

and forth. Edward had found my collarbone by this point and was licking along it with a swirling motion that I liked a whole lot. I rewarded his attentions with some more nipple pinching that he liked a whole lot too.

Suddenly, the heat in the room seemed to increase ten-fold. It might have been because his neutral hands suddenly became not so neutral anymore. With one of my hands on his shoulder and then other teasing his nipple, I'd left my own chest wide-open for some exploratory touches. And boy did I like the exploring that his hands were doing.

"Oh," I breathed as he slipped his hands up my rib cage to cup my breasts in his hands. "Yes," I said as his thumbs found my nipples and rubbed them lightly, teasingly. I loved a man's hands on my breasts. I just loved to feel their strength and heat and, occasionally, tenderness wrapped around me. I was incredibly sensitive there as well - I sincerely hoped that Edward was going to wrap his hot lips around me soon.

My pulls on his nipple grew fevered and I started gripping him harder, unfortunately to the point of pain. "Ow," Edward called out when I gripped him harder than I should.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," I said quickly smoothing it gently with my hand, like it was a hurt puppy. He was quickly distracted by the view he'd gotten down the top of my shirt and I knew exactly how I wanted to make it up to him. I licked my lips and dove towards his chest, drawn to his nipple like a dart to a bull's eye.

As soon as my lips wrapped around him, Edward groaned and I felt it against my mouth. "Oh, Bella, harder please," he pleaded with me. His left hand shifted to the back of my head as I licked and sucked him into my mouth.

I was getting high on Edward's taste. He was salty and delicious and I wanted more. I switched to the other nipple and tasted more of the same, but it still wasn't enough. "I need more," I said against his mouth. "Please." I wasn't above begging anymore. I was on the edge of hysteria. All this foreplay was fantastic, but I still had all my clothes on and he'd barely touched me. It was strange and electric but I needed more.

And then, heaven sent an angel down to answer my prayers. Edward uttered the most beautiful words I'd ever heard. "Where's your bedroom?"

This time I didn't hesitate. I ripped my mouth from his body and grabbed his hand, trailing him behind me as I rushed to my room. I threw the door open with a thud

and turned on him as soon as we entered.

"Here," I told him, a little out of breath. "Here is my room."

He pulled me close again, a wide smile on his face. "You move fast."

"When I need to, I can. Listen, I have to tell you something." I needed to stress the importance of the Beautyrest mattress. If it was injured in any way, shape, or form, I wouldn't be able to sleep. I craved a good night's sleep like Rosalie craved quiet first thing in the morning. I would be a total shrew if something happened to my bed.

"Tell me later," Edward insisted as he mouth descended towards mine again. And as he kissed me, protective thoughts of my mattress slipped away, replaced with thoughts of naked Edward loveliness instead.

Soon enough, we had reached the same fevered pitch as before, but it was still a maddeningly slow pace. Our hands and lips seemed to be everywhere, but nowhere at the same time. I kept trying to rub myself along his body to take some of the edge off but Edward would lean away each time I got close. I finally ripped my lips from his when I couldn't take it anymore.

"Dammit Edward, I need to feel you."

His eyes grew darker at my outburst and I was briefly afraid that I'd made him angry. Edward, however, didn't have a truly angry bone in his body. He surprised us both by sliding his hands down to my waist again and just like I'd done to his shirt, he whipped my tank top off my body and tossed it to the other side of the room.

I gasped when the warm air of the room hit my breasts. I wasn't wearing a bra and they bounced free, happy to be rid of the garment that had been separating them from Edward. Yes, my boobs had a mind of their own and right then, the only thing they wanted was Edward.

Edward's hands wrapped around my back before I, or my boobs, could have any further thoughts. I would have paid more attention to the way his long fingers stroked my bare skin had my nipples not made contact with the silky hair on Edward's chest. I groaned and rubbed myself against him. The skin to skin contact was just as good as I'd imagined, better even.

For me, it still wasn't enough. It wouldn't be enough until his cock was so deep inside me that I felt it in my eye sockets. I wanted this man naked and pronto. My hands slid to his waistband and started frantically working the button of his jeans. It

kept slipping out of my fingers and I huffed in frustration.

"Bella, slowly," he reminded me as his hands continued to fill themselves with my breasts. I nodded and took my time, and this time the button slipped free without any problems. I pulled down the zipper next and dared to take a peek at what had been hiding from me all day.

Through the opening of his zipper, I spied a pair of black shorts that bulged impressively. I reached down with my hand to touch him there, but he stepped away from me before that could happen.

"Edward, we're never going to have sex if you keep stopping me." I placed my hands on my hips as I gave him my serious face. I was seriously pissed about his constant interruptions, but with my boobs bouncing in front of me every time I moved, I don't think he was taking me very seriously at all.

In fact, the fucker laughed at me as he knelt down to the floor. I was itching to push him over when his sweet-talking self saved the day. "I just need to take my shoes off. Then you can have your wicked way with me. But, slowly." I waited impatiently as he removed his shoes and socks and placed them neatly on the floor at the end of the bed.

He stood up and mimicked me by placing his hands on his hips. "So, where were we?" he might have asked. What I really heard was, "Blahbitty blah blah blah" because he looked fucking hot standing there with no shirt on, bare feet, and his jeans open with paradise poking through. I was thinking about taking a running leap at him when he stepped closer to me with a look of concern on his face.

"Are you alright?"

I blinked, trying to surface from the deluge of pornographic thoughts that had just flashed through my head. I sucked in a breath and forgot that my filter was probably turned off by this point. "You are so fucking gorgeous. I want to sex you up long time me so horny." I slapped my hand over my mouth to stop the incessant bad lyric outburst.

Edward found it amusing. "I couldn't have said it better myself. Come here," he said, crooking his finger at me.

I couldn't say no to this man. I shuffled over to stand in front of him and he kissed me gently, just like he had in my living room. His hands held my face as we tasted and teased and this time I tried to slow down my aching body parts long enough to

enjoy his mouth. It was tough though with both of us naked from the waist up.

My hands found his waist again and I taunted him with my fingers. I slid them in and out of the waistband of his shorts and he tensed each time I did. I started in the back because I was itching to take a handful of his ass like he'd done mine earlier. I managed to slip two of my fingers underneath and stroked along his skin until I found the top of his crease. Edward fucking whimpered against my mouth and I ate that shit up. I slipped a finger between his cheeks, but just a little bit. He squeezed my lone digit with his buns of steel and I pictured how else he would be using his buns in the very near future. I liked a little extra thrust.

His pants had begun to fall off his hips by this point so I was able to push more of my hand against his skin. I slid all five fingers over the top of his hip and below his stomach. My fingers traced along muscles, fine little hairs, and damp skin, and Edward rewarded me by shoving his tongue even further into my mouth. When I finally slid along his vee, he pulled away from my mouth and stared down at my hand in his pants with a look of wonder on his face.

"Please, Bella," he said, as I traced circles on his skin. "Please touch my penis."

I didn't hesitate. We were finally on the same page. I slid inside his shorts passing quickly over his short wiry hairs until I hit pay dirt. His erection practically sprung into my hand and I gleefully wrapped my fingers around him. I was happy to see that at least one part of Edward was ready to go, even if his mind was holding the rest of him back.

"Hello," I said huskily in greeting to my new friend. I stroked along his length as I got a feel for the situation. His cock, or penis as he wanted to call it, was feverishly hot. It burned in my hand like a hot ember. His head was firm and smooth to the touch and I licked my lips as I thought about wrapping my mouth around him.

Edward must have been watching my face because he groaned in reaction to my oral display. I rubbed my thumb across his head again and his groan filled my bedroom. "The glans...oh, I love it when you rub the glans."

I could figure out what he meant by glans but he was seriously killing the mood. To shut him up, I sucked his tongue into my mouth as I worked his head over a few times, swiping his pre-cum around to make things slide easier. It didn't take long for his hips to start pumping, sliding his cock in and out of my hand. I gripped him hard in my fist and was so fucking glad I did. He slid his knee between my legs then and I rode his thigh. We panted into each other's mouths at the new sensation and I wondered which one of us would break first. We couldn't stand there all afternoon.

It was not a surprise when I was the one to pull away well before he was ready to move on.

Before he could blink, I pulled my hand out of his pants, twisted us around and pushed him down onto my bed. He fell not very gracefully and landed with a bounce on his back. My eyes widened in delight at the sight before me. Even half-dressed, Edward looked fucking unbelievable against my green comforter. His skin looked golden against it and his hair shimmered in the sunlight that streamed through the open window. I pounced before he had a chance to move, landing on top of him as gently as I could.

"Bella, wait, slow down," he insisted again as I frantically tried to pull his pants off. For me, there was no more slowing down. I was wet and achy and I really needed an orgasm. Edward was going to give it to me and pretty fucking soon. I was delighted when he let me pull his jeans and black shorts down his long legs. I had to scoot off the bed to finish the job, but I finally got him completely naked. I stood and admired the vision before me before jumping on him again.

I should have known it wouldn't be that easy. Edward was ready for me this time. As soon as I landed, his strong arms wrapped around my back and he flipped us, using my momentum from my jump to pin me underneath him. He straddled my legs and I could feel the bounce of his balls and cock against my thigh as we settled onto the bed once more. His hands held my wrists down on the bed as he stared down at me from above. It was his turn to sit up high on a throne, and he seemed to take to royalty just as well as I had.

"You don't listen very well," he said quietly as my chest heaved between us. I tried to catch my breath but his nakedness was making it very hard for me to breathe. "Now that I have you under control, I'm going to show you exactly what I mean."

Fuck. This man was slowly, determinedly, trying to kill me. I whimpered as his hands pushed mine harder into the bed beneath me.

"You need to hold still. Don't move. If you're good, I'll give you my tongue. If you're very, very good, I'll give you my penis. Understood?"

I didn't dare move to acknowledge his question so I whimpered again, hoping that he could translate it into, "Hell to the yes."

Edward released my wrists and I kept them exactly where he placed them. They lay on either side of my head and it was so hard fighting the urge to touch him. I had an incredibly sexy, naked man on top of me and I wasn't supposed to touch him. I

really wanted both his tongue and his cock, so I closed my eyes and hoped that his slow torture of me wouldn't be so bad. Hell, was I ever wrong.

With my eyes closed, I didn't see what he intended. I felt him shift a little above me, but it surprised me when I felt his hand on my knee. He rubbed it gently, and my mouth opened as I gulped in more air.

"Your skin is so soft and smooth," he said, his fingers slowly climbing my thigh. "Especially here." He rubbed a small spot on my right inner thigh.

I felt more shifting and nearly buckled in half when his mouth replaced his fingers. He sucked me there, telling me the whole time how good my skin felt. It took all my strength to hold still as he repeated the same action on my other thigh. His hands slid up my legs to my hips while he sucked and I was a little disappointed that he'd skipped over the buttons to my shorts. I was ready to get naked but Edward had found something else that interested him more.

Up over my stomach, his hands traveled. His mouth left my thighs and I felt his breath ghost over the same path his hands had just taken. He moved up my body and settled his weight next to me as he cupped my breasts carefully. He massaged them and teased my nipples until I was sure that I was going to be forced to try to throw him down again. Fortunately, he took pity on me.

"You've been so good, Bella. I'm going to give you my tongue now."

I panted in anticipation, not knowing exactly where to expect his tongue. When he flicked it across my aching nipple, I groaned in relief.

"Yes," I told him, wanting to hold his head to my breast. I resisted the urge, hoping that if I continued to keep still he would give me what I really wanted. "That feels so good."

His tongue continued to circle my nipple, flicking across it harder and harder on each pass. He finally placed his whole mouth on me and sucked me in, his tongue continuing its frantic tasting. I shifted my feet slightly, the ache in my pussy needing some relief, and damn if Edward didn't know about my indiscretion.

His mouth pulled away from my breast and looked down at me with a sad smile on his face. "Bella, I told you to keep still. Now it's going to take even longer."

My eyes popped open as I contemplated the slow torture he was putting me through. "Edward, I just need some relief," I tried to explain to him around the

whimpers I made. "Please."

He stared down at my wet nipple and blew across it, making it pucker even more than before. He completely ignored my begging as he stared at my boobs. "Your areolas are such a lovely shade of pink. I wonder what else is a lovely shade of pink."

His gaze slid down my body to my shorts and I immediately forgot about the loss of his tongue. If he was going to take my shorts off then I was going to hold perfectly still and pray that the sight of my girlie parts would render him incapable of speech and going any slower. I decided that he just needed a little push, and I needed to speak a language he understood. "You should see my labia. They're nice and pink too."

Edward went completely still, almost as still as I was. My lips twitched as I realized I'd said the exact right thing to him. Silently, he crawled back down the bed and attacked my shorts with abandon. They, and my panties, were torn off my body and tossed across the room.

Edward crouched over my pussy like he was getting ready to conduct an investigation. "What's the verdict?" I asked as his hand stroked through my curls to part me for a better look.

"Your *labium* is a beautiful shade of pink," he agreed as his finger ran along my slit, coating itself in my juices. I rolled my eyes at his correction but almost went blind when his finger flicked across my clit. "Your clitoris, however, is the most beautiful shade of pink I've ever seen. They should name this color after you."

I tried to laugh at his odd comment. It came out as more of a garbled squeak. "I don't think moms and dads would appreciate their kids coloring with a crayon called 'Bella's pink pussy'."

I watched in fascination as he dipped his head closer to me, breathing in deep as his nose skimmed up my slit. "You smell delicious. I want to taste you Bella. I want to feel you on my tongue."

I gasped as he did just that. His tongue showed no hesitation in achieving its goals. He lapped at my folds like I was a tasty morsel and licked at my clit until I nearly screamed. His attention to detail and thoroughness earned him high marks in his oral exam, I decided while I was trying not to buck my hips into his face. I groaned his name over and over as he brought me closer to orgasm. His tongue on my body was almost as good as his cock inside of me, but he seemed in no hurry to get around to that.

He pushed my knees apart as he settled between my legs, forcing me to make room for him. In my new position, it was even more difficult to keep still and I resorted to begging, because I wasn't going to last much longer. "Edward, please, I need to move. I need to feel you inside of me. I need to rub against you. I need to kiss you and press my tongue to you. I'm going to die," I concluded dramatically as my body continued its tortuous ache.

All licking and touching stopped at my declaration. His head rose from between my thighs and he calmly wiped some of my juices off the stubble of his chin. His hand released my knee as he continued to stare at me, and it slid up my thigh and into my folds again. "Are you ready for me?" he asked, the tip of his finger teasing my entrance. I nearly cried when he began to push inside of me. I bit my lip to keep from arching off the bed at his invasion.

He pushed his finger all the way inside of me, but it wasn't enough. I was greedy. "Two," I whispered, and he immediately granted my wish. He filled and stretched me and I squeezed around him, anticipating how his cock would feel inside my body.

"I can feel you tightening around me. You want my penis now, don't you?"

Holy fuck, if that hadn't been obvious for the past several hours then I seriously needed to work on my game. I'd been practically begging Edward for his cock all day, and he was just now figuring it out? I growled in frustration but bit back my nasty retort when he smiled at me.

"Show me how much you want me. You may move now."

With those two commands, I sat up and wrapped one of my hands around his head. My mouth found his and I pushed my pelvis against his hand, shoving his two fingers as deep inside me as they could go. I frantically rode him, trying to get off, but Edward was sadly still in control. With a flourish, his fingers disappeared from my body and his mouth ripped away from mine.

His green eyes stared into mine as we panted at each other, like two wild animals. I was on the edge. If he didn't fuck me soon, I was going to scream at the top of my lungs and show him how to make a girl come in three minutes or less. I didn't care anymore, I just needed a release.

Incredibly, Edward seemed to have reached the end of his rope as well. "Condom?" he asked through clenched teeth and I pulled away from him only long enough to dig one out of my night stand. I scurried up my bed to get comfortable as I watched him tear the package open and roll it down his cock. When he turned to

me, I opened my arms to welcome him into my embrace.

Our teasing was done. The slow, tortuous trip we'd just taken was over. This had already been the longest sexual encounter I'd ever had, and we hadn't even achieved penetration yet. Edward pushed my knees apart even wider as he settled between them, and I helpfully wrapped my legs around his waist as he positioned his cock at my entrance.

His hand held onto my hip, his eyes bored into mine, and his cock sunk deeply, and easily, into my body. With a long, slow, stroke, he pushed until he could go no further and we both sighed in relief. No more games, no more holding still. It was just me and Edward.

I pulled his head down and we kissed slowly as he began to stroke in and out. Our mouths matched the rhythm of our hips as we took our time, no longer in any hurry to just get off. I realized as I ran my hand over his back that not only was this the longest I'd ever gone, it was also hands down the best experience I'd ever had. There was something to be said about delaying our gratification for a while. I found more pleasure in his sighs and groans than in any quick finger-fuck I'd ever received.

I called his name gently as his speed increased, guiding his hand to my clit so we would both come. I was afraid for a moment that he was about to burst because he suddenly started arching into me like his orgasm was upon him. I concentrated on his strokes, both inside and out, as I was pushed up the bed. The pillows fell off the sides as the comforter slipped and slid underneath our bodies. Edward was pumping into me so hard by this point that my head was banging against the wall, and I braced my hands behind me to stop the thudding.

This action only pushed me harder against Edward and he started calling my name in short, low grunts. He looked down at me and I knew he was there, just waiting for me to join him. I increased the tempo of my hips and I felt the edge of my orgasm close in on me. With a final surge, I came against his hand, against his cock, against his entire body as he pounded into me, filling me, stretching me, then finally coming inside of me was his orgasm ripped through his whole body.

I nearly cried as I came down off my high, my vision clearing so I could see Edward's face again. He continued to pump inside of me, riding out the last of his orgasm and the aftershocks of mine. Had either of us been more coherent, we would have noticed the warning signs: the creaking, the grinding of metal on metal, the subtle shifting of the bed.

And then it happened. Just as Edward collapsed on top of me, his sweat-slickened skin fully connecting with mine, my bed collapsed to the floor. We both shrieked as the cheap frame that the mattress store had tossed in for free with my purchase gave underneath our exertions, sending us, and the mattress, to the ground with a loud thump.

I lay completely still in Edward's arms, but not because he'd told me to. I felt paralyzed, and not just from the hot sex we'd just had. But because I was afraid that I'd somehow managed to damage the only possession that I really gave a shit about.

Edward, somehow, knew exactly what to say. "I'll get you a new one."

I laughed against his shoulder and he joined me, holding me close as we dealt with the moment the only way we could. When we were done, Edward slipped behind me and tucked me underneath his chin. I didn't care about the bed anymore. I only cared about the satisfaction of my body, the pull of my eyelids as they drifted down, and the man who lay behind me.

Our nap was much too brief.

A/N: This chapter wasn't brief though! Hopefully, this will be the longest one of the story. We're about halfway through Standoff! now. I always planned this as a short little story (short compared to OOHH anyway), so it's just a small peek into a day in the life of these characters.

Thanks to everyone who's been reviewing - I really appreciate it! Please review this chapter as well. It was a bear to get through, and my beta **Blackdogs** was a huge help in getting me through it. A lemon deserves a review, right?

Also, OOHH was nominated for an award! Voting begins on Saturday (August 1st). The link is also on my profile: [http://twilightallhumanawards\[dot\]webs\[dot\]com](http://twilightallhumanawards[dot]webs[dot]com)

Back to Reality

A/N: A few readers expression confusion over Edward's vernacular during chapter 6. "Why?" is the question I keep getting. Two things: I'm writing this hoping that you will laugh. The idea of a guy using a formal way of speaking during some smexy times cracks me up. Second - Edward's way of speaking is very different from Bella's, even when they're not hot and heavy. It would be out of character for him to talk any other way at this point. Now that we've cleared that up, I hope you enjoy chapter 7.

Disclaimer: Still not mine.

Chapter 7: Back to Reality

Like a bad case of *déjà vu*, the pounding on my door woke me long before I was ready. Edward had already rolled off my broken bed and was trying to dig out his clothes that I'd carelessly removed earlier. I groaned and covered my eyes, wanting to go back to the place where there wasn't noise and a stuffy apartment building. We'd dozed for not very long at all, but I'd shut down completely and had been blissfully ignorant of everything.

I watched as Edward tried to yank his jeans out from underneath the collapsed bed frame. I could have helped him out by climbing off the bed, but I was enjoying the view of the flex of his muscular torso and the sway of his naughty bits. I sat up and shoved the mass of hair out of my face. I probably looked like I'd been electrocuted - but I wasn't going to complain. Edward had done several wonderful things to my body and I was thankful for each and every one of them.

Another series of loud bangs on the door echoed through the apartment and I dragged the comforter over my head in protest. "Why can't they leave me alone?" I muttered, the sound muffled by my hiding spot.

"I'll go see who it is," Edward said calmly. I pulled the comforter off my head and found Edward had already pulled his jeans on.

"How do you do that so quickly? I was hoping to enjoy the show." I pouted at him as he sat on my bed to put on his shoes and socks.

He shrugged indifferently in response and I felt a chill go down my spine. It wasn't

because it was cold either. The temperature had only climbed higher as the day had gone on and I had seriously been contemplating taking a shower to cool off, especially after my romp with Edward. But, seeing Edward acting nonchalantly towards me so soon after our wild sex - so wild that we broke the bed - left me feeling nervous. I crawled down the bed to where he sat and wrapped my arms around his shoulders from behind. He tensed underneath me, but then sagged back into my embrace.

"Are you ok?" I asked, rubbing my hand against his shoulder. I was going to face this head on. No need to drag this out if he was planning on some assfuckery. It grated on me a little to console him when I was afraid that any minute now I would have to start punching him in the kidney, but I didn't know what else to do. I really wanted to believe that he wasn't an asshole.

"I'm fine," Edward replied after a moment. "That was just...intense. I didn't know what to expect from you, after all that." His hand clasped mine on his shoulder and we stayed like that, until the banging on the door picked up again.

Edward stood to go answer the door, and I hesitated. I knew I needed to say something, but I wasn't sure what the right response was. Just like him, I was afraid of saying or doing the wrong thing too. "Edward," I called his name just as he reached the bedroom door. He stopped and turned back to look at me. "I liked being with you. Maybe we could do it again, sometime?"

A bright smile spread across his face. "I'd like that," he said before turning and walking out the door.

I breathed a sigh of relief. I guess I'd said the right thing after all. It was a first for me - asking for a repeat performance. But, I meant what I'd said. Moving to Forks was supposed to be about trying new things. So far, I'd tried several new things, with pretty favorable results. Making friends in the building hadn't been such a horrible idea. I'd given advice and not felt like a know-it-all tool in the process. And I'd stuck up for people who'd needed a little more defense in their corner. All in all, I was beginning to feel fairly fantastic about myself, and I couldn't remember the last time that had happened.

I heard voices at the door at the same point I realized I was sitting naked in my bedroom where pretty much anyone out in the hall would be able to see me. I scrambled off the bed, taking the comforter with me for cover and began the mad search for my clothes. I was having trouble locating my shirt when Emmett's voice echoed through the apartment.

"Bells! What have you and my brother been up to?" Emmett called from the other room, making my eyes cross in annoyance.

"Half-brother," was Edward's reply and I smiled this time at the correction. I knew now that he meant it teasingly, lovingly even, and Emmett took no real offense.

"Come on, Bells!" he shouted again. "You know these walls are thin. Rose and I could hear the wall-banging sex downstairs. Come out and tell your good friend Emmett all about it. Or, I could come in and see you. Fuck yeah - that's a better plan."

I scurried to my closet to dig out something else to wear. Fuck the shorts and underwear I had on earlier- there was no time to look for them. I did not need Cougar Pants checking out my naked lady bits. It was bad enough that his brother had posted our make-out session on YouTube and then we'd apparently notified the building of our sex session as well. I did not need the CP blogging about my tits or anything else that caught his eye. I pulled out a yellow sundress that was lying on top of one of my boxes and yanked it over my head. I turned just as two scuffling, male bodies bounded into my room.

"Dammit, Edward, you made me miss the show," Emmett complained after taking in my less than nude state. He pushed Edward's shoulder to further show his displeasure.

"Emmett, stop being such a perv," I said as I ran my fingers through my hair, hoping to tame it down some. I glanced between the pair of them as they stood just inside my room. They stood exactly the same - hands on their hips, heads slightly down, chests heaving as they caught their breaths. They must have been adorable together growing up. I was curious though how they'd gotten so out of breath. "What were you two doing?"

"He was trying to force his way back to your bedroom in the hopes of catching you sans clothing," Edward said, between huge sucks of air. "I was merely attempting to forcibly restrain him from doing so."

"Aw...thank you, baby," I said as I crossed the room to stand next to Edward. "That's sweet." I batted my eyelashes at him just so he would doubly understand my thanks. Edward stood a little straighter under my praise and shot his brother a dirty look.

Emmett was completely oblivious. His eyes were trained on the remains of the bed. "Dude," he said reverently, finally turning to place his hand on Edward's

shoulder. "You broke the bed. You are the man!" They bumped fists and I rolled my eyes at their display of caveman-like maleness.

"Emmett, don't be a jerk. What we do or don't do is our private business. For the future, I'll remember that you can hear through the walls and I'll expect you to stop trying to peep in on me." He was standing close enough to me now that I could reach out and grab his ear, which I did, and twisted it. Just a little bit. "Don't even think about telling anyone about my bed. I will make things very unpleasant for you. I'm talking cockblockage of epic proportions."

Emmett's eyes went wide at my threat and I released him. I liked him - really I did - but I'd had enough of people talking about my sex life to last for pretty much ever. Some things needed to stay private, like the fact that Edward and I had broken the bed. That was for him, me, and the furniture delivery man to know.

I released Emmett's ear only after Edward shot me a look filled with quiet pleading. *Shit*. I was so easy. He was back to working his sexy magic on me again. This was not good. I didn't want him to think that he would always get his way just by looking fine and blinking his lashes at me.

"Why were you banging the door down, Emmett?" I asked, ignoring Edward completely. "I hope it wasn't just to tell us what a perv you are, because we already know."

Emmett straightened, rubbing his ear and darting glances between me and Edward. "Alice sent me. She said there's something you need to see in the parking lot."

I sighed and headed out of the bedroom towards my bathroom. I needed to assess the damage that Edward had wrecked upon my person. "I'm over that whole parking lot fiasco, Emmett. It's boring watching cops scurry back and forth. At this point, I just want them to hurry up and finish their job so I can go back to my life." I wasn't sure exactly what that would include anymore, other than my job at the factory and the hopes I'd been pinning on meeting my father, but I kind of hoped that Edward would figure in there somehow. So long as I didn't screw it up first.

The bathroom mirror revealed a sight that wasn't too scary. I freshened up and pulled my hair into a ponytail. I found the half-brothers waiting for me in the living room. Edward was trying to see down into the parking lot and Emmett was eyeing my kitchen like it held a pot of gold. When he spotted me, he smiled easily at my reappearance.

"You look hot, Bells," he said, which made Edward turn quickly from the window and advance on his brother. Emmett held up his hands in defense as he backed up to the wall of the kitchen. "What? She does. I'm like Abe Lincoln: I can't tell a lie."

I rolled my eyes as I waited for them to stop goofing around. Apparently, Edward's testosterone levels kicked into high gear around his brother. I'd have to remember that in the future. Maybe I could use it to my advantage.

"That was George Washington," I told Emmett as he ducked and dodged the playful swipes Edward kept taking at him. He was surprisingly agile for a large man.

"He was the cherry tree guy," Emmett said as he put the broken couch between him and Edward.

"Right. He couldn't lie about chopping it down." I smirked at his description of the first president of the United States.

"Dude - you broke the couch too?" he asked in awe all over again as he paused in his attempts to deflect Edward.

It was all the advantage Edward needed. He took a giant leap over the couch and landed on Emmett's chest. They crashed to the ground with a loud thud and I decided that I'd had enough. *Boys.*

I quickly crossed to the door and yanked it open while they rolled around on the floor together. Poor Esme must have had her hands full with those too.

I walked down the steps to the front door and found Alice, Rosalie, and Jasper talking quietly while they looked outside. Alice bounded up to me, back to her normal bouncing energy, as I approached.

"You have perfect timing. They're getting ready to release the hostage and guess who's going to help with the transfer?"

"Um...Jasper?" I asked in confusion. How the hell would I know who was involved in that? That was something for the police to handle and I didn't know any cops. Oh - except for...

"Your dad! They just finished outfitting him in the SWAT team gear. He's got one of the fun face shields on, so you can't really see him. But see, there," Alice got right up next to me as she pointed across the parking lot, "that's him. The tall one on the end."

I froze as I realized I was looking at my father for the first time. I couldn't see his face or anything, but it was him, there, right in front of me. The man I'd been building up in my mind for years was suddenly in front of me and I felt a wave of panic begin to wash across my body.

"Um...I've got to go," I mumbled as I turned to leave. I wasn't ready. I wasn't ready. The panic sped through my veins and I felt like I needed to puke.

A pair of strong arms wrapped around me before I could hit the stairs. "Hey, what's wrong?" Edward asked in concern as he looked between my upset face and those of our neighbors.

"It's Bella's dad," Jasper answered.

Great. So, now everyone knew about my lame life.

"Sperm donor," I sneered in disgust.

Edward frowned at my outburst. He didn't try to correct me though. I knew he was smart.

"The hostage is being released and he's going in on the exchange," Alice explained again, quietly this time. Everyone stared at me and I felt a major bitchslap coming on.

Fortunately, Edward really was just as smart as I'd been giving him credit for. He rubbed my arms gently. "Come on. Let's go someplace cool for a while." He tugged my arm and I followed him down the steps, along the hallway, and into the laundry room at the end. My last glimpse of the front door landing was of Jasper, Alice, Rosalie, and Emmett standing with their mouths open at us as Edward clicked the door shut behind us.

The laundry room was a few degrees cooler than my apartment had been. There was no window though, so we wouldn't be able to stay in there long with the a/c off and the door closed. There were two washing machines and two dryers, all lined up in a neat row. I crossed the room and hopped up onto the lid of one of the washers. I needed a moment to collect my thoughts and Edward was perfectly ok with the silence that settled over us.

I appreciated and disliked that he knew how to handle me. He'd seen that I was getting pissed and had known the exact right thing to do to take the edge off my anger. He hadn't pushed me; instead, he'd removed me from the situation and given

me time to think. He *was* good for me, but that was a highly unusual thought. For my whole life, I felt like I'd been the only one who was really good for me. A few hours of getting to know Edward, and I was afraid that I was going to start relying on him too much. It was frightening and I didn't like being scared.

"I don't think I'm ready to meet him yet," I began as I curled my fingers into the edge of the washing machine lid. "I need more time."

Edward nodded his head slowly as he crossed the room and hopped up onto the machine next to me. "No one's going to force you to meet him today. I believe that Alice just wanted to point him out to you, so perhaps you'd be able to recognize him on your own next time."

I snorted at that. "Yeah, so long as he's wearing all black and a mask that covers his face, I'll be able to pick him out perfectly."

"Alice has very good intentions."

I blew out a breath as I realized that I was a little mad at myself. "I know she does. It's just hard for me - you know? I don't know how to be gracious or kind or fucking friendly."

"You've been doing a good job all day, as far as I can tell." Edward shifted slightly so he faced me. "Bella, don't be so hard on yourself. You have these stunning moments of joy and beauty and kindness, and sometimes I can see that you do keep them locked inside, but other times they burst forth and it's wonderful seeing you open up like that. It's alright to allow yourself to let those feelings go. Even if you just want to practice on all of us first. We want you to succeed and none of us will mock you for trying something new."

I darted my eyes at him. "Rose would."

He grabbed my hand off the washer and placed it between his. "Rose might. But I won't."

I stared at him as I thought about what he was suggesting. Change - that's what he was talking about. It was what I'd wanted for a long time, but had only recently found the courage to try and discover. I wanted things to be different because I was tired of the life I'd been leading, but I had always thought it would be a solitary process. I didn't know how I felt about making myself a group project.

"One step at a time, Bella. You don't have to meet Charlie today. Perhaps, today

could just be a looking day. It won't hurt to just stare at him through the window. He has no idea that you're here, so he won't be looking for you. This way, you'll have an unencumbered opportunity to learn about him before you do anything else."

Edward made a lot of sense. I could look. It didn't mean I had to rush out there and introduce myself as the long-lost daughter that he apparently hadn't wanted anything to do with. And maybe having Edward there, just in case I spazzed again, wasn't such a bad idea either.

"Ok," I relented after a moment. "I can look. But if anybody gives me any crap, I'm gonna start throwing punches."

The corners of Edward's mouth twitched at my statement. "Fair enough. At least allow me to warn everyone beforehand though." He jumped off the washer and headed towards the door.

"Hey," I called after him. He turned back around before he could pull the door open. "I wasn't finished." Edward narrowed his eyes at me as he walked back and stood in front of me. I crooked my finger at him until we were nose to nose. "Ever had sex on a washing machine?" I asked, wagging my eyebrows. I figured there was no way he could make some laundry room sex last as long as our first encounter. And I was definitely ready for some more sexy Edward times. Plus, we really couldn't let Alice keep all the fun that this room had to offer all to herself.

Edward leaned in and captured my lips while his hands slid down to my hips. I scooted to the edge of the washer while I enthusiastically dug my hands into his hair. He had great hair and I liked to tug on it while he kissed me. Things had just turned interesting - I was pretty sure my tongue had just invented a new acrobatics trick - when he pulled away and headed back towards the door again. "Another time," he promised as he pulled the door open and left me sitting there, all juiced up with no relief in sight. I sagged back against the machine, plotting my revenge. He didn't own the rights to the slow and painful routine. Just wait until I borrowed Alice's handcuffs. And got my new bed - I couldn't forget that. Maybe scarves would work better...

My plans to restrain Edward were interrupted by the sound of my neighbors' voices that carried down the hall. They had all laughed at what sounded like a joke that Emmett had made and I felt a little pang in my chest. I was used to not being part of a large group of people, but this was the first time that bothered me. The higher voices of the girls trilled above the boys' again and I felt even more left out than before.

I pushed myself off the washer and rearranged my dress. I was going out there. I needed to do this, not just because of Charlie Swan. But because I wanted to know what they were laughing about. I wanted to wrap my arm around Edward's waist and laugh along with the girls. Fuck - I wanted to join their silly little apartment group and not be the outsider anymore. I sucked in a deep breath and stormed out of the laundry room, determined to be a part of something for the first time in forever.

Unfortunately, my appearance on the crowded landing didn't bring about the exact reaction I'd hoped for. Rosalie and Alice stood off to one side and their smiles disappeared as soon as I stood next to Edward. Emmett took a few steps away from Edward to stand closer to Rosalie and Jasper looked to Alice for direction. I obviously needed to work on my people skills some more if they were all going to treat me like a leper every time I appeared.

Edward squeezed my shoulder and offered me a smile. I was glad he was there. I really was going to need backup. "Hi," I said brightly, hoping that my smile was of the friendly variety, and not showing too much teeth, like a rabid dog waiting to bite off a chunk of flesh.

A chorus of hellos were offered in return and we all stood silently again.

Awkward.

"Look, it seems like everybody already knows why I spazzed out earlier," I began, jumping right onto the elephant in the room and hanging onto its ears. I'd only told two people about Charlie, and I could guess who had told the others, but I wasn't going to let myself get pissed about that. "I'm here to meet my father - my biological father. He's in the parking lot today and I may or may not introduce myself to him at some point, so if I act weird and schizo again, just ignore me. If I don't talk to him today, then I'll try again some other day. It's no biggie. So...yeah."

I looked to Edward and he nodded encouragingly. Good - maybe that had not sounded as lame as it had in my head.

"Bella, we'd love to help you with your dad project. Whatever you need, you just tell us and we'll do our best to get it done for you," Alice explained as Emmett nodded his head next to Rosalie. He was like a giant bobblehead doll and I just wanted to hug him for it.

"Thanks," I whispered. I was uncomfortable with her ability and willingness to help so easily. I'd never known people like that before.

Jasper stepped forward and shot Alice an appreciative glance. She practically bloomed underneath his gaze. "Would you like another look at him? We were just telling Edward that the perpetrator released his hostage and Chief Swan is standing off to the side with one of his deputies now." Jasper stepped to the side again and motioned for me to come forward. I did so hesitantly. "He took his mask off," Jasper said under his breath as I passed by. I sucked in a breath and held it, anticipating my first look at the man who had given me life. Jasper pointed to a man standing a mere ten feet away and I gazed greedily upon Charlie Swan.

He was a tall man, with not much hair left up top. What he did have was the same color and thickness as my own. I played with the end of my ponytail as I imagined that his hair would feel the same as mine. He was guzzling a bottle of water, and when he was done, he swiped a deeply tanned hand across his mouth, revealing a thick moustache. My eyes ate up his facial structure. Edward had been right about us having the same noses and cheekbones. As far as likenesses, that was the end of the tour. He was thin as a rail, whereas I had more my mother's curvy figure. I was also vertically challenged and the Chief stood above most of the men around him. My own skin was pale - almost pink. His was the complete opposite - he was either a melanoma patient waiting to happen or he had some genetic heritage that had not found its way to me.

I watched for a few minutes as he joked with the men around him. And just like that, he walked off towards the other end of the parking lot and my viewing session was over. I stared after him for a while before I realized that my personal bubble had been seriously compromised while I was distracted. Five faces pressed eagerly next to mine out the door. It was a wonder none of the cops had come to yell at us for looking so ridiculous. We were like a bad version of The Brady Bunch credits. We had an Alice, but she was no maid to do my cooking and cleaning for me. If only.

I bit back the nasty comment I would have normally made when someone got too close to me. "Would you guys mind giving me some space for a minute?" And just like that, five little heads disappeared out of my line of sight. I felt their bodies disperse, except for one. Edward had stayed behind, but allowed me the space I needed to think.

Looking at my father hadn't been so horrible. I felt that horrible ache again in my chest, but it eased with the knowledge that Edward was there to talk me through whatever twists my head was going to give me. I was the queen of turning a rational thought into something completely convoluted and unrecognizable.

"He looks like a nice guy," I said after the pangs I'd felt had gone away.

Edward quickly stepped to my side. "He is. He has a house on the north side of town. And a dog. Eats at the diner for lunch everyday. The whole town loves him."

He was trying to help, but his words tore me up on the inside. "How come he's so nice to everyone but me?" I asked, allowing a little of my hurt to seep through.

Edward took the hand that I'd placed unconsciously against the glass door and held it in his own. "You won't know until you ask him what happened between him and your mother."

I squeezed his hand to let him know that I'd heard him. That seemed like a step far off in the distance. Right then, it bothered me that I'd never asked my mom about Charlie Swan. When I was little, it had felt a little ungrateful to bring up another man when a different one was taking care of me. It wasn't until I'd grown up some that I'd realized that Phil's idea of caring for someone and anyone else's idea were two very different things.

"I was mad when I was teenager," I explained quietly to Edward. "I should have asked my mom about Charlie then, but I didn't. I was hell bent on punishing everyone around me, including myself, for feeling so alone and isolated. I don't want to be alone anymore."

My inner self, the one that hid within the shell that I presented to the world, curled up into a ball at that admission. I looked at Edward, feeling lost without that constant presence within me, and felt the hot burn of unfamiliar tears in my eyes. Edward gathered me in his arms and held me close. "You don't have to be alone anymore. I'm here."

And I knew then that I was in serious trouble with Edward. A little flame ignited in my heart, just the size of a tealight really, but it was enough to let me know that I had feelings for this man that wouldn't be easily dismissed. That also meant that the hurting would be a hundred times worse if things between us went south. I squeezed his waist as I contemplated my options. I could (a) act like a bitch and scare him off, hence snuffing out the flame before it got any bigger. This had the downfall of leaving me feeling fucking lonely though. Or, I could (b) put some more faith in Edward and see what kind of flame grew out of my little tealight. Maybe it would be manageable and I wouldn't have to be afraid of it consuming me if things would be bad. In this case, it had the added bonus of being lonely no more.

I squeezed Edward once more before stepping away. I took option C instead: ignore the little flame for now and make a decision later. "Thank you," I told him before looking around for the girls. "Do you know where Alice and Rosalie are?" I

wiped my hands on my dress while I tried not to look at him. It would be all over if I looked at him now.

"They went to Alice's apartment," he said, with a hint of resignation in his voice. I knew that he'd been expecting a different response, but I didn't have anything to give him yet. I was the one who needed more time now.

I quickly found myself at Alice's door and rapped hard three times. Rosalie opened it and pulled me inside before I could even wave goodbye to Edward. Maybe it was better that way.

"What's going on?" I asked as I followed Rosalie to the kitchen. Alice stood at the counter stirring a pitcher of what looked like lemonade.

"It's margarita time," Rosalie announced, holding her glass out for Alice to fill.

I shook off the rest of my gloomy mood and perked up at the mention of alcohol. I happily took my glass from Alice and we toasted to a quick return of the building's power before clinking our glasses together. I took a large sip and took my time licking the tequila off my lips. There was very little that a margarita couldn't fix.

We soon found ourselves seated on Alice's sofa. I didn't mention that mine was broken and Rosalie didn't bring up that she heard me and Edward banging into the wall earlier. Fortunately, Alice was more than ready to make up for our lack of conversation.

"Jasper asked me to dinner," she announced when she had finished her first margarita. "He's taking me to Port Angeles Tuesday night."

"That's great!" I said, licking the remaining salt off my glass. "Try not to attack him in the car or afterwards, ok?"

"I have it all planned out," she said as her eyes began to lose focus. I didn't know if it was from the alcohol or the extensive plans she'd made.

"Don't even let him kiss you," Rosalie added as she sipped delicately at her drink. She'd barely touched hers while Alice and I were already eyeing the pitcher, wondering who was going to pour the next round.

Rosalie's advice was apparently not among Alice's plans. "What? You're joking. Step one is 'Good night kiss only'. I can't let him take me to dinner without a little something for dessert."

"So bake him a cake," Rosalie said as she rested her head on the back of the sofa between me and Alice. Her eyes were drooping and I wondered if she was getting ready to fall asleep on us. "But if you want a second date, make him wait. He's scared of you, right? So he's going to be watching you all night like a hawk for you to make your move. Don't make it - at all. Give him time to relax in your presence, let the tension build, and before you know it, he'll be the one making the move. And it will be way hotter just because you let him man up first."

Alice and I exchanged a look as Rosalie drifted off to sleep. She actually made some sense. I didn't know her very well, but it was possible that she was more rational than I'd ever given her credit for. But, she had given me plenty of reasons to assume that she was a psycho bitch. I'd seen her trying to start her clunker one afternoon and the hood bore the brunt of her displeasure that day. We all had reasons for the things that we did, and perhaps Rosalie had hers too.

We left Rosalie asleep on the sofa and headed into Alice's den of iniquity. Fortunately, I didn't spy any toys or handcuffs this time around. A huge grin spread across her face as she tapped her fingers on the door behind her. "So, you and Edward?"

I rolled my eyes and flopped down onto the comfy chair she had in the corner. I refused to think about any of the things she might have done in that chair. "You heard us too?" I shouldn't have been surprised. I knew that the walls were thin, but that had been the last thing on my mind when Edward had been slowly torturing me.

"I think the whole complex heard you."

"Shut it. I'm sure you and Jasper will be the same way once you get to that point." I really needed to invest in earplugs soon, especially if we were all going to be enjoying our partners in the same building.

Alice started pacing the room, a nervous energy settling about her person. "We should do something," she said, flinging her arms about in a wide circle.

"Are you ok?" She looked like she was getting ready to have some type of fit. It was like she'd absorbed a sudden excess of energy and needed an outlet to release it. I was afraid that she would explode into little Alice bits at the rate she was going.

"I'm great. Alcohol gives me all this energy and now I need to run it off or something. We should do something," she repeated, and I thought it was maybe in everyone's best interest if we found something for her to do. We couldn't let her go for a run around the block - we were stuck inside the building still.

"We could play a game," I suggested hesitantly. I was concerned about what type of game Alice would come up with. With my luck it would be spin the bottle or strip truth or dare.

"Hide and seek! Hide and seek!" She started jumping up and down, shaking her arms to her sides in the excitement of her big announcement.

I stood slowly, not wanting to scare her with any sudden movements. "Um...ok. But there are not a lot of places to hide in the apartment."

"No, we'll use the whole building. Get everyone to play. If we all shut our curtains it will be darker too and that will make it harder. Come on! Let's go tell the guys!"

She shot out of the room before I could blink and I followed slowly to the living room. Her apartment door was wide open and Rosalie was still conked out on the sofa. I could hear Alice's excited voice through the door and I sat down next to sleeping beauty as I waited for her to reappear.

I swallowed the lump in my throat and drank the rest of Rosalie's margarita. I wonder how they would react when I told them that I'd never played hide and seek before. I could only hope that the rules were as easy as they sounded. Of course, Edward would probably be willing to help teach me the rules. And maybe we could play our own private game of hide and seek again.

Edward strolled into the room then and my eyes zeroed in on him and his eyes zeroed in on the margarita pitcher and empty glasses that littered Alice's table. He leveled a look of amusement upon me as I stood and quickly crossed the room. I wrapped my arms around his neck sloppily as I pressed my body to his. "I like it when you hide your..."

Emmett burst into the room before I could finish my sentence and tackled a sleeping Rosalie. I laughed at his antics but was surprised when Rosalie only swatted him away.

"Do you want to play?" Edward asked me as I watched Emmett continue to try and coax her out of her nap.

I blinked up at Edward. We'd only been separated for fifteen minutes or so, but I was surprisingly glad to see him. I tucked that thought away to ponder later. "I always want to play with you," I told him as I licked my lips suggestively.

"Great!" he said with mischief clearly turning the corner of his eyes up. He tagged

my arm before backing out of the room. "You're it."

And with that, all five of my neighbors ran out of the room, slamming Alice's apartment door behind them.

Shit.

A/N: Please review! Thanks as always to my beta extraordinaire Blackdogs. She so rocks.

Hide and Seek

A/N: Thank you for your patience. My sister gave birth to a beautiful little girl last week and all my attention has pretty much been given to her for the past two weeks. I managed to sneak away and finish this chapter, plus start some of chapter 9. We're almost to the end!

Chapter 8: Hide and Seek

Surely, I could figure this out. My childhood hadn't been completely filled with boring parties, lessons on how to act like a lady, and endless hours spent with a tutor so I wouldn't be "so far behind my peers academically." I'd played with other children - it had always just been in a controlled environment with one or two nannies looking on, reminding us to keep our dresses clean. I could figure out hide and seek.

I sat on Alice's sofa until the footsteps pounding throughout the building had stopped. I didn't know how long I was supposed to give them to hide, but ten minutes seemed like plenty of time. It wasn't like there were tons of hiding spots. I decided to attack this systematically. I began my search on the first floor with the laundry room. I checked behind the door and the on the other side of the far dryer, but there weren't any humans hiding in that small space.

I paused outside Emmett's door. It felt invasive to barge into his apartment without an invitation, but it was obviously part of the game so I left my inhibitions in the hall. I turned the knob quietly and let myself in. My nose was immediately assaulted by the smell of nachos and dirty socks. I groaned quietly as I padded through to the kitchen, pulling open the small coat closet we all had along the way. His bathroom, which I hoped to never enter again, and his bedroom were both empty as well. I checked the one remaining hiding spot - his bedroom closet - but it was just as empty. Well, except for the stacks of medical journals I found on the floor. It looked like he was serious about his EMT career after all. I closed the door to the closet and the resulting squeak was loud to my ears.

Apparently, it was the signal that at least one person had been waiting for. I heard a set of feet pound down the stairs and barrel into Alice's apartment. I ran down Emmett's small hallway, past the smelly living room and through Alice's wide-open door. On her sofa sat Jasper, smiling triumphantly. "Safe!" he yelled as he made himself comfortable.

I stared at him in confusion. "Safe from what? I found you. Now it's my turn to hide."

Jasper laughed, and the sound surprised me. I'd yet to hear him laugh. He was usually serious. Maybe it was our game of hide and seek that had made him loosen up. "No, Bella, you need to find the others before they all make it to base. Once they're on base, they're safe and you can't tag them. Once you tag someone, then the game is over and that person is 'it' and you're free to hide."

"Oh," I said, processing the odd set of rules in my head. "And the others know all about this 'base' thing as well?"

"Of course," Jasper said, rearranging his long legs on the sofa. He was trying to lie down on it but he was just too tall.

"Of course," I repeated under my breath. Of course everyone but me had normal childhoods and played games like hide and seek. Of course they would all know the rules and wouldn't hesitate to join in at a moment's notice. Of course I would find myself alone, once again.

"You'd better get to seeking if you don't want to be 'it' next time," Jasper said, prodding me out of my thoughts.

I turned with a nod and headed up the stairs to inspect my and Rosalie's apartments next. Another set of footsteps sounded on the floor I'd just come from and I saw Alice's dark head duck into her apartment. I stumbled down the steps and found her standing next to the sofa, her eyes twinkling with delight. "Safe!" she called out and I frowned at her merriment.

"How did you do that?" I demanded. "I searched this whole floor."

"I snuck downstairs while you were talking to Jasper. You're not very good at this game, are you?"

I gave her the stink eye before heading back out into the hall. I knew I was going to hate being "it". I'd better find someone to tag soon or there would be one pissy Bella for them to deal with next round. I paused outside Alice's door, not knowing whether to re-search the first floor again or not. I decided not and headed up the stairs.

As I passed the front door of the building, the clouds off to the west caught my eye. They were dark and foreboding, which usually meant that a thunderstorm was

about to open up on us. My eyes slid across the police officers in the parking lot and their currently dry uniforms. They would probably bust out their rain gear soon enough. The cloud cover left the inside of the building much darker than usual. I realized instantly that this would be to my disadvantage since I was the seeker. The others were probably jumping for joy at their advantage.

On the second floor, I took the coward's way out and headed into my apartment. I was afraid to go into Rosalie's apartment without her permission. The few times we'd talked in the hall, she'd made a point of pulling the door closed behind her so I wouldn't be able to see in. I was not willing to suffer the consequences of an angry Rosalie if I trespassed on her private domain.

In my apartment, the curtains were billowing out from the wind that had finally arrived as a precursor to the storm. I listened closely at the door, leaving it open behind me so I could hear anyone who might try to sneak past. My living room looked untouched, as did the kitchen and the bathroom. In my bedroom, I was surprised to find the comforter neatly folded across the bed. That was definitely not how I'd left it earlier when I'd used it to hide my naked bits from Emmett. I circled around the broken bed, expecting to find someone crouched on the other side, but no one was there. I didn't bother with the closet because it was crammed full with my moving boxes, and unless they'd tossed those out the window, they were still in there.

Confused, I left my bedroom and headed back out into the living room. Maybe Alice had been hiding in my room - that was the only explanation I could come up with. Unless, someone else had been in there initially and then changed hiding spots while I was distracted by Alice and Jasper downstairs. Fuck - why was this game so hard?

I stood outside my apartment door looking towards the third floor. I glanced once at Rosalie's apartment and stalked over to it with my head held high. I was not going to be "it" again, and if someone was hiding in her apartment, I was going to find them. I turned her doorknob forcefully and nothing happened. I twisted it a few times just to be sure, but my first assumption appeared to be correct. Her door was locked. Either Rosalie had locked it herself to keep people out or someone was hiding inside. Since I had neither the desire nor the time to force myself inside her apartment, I headed up to the third floor instead.

A quick search of Edward's and Jasper's apartments revealed no one. Not a soul. Nobody. I stomped down two flights of stairs and into Alice's now full apartment.

"What the hell?" I said to the five smiling faces that were beaming back at me. "I

looked everywhere. You were hiding outside, weren't you?" I was mad. No wonder I'd never played this game as a kid. It sucked. Princess Tea Party at least had the benefit of eating at the same time as dressing up in pearls and hats while sitting with our teddy bears. None of my teddys had ever made me mad.

Five heads shook side to side at me, but no one said a word. Fine. They could keep their hiding spots secret. I'd figure it out eventually. They all filed out of the room while I got ready for round two. Edward was the last to leave.

"Only count to 100 this time," he said quietly, keeping his eyes on the open doorway. "And try to be quieter going up and down the stairs. We could hear every step you took."

I softened at his helpful suggestions. "Thanks," I said sincerely. I felt like I was the one who was lost in this game. I didn't mind playing with them, I just didn't like feeling like the odd girl out. Edward closed the door as he left and I began my count to 100. I may have counted really fast, but I was determined not to be "it" next time.

This time, I pulled Alice's door open slowly and tiptoed out into the hall. Emmett's door was still open from my earlier search, but I didn't want to leave home base unguarded while I checked it. Since I already knew the hiding spots, I decided just to get it over with as quickly as possible. Thirty seconds later, I was back out in the hall and walking backwards to the laundry room. No one was getting by me this time. The laundry was also empty and as I passed Alice's apartment, I was relieved to see that no one had made it to base yet. It felt like a small victory, but I gobbled up the achievement and let it bolster me to move forward.

Thunder sounded in the distance and it made me jump. The air in the building crackled from the pending storm and a chill raced across my skin. I almost felt like I was shuffling through a haunted house and at any moment someone would jump out and yell "boo" at me. I decided to check Rosalie's door again and just as I tried the knob, the rain that had been looming in the distance unleashed upon us. The sound of the heavy downpour was loud as it rang against the roof and began to pour down the gutters. This could only help me since Edward said I needed to be quieter this time. My footsteps and awkward door jinglings would be muffled behind the sound of the rain. Rosalie's door was locked, again, and my apartment was empty, again. I felt extremely frustrated as I climbed to the third floor. They weren't all hiding in Jasper's and/or Edward's apartments were they? That seemed odd, but then again, I'd never played the game before.

Jasper's apartment had been freakishly neat, with ceremonial swords, plaques, and fancy degrees on the walls. The only item in his apartment that I'd found

interesting had been the cockring I'd found in his bedside table. I freely admit to having invaded his space, but I was curious. I really hadn't thought that he could be as uptight as he seemed. He'd shown some actual interest in Alice, despite her attempts to scare him off, and I had the feeling that much like he'd told Edward earlier, he just preferred to keep his private life as private as possible. We all have secrets - even Jasper. I wasn't going to share what I'd found with anyone, but I did feel better about their chances at having a relationship. Still standing in the hallway, I turned away from Jasper's door and tiptoed into Edward's apartment instead. I was much more interested in learning about him than Jasper.

I opened his door quietly and began my search just as I had last time. The kitchen was empty. His home office was empty. His coat closet was empty. I had a hard time deciding between checking the bathroom or his bedroom first, but I went with my instincts and choose his bedroom. Edward had a large sleigh bed in his room that was a beautiful cherry color. His curtains matched his bedspread - blue stripes - and it struck me as being masculine without screaming bachelor. He had very good taste.

The closet was still empty and I sat down on the edge of his bed in defeat. There was no way I was going to avoid being "it" again. Somehow, they were sneaking past me but I couldn't figure out how. My legs weren't quite long enough to reach the floor, so I swung them back and forth as I picked out my pity party decorations. I had just decided on the dramatic sad face teardrop theme when a hand reached out from underneath the bed and grabbed my ankle.

I screamed and tried to pull my ankle away, but the hand holding it was much stronger. "Why didn't you check under the bed?" Edward's muffled voice asked. His thumb caressed my ankle bone as he waited for my answer.

My breathing returned to normal after a minute. "It never occurred to me to check under the bed. Shit, that's where everyone's been hiding, isn't it?" Not once had I checked underneath a bed. How they'd all known to hide there was lost on me though.

A moment later, Edward shimmied out from under his bed and I admired his ass as he did so. He sat on the floor facing me with a huge grin, hair disheveled, and dust bunnies clinging to his shirt. He looked delicious.

"I don't know about everyone, but this is the second time I've chosen this exact hiding spot. I will admit that I sneaked downstairs last time while you were clomping around in your room before you made it to the third floor."

I sighed as I listened to his explanation. I sucked balls at this game and it still made me mad. "I didn't find anyone this time either though. I can't figure out what I'm doing wrong."

Edward's eyes shined through the darkness of the suddenly overcast day. "You found me," he said softly, wrapping his arms around his knees.

I knew he wasn't just talking about the game. I had found him. I had him, but I didn't know what to do with him. I wanted to keep spending time with him, but I had no experience with that. I knew how to have casual sex and that was it. Edward was an enigma, one that I didn't know if I could or would attempt to figure out.

He sensed my discomfort and joined me on the bed. The mood lightened when he nudged me with his shoulder and said, "All you have to do is tag me now, and I'll be 'it' for the next round."

I looked at Edward's face and felt all the stress and confusion of the day settle around me. It was overwhelming. I knew he was just talking about the game, but it didn't feel like it to me. I was pretty sure that I was tired of playing games anyway, but I had no idea how to tell him that. Instead, I was honest as I could have been at that point. "I don't know what I want," I said.

Edward's arm snaked around my waist and he pulled me close until our hips bumped together. "That's ok," he said, his fingers bunching up in the material of my dress. "I do."

I snuggled into his side and we cuddled for a long time, just enjoying being close to each other. His window was open and we watched the rain and lighting beyond his four walls. As his fingers continued to caress my waist, my own pressed against his chest meaningfully. It felt like a different storm had formed inside his bedroom and I wasn't sure that this was what he had meant.

"Is this what you want?" I asked against his chest in clarification. His heart sped up and I gripped his t-shirt tighter.

"This...and more," he replied. His lips found mine in the darkness and none of it seemed to matter anymore. I wanted him and he wanted me. We would work out the details at some point. We had a more pressing matter at hand, currently the erection that was poking me in my thigh.

I didn't have the patience for the slow Edward torture this time. My hands made quick work of his pants and he helpfully pushed them down to his ankles.

Conveniently, I still wasn't wearing underwear so I climbed on top and positioned his cock at my entrance.

His hands gripped my waist tightly, preventing me from impaling myself on him.

"Condom," he gasped, his eyes bright with need.

"I'm clean," I whispered back, "and on the pill." We could have stopped to dig out a condom from somewhere but we were both too desperate in that moment to do anything but join ourselves as basically as possible. I sank down onto his length at the same time that his lips found mine.

His hands were greedy on my body, releasing my breasts from the loose confines of my dress. The straps ended up wrapped around my elbows, but it didn't matter so much when his mouth followed the path of his fingers. I moaned as I held his head close, my movements along his erection slow and steady. Despite my thoughts that I didn't want to take it slow this time, I found that I wasn't in any hurry.

My knees squeezed his hips as each pull on my nipple threatened to break down the delicate dam that I had built inside. I felt like his mouth and tongue were unlocking secrets that I'd never meant to share with anyone. I called his name gently, reverently, and he looked up at me. His lips were moist from the lavish attentions he'd been paying to my breasts and it was nearly my undoing. An unfamiliar emotion swept over me and I pulled his head to mine, letting my lips form the words against his mouth that I couldn't speak aloud. Words that wouldn't come because I didn't know what to say.

I had no way to express myself other than through my body, so that's what I did. We kissed forever, sweet, gentle kisses, as the storm raged on outside. Lighting flickered across his face as I came up for air and I squelched the moment of panic that threatened to ruin what was possibly the most beautiful moment I'd ever had with another human being. Edward was beautiful, both physically and as a person, but I felt unworthy of everything that he offered me. I took it anyway, because I knew how to take. It was the giving that I was trying to work on and I could only hope that he would have the time and patience to let me do it.

My hips sped up and I squeezed around the thick length that was inside of me. I was on the verge of tears and I didn't want to cry. I wasn't unhappy, just too full of emotions. They wanted to leak out like the overspill of the rain gutters on the roof. Edward's hand found my clit and he teased me endlessly, bringing on my orgasm sooner than I had wanted. I arched back as it gripped my body, the waves of pleasure shooting out from my center. My fingers dug into his shoulders as I was

suddenly flipped and pressed into the soft confines of Edward's bed.

My legs spread to accommodate him as he plundered my body. Our mouths met greedily as I coaxed him on to his own release. He came within me moments later, the hot jets of his cum a soothing balm to the fire within me. His cock twitched for a long time until he slipped out and down my body, his head cushioned between my breasts.

I wanted to hold Edward like this forever. His weight on my body was comforting rather than smothering. His hands on my thighs were gentle, not restrictive. His breaths across my nipple were oddly soothing, and anything but suggestive. I'd never felt so at peace before, but much like I'd felt before we'd had sex again - I didn't know what to do about it.

I wanted to trust Edward and let him guide me through whatever was happening between us, but at the same time, it was almost impossible for me to give up that much control. I was afraid of being hurt. And he would have the power to hurt me like I'd never been hurt before.

I licked my lips, tasting him on me, wanting his mouth again, but knowing we needed to do something other than fuck like bunnies all day.

And that one thought gave me hope. It brought a smile to my face and I snuggled closer to Edward as a result. If I could actually want to do something with a guy other than have sex with him, then I was making progress. I wasn't sure what else there was to do, but I might just be more receptive to any ideas that Edward might come up with.

I played with his hair for a few minutes as the storm outside began to move past and quiet down. "I think you're 'it' now," I said playfully. I was pretty sure that he'd been thoroughly tagged. "Do you think the others know why we've both disappeared?"

"Not exactly," he said, and I swore I could feel the pride he radiated. "I suggested that they all hide in Rosalie's apartment and I'd give them the signal once the coast was clear."

I started to laugh and the tremors made me bounce against his chest. "So, they've all been sitting in her apartment, this whole time, waiting for your signal."

He shrugged, the movement barely noticeable. I pushed myself up so I could see his face. He had a huge shit-eating grin and I wanted to kiss him all over again for it.

"You know they're going to be pissed, right?"

Edward pushed himself off my chest and slid up my body to kiss my lips. He pulled away and stared into my eyes. "I don't care."

I giggled against his chest, wondering if I was having some influence over him after all. "How long until they figure it out?"

"Not much longer. My brother will loudly verbalize his displeasure at the discovery. We should probably get dressed soon unless you want him to attempt to catch you off-guard again." Edward rolled off his bed fluidly and grabbed his jeans off the floor.

With a conceding sigh, I wiggled back into my dress and watched Edward wrestle with his jeans again. It made me sad to watch him get dressed. It would be nice to keep him naked for longer than an hour at a time.

"Can I ask you a question?" Edward sat on the bed next to me once we were both decent again.

"Yes," I said reluctantly. I sometimes worried about the things Edward wanted to know about me. There were some pieces of information I just wasn't ready to share with him yet. Someday I would be, but I'd already revealed a large portion of myself to him and I didn't think I could handle much more unwrapping of the Bella present.

"There's no need to look like I've asked to show you my shrunken head collection," he said with a grin. "Maybe this would work better if I put my thoughts into statement format." He pulled us both off the bed and wrapped his arms around my waist. I slipped mine around his neck and hoped he didn't notice the fine tremor that shook me.

"You've mentioned that you don't have much relationship experience, but I truly feel like we have something special here, Bella. I want to date you. I want to take you to dinner. I want to go to the movies with you and wrap my arm around you. I want to drive to Seattle with you and attend a Mariners game. You can meet my parents too." He paused when he felt my body go still at that. "I like you. I want to spend more time with you than just here in this building."

I played with the hairs that curled around the collar of his shirt while I sorted through what he was telling me. Was this what I wanted too? Hadn't I just passed over this hurdle in my brain before we'd tumbled into bed together again? So, why was my chest seizing at the thought of dating Edward? Who wouldn't want to date

him? He was hot and smart and kind and considerate. He was a terrific lover, so there were no complaints there either. What was holding me back?

Of course, he sensed my hesitation and responded accordingly. "One step at a time, remember? I don't mean to overwhelm you. We'll start small. Would you like to go for ice cream after we get the all clear from the police? The Dairy Mart down the street has always been a particular favorite of mine and nothing would give me more pleasure than to share that with you."

Edward's eyes shone brightly with his excitement and I knew that I was giving in more easily than I had planned to. But, somehow, he had discovered my weakness. I couldn't say no to ice cream.

"Alright," I said, sighing dramatically as if it were an effort to agree to get ice cream with him. "But you have to buy me a large cone. I like to lick." I demonstrated with my tongue, just in case my innuendo was too subtle, but Edward's cheeks revealed yet again that he knew exactly what I was talking about.

He took me by surprise when he leaned in to whisper in my ear. "I like to lick too. Peaches and strawberry are my favorite flavors."

My responding giggle was cut off by a bellow from the floor below us. "Here comes Emmett," I said as Edward dragged me out to his living room to await the others.

Emmett's feet boomed up the stairs, two at a time from the sound of it, and he skidded into Edward's apartment with a wild look about him. His eyes found us standing innocently in the living room right before Rosalie, Jasper and finally Alice bounded into the apartment right behind him.

"I knew it!" Emmett laughed, pointing one of his large fingers at Edward. "You were supposed to give us the signal, but instead you decided to take a little hanky-panky time for yourself."

Rosalie shouldered her way next to him and forced his hand down. "Leave them alone. I would have done the same thing."

Emmett puffed his chest out. "Yeah? I'd enjoy that."

Rosalie rolled her eyes. "I never fucking said that it would be with you."

We all laughed and Edward hugged me closer. I noticed that Jasper and Alice

were also standing next to each other, giving each other shy looks. I just shook my head at Alice's ability to act shy at all. I knew if she'd had her way that Jasper would be tied to her bed by now, but he was obviously worth the extra effort she was giving to tone down her scary behavior.

"So, I tagged Edward and he's 'it' now. You guys want to play again?" I was excited about playing some more. Not just hoping for a hot grope in the closet with Edward either. I wanted a chance to try hiding for once. I thought I'd be pretty good at it.

The others started to nod in agreement but we all froze the moment we heard the front door to our building squeak open. I looked around the room and counted heads just to be sure: yep, all six of us were present and accounted for. Several pairs of heavy feet treaded up the steps very quickly.

Emmett was the first to walk out into the hallway. I tugged on Edward's hand when he tried to move past me but he gave me a menacing look that made me drop his hand and step back. He and Jasper stood shoulder to shoulder with Emmett in the hall while I waited inside the apartment with Alice and Rosalie. My heart was beating quickly in my chest as I worried over who was invading our building. Best case scenario was that the apartment manager was coming to tell us the standoff was over and we could go about our lives again. Worst case scenario was that the crazy guy across the street had escaped and decided to take all of us hostage instead. I moved a little closer to Rosalie at this thought. I knew that she would not put up with any shit from Crazy Guy.

A moment later the three guys relaxed as one of the police officers from the parking lot came into view. He was covered in body armor and the gun slung across his shoulder was terrifying but he was a welcome sight after thinking the perpetrator might have escaped.

"I'm Officer Jenks," he said as he looked quickly at all six of us. "We need access to the northwest second floor apartment. The door is locked. Is one of you the tenant?"

I heard Rosalie hiss under her breath as she stepped forward. I was curious to see her interaction with the police after all her diatribes against them. "It's my apartment. Why do you need it?"

Leave it to Rosalie to question an officer of the law. I would have just handed the man my keys and asked him not to get bullet holes in any of my clothes.

"Ma'am, I'm sure you're aware of the situation outside. We believe that we can get

a clear view of the perpetrator from your corner window. We'd like permission to enter your apartment." The officer was all politeness and I gave him extra points for it. The lines of stress across his forehead were in direct contrast to the calm way he'd spoken to Rosalie. I had the feeling that a different kind of officer may have just kicked her door down and be done with her.

Rosalie looked to Emmett, who was nodding his head encouragingly. "Alright," she said with a sigh. She stepped out into the hall with me and Alice close on her heels. As I crossed the threshold my eyes found Edward. I was going to ask where he wanted to wait out this newest development but the look on his face stopped me cold. He looked scared.

"Edward? Are you ok?" I realized then that he wasn't looking at me. He was looking past me to the stairs. I turned, expecting to see Rosalie descending with the police officer. Instead, I found that she had already disappeared but there was someone else standing at the top of the stairs instead. My hands started to shake and I felt Edward's arms supporting mine as he pulled me so my back was against his front.

"Chief Swan," Edward said, the sound of his throat swallowing loud in my ear. "I'd like you to meet someone."

A/N: Oohhhh - how do you think Bella's going to react to this development? Thank you to everyone who reviews - they encourage and motivate me to keep writing. A big thanks as always to my beta Blackdogs. Just a reminder that *Out of Her Head* was nominated for an award - voting is open until August 25th. The link is on my profile. Also, if anyone has any good fic recommendations, please send them my way. I've found that several of the ones I've been reading have ended and I need something to fill their slots. Thanks!

Putting it Together

Disclaimer: I do not own Twilight. At all. But I'm thinking about owning a Rob shower curtain. Is that too weird?

Chapter 9: Putting it Together

I froze as I stared at the man who had fathered me. My hands gripped Edward's forearms tightly and I had to remind myself to keep breathing. I didn't know what Edward was up to, but he knew I wasn't ready to do this. I would yell at him later about it. After we'd escaped the searching looks of Charlie Swan.

"This is my friend, Bella. Bella, this is Chief Swan." I heard Edward's voice behind me but I was still frozen in place. My arms were not going to let go of him for anything at this point.

Fortunately, Charlie Swan seemed distracted. "It's nice to meet you," he said with a brief look at me. He immediately mistook my discomfort for fear. "Edward, perhaps the two of you should stay up here out of the way. This should all be over soon." Charlie turned away and headed back down the stairs to join his cronies in Rosalie's apartment.

I turned on Edward as soon as he was gone, shaking his grip off. "What was that?" I whispered angrily. "You knew I wasn't ready."

Edward pursed his lips at me as Jasper and Alice began to slink past us towards his apartment. "He doesn't realize who you are yet. The opportunity presented itself to get the initial meeting out of the way and I took it. There will be plenty of time later for you to explain your connection to the man."

"I don't need you making decisions for me, Edward. If I'd wanted to introduce myself, I would have. I don't like you taking that out of my hands." I was upset, still shaking from the encounter, but I was also mad. I felt like Edward had ripped a small carpet out from underneath my feet and expected me to sprout wings and fly.

Edward shook his head in disbelief. "I didn't think you'd react like this, honestly. He's on the job, he probably won't remember this encounter later, and I was just trying to help you over this first, small hurdle. I think you're being irrational and over-emotional."

A red haze blocked my vision. Despite the closeness Edward and I had gained over the day, I was ready to throttle him. The only thing worse he could have said to me was accuse me of PMSing. It was a typical man statement and I was determined to let him have it.

"I'll show you over-emotional," I said as I took a step forward. Alice jumped between us and pushed me back.

"Bella, I'm sure Edward didn't mean it and he will apologize at any moment." I stared at Alice in disbelief. Did she think she could see the future or something? The smug look on Edward's face told me more than words that he wasn't going to apologize anytime soon.

Edward's spokesman joined in the conversation. "Edward didn't realize the awkward position he just placed you in, Bella. He was just trying to be helpful but understands that his tactics might have been heavy-handed." Jasper placed a hand on Edward's shoulder and squeezed it. Edward's smug look changed into a grimace under the pressure.

"That's right," Edward said, his voice a little higher than normal. "I apologize. Please forgive me."

I opened my mouth in surprise, but my words failed me. I wasn't used to apologies, even ones that had been forced. Edward did look sorry though, so I was willing to let it slide. "I forgive you," I said quietly.

Looking smug themselves, Alice and Jasper skipped into his apartment and shut the door behind them. They were probably going to spend an hour congratulating themselves on bartering our treaty and then spend the rest of their time doing something boring, like talking to each other.

I turned to Edward and was surprised to see that he still looked very proud of himself. "I'd do the same thing again though, Bella. You said that you'd let me help you and if you really meant that, then you need to relinquish some control. I'm not trying to rule you - I'm just trying to help you see other available options."

I sighed in defeat. I didn't want to fight with him, but I needed him to understand my point of view. "That's fine, but when you do something for my own good without asking me first, you're taking away my options. You knew how I felt and you jumped in with the introduction anyway. It makes it seem like you don't care about hurting my feelings." My voice whispered over the word "feelings." I never talked about feelings and I was getting dangerously close to admitting that I had some for

Edward. I wasn't ready for that. We were still operating under our one step at time policy. That had to be step 128 at least.

Edward took a step closer to me so our voices wouldn't carry down the stairs. "You have a point and I am sorry for taking away your options. But, think about how much easier it will be now to reveal yourself to Charlie. You're no longer an unknown entity. The next time you meet, you can explain the situation and listen to his side of the story."

"If he has one," I replied sullenly. I knew I was acting like a brat now, but it was hard to be rational when I'd just been standing mere feet from my sole reason for moving to Forks. And truthfully, I was mad at myself for being too chicken to just throw myself out there and tell him who I am.

Edward wrapped his arms around me and pulled me close to his chest. "There's always two sides to every story. The chief is a good man. You should hear him out. Besides, I know you want to so it shouldn't be that difficult."

I nodded my head as his words washed over me. Just like the rain had washed away the day's grime and dirt, I wanted Edward's words to wash away the fear and anger that I felt inside. I did want answers. I did want to hear Charlie Swan out. I did want to grow a large set in order to do all this.

"What should we do now?" I asked, pushing aside any decisions for the time being. I didn't have to look for my balls today. There was still time. Time, in this case, was my constant companion.

"I'm actually curious about what's happening downstairs. If you want, you can stay in my apartment and snoop through my closet. There's a few photo albums from my college days on the bookshelf as well that might amuse you. I'll come back up once I've learned something useful." Edward took my hand and rubbed my knuckles gently as he spoke. Apparently, like the chief, he thought that I was afraid too. Little did he know that Bella Dwyer was no scaredy cat.

"I want to come with you. Maybe we can grill the cops for some answers. I'm more than ready to get out of this building."

Edward chuckled. "Has my company been that horrible? I thought you'd been having a good time earlier," he added with a waggle of his eyebrows.

I rolled my eyes at his mock insecurities. He knew exactly how much of a good time we'd both had earlier. "Actually, I'm just looking forward to some ice cream.

This really sexy guy offered to take me for a cone and I don't want to keep him waiting."

I laughed a little at my own cheesiness but it seemed to make Edward happy. He stood a little straighter and puffed out his chest. "That's one lucky man. It sounds like a fun date."

We both froze at his use of the word that had sent me into a tizzy earlier. This time, it didn't make me want to run for the Canadian border. Rather, I felt a warm glow inside my chest at the thought of going on a date with Edward. "I think it will be fun," I said as I stared into his eyes. I wanted him to know that I wasn't going to run from him any longer. My father - yes. Edward - no. I wasn't ready to announce to the world that we were a couple, but I could definitely see us spending more time together in the future. By the smile on Edward's face, he must have felt the same way.

At that moment, Emmett appeared at the top of the steps. I had to hand it to him, he'd really improved throughout the course of the day and I had the feeling we owed it all to the small attentions that Rosalie had been paying him. He had on a shirt and shorts. He wasn't leering at me in an obvious way - though he had looked at my boobs the moment he'd spotted us, but that was to be expected. Best of all, he hadn't tried to peek underneath my door in hours. I was more thankful to Rosalie than I'd realized if she was the reason for all these upgrades.

"Hey," Emmett said in greeting as he slapped Edward awkwardly on the back. "The cops kicked me out of Rosie's apartment so I thought I'd hang with you." His head swiveled back and forth for a moment. "Where's Jasper and Alice?"

I pointed at Jasper's door. "They're braiding each other's hair and discussing the last episode of Oprah," I said with a smirk on my face. Ok, so Jasper wasn't gay like I had assumed at first. That didn't mean I couldn't continue to mock his metrosexuality.

Emmett just nodded his head like that was a totally plausible situation. I cocked my eyebrow at Edward, who sighed heavily. "You really don't know Jasper at all if you think that's what they're doing. We'll have to double with them some time so you can get to know him better."

"Double?" Emmett asked, looking between us. "Make it a triple. Rosie and I will come too. Well, so long as it's before her shift starts and I don't have class or training."

I scrunched my nose in displeasure. "This keeps getting more complicated," I said out of the side of my mouth to Edward. I was trying to pretend that Emmett couldn't hear me, but I knew he could. Whispering had never been one of my strengths. "Ice cream is just you and me, right?"

"Ice cream! Fuck yeah! The Dairy Mart has the sweetest Rocky Road in town. We should go before Rosie has to leave for work," Emmett said excitedly as he shifted from side to side.

I frowned at Edward who only shrugged in response. "We can't go until the police give us the ok," Edward reminded him.

Emmett waved his hand in the air. "They've got it all wrapped up. The cops can see that guy from Rosie's window. They think he's using a water gun so they're getting ready to send a team in."

I grabbed Edward's forearm in excitement. "Really? That's awesome news!" I glanced down at my dress, wondering what I should change into for my first date in forever. I had a black and white skirt that I really liked, and I could wear my blue top with it, and I wouldn't need to wear a bra which would be handy for Edward later...

I turned to Edward and gave him my sweetest smile. At least, I hoped it was more sweet and less I-like-the-way-you-jump-my-bones. "I think I'm going to change if we're going to get out of here soon. I'll come back up in a few minutes."

Edward nodded his head and I left him and his brother conversing in the hallway. This time, it was my turn to skip down the steps as I hurried to get ready for my date. The thought of going out with Edward gave me happy chills all over my body. I was pleasantly sated after our fun naked times and I was just looking forward to spending more time in his presence. Edward was incredibly easy to be with, when he wasn't pushing me into incredibly emotional situations that I wasn't ready for. Other than that, I liked the way he made me feel. I felt like an endless road full of possibilities lay before me. On this path, the sun shone brightly overhead and every path led to something positive. I wanted more of that, but I also wanted to be able to do the same for Edward. That was going to be a work in progress because I had no experience in making other people feel good about themselves. The important thing was that I was willing to try and Edward seemed to have plenty of patience while I worked it out.

The door to Rosalie's apartment stood wide open. I peered into her living room a little timidly given her past reluctance to share her apartment with me. It consisted

of the basics: sofa, TV, a couple lamps, some pictures on the wall. The one item that really stood out was the large telescope she had propped in front of the window that overlooked the parking lot.

I'll admit it - my curiosity was piqued. With a quick glance around the room, I darted into her apartment towards the mysterious telescope. I could hear her talking to the police officer in her bedroom, so I felt comfortable enough that I had a few minutes before she discovered me uninvited in her living room. My palms started to sweat as I neared the innocent-looking stargazing instrument. I'd done some weird things in my life, but I liked to think that there was a line that I wouldn't cross somewhere along the way. Sneaking into Rosalie's apartment crossed that line but now that I was standing right in front of the telescope, there was no going back.

I'm not sure why I was so convinced that she used it for something other than identifying constellations or checking out meteor showers. Somehow I just knew that Rosalie had a secret she was keeping - one that she'd done her best to keep from me all week. The rest of the building must have already been in on it because she had them locked in her apartment during hide and seek with her, unless they believed whatever lameass story she came up with to explain it away.

Rosalie's voice raised a notch from the other room, perhaps in anger, and I took as a sign to speed up my recon mission and get the hell out of there. I took a deep breath and bent over to look through the eyepiece at whatever had held Rosalie's attention the last time she'd been "stargazing."

A loud snort escaped from my nose before I could stop it. I couldn't help it after seeing exactly what she'd been examining. On the other side of the parking lot, two buildings down from the crazy guy with the water gun, was the destination of Rosalie's telescope. Not the sky above it. The second floor window. Specifically, the window with the half-naked man lifting barbells as I stared at him and silently applauded his efforts. Her telescope must have been top of the line, because the view was so focused and clear that I could see the sweat dripping down his forehead and the rippling of his biceps. Any other time and I would have been standing at his doorstep just as soon as the cops gave the all clear. He was that fine of a specimen. However, I had an even better example of manhood waiting for me upstairs and I was no longer interested in chasing after Mr. Muscles.

"What the fuck, Bella?" came Rosalie's voice from right behind me. I jumped, knocking the telescope so it no longer stared into the muscle-bound neighbor's apartment, and faced an angry-looking Rosalie.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, crossing her arms over her chest.

"I...uh...saw that your door was open and wanted to see if you needed any help," I said as I frantically tried to right her telescope. I aimed it back out the open window but the damage was already done. I felt bad for invading her space, but it seemed like I wasn't the only one guilty of that. And it looked like Emmett wasn't the only peeping tom in the building. "I guess you and Emmett have more in common than I thought," I added in the hopes of deflecting her intense scrutiny off of me and back onto her.

"My sister's studying astronomy in school," Rosalie explained calmly. "She gave that to me as a Christmas present."

"Uh huh," I said with a smirk. This must have been the story she'd given the others earlier. "And why do you need to 'study' the half-naked guy across the street?"

Her eyebrows arched at my question but she took me by surprise when she pushed me out of the way and put the telescope back into position. "Is he back? He's been gone all week - I was getting concerned." She stared through the eyepiece as I gaped at her hunched form.

"You're not going to pretend that you haven't been spying on people?" I asked as I stood next to her.

Rosalie continued to stare through the telescope. I looked through the window towards Mr. Muscles' apartment but couldn't see that far. "I'm not going to waste my time trying to convince you of some lie that I would be forced to make up on the spot. I don't need to make excuses for what I do and really, you should be thanking me. What I do is a civic duty to the entire apartment complex. There are some sick fucks that move in here and sometimes it's up to me to check them out and make sure only the good people are moving in."

Rosalie straightened away from the telescope and I followed her into the kitchen. She kept looking behind her like she was afraid the cop in her bedroom would appear at any moment. "Look, these cops don't know what they're doing. I just like to keep an eye on everyone and make sure they're not complete fucking freaks. The ones that are...well, I leave anonymous tips sometimes. Other times I alert Tyler in the management office. Like I said - I'm just doing my civic duty."

"But doesn't that seem, gee, I don't know, overbearing, invasive and disrespectful of people's basic human rights?" I was a little surprised by Rosalie. I didn't know her that well, but this seemed like a pretty crappy thing to do.

She slammed her fist down on the counter, startling us both. "You know what's invasive and overbearing? Having to watch your little sister being dragged away to foster care because the cops say you're not an adult and not allowed to take care of her. And then waiting two years just to turn eight-fucking-teen only to find out that the wonderful, caring 'home' she'd been left in was run by a bitch who only wanted the state's check and didn't care if your sister had clean clothes to wear to school or a pencil to write with so she could do her fucking homework every night. Maybe if she'd had a neighbor who gave two shits about what was going on in her apartment my sister could have been moved some place better. So, yeah, what I do might not make you feel all warm and fuzzy, but somebody's got to do the tough, shitty work. It might as well be me." Rosalie turned her back to me when she was done her speech, her shoulders heaving up and down from the emotions that she'd just spewed.

Well, fuck me. What could I possibly say to all that? She made sense, in her roundabout Rosalie way. Peeping in on other peoples lives was invasive, but if someone had been looking out for her sister, then maybe she would have had a better living situation until Rosalie was legally allowed to take her. "How's your sister now?" I asked, sensing that she wanted to talk about her.

Rosalie turned back around and gave me a smile half-smile. It was the first real look of happiness I'd seen on her face. "She's great. Kate's a sophomore but she's already got her life planned through her PhD thesis. Really fucking smart." Rosalie pursed her lips and added quietly, "I'm so fucking proud of her."

Hesitantly, I placed my hand on her shoulder. "You should be," I said. "You should be proud of you too. She didn't raise herself, and I know that you're putting her through school. Not everyone sticks by their family like that. You're a good person, Rosalie."

She shrugged her shoulders in discomfort and I removed my hand. I knew just how she felt. I didn't like getting compliments either. But, sometimes you needed to hear that you weren't a total fuckup. I had the feeling that much like me, Rosalie hadn't been on the receiving end of much praise within the past few years. Our situations weren't exactly alike, but there were enough similarities for me to feel like I could relate to her a little better. We both had less than typical families and were trying to make it work, on our own for the most part, the very best way we could.

"The Chief's a good guy," she said after a moment while she studied the Formica counter that she leaned against. "I don't know what the deal is there, but for a cop, he's an ok guy. You don't need to be afraid of him."

I tapped my fingers against my leg. Yet another person telling me that Charlie Swan was a good person. It was getting harder to believe the worst about him, and harder still to keep away from him. I wanted answers, and it looked like the only way I was going to get them was if I actually talked to him.

"How do you know you're doing the right thing - with your sister?" I asked as we both stared off into space. Rosalie had made some tough decisions when she was a teenager. I was curious how she knew what to do.

"I just know. I feel it?" She looked at me then to make sure I was following along. I nodded and she continued. "At first, when our parents died and we only had each other, I knew that we had to stick together and I just went from there. Almost every decision I've made since then has been about keeping us together. My job, where I lived, where she went to high school and then college - they all spiral out from just knowing that I could get through anything so long as Kate was by my side. Family's important - right? Those are our most basic ties and they're important. Fuck - I'd be lost if it weren't for that."

And it hit me just as she said that. She was right - I was pretty fucking lost. Or at least, I had been. I'd roamed for years not knowing what was wrong with me, just that something was missing. What if it was all this family garbage that Rosalie was dishing out? What if that's what had been missing. Sure, I had my mom, but she'd never really completely been there. She'd done her best and I couldn't hate her for it. But, what if I needed to complete my only other family tie in order to not feel so lost?

I'd come to Forks to meet my dad, but there was more to it than that. Yeah, I wanted answers, but I realized that I wanted more than that. I wanted a relationship with him. I wanted to get to know him and discover the things, if there were any at all, that we might have in common. I wanted to build that bond with him, even if it meant that there might be some hurt along the way. Hell, I was used to the hurt. I could take it. And if that was all that was holding me back, then I was more than fucking ready to put myself out there and try to get to know him.

I felt my new-found confidence flow through me, filling my veins with purpose, and straightening my bones with pride. I was Bella Dwyer and I was going to meet my dad. Edward had been right - I just needed a small push in the right direction. I was ready. I could do this.

"Bella? Are you ok?" Rosalie waved her hand in front of my face. "You're shaking."

Ok, so I was still nervous as hell, but I was fucking determined. "I'm going to meet

my dad," I told her.

Rosalie laughed and I instantly felt better, some of the nerves draining out of me at her unusual outburst. "That's great, but you might want to wait until after he's off the job. He really doesn't need to be distracted by your whole reveal right now."

I nodded my head enthusiastically. "You're absolutely right. It can wait until later." I felt a little outside myself at that point, but I knew that I was doing the right thing. Finally - I felt like I was doing something positive.

"Ms. Hale?" a voice called from the direction of her bedroom. Rosalie's eyes narrowed as she tapped the counter twice before turning and hurrying out of the kitchen. I followed behind slowly, letting my recent revelations sink into all the cells of my brain.

A string of expletives preceded Rosalie from her room. "Morons, they're all fucking morons," Rosalie muttered as she crossed the room angrily towards the apartment door.

"What's wrong?" I called after her, causing her to stop mid-stride.

"His comm device isn't working and I'm expected to play fetch and carry for him."

Uh-oh. That didn't sound good. Her eyes were already narrowing and I was afraid that she was about to launch into bitch mode again. "I can get it for him. What does he need?" If I could prevent a bitchsplosion, the whole building would thank me.

She laughed and propped a fist on her hip. "I don't think you're ready for this," she said.

I rolled my eyes. "Ready for what?" I could handle fetching a bottle of water or whatever the cop needed. I wasn't completely incompetent.

"He needs the Chief," she said, skipping any attempts to make the request pretty for me.

"Oh," I said as my shoulders slumped in defeat. "Chief Swan," I added for clarification.

She nodded and waited for me to make a decision.

It only took me a moment. I'd made my decision in the kitchen. I just had to say

the words and then make my feet move. "I'll go get him."

Rosalie continued to stand and stare at me while my feet set like concrete to her living room floor.

"Ms. Hale? Quickly please," the cop called out again, causing me to shuffle awkwardly towards her door.

My heart pounded in my chest as I stumbled over the doorframe that I'd never tripped over before and out into the hall. The hall itself suddenly seemed as long as a football field, the stairs leading down to the front door as numerous as those in the Empire State Building. I took a deep breath and shook my head, determined to do this. All I had to do was summon him. I wasn't allowed out of the building. It would take a few seconds. He'd come in, pass by me and hurry up the stairs to help out Officer Jenks. Piece of cake.

I swallowed and the dryness of my mouth made me breathe even harder. I held onto the wall as I walked down the short flight of stairs and hung onto the glass door that protected me from the outside world. The etched number "4" was in my line of sight again and I stepped to the side so I could locate the Chief. I instantly felt better when I thought of him just as the Chief. He was just a man with a job and someone needed his help. Nothing else.

My eyes scanned the parking lot, looking for the blue windbreaker he'd been wearing earlier. There were a lot of blue windbreakers in the parking lot. Fortunately, his said Forks in large letters across the back and he was very helpfully standing just feet away, sucking down another bottle of water.

I took a deep breath and pushed the door open a crack. "Chief Swan," I called out, just loud enough for him to hear me. My nerves were threatening to make me scream his name but luckily my brain had kicked into survival mode and had prevented such a thing from happening.

The Chief's head turned at my voice and he stared at me with a look of confusion and annoyance. I inched back into my building but waved him over anyway. He said something quietly to the men he'd been standing with and then made his way up the outside steps and inside the door.

"Miss, you're not supposed to be out here now," he reminded me gently.

"I know," I said with a squeak, already frightened since he wasn't following my plan like I thought he would. "They told us earlier today to stay inside the building

and that's what we've all done, for the most part I think, but then the power cut off and it's wicked hot in here now and I'm a little afraid that all my food's going to go bad which would just suck because I went to the grocery store yesterday and I won't get paid again until next Friday and I guess I'll have to live off canned green beans until then otherwise and oh shit I'm rambling. Sorry." I took a deep breath and grimaced at the pitiful look the Chief was giving me.

He shoved his hands into the pockets of his jacket while he looked me up and down. I'm sure I looked like a freak and I promised myself that I would try and look respectable the next time I had a conversation with this man.

"It's ok to be scared," he said with a brief smile hiding underneath his moustache. "This should be wrapping up soon. Now, it's best to stay inside alright? I've got to get back to my men." He turned and opened the door to leave and I realized that I wasn't done with him yet.

"Wait!" I called out before he could step out. "Officer Jenks asked me to come get you. He said his comm is out and he needs your help with something." I bit my lip as I willed my nerves away and kept reminding myself that this was just the Chief. Nothing more.

He stepped back into building and I was saved from having to throw myself out the door after him. His eyes narrowed on me as we stood facing each other across the landing. "Where did you say you lived before?" he asked as his eyes continued to scan all my features.

Shit. "I didn't. Say, that is, where I came from. I lived in Phoenix before I moved here," I told him hoping he wouldn't remember that my mom had family there at one point. The last thing I wanted was for him to recognize me and put all the puzzle pieces together right now. I was ready, but I didn't want him to find out like this - accidentally while a criminal was being taken down just outside. I had pictured this conversation taking place at a coffee shop over a slice of pie, with Edward sitting nearby just in case.

"You look familiar," he said as his eyes lingered on my nose and cheekbones.

I should. I'm your daughter. I thought to myself. *Please don't let him figure this out now. Please.*

"What did you say your name was?" he asked again, more quietly this time.

Oh, fuck. It was all over. He knew, he knew, he knew. My stomach dropped and

my palms started to sweat. I licked my lips and somehow found some spare oxygen to state my name to him. "Bella. I'm Bella," I said as I broke eye contact and stared at my bare feet. I couldn't look at him. I just couldn't.

I'd never believed in divine intervention until that moment. But somehow, an interruption appeared just when I needed one. Rosalie appeared at the top of the stairs, full bitch face on. "What the fuck, Bella? You knew it was urgent. Chief, he needs you upstairs," she huffed, giving me the evil stink eye.

"Right," the Chief said as he took a step away from me and started to head up the stairs.

And I knew I couldn't just let him go. We both knew that there was something more to us than strangers whose paths had randomly crossed. I had one puzzle piece and I hoped like hell that he had the matching one. "Chief?" I said before he could disappear.

He turned back, his hand resting on the banister. I saw a flicker of emotions cross his face and knew that I was interfering with his job, but I had to say it now. "Can I talk to you later?" I bit my lip again and he stared at it like it was a snake waiting to bite him.

He took a deep breath and nodded once before disappearing down the hall and into Rosalie's apartment.

"What was all that?" Rosalie asked as she stared at my shaking form.

"I think he recognized me," I said as I leaned against the glass door for support. "Um, would you mind getting Edward for me? I don't feel so good."

I felt like I was going to throw up and I knew that Edward would know how to help me. Emotionally, I felt drained. I needed his comfort and support and I didn't mind admitting his help as well.

I made it to my apartment door before Edward had appeared. Rosalie and Emmett stood behind him with matching worry faces. "What's wrong?" Edward asked as he helped me into my apartment. I heard him say something quietly to Emmett and Rosalie before he closed the door and settled us onto the broken remnants of my couch. I sat on his lap and he stroked my back very sweetly.

I explained to him my encounter with the Chief and he nodded encouragingly as I told him how I'd arrived at my decision to go through with talking to him.

"I think he knows," I said as I cuddled even further into Edward's strong arms.

"Chief Swan's very intuitive. It's part of the reason why he's so good at his job. You're still going to have to explain it to him though. He might be able to formulate a guess, but it's up to you to confirm his hypotheses."

"I know," I muttered.

"I'm very proud of you," he said as we sat quietly together.

My chest swelled at his words and I turned and placed a kiss of thanks on his cheek. I couldn't remember a time that someone had told me that they were proud of me. The casing around my heart thawed just a little, and I knew that it was possible that I could have very strong feelings for Edward. Were they love? I didn't know, but I was finally at the point where I felt like I could actually take the chance and see if that was what was in store for us.

Just then, several things happened at once. The building hummed to life as our electronics, air conditioning units, and appliances powered on. A loud cheer came from the direction of the parking lot, and the other residents of our building busted into my apartment like they had free rein. However, they had such good news that I couldn't even find it in myself to yell at them for trespassing.

"The standoff's over! They got the guy to come out and surrender!" Emmett announced as he wrapped an arm around Rosalie.

Edward helped me off his lap and we both stood to celebrate with our neighbors. "That's terrific news," Edward said as he squeezed my hand.

Alice twirled around the room. "We can go back to our normal lives now," she said as she spun right into Jasper's waiting arms.

I looked at Edward, his handsome smiling face inches from my own. "I don't think I want my brand of normal any more," I said as I nestled closer to his body.

Edward gave my hand another squeeze. "I'm happy with whatever you want," he said, and I knew that he meant it. Already, he knew that I wanted so much more than what I'd been willing to allow myself to have. The future seemed open and bright and endless to me, and I was glad that Edward was there with me while I faced it for the first time with a smile on my face.

A knock on my door brought us all out of our own mini-celebrations. Chief Swan

stood awkwardly in the hallway and I realized that I had one more thing to do before I could step out into that open road. One last item to check off my list before I could finally move forward.

"Are you ready to talk now?" he asked. He looked just as nervous as I felt. This was going to be difficult for both of us, but it needed to be done.

With a final squeeze from Edward, I nodded my head. "Yeah. I'm ready," I told the man who was my father.

A/N: As always, thank you for the reviews! I enjoy reading what everyone thinks about the story, the characters, and how it's progressing. Just one more chapter and then we're done! Thanks also to everyone who sent me a story recommendation. I posted them all on the forum just in case anyone else is looking for a new story to read.

Hugs and waves to my beta Blackdogs who really puts the awesome in awesomeiciousness.

A Checkered Past, A Brighter Future

Disclaimer: I don't own Twilight.

Chapter 10: A Checkered Past, A Brighter Future

With my head up and my chin quivering only a little bit, I followed Charlie Swan down the steps and out the front door of my apartment building. He held the door open for me as we descended the remaining steps to the sidewalk out front, and I took my first deep breaths of fresh, non-apartment air. As usual, the rain had cleaned the air out a bit, bringing in a bit of the ocean and a bit of the moss from the forests. It was a smell unlike any I'd encountered in my previous travels, and I really liked it.

"Let's walk this way," the Chief said as he indicated to his right. For a brief moment, I'd forgotten why I was outside at all. As I stared into the face of my father, I couldn't ignore my reason for being in Forks any longer.

I followed him down the sidewalk, away from the building that had caused the day's problems. Three state police cruisers zoomed past as we turned the corner at the end of the block. The Chief waved stoically at each one and we were once again left on our own. I wasn't sure where we were headed, but the Chief didn't seem anxious to start our conversation. For that matter, I wasn't anxious either.

"So, you caught the guy in the other building?" I asked nervously as we rounded the backside of the apartment complex and walked along a narrow tree-lined road that didn't seem to get much traffic.

Charlie cleared his throat. "Yes, he was apprehended. I'm not allowed to say much about it, but we were all content that the matter was resolved quickly and without any casualties."

"Quickly?" I asked, looking at him out of the corner of my eye. "It's been almost ten hours."

"I've seen hostage situations go on for days, usually with less than pleasant results."

"Here? In Forks?" I asked, slightly incredulous.

"I don't mean to give you the wrong impression about Forks, especially since you're new to town, but we have seen our share of crimes." His eyes searched my face, but didn't seem to find what he was looking for.

I was, however, distracted by what he'd just said. "Wait - how did you know that I was new to town? I don't think Edward mentioned that earlier."

"It's a small town, Bella. It's big news when a young woman moves in that no one's met before," he replied, with another glance my way. I couldn't ignore his determined looks at me anymore.

I took a deep breath and dove in. "Do you know who I am?" I asked, looking anywhere but at him. My heart pounded in my chest as I waited for his answer.

His hand brushed my shoulder and I jumped at the contact. He frowned at my reaction but took a step back. "I do," he said quietly.

We both stopped walking and turned to face each other. "Oh," I said in my own special, eloquent way. "So you've known who I am since I got here a week ago."

He rubbed his chin as looked anxiously at the tree behind me. "Actually, no. Even the police chief needs time to gather all the evidence before coming up with a plausible explanation. Edward called you 'Bella' earlier, you have the nervous habit of gnawing on your lip, just like your mom, you bear a strong resemblance to my sister - it took me a while to put it all together. And even then, I wasn't sure that I was right. Until now."

I blew out a breath, suddenly more nervous than before. Here I stood with my father, a moment I'd imagined hundreds of times, but I didn't know what to do next. The best plan I came up with was to just start from the beginning.

"What happened - all those years ago? Why did you just disappear from my life?" My mouth was dry and it felt like peanut butter was keeping my tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth. I pushed the words out anyway in a mad rush.

The Chief changed positions, swiping his hand across a head that was mostly devoid of hair. He rubbed it like he missed what used to be there. "How much has your mother told you?" he asked, wincing a little.

I barked out a laugh and it was just as dry as my throat felt. "Hardly anything. She left Forks with me when I was an infant. That's all I know." It was an embarrassingly small amount of information. I cringed, realizing that some of the blame was my

own. I'd never tried very hard to weasel information out of my mom over the years. For so long, she'd acted like our lives pre-Palm Beach hadn't mattered and she'd always changed the subject the few times I'd asked any questions.

He sighed and shoved his hands into his pockets, shoulders all hunched and awkward. "It sounds like we have a lot of ground to cover."

I crossed my arms and stared him down, waiting for him to continue. I had nothing else to contribute. Yet.

"I can't believe she didn't tell you more," he muttered then stood a little straighter. "If I'd known that she was going to keep you completely in the dark, I would have tried harder to contact you. I never took Renee for the type of person to just pretend like what we had..."

"Wait," I said, interrupting what seemed to be like the beginning of a rant against my mother. "What do you mean 'tried harder to contact' me? Did you know *how* to contact me?" This thought had never occurred to me before.

The moustache above his lip twitched. "I did. Your mom thought it best if..."

I felt like my body was suddenly a big ball of rage and hurt. I didn't give him the chance to continue. "You've kept tabs on me all these years, but could never be bothered to contact me? That's just terrific news. Because all this time, I thought that Mom had run away with me and you just didn't know how to find us and that's why I had to grow up without knowing you. Fucking spectacular, *Dad*." I sneered the name at him and turned away, not wanting him to see the tears that had begun to form.

"Bella, it wasn't like that. Please let me explain it to you. Maybe we should go back to the house and discuss things there," he pleaded with me.

"Oh - *the house* - I guess that's the house that I lived in for the first six weeks of my life?" I really had no desire to go there and see the home that he'd made for himself without me or my mom. *Fuck* - what if he had a new wife and kids? I really couldn't handle that yet. I was not ready to meet Stepmommy and any siblings I might have.

The Chief - Charlie - grabbed my elbow then and held on when I tried to shake him off. "I can't believe she never told you," he muttered, his eyes growing cold as he stared me down.

In that moment, I saw the face of the town's chief of police. He'd been open and talking freely with me so far, but he seemed distant and angry upon the realization that my mother had left me fairly clueless about him. However, his large, tanned hand held tight to my elbow. His eyes slowly softened once more and the moment passed. He gently released me and I stayed put. "Never told me what, exactly?" I asked, merging the image of my father that I've always had in my head with the man standing before me.

"The house burned down when you were an infant." Charlie subtly shifted away from me. "You and Renee were home alone at the time. Damn - I never expected to be the one telling you this story." His eyes fell to my face again but I could only shake my head. Mom had never mentioned a fire.

Charlie took a deep breath and let it out slowly. His hand took the route from chin to head to pocket again. "I was on duty that night. I was the newest deputy on the force and I constantly got stuck with the worst shifts. I especially hated it that night because you'd been extra fussy all week and I knew Renee needed more help than I was able to give her. You weren't sleeping, so she wasn't sleeping. It was a difficult adjustment period for all of us."

"Mom did like to complain about how fussy I was when I was a baby. She said she should have known then that I would give her trouble later on," I said, picturing my mom standing in the yellow kitchen at Phil's house, grounding me yet again for sneaking out. I decided not to tell Charlie that part of the story.

"You were the most beautiful baby," he said, his eyes going all gooey and soft. "If I could have gotten away with bringing you to the station with me, I would have. Renee needed the sleep, but it just wasn't possible. I guess it was a good thing you were there with her that night after all. Things might have ended quite differently," Charlie said mysteriously.

My ears perked up as I sensed that we were getting to something important. "What happened?"

Charlie cleared his throat and started pacing up and down the sidewalk in front of me. "It was almost Halloween, so we'd been dealing with the usual toilet paper and egging pranks. However, a few days prior, I'd busted a group of college boys passing through town for smoking pot on the football field behind the high school. That wasn't that abnormal, but it was unusual because one of the boys' father was a state public official and he wanted the matter hushed up." Charlie paused in his pacing and stared at his feet before continuing. "That's just not how I operate. Anyway, the boy and his friends came back a few days later looking for a way to make my life a

little more difficult."

My gut clenched as my mind caught up with where Charlie's story was headed. "They set the house on fire?"

Charlie huffed out a breath. "They set the garbage cans that were stored next to the house on fire. What they didn't know was that one of the cans wasn't actually garbage. I used it to store cans of paint because your mom was on a painting kick - she wanted all the rooms painted new colors. Something about brightening the house up some for you. But, the smell bothered her so we were doing one room at a time and I had to store the cans outside."

"And the fire spread to the house?"

Charlie nodded. "The paint we had was highly flammable. I shouldn't have kept it so close to the house. It was the middle of the night when Renee smelled the smoke. She was only awake because you'd been so fussy. She ran outside with you and watched in horror as the house burned to the ground. It went quickly - the house was old and just gobbled up the flames. I got there right behind the fire trucks and Renee was a wreck."

"Seems understandable," I muttered. I felt more childish than usual, wanting to stomp my foot and pout. I was having a hard time believing Charlie's story. My mom had never mentioned any of this. Not once.

"We lost everything, but I was more than willing to trade our material goods for your lives. Renee...well, she just couldn't handle it. She told me a few days later that she couldn't stay in Forks anymore. She didn't feel safe and was afraid that there would be more incidents that would put the two of you in danger. I begged her not to go." Charlie's voice got quiet.

"What happened next?" I asked, feeling a little sick at this peek into my mother's life that I'd never known about. She and I were definitely going to have a chat once I got things straightened out with Charlie. I was done with sweeping history under the rug and pretending it didn't exist.

"She left. She had a cousin who lived in Phoenix that you both went to stay with. I let her go, thinking the change would do her some good. She could think of it as a vacation and then once I'd found us a new place to live, she would come back."

"We didn't stay in Phoenix very long," I said, remembering the bits and pieces of my infancy that Mom had relayed. "We moved to Florida just a few months later."

"I know," Charlie said, his voice tinged with bitterness. "Believe me - I know. She sent me divorce papers at the same time she arrived in Florida. It took me a few weeks to track the two of you down."

"You came after us?" I looked at his face, seeing the strain that our conversation was beginning to take on him evident in the lines across his forehead and around his eyes.

"Of course I came after you," he said as his eyes drilled into mine with conviction. "You two were my family. I couldn't get over how much you'd grown already. I hated that I'd missed so much in such a short period of time. I told her that if she didn't want to come back to Forks that I'd stay in Florida with the two of you."

"But..." I said, remembering one of only a few things she'd ever told me about my father. "Mom said that you never wanted to live anywhere other than Forks." I was beginning to see that she'd been feeding me half-truths for my entire life. Why would she do that? My mother might not have been the best that she could, but I'd always felt like I could trust her to tell me the truth. If Charlie's story was true, then she'd hid more from me than I'd ever even thought possible. A father who had actually wanted me. I would have given my entire NKOTB poster collection for that. Yep - mommy dearest and I were overdue for a long talk.

Charlie scoffed, "That much is true. I didn't want to live anywhere else. But I would have moved anywhere with the two of you. In the time we were apart your mom decided that being married to a police deputy was too dangerous. She needed a quiet, peaceful life and didn't want to raise you anywhere where people tried to burn her house down."

"So, you just gave up? That was the end of the road for you? You just cut off all contact with your child and washed your hands of us?" I was hurt at this development. I'd never wanted to believe that I'd been abandoned, but it sure seemed that way. No matter my original intentions behind moving to Forks, I had hoped to develop a relationship with my father. I had held out hope that he would want that too. I couldn't figure out a way to have any type of relationship with a man who would just ignore his own offspring.

Charlie took a step closer, an intense look of concentration on his face. "No, I didn't give up. I stayed in a motel in Florida for two months, trying to talk some sense into your mother. She refused to see me and only allowed me to spend a few nights a week with you. It was a horrible existence, but I didn't know what else to do. I could accept that our marriage was over, since she seemed hell bent on the divorce. But I couldn't accept not being near you. I applied for a few positions in the

area where you were settled, but the towns weren't hiring any additional police officers."

The sun had come out by this point and was beating down upon my face. My skin felt like it was on fire. A side-effect of the week-long cloud cover. Charlie noticed my discomfort, and probably the lobster-hue I was beginning to take on, and guided us over to the fence that lined the property. A large tree provided enough shade to hide my pale skin from the sun once more. We both leaned against the wooden slats as Charlie continued his tale.

"Your mom had a job at a diner on the main drag in Carrabelle. Small town on the Florida panhandle, which had surprised me. I figured she'd want to move someplace bigger after Forks. Anyway, it was mid summer and you and I were spending the evening together. I'd taken you down to the wharf to watch the fishing boats come in for the evening. On our way back to the motel, I got mugged. They took my wallet and your diaper bag of all things. I knew as soon as it happened that all my hopes for keeping you in my life were over." He swiped his hand across his face and I could see the pain etched there. I wanted to reassure him, but I didn't know how to do that. I nodded at him encouragingly instead.

"Renee insisted that I leave town and not try to contact either of you again. She said that I was some kind of danger magnet and that there was no way I'd ever be a good father. At that point, I'd begun to agree with her. I couldn't protect you or your mother, and I was supposed to be trained to protect entire communities. I was afraid that I did have some kind of bad luck following me around so I did what she'd wanted me to do back in Forks - I let the both of you go. Moved back home and here I've stayed ever since." Charlie hung his head and leaned against the fence, looking as still as a statue. He seemed drained of energy now. Even his skin seemed to hang off his frame in defeat.

My brain was still trying to process this tale of my first year of life that I'd never heard. "We moved around a bit, those first couple years," I said, reiterating what I'd been told. "We settled near Palm Beach when I was four and that's when she met Phil."

Charlie's grunt was his only response.

"You just let me go," I repeated, hanging onto that small but vital fact. "You never sent me birthday cards or Christmas presents or tried to visit. It was like I never existed."

Charlie's head shot up and the anguish in his eyes matched my own. "You have

always existed here," he thumped his chest twice, "where it mattered. Your mother, and I don't mean to speak ill of her, was quite determined to keep me away from you. She got sole custody of you, using my 'dangerous' lifestyle as an excuse as to why I wasn't fit to be in your life. But, I'm just as culpable. I let her do it because I was convinced that she was right. That somehow, I would bring harm to you and that was the one thing I never wanted."

"You could have called," I muttered, kicking the stones at my feet, feeling like a little kid once again. Charlie seemed to keep bringing that out in me.

"I did call - the year you turned four. I finally decided that I needed to try again to convince her to let me into your life. I do have some connections, and was able to find the two of you living in Palm Beach. By that time, Renee was married to Phil and I was informed that you and your stepfather had formed a special bond and any intrusion on my part would not be welcome."

"Mom told you that?" I asked with I'm sure shock written in bold letters across my face. My mom had known from day one that Phil and I didn't share a "special bond." He'd barely tolerated me and my first impression of him had been that he smelled funny.

Charlie shook his head. "Your Grandma. I called the house one afternoon about a week after I'd located you. It took me a while to build up the courage," he added.

"Huh," I said, knowing exactly what he was talking about. I'd needed my own week to grow a pair.

"She answered the phone and politely explained how my position had been filled and I was now superfluous. Since I still blamed myself for everything that had gone wrong when you were a baby, I saw no reason to cause you any further harm." Charlie straightened then and turned to face me. He looked stronger now, more like the chief of police that he was. "Isabella, there hasn't been a day that's gone by that I haven't thought about you. I hoped that you were happy and loved, wherever you were. When you approached me earlier today, I nearly had a heart attack. You look just like my sister, and then when you told me your name I was afraid to hope that it was really you."

He smiled and then leaned over to pat my shoulder awkwardly. "I hope that your presence here in Forks means that you're willing to give me a try. I know I can't be a dad to you anymore - you're a grown woman - but I would like the chance to get to know you."

Ah, fuck. The man was going to make me cry. He was everything I'd ever wanted him to be, except for the whole part about giving up and listening to the crap my mom had word-vomited about him being dangerous. The man was awkward as hell, but he was sweet and kind and loyal. He didn't even want to talk shit about the woman who'd skipped town with his kid and then pushed him out of our lives. As far as dads went, and I only had Phil for comparison, he was already a solid six or seven, with lots of ways to move up quickly.

"I'd like to get to know you too," I admitted, blinking furiously as I willed my stupid traitor tears away. "Though, you're going to have to explain to me again some time why you thought you were such a danger-magnet. You seem pretty safe to me."

Charlie nudged me with his shoulder and we started walking back towards my apartment building. "I can give you an example right now," he said as we walked back, slower this time. "I was the first officer on the scene this morning. We got a noise complaint from one of the perp's neighbors and I came by to investigate. When I knocked on the door, the perp refused to come out and claimed to be holding his girlfriend hostage until we met his demands."

I groaned as I recalled how peacefully I'd been sleeping until the sirens had woken me, followed by Emmett pounding on the door. It felt like months had passed since then.

Charlie's moustache curved upward at my loud non-verbal response. "Two weeks ago, I was off duty when I walked in on a robbery in progress at the grocery store. A few months ago, someone tried to steal my cruiser. I could go on, but I won't bore you."

I laughed as we rounded the corner again, enjoying his company. "I think I'd like to hear more of your stories."

"Good," he said, the moustache curling higher. He studied his feet as we treaded the root-split sidewalk.

"So, what do we do now?" I asked, unsure how we were to proceed. I'd found my father but I didn't know what to do with him. I'd always felt like there was a place for him in my life but now that he was in front of me, I wasn't sure what that was exactly. He was right - I didn't need a "dad", not at my age. I'd probably be pissed if he tried to tell me what to do at this point anyway.

He looked at me with a mixture of disappointment and resignation. "I have to go to the station to file my paperwork. I imagine your friends are anxious to talk to you

as well."

I caught his eye as we neared my building. "I meant about us. Should we meet for coffee some time?" I felt really brave reaching out to him like this. We'd both admitted that we'd like the chance to get to know the other, but I was making the actual first step. My gut churned and my palms sweated, not just from the heat of the day either.

"You could come to the house, if you'd like. I have some pictures from when you were little, if you'd like to see them." We stopped in front of my building and Charlie stared down at me with hope in his eyes. I was more than ready to turn that hope into something more tangible.

"I'd really like that," I said, smiling at him.

"You look so much like your mom when you smile," he said with a hint of sadness. "She always had the prettiest smile."

I could understand the sadness. My mom had apparently been the instigator of the end of their relationship and from what he'd said, he hadn't been happy about letting her go. I was ecstatic to learn that he hadn't been happy to let me go either.

"Thanks," I said, an uncharacteristic red stain creeping up my cheeks. Men had paid me tons of compliments over the years, but it was different coming from Charlie. I felt like he really meant it.

"So, I'll pick you up tomorrow? Is that too soon?"

"Tomorrow's good. I get off work at 5."

Charlie's eyes flicked to the doorway behind me. "Your boyfriend's waiting for you," he said gruffly.

I suppressed my grin. Charlie did seem to want to play "dad" after all. It also made me oddly satisfied to hear him call Edward my boyfriend. "He's a great guy," I said without turning around. Instinctively, I knew that Edward was framed in the door, waiting for me to go in so we could deconstruct my talk with Charlie.

"The Cullens are a good family," Charlie responded with one last look at the door. "I'll see you tomorrow Bella." Charlie turned and jogged off in the direction of his cruiser. I stood watching him until he hopped inside and pulled out of the parking lot.

When I turned around, Edward was indeed standing right where I expected. I climbed the steps, unable to hide the smile on my face. Edward held the door open for me and enveloped me in his arms as soon as I was inside. I instantly felt a hundred times better.

"How did it go?" he asked against my hair.

"Good," I replied, wrapping my arms across his back. "He had quite the story to share." Both my parents, it seemed, had a part in keeping me from Charlie. Truthfully, I felt some amount of hurt and anger over the situation, but I was still riding a high from everything that I'd accomplished that day. There was time to deal with my feelings, and my parents, another day.

"I'd like to hear it," Edward said as we snuggled closer. I still couldn't believe that I was actually embarking on my first relationship. I couldn't have been luckier or prouder that it was with Edward though. He was perfect, not in the no-fault kind of perfect way, but perfect because he didn't do everything right. He'd made mistakes, and so had I, but I would have been less interested in him had he done and said the exact right things. Any man that was capable of showing that he could screw things up, learn from that, and apologize was someone that I needed to work hard to keep around for a while. I had the feeling that I could learn a lot from him. And I was finally in a place where I was more open to doing just that.

"I'll tell you all about it," I said as I wiggled out of his arms and headed up the stairs to my apartment, "just as soon as you buy me that ice cream you promised."

Feeling lighter and more content than I had in months, I let myself into my apartment to change into some clean clothes for my date with Edward. I wanted to look nice so I took my time picking out my clothes and trying to fix my hair. I left Edward sitting out on my broken couch for quite a while, but when I reappeared I knew my extra efforts had been worth it.

Without a word, he took my hand and guided me outside. I closed my eyes briefly as I exited the building for only the second time that day, memorizing the smell of the air, the feel of Edward's skin on mine, and the glow of the late afternoon sun. I wanted to remember this day for a very long time.

The End

A/N: Final chapter! Woooo! Actually, I'm in the process of writing a **bonus**

chapter that's basically an excuse to write one more lemon. Happily for you, that shouldn't take nearly as long to post as a regular chapter.

Thanks to everyone for reading and reviewing! I really appreciate it. As always, I owe a huge thanks to my beta **Blackdogs** who is really, truly the best.

In case you're interested, my next story is the continuation of a one-shot I wrote this summer called "**Devil's Pitchfork**." It's an all-human Bella/Edward (that's really all I write so that shouldn't surprise you) where the town of Forks is a supporting character. Edward is the badass leader of the town and Bella is the stranger who stumbles in, making a life-changing decision that puts her life, and the entire town, in jeopardy. Only, Bella might not be quite the stranger that she thinks she is... Anyway, the one shot is posted on FF (check my profile for the link) and it should give you a good idea of what the story will be about. Once I'm ready to post (and the prologue is already written), I'm going to yank the one-shot and start posting actual chapters. I'm really excited to write this story, but it will be a few weeks before anything new is posted. I'm still working on character sketches and the outline. So, check my twitter (I'm 1blue25) or add the one-shot to your story alerts so you'll know when it starts. Thanks!

Ice Cream Bonus

A/N: I still don't own Twilight.

Edward didn't know it, but I was watching him. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see his fuckhot smile and fuckhot body and fuckhot hair. I wanted to pounce on him, but that really wasn't anything new. What was new was this awful sexbargo that he had placed upon us. And it was killing me.

It was our fourth "official" date and we were at the Dairy Mart, where we'd had our first date. "Official" only because he'd specifically asked to take me somewhere other than his apartment. I didn't mind the dates where we stayed in to watch a movie or play a video game or just make out. But the ones where we got dressed up and actually left the building were just a little more special to me, because Edward was the first guy that I had actually dated. And I really, really liked it. The dating. And Edward.

Then, out of the blue, sexbargo 2009 had begun. I wasn't sure why, Edward's reasons had been weak and undefined, but I hadn't seen his peen for a week.

My vadge was lonely. Lonely enough that watching Edward lick strawberry ice cream off his spoon made it twitch and yearn.

"You're staring again," Edward said, bringing me out of my trance. I realized that my sneaky glances had turned into full-blown stalker stares and I laughed it off.

"Yeah, well, you look exceptionally fine tonight," I said, raking my eyes over his body. Docs, jeans, and one of his company-issued polo shirts turned me on like nobody's business. The Docs had been a surprise a few days ago when he'd dug them out of the closet. He'd only shrugged and said "Emmett" in response to my raised eyebrow. They somehow turned the nerdfit into a hotfit. I was not complaining in the slightest. Well, except for my girlie parts that hadn't been touched in eight days. I sighed in remorse and turned away from my fuckhot boyfriend. I was only torturing myself by staring.

Edward scooted closer to me on the bench we'd commandeered next to the ice cream shop. It was the first dry evening we'd had in over a week and I'd been ecstatic to do something outside for once. The rest of town had come out too, so seating around the ice cream stand had been limited. My man had correctly

calculated the time the couple sitting here previously would need to finish their cones and we had swooped in as soon as they stood up to go. The dad with the Mohawk and matching spawn had given us the evil eye, but I didn't care.

I ignored Edward for the most part while I licked my ice cream cone. Chocolate chip cookie dough was so my freaking favorite flavor. I liked the way my tongue bumped over the cookie dough bits while I licked it from the base of the cone to the top of the scoop. Little chocolate chips found their way into my mouth mixed in with the ice cream. It was fucking fabulous.

When I had licked down far enough, I took the whole scoop into my mouth, sucking on it lightly, licking in pieces of the cookie dough as I went. Ice cream was my weakness, this Edward knew after knowing me for two weeks, so I figured he was buttering me up for something big. While I waited for him to spill his guts, I licked and bit and gnawed at my cone, savoring the creamy richness of the homemade ice cream.

A slight movement made me pause mid-lick and I turned towards Edward to see what had made him so twitchy all of a sudden.

If I'd been a scoop of ice cream, I would have melted on the spot.

Edward's gaze was so scorching that my body was instantly inflamed. His own empty ice cream cup sat to the side and his hands were clenched on the outside seams of his jeans. I felt like he was eyeing me as his next course as his eyes sent intense laser beams to my lips and tongue.

"Edward?" I asked, slightly uncertain for once. I'd been trying to get into his pants for eight freaking days and he'd held strong the entire time. After such a long wait, it was a shock to find him looking like he wanted to climb on top of me, despite the proximity of Mohawk Guy and his impressionable kid. Edward's nostrils flared and his breathing was so shallow I could see the rise and fall of his lungs through his shirt.

Fuck. I wish I'd known a week ago that all I needed to do was lick an ice cream cone.

As I stared at him, the crazy animalistic look left his face, swept away by something much scarier: determination. His hands lifted free of his pants and his mouth curled into a half-smile. The inches that had separated our thighs on the bench became non-existent as he leaned in to whisper in my ear, "You are so beautiful when you use your tongue. I don't know what I was thinking by making us

hold back for this past week."

That's all I needed to hear. I jumped up and tossed the rest of my cone into the nearest trash can. I bid a sad, but brief, farewell to my wasted chocolate chip cookie dough and turned to face Edward.

He was standing right behind me.

"What's gotten into you?" I asked, as he took my hand and started to drag me down the street in the direction of our building.

"You have no idea how appealing you look, sitting there innocently licking your ice cream cone. I can't control myself any longer," Edward explained as he wrapped an arm around my waist and pulled me closer. His fingers whispered across the swath of skin exposed there and I felt an explosion of warmth expand across my body like a sunburst.

I tried to keep up with him as he hurried us back home, but his legs were much longer and I was dumbly wearing wedge heels. I hadn't known that we were going to marathon it back home afterwards or I would have gone for sneakers instead.

"Can we please slow down? I'm going to get blisters," I complained, then wanted to take it back. Was I actually asking to slow things down for once? Sexbargo must have dried up my brain cells along with my nether regions because I never complained about getting the opportunity to get it on with my fuckhot boyfriend.

God, I loved calling him that. I was pretty sure I'd introduced him to everyone at the factory as my fuckhot boyfriend Edward Cullen. He'd blushed, of course, but I didn't miss the unmistakable glimmer of pleasure and pride afterwards. He liked it when I claimed him. And talked about his hotness.

"I'm so sorry," my fuckhot boyfriend said as he slowed from a sprint to a walk. "Of course we don't want you to get any blisters. Though, you know I'd take care of you if you did. Afterwards." Edward winked and leered at me and I almost jumped him right there next to the Forks Elementary playground. Another twenty minutes and it would be dark enough that people wouldn't see clearly enough what we were doing on the swing...or the teeter-totter...or the slide.

I started to pull him into the playground, but Edward pulled me right back and pushed us onwards towards home. "We can't - not at the playground," he said, his mouth frowning in regret. "Children play here, Bella," he explained further, making me feel like Queen of the Hobags for wanting to do dirty, dirty things with him on

the tire bridge.

We walked as quickly as we could the rest of the way home and Edward hurried me the final steps into my apartment with a swat on my ass. I squealed and turned on him, expecting to see my smiling, sweet fuckhot boyfriend.

Mr. Nice had been replaced by Mr. Do-me-right-now. My panties were instantly soaked as I took a step back. Edward locked the door behind him quietly, his eyes never leaving my face. I felt like he was going to pounce on me, and it made me slightly afraid. Not like I needed to call for help, but like he wasn't going to take any mercy with me. I burned for him, but when he stepped forward I took another step away from him.

I no longer felt like an ice cream cone. I felt like a doe being stalked by a ravenous mountain lion. Only, this mountain lion was guaranteed to bring me endless pleasure. He was going to have to catch me first.

When I stepped back again, Edward started advancing on me. My eyes went wide as I realized that he was going to take me wherever he caught me. I turned and ran for the bedroom, hoping that I would make it to my newly repaired bed before that happened.

I was two steps from the door when he grabbed me. Edward pulled me back against his chest and walked us forward into my room. His left arm slid across my waist and his large hand spanned my stomach. The right hand filled with my breast and I sighed in relief. I'd missed his touch more than I could possibly explain.

"I'm hungry for you," Edward said, walking us forward until we hit the end of the bed. "I want to eat you."

I whimpered in response, praying that he meant what he was saying. He'd dialed back the "vulva" and "glans" talk when we were being intimate and I'd been trying to teach him different terms to use. Eating had been one of my favorites because I'd teased him mercilessly during sexbargo about everything I liked to eat. I tried to make them as phallic as possible just to make him as uncomfortable as I was.

Keeping me facing away from him, Edward removed my clothes and tossed them to the side. I stood still as I heard the quiet rustle of his own clothes behind me. My breathing slowed as I imagined him stripping down to his bare skin, his erection jutting out long and proud from his body. I licked my lips thinking about doing some eating of my own.

His hands suddenly grasped my breasts and my head fell back, a loud moan passing from my lips. He tweaked my nipples and massaged them, eliciting another moan. Edward kissed along my neck, from my ear to my shoulder, taking a nip when he reached the meatiest part. I pressed back against his body and felt the tip of his erection brush against my lower back.

"Edward, please," I said, needing something more than what he was giving me. It had been a long week and I was going to come soon whether he participated or not.

"Lie down on the bed," he told me.

I quickly turned and flopped down, trying to toe off my shoes as I went.

"Leave the shoes on," he said as he climbed onto the bed after me. He smirked as he said, "Punishment for making me break our sexbargo."

I pouted as I pulled myself higher on the bed. "I still don't understand what the point of it was. Seemed pretty stupid," I added quietly.

Edward chuckled as he began to rearrange my legs to his liking. "It wouldn't seem stupid if you were suddenly tripping across your girlfriend's newly discovered father at every turn. He made me nervous," Edward admitted in an unusual moment of self-doubt.

Leaning on my elbows, I watched him get comfortable between my legs. I lost my train of thought as his wild crop of bronze hair dipped down and brushed against my thigh. I felt his warm breath on the Promised Land and forgot everything but him.

"I'm not nervous now," Edward said as his mouth descended and disappeared into my folds.

I uttered something incoherent right before his tongue darted out and took a long lick from bottom to top. I leaned my head back against the pillows and allowed myself to just feel.

I felt his warm hands on my thighs as he held me spread open wide for his attentions.

I felt the rough whiskers of his face as he nuzzled into me.

I felt his full lips sucking on my lower lips, pulling the skin into his mouth.

I felt his teeth as he nibbled gently on the more delicate places laid out before him.

And above all else, I felt his tongue. His wide, roughened tongue as he licked at me like I was his own personal ice cream cone. He left no area unexplored, and I gave him extra credit for being so thorough. He shifted higher and paid special attention to my clit as I began to writhe against his face.

"Edward," I moaned, my hands slapping and searching amongst the sheets for something to hold onto as his tongue flicked harder and faster against me. I was close, but there was something that I wanted more than just a quick orgasm from him. I wanted to reciprocate. Badly.

I called his name again, and he mistook it for a plea. Somehow, his tongue turned into a supercharged Energizer battery and he slid two fingers into my vagina, pumping wildly to get me off that much quicker.

"Baby," I said, clenching my teeth and trying to think about the newest scratch I'd discovered on my car that morning instead of his tongue. "I want you in my mouth," I finally got out as I pushed and pulled at the sheets on either side of me.

His head lifted from between my thighs and I arched up to meet his curious gaze. His mouth and chin were coated in my wetness and I nearly died at the sight. When his tongue darted out to lick away some that had started to drip off his lip, I whimpered and forgot why I'd wanted him to stop.

Edward, however, hadn't.

"Fellatio?" he asked, shifting his weight slightly on the bed.

I rolled my eyes at his terminology but nodded my head so he wouldn't see that. I'd get him to call it a blowjob eventually. "Fellatio, yes, though this would be a 69 type situation," I explained, not wanting him to be confused about my expectations for him.

I blinked, felt the mattress dip, and I suddenly had Edward's huge cock in my face. I chuckled in surprise but it turned into a gasp when Edward dove right back in where he'd left off. His cock bobbed in time with the rhythm of his tongue and all thoughts left my head.

I craned my neck and pulled him into my mouth. I felt him gasp against my clit before he sucked and bit with renewed fervor. I sucked his length hard, wanting his

taste to complete fill my mouth. His thick head bumped against the top of my throat and I slid him in and out slowly, but just a little. I was too greedy for him to let him pull out all the way.

Wanting him closer, I wrapped my arms around his waist and pulled him down until my nose was nestled against his balls. He still wasn't resting all his weight on me, but this gave me a better angle to work on him.

I ran my tongue along the smooth head over and over, loving how it felt. Like a polished stone, the texture was smooth and intriguing, and each pass of my tongue revealed something new about his cock. We were completely entwined around each other. His arms wrapped around my thighs, mine wrapped across his back. I felt like we were trying to suck each other in completely.

I gasped when Edward pushed three fingers inside of me and I rewarded him by taking him a little deeper inside my mouth. I was pretty fucking close and my hips started bucking against his face again. My heels, still trapped in the wedges Edward hadn't let me remove, tried to dig a hole the size of Texas into the bedding. My body was electric, my limbs like downed power lines trying to find purchase on a dampened roadway. This time, my piece of crapmobile was the last thing on my mind. I concentrated completely on Edward's cock in mouth, his musky smell, and the way his back flexed as he began pumping into my mouth.

With a long, glorious flick of his tongue, I came screaming against his cock. My thighs tightened against his head as I rode out the waves, feeling my juices pulse out and against his waiting tongue. I'm pretty sure I stopped breathing and my sight went black for a minute.

Edward's cock lay momentarily forgotten against my lips. He must have slipped out at some point. Once I came to my senses, I pulled him down to me and sucked him back in, thanking him for all the pleasures he'd just brought to my body.

He pressed his face against my thigh as he concentrated on his own orgasm. His hips were pulsing wildly now and I licked and sucked like my life depended on it. I loved having Edward's cock in my mouth. In some ways, it seemed more intimate than intercourse and truthfully, it gave me pleasure to see him get off like this.

With one last flick of my tongue against his slit, he came into my mouth with a shout, biting none-too-gently on my thigh and grasping my hip for dear life. He pumped into my mouth until he was soft, then rolled to my side and collapsed.

"Holy fuck," I said a few minutes later, after I'd caught my breath. "Maybe

sexbargo wasn't such a bad idea after all." I'd come harder than I could ever remember. It was definitely worth thinking about repeating.

Edward's thoughts on the subject made me laugh. "Absolutely not. I don't plan on forcing us to do that ever again." He quickly yanked my shoes off for me, dropping them noisily to the floor and then climbed up the bed to join me underneath the comforter. He placed a quick kiss on my lips before wrapping his arms around me. "Though, if you could walk around town looking completely sexually frustrated, I would appreciate it. Perhaps it would get back to Charlie and then I'd be able to look him in the eye again."

I placed my hand on his chest, wrapping my fingers into the wiry hairs. "Then people might just think you're an awful lay," I said, trying to be funny but wanting to take it back the instant I saw the hurt look on his face. I swiped my finger across the worry line on his forehead, trying to make it go away. "I'm sorry - I don't think sometimes. What you're asking is practically impossible though. You're the best lover I've ever had, and I couldn't pretend otherwise by walking around like my man hasn't been satisfying me."

Edward turned his head into my shoulder then and muttered, "Now you're just mocking me."

I could see how he might think that. He knew my sexual history and I knew that he was occasionally self-conscious about his own in comparison. "I'm not mocking you," I reassured him as I tangled my fingers into his hair. "It's the truth. No one has ever made me feel the way that you make me feel." I wasn't just talking about my body anymore either. I was hoping he wouldn't force the issue though. I thought that I'd come pretty far in our relationship, but it was difficult enough for me to admit that I liked him. I was terrified to admit that there existed something inside of me that was deeper and more complicated than that.

"Can I ask you something?" Edward looked up at me, his long lashes framing his brilliant eyes and I knew that this was why he had been trying to butter me up with ice cream. I was suddenly nervous. I really hoped we weren't getting read to have a heavy discussion about the future of our relationship. It had been two weeks and I was happy with the way things were going, minus his crappy sexbargo plan. I swallowed nervously and nodded, having lost my voice.

"Would you come to dinner with me next week? My parents want to meet you." Edward's hands had tightened marginally on my back and I could feel the tension that had filled his body. He was afraid of my reaction, and that made me feel crappy. I was going to have to work on that.

I stroked his hair while I considered his question. Truthfully, I was afraid to meet his parents, mostly because I didn't think they'd like me. Edward talked about them constantly, and they seemed like nice, well-educated, goal-oriented people. Basically, everything I wasn't. So, not only was I afraid, I was also intimidated. What could I possibly have to offer in way of dinner conversation at the Cullen house?

"Edward, I don't know," I hedged, wanting to scream "no" and hide under the comforter.

"They already know all about you, Bella. Please say you'll come. Emmett and Rosalie will be there too, so you won't be the sole newcomer. I really want them to meet you."

He was using his puppy dog eyes on me again, damn him. He knew I couldn't resist the power of my fuckhot boyfriend's puppy dog eyes.

I groaned and attempted to pull the comforter over my head, just to shield myself from their hypnotic glare. "Edward," I whined as he held tight to the thick material, refusing to let me hide away.

"Bella," he mimicked right back. This time, his hands slid down to cup my ass and he pulled me flush against his body. His penis was no longer completely soft; I could feel the dampness left behind from my mouth trail along my thigh as we slid against each other.

My eyes rolled back into my head as the power of the puppy dog eyes combined with the power of the peen. Edward knew me well. I was his willing prisoner under such conditions. "I'll go," I whispered as he began to place soft kisses across my breastbone.

"Thank you," Edward replied, in between kisses.

"You're welcome," I replied as I sank further into the welcoming, inviting arms of my fuckhot boyfriend.

A/N: So, here's your bonus chapter - I hope you enjoyed it! Thanks again to everyone for reading and reviewing. This was just a fun little idea that I had so I'm appreciative of everyone who's read it and shared their comments with me. As always, a big thank you to my beta Blackdogs. I'm working on Devil's Pitchfork, so hopefully you'll see something from that within the next few weeks. You can follow

me on Twitter (1blue25) or add me to your story/author alerts. Thanks!!!