



Candy Hearts and Red Roses

Aylah50

Copyright Page

This book was automatically created by [FLAG](#) on April 19th, 2012, based on content retrieved from <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/6743846/>.

The content in this book is copyrighted by Aylah50 or their authorised agent(s). All rights are reserved except where explicitly stated otherwise.

This story was first published on February 14th, 2011, and was last updated on September 2nd, 2011.

Any and all feedback is greatly appreciated - please email any bugs, problems, feature requests etc. to flag@erayd.net.

Table of Contents

Summary

1. Chapter 1: Valentine's Day
2. Chapter 2: The Morning After
3. Chapter 3: Secrets Really Suck
4. Chapter 4: Playing Our Parts
5. Chapter 5: Masquerade
6. Chapter 6: Veritas
7. Chapter 7: Bad Timing
8. Chapter 8: Face the Music
9. Chapter 9: Star Crossed Lovers
10. Chapter 10: Gotta Have Faith
11. Chapter 11: Candy Hearts & Red Roses

Summary

Editorial Assistant Bella Swan has been pining after her boss, Edward Cullen, for years. Will she have a chance with destiny on Valentine's Day? Or will her hopes all come crashing down?

Chapter 1: Valentine's Day

Valentine hugs and kisses to my beta and pre-reader, Kyla713 and Awesomesauce76! Thanks also to Breathotwilight, for including me in another fabulous countdown. Big squishy hugs to Heatherdawn for the banner for this fic, and to AmberDK for creating the polyvore outfits.

**** This was originally just a one shot, hence the extremely lengthy first chapter, but is now being expanded into a longer story!**

Disclaimer: All things Twilight belong to Stephenie Meyer.

"Flower delivery for Ms. Hale," our receptionist's voice blared through the intercom at my cubicle.

"*Another* one?" Angela asked, leaning back in her chair and looking over at me in disbelief.

I stared at the phone, wishing I could have punched the stupid thing. This was the fourth delivery this week for our Life and Style Director, Rosalie Hale. It was only Tuesday, and Valentine's Day was still three days away.

"You want me to grab this one?" my other co-worker, Jake, asked. He didn't mind picking up things for Rosalie; for him, it was just another way to kiss her ass.

"No, I'll do it," I huffed, pushing back in my chair. As I marched to the front desk, I cursed myself once again on my inability to leave my stupid job.

I'd moved out to New York City two years before with a degree from Medill at Northwestern University. My plan was to become a serious journalist. I wanted to work for an intelligent magazine, like *The New Yorker* or *Vanity Fair*, and hopefully, someday become a Literary Editor or Research Director.

When I'd gotten hired as an Editorial Assistant at *The Guard*, I'd been ecstatic. The magazine covered everything from politics, to business, culture, and society. While it still had the necessary focus on style and celebrities, the features and columns were well written. Even though the job was low on the totem pole, it was still a foot in the door and I was beyond excited to start.

I had hoped to be involved in the editing and proofing process, helping to decide on content, maybe even passing on important ideas up to higher-ranking staff members. Instead, more often than not, I'd ended up making copies, filing, and arranging Ms. Hale's beauty appointments.

Jake and Angela were my fellow assistants, and we'd become close friends. Together, we did just about anything and everything that all the editors wanted. This week, it was collecting Rosalie's Valentine gifts from reception.

"Here you go, Bella," said Betty Cope, our receptionist, as she nodded toward a massive bouquet of flowers in a glass vase waiting on the hutch of her desk. I couldn't help but sigh as I saw them: they were exquisite, as were all the others he'd already sent. This one, however, was a perfect arrangement of long-stemmed, pale pink roses.

I'd never gotten roses for Valentine's Day in my entire life.

"That Mr. McCarty is a real keeper! He can't help but spoil Ms. Hale rotten, can he?" Betty asked, smiling.

I tried to hide my grimace as I lifted the immensely heavy glass. "Yup," I sputtered, the leaves on the stems hitting me in the face. "She sure is a lucky one."

Rosalie was dating New York Giants superstar Emmett McCarty. He was filthy rich, completely handsome, and spoiled her rotten. They'd met at the Sundance Film Festival in January, and ever since then, he'd been showering her with gifts and expensive nights out. Since the approach of Valentine's Day, it had gotten even worse, with daily deliveries for her, sometimes more than one.

I really didn't mean to seem jealous; from what I'd seen of Mr. McCarty the few times he'd come by the office, he really was a great guy. Even though he was a huge football player, he was kind of like a giant teddy bear, and it was obvious that he was completely in love with Rosalie, even though they'd only known each other a few weeks. The way he looked at her made my heart ache a little; I was desperate for someone to look at me that way.

Unfortunately, that *someone* never would.

It was the words of that someone that had incited me to apply to work at *The Guard*; his Editor's note was brilliant, cultured, and scholarly. He was the reason I'd stayed in this ridiculous job, passing up opportunities to transfer to other magazines where the assistants had more responsibilities and room for growth.

He was Edward Cullen, Editor in Chief of *The Guard*. He was publishing royalty; his father, Carlisle Cullen, was the C.E.O. of the entire publishing house. Edward was incredibly intelligent, well-spoken and friendly, polished, refined, professional; everything I wanted in a man. He also was possibly the most gorgeous creature I'd ever seen in real life.

And he was, without a doubt, completely out of my league.

I'd had no idea when I applied to work there that an inhumanly beautiful man wrote the words I'd fallen in love with every month. When I'd first read it, I'd assumed that the head of the magazine was someone much older. But when I'd discovered during my first interview that he was actually a twenty-seven year old Harvard graduate, with sexy tousled hair and the most incredible eyelashes I'd ever seen on a man, I'd nearly fallen off my chair.

And there I was, nearly a year and a half later, doing the most menial tasks imaginable because I had developed the most ridiculously pathetic crush on Edward Cullen, and didn't want to work anywhere else.

Carefully walking back down the hallway, I gripped the vase tightly with both hands and tried not to run into anyone. I had a horrible reputation of tripping over my own feet at the office, and really didn't want to end up ass down in a pile of roses and thorns.

Turning the corner into the doorway to Rosalie's office, I paused, listening to see if she was on the phone or in a meeting.

"Yes, that will be perfect!" I heard her say. Inching my way forward into the office, I pushed the door open with my elbow and held the flowers precariously in my hands.

I was barely able to see through the spray of baby's breath in front of my face, but observed that she was perched daintily in her luxurious black office chair, her phone held in one hand. The other was held out for her manicurist, who was carefully applying a coat of pale pink polish.

Rosalie Hale was truly one of the most beautiful women in the publishing business, if not in the entire city. Her skin was tanned to a warm glow even in the depths of winter, her hair had the perfect balance of silkiness and volume. Rosalie's clothes were impeccable: always couture, the height of fashion. Her hazel eyes were always shaded with perfectly applied makeup, and she had a figure I would kill for.

I felt like a troll just standing in the same room as her. I was dressed, as I always was at work, in my business-casual skirt and blouse. I glanced down at my pale skin, my dark brown hair that would never behave no matter how much I tried to style it. I always *wanted* to look sexy, but didn't have the fashion sense or guts to wear what was on the runways.

"Okay, see you then!" Rosalie blew fake kisses into the phone before hanging up, and I rolled my eyes, glad that my face was hidden.

"Make sure you put the fast-dry coat on," Rose ordered her manicurist. "I don't want to mess them up when I go lunch."

I knew from having to manage Rosalie's schedule that she was speaking of a luncheon celebrating a new exhibit launching at The Museum of Modern Art. As the Life and Style Director, she was always going to publicity events like that, but preferred the parties and club openings where she could be photographed with celebrities and fashion icons. If she didn't leave soon, she was going to be late, so I cleared my throat, announcing my presence.

"Are those for me?" Rosalie squealed.

Well, maybe not *my* presence, but certainly the monstrosity I was carrying.

"Yes, Ms. Hale. Another delivery from Mr. McCarty," I reported quickly, her face barely visible to me through all the petals.

"Set it on my desk, will you, Bella?" she asked, blowing on her nails once her manicurist had switched hands.

Taking a few tentative steps toward the desk, I lowered the vase, only to be at a total loss as to where to place *this* delivery. The entire surface was covered with bowls of peonies and tulips, surrounded by tiny votive candles, as well as mini bottles of champagne and perfume.

"Um...where?" I inquired blankly.

"Oh, just find a spot somewhere," she replied in a bored tone of voice, studying her fingers. I held in my sigh and scanned her desk, searching for a way to fit yet another floral arrangement.

Tasks like this were one of the reasons I hated my job. Jake and Angela had been on the staff before I'd arrived; the third assistant spot had opened when their

previous coworker got promoted. The two of them had gently dashed my hopes on day one; explaining how the Editorial Assistants at *The Guard* tended to the needs of all the editors, save for the ones that had their own personal assistants.

"Ms. Hale?" a voice from behind me chirped.

Speak of the kitten-heeled devil.

Jessica Stanley, Edward's assistant, was standing in the doorway to Rosalie's office. She was a snotty bitch who paraded around the office with Lauren Mallory, Assistant to the Managing Editor, Jasper Whitlock. The two of them, as well as the other assistants, treated Jake, Angela and me like crap, occasionally handing us the work they didn't have time for. But that wasn't the reason I hated Jessica.

"Mr. Cullen is ready to go to the opening. He asked that you meet him at his office in five minutes," Jessica announced.

That was why I hated her.

As the Editor in Chief's Assistant, Jessica was privy to every single thing Edward did, and gloated about it endlessly. I was pretty sure she wanted to sleep with him, but just in an attempt to worm her way into a better job. She was too shallow to really care for Edward. Not like I did.

Never gonna happen, I reminded myself, and resumed my task of finding an uncovered spot for the bouquet, which was quickly becoming heavier in my arms by the minute.

"Ugh, are they *dry* yet, Maria?" Rosalie whined to her manicurist. "Jessica, tell Mr. Cullen I'll be right there."

"Yes, Ms. Hale." Jessica scampered off, not acknowledging me at all, as usual.

"Okay, I've got to run!" Rosalie jumped up quickly, practically knocking me over, and I backed out of her way, nearly dropping the stupid glass on the floor. Finally finding a spot for them, I listened to Rosalie rattle off some tasks for me to do while she was out of the office.

Once she'd finally slid into her coat, she dashed out into the hallway. I peeked around the corner of her door, watching her run toward Edward's corner office in a fabulous pair of Christian Louboutins.

*How does she **run** in those? I wondered. I can barely walk in my flats without falling down.*

Chewing my lip, I gazed down at my comfortable, boring shoes; I'd never worn anything sexy to work, not even once. I didn't think it was appropriate, and I shuddered to think what an embarrassment I could make of myself in heels.

I made my way back to the area where my desk was, in the center of the office where all the editors could bark instructions at us. Slowly sinking into my chair, I watched as Rosalie and Edward stepped out of his office, discussing something. My heart spasmed in my chest, as it always did whenever I laid eyes on him.

Today, Edward was wearing a black button down with matching pants, the only splash of color being a green and blue tie that picked up the glittering hue of his eyes. He'd let the beginnings of a beard grow in, and a soft layer of stubble was accentuating his chiseled jaw. My fingers twitched as I imagined what it might feel like to touch his skin.

As he and Rose passed by us, Edward glanced in our direction and I gasped softly, feeling the shockwave at meeting his eyes start in my stomach and ricochet down between my legs. I crossed them quickly, attempting to squeeze away the lustful ache that had become my constant companion. Once they were out of sight, I buried my face in my hands.

"Ohh, poor Bella!" Angela cooed, reaching out to rub my head affectionately. "So hopeless."

"Don't remind me," I groaned.

"Rosalie's shoes are incredible," Jake murmured, causing me to lift my head and stare at him. He gazed back at me, smiling. "What? They are!"

I laughed and Angela just shook her head. Jake was very much out of the closet, and simply loved working for Rosalie. He said he always got the best fashion tips from her.

"He looked so....just...unf!" I cried softly, turning to look at Angela, who simply smiled and shrugged. She was dating an I.T. guy named Ben who worked downtown, and pitied me for my hopeless crush on our boss.

"Never gonna happen," Jake teased in a high-pitched voice, echoing my thoughts from before.

Suddenly, we heard the familiar sound of a fist banging against a desk nearby.

"Where the *hell* are those mock-ups from advertising?" the Art Director shouted from his office. Giving each other knowing glances, the three of us got back to work.

Later that night, I threw my jacket over the couch in my living room and slumped down onto the soft cushions.

"Rough day?" my roommate and best friend, Alice, asked me from the floor where she was stretching out her legs. She was a dancer, and was currently in rehearsal for a small production of *Romeo and Juliet*. The two of us had met when we were nine years old, at our ballet class back in Forks, Washington.

While I was only attending the class at the urges of my mother, who hoped it would make me less clumsy and awkward, Alice was a natural, pirouetting across the floor with perfect grace. I'd dropped out once we were old enough to advance to pointe, but Alice had continued, quickly discovering that dance was her passion.

She'd already been out in New York when we'd both graduated college, having received her M.F.A. from Julliard. When she told me she was looking for a roommate, I'd jumped at the chance to move in with her, especially when she'd managed to find a rent controlled apartment in the East Village.

"Oh, the usual," I answered.

"Edward?" she asked as she bent over her right leg, wrapping her fingers around her pointed foot and lowering the crown of her head to her knee.

"What else?" I sighed. Alice was all too familiar with my hopeless crush.

"Bella," she began. I groaned, recognizing her tone of voice. I'd heard it many times before, and it always preceded the lecture that was about to come. "You can't keep doing this to yourself."

"I know, I know," I whined. "But I can't help it! He's too beautiful!"

Alice rolled her torso back up, stretching her arms elegantly above her head before turning to reach for the opposite leg. "I know. You've said he's gorgeous and perfect and the most incredible man to crawl the face of the earth."

I rolled my eyes at her as she went on with the speech I'd nearly memorized by now.

"But in the entire time you've worked there, in all the times he's talked to you, have you ever gotten *any* inkling *whatsoever* that he was interested in you?"

My mind wandered back to all the times I'd spoken with Edward. He'd always been businesslike, polite and friendly, nothing more. I, however, had a wonderful penchant for humiliating myself in his presence. There were two times in particular where I'd nearly made a complete fool of myself that really stood out in my memory.

The first time had been in the elevator, shortly after I'd been hired. We'd been the only ones in there, and he'd asked me how I was enjoying the job so far. I'd answered that it had been great, but then our hands had brushed against one another's as we both reached for the 'lobby' button. A shock had coursed up my arm, causing me to practically shudder at the sensation, and was too embarrassed to say anything more.

The second had been a few months ago during one of the few staff meetings I'd actually said anything at; I'd made a suggestion about a feature I thought should be written. Most of the editors had just stared at me, surprised that an Editorial Assistant would even speak up at a planning meeting. Jake and Angela had both looked as if they were trying to climb under the table.

Something that resembled a smile had flickered across Edward's face; a look I'd later determined was him trying not to laugh at my suggestion. He had told me that while my idea was interesting, it wouldn't work for the upcoming issue, but he would keep it in mind.

Since I hadn't answered her, Alice looked up at me from her stretch and glared. So I crossed my arms in front of my chest and petulantly mumbled, "You know I haven't."

"And even if he *was* interested," Alice continued, ignoring my response as she arched her back to sit straight up again. "Do you have any idea how completely wrong it would be to sleep with your boss? It would ruin your career!"

I didn't answer her as images of sleeping with Edward rushed through my head. I couldn't help picturing, as I'd done before in countless daydreams, what he would look like naked, kissing me, his body hovering over mine.

"Besides," she went on, interrupting me from imagining Edward's face when he

came. "Isn't he supposed to be with that Tanya chick?"

I shuddered at her name, my fantasy fizzling away like a popped balloon.

Tanya Denali was the daughter of Carlisle Cullen's partner, Eleazar Denali. She was also an Editor in Chief, of some gossip women's magazine I'd never bothered to pick up. Tanya was attractive, but in a blonde bimchette kind of way. Although she and Edward had been photographed together at random events, I'd never heard tell of them actually *being* together.

"No," I muttered, picking at the arm of the couch. "And she's too stupid for him anyway."

"Bella, focus!" Alice was clearly exasperated. "You've been pining over him for *ages* now. You need to get over him."

"I wish I could, Alice!" I complained. "Trust me, I wish I could just snap my fingers and fall out of love with a man who will *never* have any interest in me, but it's not that easy."

She sighed and reached her arms in front of her, bringing her chest level with the floor. I shook my head at her flexibility. "I still don't understand how someone who can move the way you do is still single."

"I don't have time for relationships," she answered, sitting back up. "I'm in New York to dance, not to date." Alice's dedication to her career was unparalleled; she didn't seem to mind that she hadn't been on a date since prom.

I, on the other hand, had only had one lousy boyfriend: Mike Newton. We'd met in college. He was never particularly romantic at all, really; he never made me feel beautiful or wanted. The sex was pretty pitiful too; he never tried very hard to please me, and always fell asleep immediately afterward, whether I'd finished or not. Mike also never ceased to amaze me with his ability to forget that February 14th even existed. He'd missed it each of the two years we'd dated.

"I just wish Valentine's Day was over already! This is the worst time to be single!" I moaned, pouting from the couch as Alice moved to sit next to me. "It's even harder being hopelessly in love with someone who doesn't even know you exist, and when you have all these stupid hearts and roses everywhere."

"I know, honey. Come on," she said, standing up and pulling me up off the couch with her. "Let's go make some dinner."

The following morning, I hurried up the stairway from the Times' Square subway station, crossing Broadway and dodging honking cabs to reach the Cullen-Denali Building. I breathed a sigh of relief when I entered the warmth of the crowded, marble-floored lobby; the February air outside was biting cold.

I rummaged through my purse for my I.D. badge, sliding it past the scanners everyone had to funnel through before entering the elevator bay. After riding up fifty-two floors, I stepped into the main entrance of *The Guard* and gazed at the painting that hung there; it was the first thing anyone saw when they entered our office.

It was done all in oils, and framed in an ornate gold. The subjects on the canvas were three finely dressed men standing on a balcony, looking down on a group of revelers, all of whom were indulging in some aspect of the arts: playing music, dancing, performing drama or reading.

Carlisle Cullen had seen the work of art when he'd been traveling through Italy many years before. The painter had entitled it, "The Guard," as these fictional ancient aristocrats were purported to be the guardians of all that was artistic and refined in their world. He'd immediately bought the painting, and the idea behind it had been his inspiration for the magazine and its name.

Edward had told me the story of the painting's origin once when we'd both been waiting for an elevator. I'd been completely riveted, taking in the elegant brush strokes, and complimented on both its beauty as well as Carlisle's tastes. When I'd looked back up at Edward, he'd quickly averted his gaze, as if his eyes had lingered on me longer than they should have.

I'd probably just imagined that part, though.

Dragging myself away from the painting and approaching the front desk, I frowned at what waited there. It was only eight-thirty and Mrs. Cope hadn't arrived yet, but another delivery for Rosalie Hale had. I took a deep breath and carried the heart shaped box of candies to her still vacant office, deciding to leave it on her chair rather than try to find a spot on her over-crowded desk.

I really hate this stupid holiday!

I marched back toward my cubby in the eerie silence of the nearly empty office; Jake, Angela and most of the staff weren't in yet. I'd woken up that morning earlier than usual, and after another pep-talk at breakfast from Alice, was determined to find a way to get over my feelings for Edward.

Repeating the words 'he's my boss' over and over in my head, I sat down at my desk, reminding myself of my career aspirations. I was here to climb my way up the ladder, not to ogle my boss. I'd simply have to focus entirely on work, just like Alice did, and force my sad little crush out of my mind.

As I placed my coffee and purse down on my desk, a husky, smooth voice to my right took me by surprise.

"Good morning, Bella."

I'd know the sound of Edward's voice anywhere, and it sent a shiver down my spine. I closed my eyes and froze behind my chair, the skin on my arms rising up into gooseflesh as I let the delicious tones of his greeting wrap around my body.

Reopening my eyes and turning my head, I saw him heading my way from the kitchen, sipping a steaming mug of coffee and looking more gorgeous than any man should legally have a right to.

"Good morning, Mr. Cullen," I managed to squeak out. My cheeks flashed with heat as he smiled and took another sip, stepping closer in my direction.

"You're here early," he remarked, only a foot away from me now. His proximity made my face flush even more.

"Oh, yeah...you know. Trying to get a jump on the day and all." *Could my reply be any **more** boring?*

"Is that all? Because you're blushing like I've caught you with your hand in the cookie jar!"

I must have turned an even deeper shade of red at his notice, and he chuckled. I tried to stammer out something about him simply startling me, but he looked so damn fine in his grey-blue button down shirt that I could barely breathe, let alone speak.

"Have you gotten any more ideas for some good feature articles lately?" he asked. My eyes widened at his mention of the very staff meeting I'd thought about the night before, but I was stunned into silence as I watched him lift his coffee cup again, pursing his perfect, soft lips to take a sip.

I would give my life to be that mug of coffee right now.

I was so distracted, I'd almost completely forgotten he'd asked me a question until Edward quirked an eyebrow at me.

"Oh! Um...no. Well...yes! Well, actually, I *have* thought of a few things, but you know, I'm so busy with all the copying and carrying flowers around lately to do any research."

As soon as the words came out of my mouth, I immediately regretted them, clamping a hand over my mouth.

Great way to impress your boss, Bella. By insulting a long time member of his staff, who also happens to be your superior. Brilliant.

Surprisingly, Edward just laughed, a sound that made my entire body tingle, and nodded in the direction of Rosalie's office.

"Yeah, Emmett *has* gone a bit overboard lately," he admitted, shaking his head.

"Do you *know* Mr. McCarty?"

He took a sip of his coffee and grinned. "Who do you think introduced them?"

Of course! He meets celebrities all the time since he runs one of the most influential magazines in the country. I remembered seeing the photos of him at Sundance as well.

"Yeah, the three of us go way back," he added.

"Three?" I asked, not sure whom else he was talking about.

He pointed his coffee cup in the direction of Mr. Whitlock's office. "Jasper, Emmett and I all went to high school together. We knew Emmett before he was big and famous."

He waggled his eyebrows as he spoke, causing me to giggle and his answering grin to widen. "You have a very pretty laugh, Bella."

My mouth may have dropped open so far that it hit the floor, like an old *Looney Tunes* cartoon. "I...what?"

"You're always so serious!" he laughed. "Not that that's a bad thing. I appreciate focused staff, but," he leaned in closer to me, "It is nice to see you smiling."

I couldn't get out a word, dazzled as I was by everything about him: the way his eyes sparkled, how his smile was slightly crooked, making him appear boyishly handsome. Even his scent, clean, earthy, and masculine, had me hook line and sinker.

He leaned closer to me than he ever had before, and I gazed up at him as he said softly, "You should laugh more often."

And then, the impossible happened - he winked at me. It happened so quickly, I wasn't sure if I hadn't imagined it.

Over his shoulder, I could see other staff members starting to arrive. Edward noticed this as well, and took a step backwards. I just stood there, blinking like an idiot as he headed toward his office.

"See you at today's meeting," he called out before turning around and walking away. Dazed, I sank down into my chair and stared into space until Jake and Angela arrived.

"What's with *her*?" I heard Jake ask, and Angela waved a hand in front of my face.

"Earth to Bella!" she sang. I turned in her directly, my expression blank.

"He thinks I have a nice laugh," I said dreamily.

Angela raised her eyebrows while Jake furrowed his in confusion. "Who does?" he asked.

"Edward," I murmured, still astonished.

Jake pursed his lips, exchanging glances with Angela. She pulled her chair right next to mine and ordered, "All right, Bella. Spill."

By the two o'clock staff meeting that afternoon, I'd already spent most of the day trying to ascertain whether or not Edward was actually interested in me.

I hadn't been able to tell Jake and Angela everything that morning since all of the editors came rushing in, but I'd recounted the entire conversation with them over lunch in the building cafeteria, examining his every word.

"What do you think it means?" I'd asked them, too excited and nervous to eat.

"I think it means he likes your laugh," Jake had replied dryly with a mouthful of food.

Angela turned toward him in disgust. "You know, you are the most un-metrosexual-like gay guy in all of Manhattan."

Jake had just shrugged at her and continued enjoying his sandwich.

"I don't know, Bella," Angela had wondered, doubtful. "It *could* mean he's interested. I really don't know. But, if he is, then why hasn't he said anything before?"

"Maybe my stellar conversation skills swept him off his feet this morning?" I'd suggested.

I laughed to myself and shook my head as we filed into the conference room. So much for getting over him. Alice was going to kill me.

The staff meeting agenda was longer than usual that day, since the editors needed to brainstorm ideas for the upcoming issue. I didn't mind; it gave me ample time to sit at the other end of the long table where we all sat, and steal glances at Edward.

I'd come to love the weekly staff meetings here, watching him motivate the team. He ran each meeting with an exquisite balance of professionalism and charisma, keeping everyone on track, but still cracking a joke or two every once in a while.

I tried to laugh a little louder than usual that day, just in case he was listening for it, and Angela and Jake both rolled their eyes at me in tandem.

When the meeting was nearly over, Rosalie raised her hand, saying she had something to add. Edward waved gallantly at her, indicating she had the floor.

She stood, flashing her signature smile at everyone. "As everyone knows, Valentine's Day is coming up-

"You mean Emmett hasn't been trying to start a small flower store in your office?" Jasper teased from his seat next to Edward at the head of the table.

Rosalie scrunched up her face and ignored him, continuing her announcement. "As many of you know, that hip club on West 13th Street, Howl At the Moon, is

opening on Friday, and my boyfriend, Emmett, is one of the owners!"

There were a few snickers and eyerolls around the table as she gushed over him. Edward's smile seemed slightly bashful, his eyes lowered as he swiveled in his chair. I couldn't help the sigh that escaped my lips as I stared at him, and Angela flicked the side of my arm to keep me focused.

"Anyway, in celebration of the holiday, the whole editorial staff is invited to come out to the club launch!" Rosalie added, "And you can all bring a date."

"All right!" Jake whispered to us. "I've been dying to introduce Rosalie to Paul."

"Who the hell is Paul?" I hissed back at him.

"The new boy he's dating," Angela replied quietly, keeping her eyes on Rosalie as she began handing out flyers for the event.

"I thought you were with someone named Sam," I asked in a hushed tone. Jake just shrugged and smiled.

"Jake's a regular slut these days. It's a new boy every week with him," Angela said under her breath as she passed me a leaflet. "I need a freaking flow chart to keep up."

I laughed at that, which was unfortunate since at that very moment, Rosalie stopped speaking. Everyone turned my way, including Edward, making my face blush scarlet again.

"I'm just...so excited for the party!" I said in an attempt to explain my laughter, and gave Rosalie a thumbs-up when she cocked an eyebrow in my direction. Edward laughed, shaking his head as he dismissed the meeting.

"Can the earth just swallow me up now?" I asked my friends as we hung back, sticking around to help the interns clean up the conference room. "Honestly, I should go into the Guinness Book of World Records for the number of times I've embarrassed myself in front of him."

As I gathered up a pile of unused agendas and carried them over to the recycle bin, my mind wandered to the idea of seeing Edward out of the office. What would he be like at a club? Would he talk to me? I pictured us laughing over cocktails, him leaning close to me again, as he did this morning-

"Oh, yeah. He's *definitely* taking Tanya as his date."

The sharp, shrew voice of Jessica Stanley, coming from just outside the conference room door, caught my attention. Tiptoeing closer, I hid on the other side of the wall and listened.

"Are you sure?" Lauren asked. "I didn't think he was with her."

"Oh, totally!" Jessica assured her. "They were photographed together at Fashion Week the other day. He's *completely* into her, and he should be. They're, like, perfect for each other."

My heart sank into my stomach as I eavesdropped. *Could he **really** be with her?*

"I'm going to make sure to call the flower shop so that he has roses ready," Jessica said as they began to walk away. "Edward will *never* remember to do it on his own."

Their heels clacked down the hallway and I leaned against the conference room wall, letting my head fall back against it with a thud.

"No head banging in the office," Angela joked light-heartedly.

"No, I get to save *that* for Paul and my headboard later," Jake chuckled, and Angela elbowed him in the ribs.

"He's taking *her*," I lamented, resuming my task of helping to clear the table. "Tanya 'Botched-Boob-Job' Denali."

"So? They're colleagues. It's probably just a business thing," Angela reasoned.

I glared at her. "Who does 'business things' on Valentine's Day, Ang?" I asked, dumping some used coffee cups into the trash. "Besides, Jessica said he was 'totally into her'." I raised my voice to a mocking squeak as I repeated her words.

"Jessica Stanley is an idiot. She can barely keep Edward's schedule straight," Jake insisted, then paused in thought. "She *does* have great taste in shoes, though."

"Ugh! You and shoes!" Angela cried. "One day, you are going to show up to work in stilettos, I swear."

"Do you think I could get away with that?"

One of the interns giggled at Jake's retort, and scampered out of the room.

"And," Angela said, clearing the last of the papers and napkins off the table. "Jessica *could* be wrong, you know."

"Yeah," Jake added as we left the room and headed back to our desks. "I mean, have you *heard* Tanya's laugh? She sounds like a goose. Yours is way better."

Not bolstered by their encouragement, I sank into my chair in defeat. Angela reached over and patted my arm. "Just wear something fabulous and *talk* to him, even if Boob Job is there. You'll dazzle him with your intelligence and charm."

"I don't own anything fabulous, and...oh my god! I need a date! I can't show up at this thing alone!" I turned desperately to Angela. "Does Ben have any great single friends?"

"Not really. All of his friends are dorky I.T. guys. I wouldn't want you to show up with any of *them*."

I turned to Jake, who gave me a look. "You're kidding me, right?"

"Oh, you guys are useless!" I moaned, letting my head fall to my desk.

Jake reached over and ruffled my hair. "But you love us."

I lifted my head up just in time to see Edward walking out of Jasper's office. My body immediately went on high alert, every inch of me aware that he was near.

Sitting up quickly, I started typing on my keyboard, not wanting to look like I was slacking. After a moment though, I glanced back over to where Edward had been standing. A shock went through me as, for the briefest moment, our eyes locked and a smile flickered across his face. His gaze lingered on me for a moment longer, and then he walked into his office.

A sound that resembled a strangled whimper gurgled out of me.

"See, Bella?" Angela whispered, beaming. "There's hope yet!"

"Never thought I'd see the day," Jake joked. I rolled my eyes at him, and attempted to get back to work.

"Alice, do you know any available, single guys?" I asked later that night, when I'd met her for a drink after her rehearsal.

"I'm a ballerina in New York, Bella. All the guys I know are either gay, or more of a primadonna than our lead dancer." She narrowed her eyes at me, suspicious. "Why?"

"Oh, it's nothing." I shrugged, taking a sip of my cocktail. "I just have this work thing to go to, and I don't want to show up alone."

"'Work thing'?" she asked, eyeing me. I could never keep anything from Alice; she knew me too well. So I told her about the day's events, starting from my conversation with Edward through the end of the meeting.

Deep in thought, Alice stared at her glass, watching the liquid swirl around in it. She didn't speak for a while, so I had to prod her. "Al, what do you think?"

"I *think* that it's time for an intervention," she declared, downing the rest of her drink and slamming it back on the table.

"What does *that* mean?" I asked warily.

"It means, Bella, that you are taking *me* with you to this thing."

I snorted. "Oh yeah, *that* will be helpful."

"You are! But not as your *date*. I'm going as your wing-woman."

Alice stood and began pulling bills from her wallet, placing them on the table. "I'm tired of you wasting every day over Edward Cullen. I am going with you, and I am going to show you that there are other handsome, intelligent, *available* men on the island of Manhattan."

She pulled me up from my seat and threw my coat at me.

"Come on, the stores are still open," she announced. "We're going to find you something to wear that doesn't look like you raided Hillary Clinton's closet."

I frowned at her, insisting that my clothes were fine, but there was no stopping Alice when she wanted to get her way, especially when what she wanted was shopping.

"Fine, but no stilettos," I insisted as we left the bar. "Jake will end up asking me to trade."

"Jake! That's right!" she said, pausing and staring into space for a moment. Alice knew Jake well; he had joined her in many an attempt to get me to give up the ghost. "He's dating Paul, that fabulous new hair stylist in Chelsea."

"How do you *know* this?" I asked as she grabbed my arm and pulled me to the street corner, reaching her other arm out to hail a cab.

"I know everything," she smiled as a yellow taxi slowed to a halt in front of her. "And you, my dear, are going to look fabulous this Valentine's Day. Trust me."

I started to protest, but knew better than to bet against Alice after fifteen years of friendship. Ducking into the cab after her, I groaned as she took out her phone.

"Jake, love," she said, and I could hear the telltale squeal of my co-worker on the other end. "Get your delicious little boyfriend on the phone. We've got some work to do."

Thursday passed quickly at the office in a flurry of aggravated editors and pressed-for-time writers. All of the articles for the next issue needed to be submitted by the thirteenth; it was a day I dreaded every month. Everyone was stressed, and, unfortunately, the Editorial Assistants always seemed to be hit with the brunt of it.

Edward had only been in the office for a short time that morning, and had left before lunch for an afternoon of meetings. I'd listened as Jessica had followed him quickly down the hall, reminding him of his appointments and handing him his coat. He hadn't even looked in my direction.

"Have faith, my dear," Jake said when my gloomy expression continued into the afternoon. "We're gonna make you look like a total diva tomorrow."

I let my chin rest in my hands and sulked. "Diva? Or high-classed hooker?"

Alice had dragged me from store to store the night before, throwing outfits on me, and dressing me up like a doll. She'd insisted on my purchasing the outfit she'd finally decided on; something that was much more risqué than anything I'd pick out for myself. And despite my protests that I was sure to fall down in the three inch heels she'd picked out, she wouldn't take no for an answer.

I couldn't reach her level of enthusiasm for the night, especially since her plan was to get me interested in someone other than Edward. "I thought the point of getting me all decked out was so I could meet some other equally-as-gorgeous guy."

"Well," Angela said, cocking her head to the side. "Who's to say that Edward won't notice you, too, if you're looking like a rock star?" She smiled deviously at me, but we were interrupted by the beep of the intercom.

"We have a problem up here," Mrs. Cope said. I quickly picked up the phone, if some contributing photographer had sent the wrong images or something, but when she explained to me what the issue was, I quickly grew agitated.

"What is it?" Jake asked as I slammed down the phone and stood up.

"Apparently the floral shop that Emmett McCarty has been raiding lately won't deliver his most recent bouquet," I huffed, throwing my coat on. "It's too damn big, and one of us has to go down and get it!"

"Okay, relax, killer," Jake said soothingly. "I'll go with you. I'm afraid you may hit someone with it if you go alone."

We looked back at Angela, who waved us off. "I've got the fort," she told us.

A short while later, Jake and I braved the cold and the mass of people in midtown, and arrived at the floral shop. We stepped up to the front desk and I let Jake do the talking, charming the lady working there. As they tried to figure out which giant bouquet we were supposed to retrieve, I heard a familiar voice from another corner of the store.

"Definitely dark pink and white roses," the voice said, and my heart lurched into my throat.

Edward!

I tiptoed into the direction from where I'd heard him, hiding behind a marble statue of a cupid spouting water. It was definitely him; I recognized his beautiful auburn hair and long black trench coat.

"My assistant wanted to place the order for me," he said to the salesperson standing next to him, "But I thought it would be better, more personal if I chose the flowers myself. She's very special to me."

Oh no! He's here to pick out the bouquet for Tanya! Jessica was right after all!

Tears sprang into my eyes and my stomach twisted into knots. Edward turned around at that moment, and I tried to hide behind the statue, but only succeeded in practically knocking it over. The movement caught his eye, and I froze when he saw me.

"Bella!" he said happily with a smile. "What are you doing here?"

The grin remained on his face and his eyes glittered as I stepped out from my hiding place. Twisting my fingers nervously behind me, I replied, "Oh, you know, just being your friendly, office flower delivery girl."

Edward's eyes widened as his smile grew even bigger, showing his perfect, white teeth. "Emmett again? Good Lord, that guy is persistent!"

He walked me up to the desk where Jake was still standing and they nodded at one another. Jake threw a concerned glance my direction, most likely trying to figure out why I looked as if I were about to cry. I shook my head at Jake while Edward paid for his flowers, and then forced a pained smile when he turned his attention back to me.

"So, will I see you at the club tomorrow night?" he asked in a softer voice. His eyes searched mine and I furrowed my brow, confused.

If he's going with Tanya, why does he care if I'm there or not?

Over Edward's shoulder, I saw Jake mouth the words 'talk to him!'

"Oh yeah, we'll all be there," I answered, motioning to Jake. "It was so nice of Rosalie to invite the whole staff."

"Good," Edward said, running a hand through his hair. He bent down slightly, as if he only wanted me to hear, "I'm looking forward to seeing you there."

"Me...too," I squeaked, thoroughly confused as he walked out of the shop. I leaned back against the counter and looked over at Jake. "That was just him being polite, right?"

"I don't know, baby, but if *that's* polite," Jake answered. "Then him seducing you could actually kill you."

Just then, the florist came forward with a giant stuffed bear, practically life-sized, holding a heart that said 'I love you bear-y much!'

"You've got to be kidding me," Jake said, staring at it.

I couldn't believe we were going to have to carry this thing back to the office. "I really hate this stupid holiday."

"There's no way I'm staying upright in these."

I stepped out of the cab on shaky legs, wishing I could just go home and put on my comfy yoga pants and converse sneakers. The sexy black heels Alice had insisted I buy hit the cobblestone pavement of the ultra-hip meatpacking district, and my ankle wobbled, forcing me to catch myself against the taxi door.

It probably didn't help that I'd already had a drink or two already. It was Friday night, and Alice, Jake, Paul and I had just arrived at the Howl at the Moon club opening.

The entire day had passed in a flurry of distracted confusion, wondering why Edward had seemed so eager to see me come to this. I'd wanted to change my mind and not go once I saw Jessica carrying a delivery of flowers into his office. Tanya was obviously going to be his date, and I didn't think I could stomach watching them together, but Alice wouldn't hear of it.

"This is a bad idea," I complained, still holding onto the door. Up ahead of us, a line of people were waiting to get into the club, and a gaggle of photographers waited at the door to see which fabulous New Yorkers were attending the opening.

"Relax, Bella. The shoes have ankle straps. You won't fall down!" Alice argued as she climbed out next to me. "And you look incredibly hot."

I groaned, still not totally comfortable with the outfit tucked under my coat.

"She totally does!" Paul said, handing the driver some bills and sliding out after us. Jake followed, coming around from the passenger seat in the front.

"Totally," Jake agreed, putting his arm around Paul. "Your best work yet."

I'd spent the better part of the afternoon once we'd all left the office in the hands

of Jake's new boyfriend, who had closed his fabulous new salon in Chelsea to make me over. I'd thought he was going to only do my hair, but his make-up artist was there, too.

They'd had to feed me a couple of drinks to shut me up, after which I was shampooed, plucked, preened, fluffed and curled within an inch of my life, the two of them working feverishly on my appearance. Alice showed up later with my clothes, gushing over my appearance while Jake smirked in the corner. She wouldn't even let me look at my reflection until she'd completely dressed me up. When she had, the person looking back me was a girl I'd never seen before.

My usually unruly hair had been styled into perfect, luscious waves that framed my face. My skin, normally so dull and pale, now held a sparkling translucence. My eyes were rimmed in a dark, smoky charcoal and my lips were the color of pink tulips. The red and black corseted top cinched my waist perfectly, the swell of my cleavage spilling slightly over the top. The tight black skirt she'd fit me into was shorter than anything I'd worn before in my life, but I had to agree with Alice when she'd said it made my legs go on for miles.

"And, so, Isabella becomes the Swan," Paul had murmured behind me as I'd studied my appearance, and I couldn't help but turn around and smile.

"So, what's your motto tonight?" Alice repeated for the tenth time that evening, grabbing my arm and walking me toward the entrance.

"I will look at guys other than Edward," was my practiced response. We were halfway past the line of people, heading toward the snooty hostess who held a list with our names, when Alice stopped dead in her tracks.

"Oh my God, Bella...who *is* that man?"

I looked ahead to see photographers snapping pictures as the door of a sleek, black limo opened. Emmett McCarty stepped out of it, smiling broadly at the cameras, before pulling a beaming Rose out after him.

"That's Emmett McCarty, the NFL star," I told her, but she shook her head frantically and tugged on my arm harder, pointing a little ways ahead of them.

I followed the direction of her hand and my heart skipped a beat as I saw Edward, looking incredible as always, heading toward the doors. His heather-gray trench coat was open, and under that, I could see a crisp white button-down, opened just enough to see a few wisps of his chest hair. His beard had grown in a little more

during the course of the week, framing his jaw perfectly, and his green eyes sparkled in the bright lights of the photographer's flashes.

"That's Edward, Alice!" I moaned, unable to take my eyes off him. "You've seen pictures of him before."

"No!" she hissed, clearly exasperated. "Next to him!"

I craned my neck to see who was walking with Edward, my stomach cramping as I expected to see the long, blonde locks of Boob Job Denali, but instead I only saw Jasper's floppy mop, his grin goofy as always as they reached the door.

"Him? That's Jasper Whitlock, the Managing Editor."

"Bella, you *have* to introduce me to him!" Alice was staring at him as she spoke to me, a longing look in her eyes that I'd never seen before.

"Okaaaay," I assured her as we stepped closer to the door. "But...I thought you were here to help me? You know, wing-woman, help me get over Edward and all that."

Alice seemed to snap out of it for a second, her eyes turning back toward mine. "Yes! Of course! I definitely will, Bella. Don't worry."

I heard Angela's voice calling my name and located her next to the hostess, waving us over. The six of us found our names on the coveted list and after leaving our coats at the check, were each given a box of Sweetheart candies and a heart-shaped hand stamp.

The club was decked out for the holiday: rose petals floated in bowls of water on every available surface, and candles in red holders were flickering on sleek black coffee tables surrounded by plush white couches.

"This place is awesome!" Ben pronounced, shoveling some candies into his mouth. Angela rolled her eyes and shrugged, following Jake and Paul as they headed toward the bar.

"You want to get a drink?" I asked Alice, leaning close to her so I didn't have to shout over the music, but she didn't seem to hear me.

Her eyes were trained on something across the room. I didn't have to guess who she was looking at, but when I turned to confirm it, was surprised to see Jasper

staring just as intently back at her. He was standing next to a high-topped table, his drink frozen in his hand. He lifted it once in salutation to Alice, and smiled.

"Introduce me," she murmured, her hand wrapping tightly around mine.

Alice pulled me behind her as we made our way through the already crowded club, until we reached our destination. She smiled brightly and the two of them gazed at one another for a moment, speechless. I yelped as she squeezed my hand tightly, and stepped forward awkwardly to speak.

"Hi, Mr. Whitlock. Great party, huh?" *I am so not good at small talk.*

"Call me Jasper," he replied huskily, never taking his eyes off Alice. "And you are?"

With the same grace she'd always shown on a dance floor, my roommate introduced herself. Jasper took her hand in his, pulling it up to his lips to chastely kiss. "It's a pleasure, ma'am."

"Charming the ladies already, Jazz?" The voice made my body flush with chills, and out of the corner of my eye, I could see Edward coming toward us. "Who have you ensnared now?"

Jasper laughed good-naturedly as my crush approached. He saw Alice first, which made sense, since I was pretty much hiding behind her. When Edward's eyes slid over to me, he smiled brightly, and then paused, a look of surprise taking over his features.

Alice nudged me with her hand and I moved out of her shadow, blushing hotly.

"Bella?" Edward mouthed my name, and I smiled nervously, giving him a self-conscious wave.

He didn't say anything else as his eyes trailed down my body and back up, his mouth hanging open slightly. When his gaze caught mine once more, the sparkling emerald of his eyes darkened with something that I thought for a moment resembled...hunger.

"Would you both care to join us for a drink?" Jasper asked, never taking his eyes off Alice.

"Thought you'd never ask," Alice replied sweetly, hopping up on the stool next to him.

The music was quite loud, and the roar of the surrounding crowd even louder, so Edward had to lean in close to me to ask, "What can I get you?"

A shiver ran through me and my eyes slid closed for a moment as I felt his hot breath against the shell of my ear. When I turned to answer him, his face was only inches from mine. His delicious scent drew me in, and I tilted my head towards his, my tongue involuntarily snaking out to lick my lips.

The motion wasn't lost on him, and his eyes darted down to my mouth, at which I caught my lower lip in my teeth, nervously chewing on it. He exhaled and looked back up at me, an unmistakable heat in the air between us.

"Um, I'll have a mojito," I finally answered and a small smile played at the corner of his lips. Alice asked for the same, and Edward winked at me once again as he turned and headed toward the bar.

I couldn't be imagining all this, could I?

He returned a short while later, greeting me with another smile, and I couldn't help the wide grin that appeared on my face in response.

"There's that smile again," he observed once he sat down. "I was hoping to get a glimpse of that tonight."

A furious blush covered my cheeks and I hid my face behind my drink.

"No no," he instructed with a smile, placing his fingertips over my knuckles and gently tugging my hand down. Electricity jolted through me as his skin brushed against mine. "Don't hide it. It's beautiful."

My cheeks burning, I thanked him. After a few moments of small talk, we got into a conversation, mostly about work and the upcoming issue. My drink was incredibly strong, but I barely noticed its effects on me as we continued to talk, his eyes darting down every once in a while to swipe across my exposed cleavage. Eventually, I became lost to everything else around me as we sat with our heads bent close to one another, talking about recent political and economic issues covered in the magazine.

When we finished our drinks, Jasper stood to pick up the next round and Alice tugged on my hand, tilting her head in the direction of the bathroom. We excused ourselves, Edward nodding politely at us as we scampered off, but when I turned over my shoulder to look back at him, I was shocked to see a blush cover his face; he

had been unabashedly checking out my ass.

"Bella, I'm so, so sorry! I know I promised to help you find other guys tonight, but Jasper is so amazing, I totally lost track of time!" Alice said breathily as she reapplied her lipstick in the mirror. I had all but forgotten her plan to distract me from Edward, lost as I was in our conversation and his undivided attention.

"It's fine, Alice. Don't worry about it." I looked in the mirror myself, still shocked by my own appearance. "I'm actually having a really good time talking to Edward."

She put her lipstick down and met my eyes in the mirror, the look on her face perplexed. "He *does* seem to be really into you, Bella." I could see the smile that flashed across my face, remembering Edward's words as he told me how beautiful I was. Maybe the stars would align tonight, and I might have a chance with him after all.

We stepped out of the bathroom back into the loud, crowded club, running into Jake and the rest of the gang. They corralled us to join them for a quick round of shots, and we half-heartedly agreed, each of us eager to get back to Jasper and Edward.

"To love!" Jake shouted as he tilted his head back at the bar, simultaneously slapping Paul on the ass. I knocked back the shot of patron, the liquid immediately burning my throat and making my eyes sting.

It quickly went to my head as Alice led me back to the table, and I swayed on my feet as we neared it, stumbling right into Edward's arms.

"Careful now," he said softly as I looked up at him. "I wouldn't want you to fall."

"Oh, I fell for you long ago," I admitted, then caught my breath in embarrassment at what I'd uttered.

*What the **hell** did I just drink, truth serum?*

"What? I'm sorry I didn't hear you!" Edward shouted over the music.

"Oh, I...um, I fall all the time!"

I seemed to cover my blunder decently, and Edward nodded, helping me toward my seat. This time, we didn't get to talk as much, because people kept coming by to talk to him; other publishing magnates, friends of his father, celebrities the

magazine had covered, even some local politicians.

I sat quietly and sipped my drink, waiting for there to be a gap in the endless stream of guests who wanted to greet him. Trying not to watch as Alice and Jasper moved even closer to one another, I gazed around the club. Suddenly, I realized it was now almost entirely filled with couples, all dancing, talking and kissing.

Still patiently waiting for Edward to turn back my way, I downed the rest of my drink and ate the candy hearts I'd gotten when we'd arrived. When a waiter came by passing around a pink martini, the house special, I took that and finished it quickly.

I tried not to feel too disgruntled, given that I was still sitting next to the man I'd been fantasizing about for months, but as the time passed, I began to feel completely invisible.

Just then, the music stopped and Emmett McCarty dragged a giggling Rosalie onto the dance floor. He grabbed a microphone from the deejay and began by thanking everyone for coming out that night, and wishing them all a happy Valentine's Day.

The bartenders all howled, which was appropriate given the club's name, and then one of them bent down to pick something up. Emmett hurried over and leaned over the bar, retrieving a bouquet of two dozen, perfect long stemmed red roses, surrounded by lush baby's breath and verdant leaves.

Hasn't she gotten enough flowers this week? I thought, clapping along mindlessly as Emmett returned to the dance floor, handing them to Rosalie. And then, everyone gasped as he reached into his pocket and lowered himself down to one knee in front of her.

"Rosalie Hale, you are the most amazing woman I've ever met. Will do me the incredible honor of being my bride?" he asked as she gaped down at him. He was presenting her with a diamond so large I could see it sparkle even from a dozen or so feet away.

"But she's only known him a few weeks!" I shouted in my buzzed fog. Thankfully, no one heard me since the words were spoken over a loud round of applause as Rosalie accepted Emmett's proposal.

Once the music started again and Emmett relinquished the microphone to dance with his now fiancé, I turned back to Alice, Jasper and Edward.

"I guess it was love at first sight for those two," Jasper concluded, and I noticed that his fingers were now tangled with Alice's. Edward was busy talking to a few people, still sitting with us but facing away as he animatedly took part in another conversation. I felt completely and entirely alone. This was quickly turning into the worst Valentine's Day ever.

I downed the last of my drink, my head swimming now, and I had to blink heavily as a thicket of blonde locks brushed roughly against my face.

"Eddie! I've been looking *all over* for you!" Her voice was like nails on a chalkboard. I was practically pushed off my stool as Tanya Denali shoved herself between me and Edward.

I swallowed back bile, realizing that he was just killing time talking to me until his date showed up. The tears began to well up in my eyes, and I knew I had to get out of there.

Quickly squeezing Alice's hand as I jumped off my seat, I mouthed 'I'll call you,' and tried to push my way toward the exit. I thought I heard my name being called, but I couldn't be sure over the noise of the crowd. As the first tears splashed onto my face, I grabbed my coat and ran outside.

I'm so stupid! I thought as I raised my arm on the street corner, trying to hail a cab. *How could I have ever thought he'd be interested in me?*

"Bella!"

A cab pulled up just as Edward appeared, breathless, behind me. "Why are you leaving?" he asked. "What's wrong?"

The tears began to flow in earnest now, the words thick in my mouth with my tipsiness. Even though he was standing there in front of me, I knew I was foolish to ever think he could be mine.

"You know, I've never even gotten flowers for Valentine's Day, *ever!*" I cried as I pulled open the taxi door and threw myself inside. I thought I heard him say my name again, but the blasting heat and radio in the cab drowned it out.

Out of all the times I'd embarrassed myself in front of him, that had to have been the worst time *ever*.

I knew Edward was still standing outside the car, but I was too humiliated to turn

and face him. I gave the driver directions, and closed my eyes as we pulled away from the curb.

An hour later, I was wiping my tear-stained cheeks in my apartment, coming down off my buzz into a grinding headache. Sitting down at the kitchen table, I popped two Tylenol and nursed a glass of water.

As soon as I'd gotten home, I'd kicked off the now painful heels, then freed my body from the corseted top and tight skirt, throwing them on the floor of my bedroom. I'd immediately reached for my comfortable flannel sleep pants and t-shirt, not bothering to change out of the matching red and black bra and panty set Alice had insisted I wear under my clothes "just in case".

I sighed as I stared at the glass of water with my fist pressed against my cheek, holding up my aching head.

I made such a fool of myself tonight!

Alice had frantically called me immediately after I'd left, asking me what had happened and if I wanted her to come home with me. I'd lied and told her I was fine, just really embarrassed at some stupid drunk admissions I'd made, and wanted to be alone for a while. I could see what a wonderful time she was having with Jasper, and encouraged her to stay out as long as she liked. Jake and Angela had both texted me, too, but I assured them all I was all right.

I knew if any of them came over, I'd end up saying how, once again, I'd gotten my hopes up about Edward, only have them completely ripped to shreds.

I can't believe I told him I'd never gotten flowers for Valentine's Day!

Groaning at the memory, I buried my face in my hands, the memories of all the lonely February Fourteenth's coming back to me.

A knock at the door startled me and I jumped, which caused my head to ache even further. Standing and walking toward the door, I called out, "I told you that you didn't have to come home, Alice-"

I froze as I pulled the door open, my eyes widening as I saw who waited in the hallway.

It wasn't Alice.

It was Edward.

Still dressed in his clothes from the club, he stood with that beautiful crooked smile on his face. In one hand, he was carrying a beautiful bouquet of roses, in the other, a heart shaped box of chocolates.

"Every girl should get flowers on Valentine's Day," he said softly.

Completely shocked, I stood there, gaping at him. "Those....those are for me?" I asked incredulously. I recognized the bouquet as one of the ones I saw Jessica carrying into his office, the ones I'd assumed were for Tanya.

He glanced down at the bouquet. "Well...yes...if you want them."

"But I saw you at the flower store...you...you were ordering flowers. And Jessica said you were with Boob Job-I mean-Tanya!" I choked out, flustered.

Edward chuckled and looked at the floor, his eyes hidden for a moment under an incredible layer of thick lashes.

"I was ordering flowers for *my mother* when I saw you at the shop," he explained, meeting my eyes again. "Jessica overheard a conversation I was having with my father and assumed things she shouldn't have. But it was good luck that she ordered them, though."

I shivered as his eyes met mine once again, every inch of my body electrified by what he was saying. After a moment or two of silence, Edward nodded toward the inside of my apartment. "Well? Can I come in?"

"Um...yeah! Sure!" Blinking, I held the door open for him, not sure if I wasn't suddenly suffering from hallucinations.

He stepped past me with a smile, and I leaned against the door as I closed it behind me, staring at him. At Edward Cullen. In my apartment.

He took off his trench coat, laying it gingerly over the top of one of my kitchen chairs. Then, he turned around to face me, and his smile melted into that same look he'd had when he first saw me at the club earlier that night.

"You looked incredible tonight, Bella," he murmured.

My jaw flexed as I tried to form coherent words, ignoring the pounding in my head. "So...you're...you're *not* with Tanya?" I asked, still trying to get my facts straight.

He laughed softly and shook his head. "She calls me 'Eddie', Bella. Do I look like a person who likes to be called that?"

A slow smile made its way across my face, and he seemed to sigh in relief at the sight of it. "No, I'm not with her. Maybe, we could put these in some water and...talk?"

I took a few hesitant steps toward him, gingerly taking the bouquet from his hands. They were amazingly fragrant, and I inhaled deeply while he gazed down at me. When I looked back up at him, my nose still buried in the petals, a fiery look burned in his eyes.

"I'm sorry about what happened tonight," he whispered softly.

"Water!" I shouted and he made a surprised face at my odd reply. "I mean, um, the flowers. They need water."

Still trying to wrap my head around everything, I quickly stood and busied myself with filling a vase with water. I remained silent, my head swimming with questions as I gently lowered the bouquet into it. Gripping the edges of the sink to ground myself, I finally gained the courage to ask, "What are you doing here?"

Edward laughed softly. "Isn't it obvious?" I heard him take a few steps, and was immediately aware of how close he was standing behind me.

"But you don't like me," I blurted out, staring at the flowers.

"Are you kidding me?" he asked, laughing again. I whirled around to face him, finding myself staring up into sparkling eyes filled with mirth, and my favorite crooked grin. "I've *always* liked you, Bella."

For far longer than was medically sound, I couldn't draw a single breath.

"I need to sit down!" I suddenly shouted. Pushing past him into the living room, I reached shakily for the couch, nearly missing and falling onto the floor. Practically hyperventilating, I gripped the cushions and tried to catch my breath.

Edward followed me into the room and gingerly sat down next to me, angling his

body so he was facing me. He ran his fingers through his hair, gripping it roughly so it stood up at awkward angles. Scratching at his scalp, he smiled and began to open his mouth to speak, but I cut him off.

"You *like* me?" I couldn't believe I was saying the words. "All this time, you liked me, too?"

Another beautiful laugh escaped his lips. "I feel like I'm in high school, or an episode of *The Wonder Years*." I gazed at him in amazement and then, in a huskier voice, he said, "But, yes. I do. I have since the first time you spoke up at that staff meeting."

I buried my face in my hands. "Oh no! I acted like an *idiot* during that meeting!"

Edward chuckled and pulled my hands away from my face, letting one of mine rest lightly in his. "You were brilliant. And ballsy, not afraid to speak your mind."

I stared down at the fingers that were touching his, feeling little shocks go through my body as we touched.

"Every time we talked, I was impressed with how intelligent you are, and how determined you are at your job," he explained, propping his free arm up on the top of the couch and resting his chin in his hand. "You've been like an enigma to me, though; always so serious, but laughing so freely with your friends."

He looked down once more, stroking my fingers with his. "I watched you when you were with them; you were different. You never laughed when you talked to me."

"I was too nervous," I admitted. "If you haven't noticed, I tend to say stupid things a lot."

"*Not* stupid." He grinned back up at me once again. "You're adorable."

My cheeks colored at his compliment, and heard him inhale sharply. His eyes blazed as I stared into them. "That blush will be the death of me, Bella."

"Why didn't you say anything until now?"

"I'm your *boss*, Bella. I didn't think I should risk your career or reputation and make a move." He let out a deep sigh. "I'm *still* not sure I should."

Frantic that we'd gotten this far, just to have him leave, I shifted on the couch,

closing the distance between us. He looked so uncertain, and at that moment, I would have risked anything, my career included, for him to stay.

"What changed?" I asked shyly.

"Seeing you smile, to start." Edward's eyes trained on my lips, which involuntarily curled into a grin. "Once you did, I became addicted to seeing it, like it became a drug or something. And then, I saw the way you were dressed tonight..."

He trailed off, a fierce hunger in his eyes, making me tremble and gasp softly with the intensity of it. I nervously bit down on my lip as my breathing began to pick up.

"You have no idea how much I wanted you tonight, Bella. I didn't want to let you out of my sight."

Edward laced the fingers of our joined hands together, tracing circles against my palm with his thumb. "It was driving me crazy, watching you blush and smile in that outfit."

"Really?" I asked, the word coming out as a hushed giggle.

This time, it was his turn to blush. "I don't know if you noticed, Bella, but I wasn't able to...uh...stand up much during the night."

He winked at me and when I realized what he was implying, my entire body flushed with heat. Wetness pooled between my thighs and I shifted on the couch next to him. Tucking my legs under my body, I sat up on my knees, squeezing them together in an attempt to subdue the overwhelming ache.

"I know I shouldn't be here," he murmured as we inched closer to one another, his sweet, warm breath washing over my face as it came out in pants.

Lifting his head up, he reached for me with his free hand, cupping my face and running his thumb across my cheek. My body was shaking from just that one gentle touch. "But I can't stop myself. I don't want to."

"Then don't," I whispered. My eyes closed for a moment, shivering from the dual sensations of one of his thumbs dancing across my face and the other stroking insistently along my palm. When I opened them once again, his expression was so needy, it was almost pained.

My mind was reeling from all the information I'd just been given, my

post-indulgent headache a thing of the past. All I could feel was Edward, so close to me, wanting me just as I'd always wanted him. He continued to caress my skin, and his entire body was rigid with tension, as if it took an extreme amount of effort to hold himself back.

I didn't care what it meant for my reputation at work, or my career. This could very well have been my one chance with Edward Cullen, and I was taking it.

In one quick movement, I closed the distance between us, leaning forward and kissing him. I heard him breathe in sharply, and his thumb paused mid-stroke across my cheek. He opened his mouth slowly, his lower lip brushing softly against my own, and I trembled against him, unable to hold back the shudders that tumbled out of my mouth.

Our mouths were still touching and open, inhaling each others' breaths. Then the hand that had been holding mine let go, swiftly reaching up to cup my face along with his other one. With both hands, he pulled me close, his lips pressing intently against mine in a searing, passionate kiss.

As our kisses quickly turned more intense, I climbed onto his lap, one arm wrapping around his neck while the other caressed the hair on his jaw. Edward's hands left my face, slipping around to my back and pressing against my spine, pushing me even closer to him. I melted into his kiss, my hands reaching up to tangle into the wild, silky hair I'd been dreaming about. It felt heavenly.

Edward broke the kiss suddenly, looking at me with raw lust in his eyes, making me whimper. His fingers found the edge of my t-shirt, and as he chased it up my sides, I lifted my arms in the air, allowing him to pull it over my head. When he saw the sexy bra I was still wearing underneath my sleep clothes, he let out a deep groan.

"Oh, fuck, Bella! What are you doing to me?"

He captured my lips with his once more, now with renewed vigor. His tongue lapped gently at my lower lip, teasing me, and when he finally slipped it past my lips to slide languidly along mine, I couldn't help but grind down against his lap, making him moan. His nails raked along my side, just barely digging into my skin, and I gasped his name into his mouth.

"If we go much further," he panted, his hips pushing up against mine, "I won't be able to stop."

"I don't want to stop," I replied, attacking his mouth and gripping his hair tightly once again, thrilling to the sounds that came out of him in response. When we broke for air, I whispered, "I've wanted you for so long. It might kill me to stop now."

He chuckled and ran the tip of his nose against mine. Then, Edward gripped me by my hips, and leaned forward, wrapping my legs around him. I held onto him tightly, kissing his neck as he stood.

"Bedroom...that way," I gasped against his skin, loving the way his strong body lifted me so easily.

"Wait," he murmured, pausing as we passed by the kitchen. He took a few steps into the room, pausing at the counter. Reaching under my bottom and holding me securely to him with one hand, he pulled one rose from the bouquet he'd brought me.

"There's something," he said between kisses as he walked us into my bedroom, "I want to try."

A slightly devious smile came across his face as he lowered me onto the bed, placing the rose beside me on the comforter. Its luscious red was a stark contrast against my white blanket. Edward gently tugged my shoes off, then tucked his fingers into the waistline of my pants and deftly pulled them down my legs. He gazed down at me with longing, and as I shivered under the intensity of his stare, I was suddenly really glad I'd kept on Alice's "just in case" underwear.

"You're so fucking beautiful," he whispered, kicking off his own shoes before climbing onto the bed and kneeling between my open legs. Then Edward picked up the rose once more, taking a whiff of it himself before grasping the stem between his finger and thumb, and brushing the flower against the inside of my arm.

I lay prone underneath him, my body turning into a quivering mess, as he traced it up my upper arm and then to the other palm, following a path up to my chest. The petals were soft and lush, and I whimpered as he brushed the rose over my collarbone, then softly over the swell of each breast.

My nipples were poking through the fabric, my skin pebbling up into gooseflesh as he continued his flowery exploration of my skin. The rose slid between my breasts and down my stomach, and my hips began grinding against the mattress as he brushed it back and forth just above the seam of my panties.

"Look at you," Edward whispered, placing the rose gently to the side and coming

down to hover above me, his palms resting on either side of my body. "I knew underneath that serious exterior was a sex kitten just begging to come out."

He ran his nose along my throat, from where it met my shoulder to my ear, and my hands flailed frantically, reaching up to grasp him wherever I could. My body arched up in the empty space between us, desperate to be connected to him, and I tugged at the collar of his shirt, reaching for the buttons.

"Let me touch you, Edward. Please!" I begged.

It was all I'd dreamt about for ages now, and I thought if I didn't get my hands on him soon, I might go crazy. He helped me by unbuttoning from the bottom up, still breathing in and kissing the skin at the nape of my neck.

"You smell so fucking good," he groaned as we finally undid all the buttons, yanking the shirt down his torso and over his arms, and then throwing it to the side. I touched him everywhere I could, from the rosy planes of his back to his muscular shoulders and arms, feeling them flex as he bent down closer to me.

His kisses were frenzied now, his body as needy as mine as he let himself lie flush against me once more, and I gasped loudly as I felt his prominent erection nudge at my hot center through the fabric separating us. I could tell already that he was big, and I wanted to touch it, lick it, feel it push inside of me.

As if he could read my mind, Edward pulled back abruptly and yanked off his belt, his movements now jerky in the heat of desire. I watched, my mouth watering at the sight, as he pulled down his slacks, the soft trail of hair that covered the perfect 'V' of his hips disappear into his boxers.

Edward collapsed on top of me once more, our tongues sliding into one another's mouths as he pulled the straps of my bra over my shoulders. I angled my body up and reached back, releasing the clasp and as soon as my breasts were free, he captured one in his hands, bringing the nipple to his lips and sucking it quickly into his mouth.

I cried out and arched against him, feeling him grind his pelvis harder into me as he did. His erection was now pressing directly against my clit, and I was desperate to remove the last layer of clothes separating us. Edward licked and rolled one nipple in his mouth, seeming to calm a little as he turned his attention to the other one, caressing that nub gently with his lower lip before giving it the same treatment.

Our hips were grinding together; my panties were now soaked, and the sensation

of his hard cock so close to me was driving me insane. He rolled us to our sides and we both tugged off our undergarments, and once we were both finally naked, he paused, staring at me.

"Do you have any idea how fucking perfect you are?" he asked, drawing his fingertip from my breast, down my side, over the arch of my hip and down my thigh.

Still on my side facing him, I did the same, tracing his chest hair with the pads of my fingers, until they hovered just above where I was desperate to touch him. "You're not so bad yourself," I joked.

He nudged my hip, pushing me flat on my back once more. Propping himself up on one arm to watch, Edward ran his fingers over my thighs, bringing them closer and closer to where I wanted him most. When he finally stroked against the strip of hair there, I gasped and squeezed my eyes shut, turning my face into his chest. Tracing his fingers along my soaked folds, I shivered with anticipation, crying out as he deftly slid one finger against my sensitive clit.

"Oh...God," I whimpered, feeling him slowly moving against my quivering flesh in up and down strokes, followed by slow circles, alternating back and forth between the two movements. My hips pushed upward against his hand, seeking more of the sensation, and when he trailed lower, pressing a finger just at my opening, I began to cry in earnest.

"Are you all right?" he asked softly, noticing the tear that slipped down my cheek.

"Yes!" I cried out, so fucking needy for him, terrified and desperate to feel him finally touching me. He slowly pushed a finger inside me, and I cried out at the delicious pressure. Edward pulled his long digit out and then back in again at the same unhurried pace, and I couldn't control the sounds that were pouring out of me.

"God, you're so fucking wet," he murmured in awe, adding another finger, pushing deeper. I arched toward him, my hips pressing reflexively down into the mattress with each retreat.

"I need you!" I shouted. "Edward, fuck! I need you so fucking bad!"

His gently pulled his fingers out, and although I whimpered with the loss, a shiver ran through me as I watched him sit up, reaching frantically over the bed toward his pants, where I assumed he was searching for a condom.

He lay back down with the foil wrapper, fumbling with it in his excitement, and

the sight of his perfect, hard cock in front of me was too much to take. Unable to stop myself, I lurched forward, licking the beads of pre-cum off the head.

"Oh, *fuck*, Bella!"

He stilled, the condom remaining in his hand as I explored him with my tongue, my hand wrapping around the base. I gently sucked his tip into my mouth, running circles around it with my tongue, listening to him gasp and pant. Slowly letting him slip all the way into my mouth, I reveled in the taste of his flesh, bringing my head back up with soft suction and then back down again. With my free hand, I reached down and stroked his sack softly before rolling it between my fingers more firmly while letting his cock hit the back of my throat.

"Bella....*ungh*...oh fuck! You have to...oh...god...yes! Fuck! You have to stop!"

His words came out as a stuttering gasp, and he gently nudged my face away. I could swear his hands were trembling as he rolled the condom over his glistening cock, and then aggressively crawled on top of me with a growl.

He kissed me slowly, softly, as if he were trying to calm himself, and I touched his face gently, opening my eyes to gaze up at him. His eyes were still closed, and he paused, pressing his forehead against mine and taking a breath. One of his hands came up to tangle in the hair at the crown of my head, the other positioning himself at my entrance. His head pressed against my opening, and I let my hands trail down to grip his forearms, melting into his kisses once more.

"Beautiful," he whispered against my ear, "Fucking beautiful, my little valentine."

With those words, he slowly pushed inside me, kissing my neck as he moved. My mouth opened in a cry, but no sound came out, as if my entire body were concentrating solely on the sensation between my legs. Edward pulled almost all the way out, paused for a torturous second, then thrust exquisitely back in.

Over and over again, he fucked me gently, perfectly, his cock rubbing against places I didn't even know I had. I could feel the restraint it took for him to move slowly, the muscles in his arms trembling. Before I knew it, I was on the precipice, all the teasing and months of wanting him bringing me to the edge of orgasm faster than ever before.

"Please," I whimpered. "Oh God! Faster, harder...more!"

"Bella, fuck, don't ask me that!" he groaned as he pushed slowly in and out, in and

out. "You feel too fucking good I won't...God...I won't last long if I do."

"Me either," I moaned, reaching down and grasping his sweet, tight ass, holding him to me, urging him deeper. I couldn't get out complete sentences, only grunts and words. "Need more!"

"Fuck!" Edward shuddered and quickly reached down, grasping my legs and pulling them up so my knees were level with his forearms. He pinned my legs to his sides and shifted his hips, changing the angle of his thrusts so he slid further into me, his pelvic bone pressing against my clit.

"Oh God! I can't...oh God!" I cried out at the new sensation, amazed at how quickly I was suddenly there.

"Yes, oh fuck yes! I want to see you come!" he snarled, driving into me, watching my face. I gasped as I felt the rush take over, desperate to keep my eyes open and stare back at him, but I couldn't; it felt too good.

The first powerful wave of my orgasm washed over me, and I gripped his hair in both hands as I cried out his name. He continued thrusting into me as the sensations continued, my body writhing and thrashing underneath him in intense pleasure. When I thought it had finally played out, he threaded his fingers through my hair as tightly as I was grasping his and began pounding into me, causing another wave to hit.

Between grunts and curses, Edward panted, burying his face against my neck. He let out an animalistic cry, then stilled and shuddered against me. I pressed my hands to his sweaty back, cleaving to him as his orgasm played out, and he collapsed in exhaustion on top of me.

I traced my fingers along his spine as our breathing calmed down, his member softening inside me. Edward pulled out and quickly disposed of the condom, then lay down and pulled me to him, his chest to my back. I relaxed against him as he gently played with my hair, turning my head up to kiss him softly and reaching down to fondle his knee, his calf, anything I could grasp. He held my other hand with his and then opened his eyes, looking up at me. A small smile played at his lips.

"What are we going to do now?" he asked, searching my eyes.

"You want to do it again?" I answered playfully and he rolled his eyes, his head falling back on the pillow. I turned over and cuddled against him. I knew what he'd meant; he was still my boss, I was still his employee.

My heart pounded with the knowledge that I just slept with Edward Cullen. But for that moment, I didn't care what it meant, how it would affect my job. I didn't want to find an answer now; I just wanted him next to me. I shrugged and sank deeper into Edward's arms, nuzzling his chest.

Outside of the bedroom, I heard the front door open and close, signaling Alice's arrival home.

"I guess we'll figure it out tomorrow," he said, pulling the now wrinkled blanket up over us and kissing my forehead. "Happy Valentine's Day, Bella."

I smiled against his skin, my breathing slowing, drowsiness taking over. "Happy Valentine's Day," I repeated, and fell asleep.

Thanks for reading! Leave me some love and let me know what you thought!

New chapters will begin posting in July!

- Aylah

Chapter 2: The Morning After

This chapter was featured in the Fandom Fights Mental Illness! Thanks so much to Agoodwitch for letting me be a part of the compilation, and for prereading my chap! This story is almost complete, and will be updating weekly, usually on Fridays, cause that's my happy day. :)

Thank as always to my girls, Kyla713 and Awesomesauce76!

Disclaimer: All things Twilight belong to Stephenie Meyer. Valentineward is mine!

EPOV

"I know I shouldn't be here..."

My words were strained, my resolve crumbling, as Bella inched closer to me on the couch. I ran my thumb along her cheek, watching her tremble from my touch.

"...but I can't stop myself. I don't want to."

"Then don't," she whispered, her eyes wide with desire.

And then her lips were on mine, her fingers gripping my hair. I started frantically pulling her clothes off, giving into the need that had consumed me for far too long...

"Oh, fuck, Bella! What are you doing to me?"

I woke up with a start, groaning at the familiar dream. Only, this time, it wasn't a dream at all. The soft breathing and warm body next to me proved that.

Oh crap!

A full-fledged panic hit me as soon as I opened my eyes, remembering I was in Bella's bedroom, and what we'd done. She was still sleeping soundly next to me, however, despite the blinding sunlight streaming in through her window.

I sat up in her bed and sighed, running a hand through my hair before bending forward and resting my forehead on my palm. I couldn't believe what had happened.

I'd slept with Isabella Swan.

Who worked for me.

On Valentine's Day.

Flashes of the night before rushed through my mind. Bella had looked ridiculously sexy at Emmett's club opening. She seemed like a different person, her hair falling in waves over her shoulders, her cleavage peeking out from the bodice of her corset, not to mention her tight skirt and heels.

I'd stared at her like an idiot when she'd shown up dressed like *that*, unveiling the delicious body I'd only dreamed was hidden underneath the frumpy, serious clothes she wore to work every day. It was as if she'd gone from librarian to sexpot in ten seconds flat.

Bella sighed and shifted under the sheets, scooting her body closer to mine, grazing my hip with the smooth skin of her ass. My dick, already halfway stiff with morning wood, started reacting to her nearness, and I groaned.

I'd wanted her for months and I was pretty sure I'd done a fantastically shitty job at hiding it, but somehow, Bella had never known. Which was probably a good thing, since she worked for me.

Reminding myself of this was not making things any easier. Nor did it change the fact that she was lying next to me. In her bed. Naked.

Fuck!

I grunted as I pushed my palm down on my burgeoning erection, affording myself some small relief, before I fell back against the pillows and looked over at Bella

She smelled so fucking good, her bedroom still heavy with the scent of her perfume and sex. I could still notice the faint aroma left from the rose petals I'd brushed across her satiny skin.

My eyes slid closed as I thought back to how she'd shivered when I did that. It was such a douchey, romantic thing to do, but it seemed so...*right* with her.

I'd stroked the flower along her breasts and down her smooth belly, loving the way her skin flushed, gooseflesh rising up in the wake of the rose's path. When I dragged it to where the soft skin met the lace edge of her panties, she'd started

whimpering and grinding her hips against the mattress.

I felt myself hardening even more as I gave into the memory of Bella writhing underneath me. Glimpses of her perfect body flickered through my mind: her breasts, the taste of her skin as I sucked on her pink, pert nipples, and the soft, wet flesh between her thighs-

Not helping...

Grunting and pushing the heels of my palms against my eyelids, I tried to force the arousing images from my mind. I was already desperate to sleep with her again, and that really fucking sucked, because I knew there was no way it could happen again any time soon. Not while she still worked for me.

Yeah, try telling that to your dick, Cullen.

I glared down at the tent that had formed under Bella's white cotton sheets. It would be so easy just to turn on my side and kiss her bare shoulder, listening to her hum in approval as I trailed my fingers down her back. I could already picture her pushing that delectable ass back against me, turning to look at me with eyes that were still sleepy, but heavily-lidded with need. Only a few moments of stroking her, kissing her skin, and I could be back inside her incredible, wet heat.

My dick twitched at the fantasy, and I groaned. It was *his* fault that I'd gotten into this mess in the first place.

Well, not entirely.

If I were being honest with myself, I knew a completely different part a bit north of my dick had something to do with it.

Fuck. I have to get the hell out of here.

Lifting the sheets up as quietly as I could, I slid out of Bella's bed and searched the floor for my boxers. I had been so comfortable and warm lying next to her soft body, but the room was cold, and the stark contrast in temperature brought my erection down to half-mast.

I found my shirt and trousers in a crumpled mess at the foot of Bella's bed, where they'd been thrown the night before in a frenzied rush. As quietly as I could manage, I slipped my arms through the sleeves of the button-down I'd worn to *Howl at the Moon* the previous night, trying not to make a sound as I fastened it closed. Letting

my cell phone fall soundlessly from my pants pocket and into my hand, I checked the time. It was mid-morning, and I'd already missed several calls. Cursing silently, I pulled my slacks on slowly, so the fabric didn't rustle against my skin.

Bella stirred behind me, and I turned around slowly, checking to see if she was still asleep. She was lying on her side, her dark hair spilling back over her creamy shoulder, her face calm and peaceful in slumber. She looked so fucking beautiful, and guilt nagged at the pit of my stomach as I slid my belt through the buckle.

The truth was that I was pretty good at sneaking out of women's rooms before they woke up; I'd done it countless times before. I was fairly practiced at getting dressed in the dark, leaving before whomever I'd slept with realized I was gone. It was a shitty thing to do, I knew that, but I was just so not good with the morning-after stuff.

But I couldn't do it this time. Not with Bella.

Sighing, I sat down on the edge of her bed and rubbed my face roughly with my hands. No matter how much I'd fucked up our professional lives by sleeping with her, I couldn't walk out on her like this. As much as I hated to admit it, I already cared too much.

"Edward?" The sheets shifted behind me and I froze as I heard her sit up in the bed. "Are...are you leaving?"

"Um, no!" I lied, turning around on the bed to flash a smile at her. "I was just getting dressed because...I was cold!"

She quirked an eyebrow at me, catching me in my lie, and I chuckled nervously. I didn't like the idea of feeding Bella a line, and she was too smart to be played, anyway. Her intelligence was one of the things I really liked about her.

Shit. I just admitted I liked her, didn't I? Fuck. Yes, I did.

So I decided just to try to be honest.

"I was getting dressed...to leave," I admitted, feeling the air rush out of me with the disappointment that shone in her eyes. "But I really didn't want to."

Bella's expression morphed from regret to confusion. "Oh," she murmured, pulling the sheet over her body as her shoulders curled forward in uncertainty.

We were silent for a minute and it was awkward as fuck. I didn't know what the hell I was supposed to say now. I was her boss, for Christ's sake! I knew that I shouldn't have been there from the second I showed up at her apartment door, drawn to it with flowers and candy like some idiot stuck in a fucking tractor beam, but I couldn't stop myself.

I didn't have the strength to stay away from her anymore.

"I guess we've gotten ourselves in a pretty big mess, huh?" she offered, staring down at her palms.

Grimacing, I nodded. "Yeah, I guess we have."

Our conversation was so stilted and uncomfortable, not at all like the easy banter we'd shared the night before. She'd been animated and excited as we talked about the magazine and politics over cocktails, her eyes flashing when we came to a topic she was really passionate about. Now she looked defeated and sad, unable to meet my gaze.

"I won't...tell anyone...you know. We can just...forget it ever happened." Bella bent down further over the sheets, and it felt as if my heart was being ripped out of my chest when I realized she was starting to cry.

Fuck! This wasn't what I wanted to happen!

In our post-orgasmic haze the night before, I'd tried to pose the question of what we should do now, but it felt so good to be wrapped around her, and I was tired as hell. I figured we could just deal with it in the morning...

And that's why you tried to turn tail and run like a fucking douchebag.

I grimaced at my actions and immediately moved to sit next to Bella's hunched over form.

"Hey," I murmured, trying to catch her eye. She shook her head, keeping her eyes glued to her hands, and stifled a snuffle as a tear rolled down her cheek.

*Crap! I'm such a fucking dickhead! What am I **doing** to her?*

"Bella, stop! Don't cry, please." I cupped her face in my hand, wiping away the tear with my thumb. "I don't want to just *forget* last night."

She gasped quietly and gazed up at me, her deep brown eyes pooling with tears and flashing with hope. "You don't?"

If only she knew that was the farthest thing from my mind. It was all I could do to stop plotting when and how we could do it again.

"No! Of course not. It was amazing." I continued to brush my thumb along her damp cheek, and Bella gulped, relaxing into my touch.

"Well, what *do* you want, then?"

Isn't that the fucking question of the century?

I sighed and looked away. Did it matter what I wanted? What I wanted was her, but I was the Editor in Chief of a world-renowned magazine, and Bella Swan was a member of my staff. No matter how many fucked up one-night-stands I'd had in my life, I had never, ever slept with someone who worked for me. We were both risking our reputations and our careers.

It just *couldn't* go any further right now.

I turned back to face Bella. Her gaze had remained hopeful as she stared up at me, my hand frozen in place against the soft skin of her cheek. Our admissions from the night before lingered in my mind: she really liked me, and I would have felt like more of a dick for what I was about to say, if she didn't already know how much I liked her, too.

"What I *want* is to get to know you better, Bella. I *want* to spend more time with you, but this is really...complicated."

She let out a breath and nodded. "Yeah, I know you're right." I thanked God she did, because I really didn't want to hurt her by saying that. "I guess neither one of us was really thinking clearly last night."

"Well, it was kind of hard for me to think about anything other than how you looked in that corset." I grinned and cocked an eyebrow at her, causing Bella to blush in response.

"Well, I guess I'm used to that."

Her cheeks flushed an even deeper shade of scarlet as she spoke, but I didn't know what she meant. *Used to that?* Was this some kind of magic corset she took

out of her closet to lure all-too-willing men back to her bed?

"What do you mean?" I asked, clearly confused.

Her eyes flashed to mine, then down my body and back up again. "I'm used to...having trouble thinking. When you're around."

"Ohh," I replied as understanding hit; incredible sex must have had a way of delaying my reaction time or something. Bella smiled bashfully at me, and I couldn't help but grin back at her honest admission.

Truthfully, I'd always thought she'd been a little bit afraid of me, since she absolutely never smiled or laughed in front of me. She had looked so fucking adorable when she said it was her crush on me that had made her so nervous.

Bella wrapped her fingers around my hand, still gently cupping her cheek. She turned her face, placing a soft kiss on the heel of my palm. The gesture was so sweet, so intimate, and it made my heart ache.

Stupid heart. It makes things even more complicated than my dick does.

She pulled my hand down to her lap and began drawing little patterns against it with her fingers, the sensations racing up my arm and down my spine.

"So...now what do we do?" she asked, leaning back against her pillows. The sheet dipped down from where it wrapped around her body, serving as an intense reminder of the fact that she was naked under there. Naked, soft and warm...

Focus, Cullen.

"I don't know." I cleared my throat and continued, forcing my thoughts to the topic at hand. "You know how I feel. I mean, I'd be lying if I said I didn't want something to happen between us again."

"Me, too," she agreed softly.

One side of Bella's mouth quirked up into a half-grin, and my dick came to life at the mention of getting some action. I took a deep breath and willed my semi to go the fuck away.

"But...it can't. Not now. Not while you still work for me."

My gaze was serious, and Bella frowned, her eyebrows knitting together. "I know."

Her voice was barely a whisper, and for the life of me, I couldn't figure out why. I thought I was implying that something *could* happen between us once she got another job. Why did she look so upset?

*This is why I don't do relationships. Because I **suck** at them.*

So I tried to be funny instead.

"I guess I'll just have to fire you."

Her eyes widened at my joke, the fear evident in her expression, until she read mine and realized I was kidding. She smiled, and the sight made me feel like my insides were turning to mush.

"Very funny." Bella snickered. "But you're right. I'll start sending my resume around. I've gotten other offers before, so it shouldn't be too hard to find something else."

"You have?" I was surprised. Bella was way too smart for her job. If she'd gotten other offers, why hadn't she taken them? "Why did you turn them down?"

She smiled and blushed again, shrugging and looking up at me from under her lashes.

*Ohh. Because of **me**!*

An involuntary grin spread across my face when I realized what she was saying, and then she giggled. I groaned silently at the sound. It was her laugh, that beautiful fucking laugh, which had captivated me. All that she needed to do now was bite her lip and I was a goner.

The blush, the laugh and the lip-bite: the Bella Swan Trifecta.

"So we'll just...put this on the back burner. For now." I stressed the 'for now' part because I needed her to see just how much I wanted this.

"For now, yes. We probably shouldn't say anything about it to anyone, either." Bella agreed, glancing seductively at me. "It will just have to be Our. Little. Secret."

I groaned. The look she gave me was testing my restraint to its limit, and I started

to move closer, desperate to have her just one more time.

Suddenly, the sound of the pipes clattering as her shower turned on startled us both. I jumped back and Bella cursed softly.

"Alice," she grumbled. I vaguely remembered hearing Bella's roommate come home last night - the one that Jasper hadn't been able to take his eyes off all evening long.

"Do you think she noticed my coat when she came in? And the flowers?" I asked in a whisper, the reality of another person's presence in this mess putting my nerves on high alert.

Bella shook her head. "She's not all that observant when she's drunk. I'll hide the flowers in here before she gets out of the shower."

I sighed. "I should probably go."

Bella nodded and moved to stand, keeping the sheet wrapped securely around her. I turned away when she reached for her bathrobe. If I saw one slip of her delicious, smooth flesh, I'd be tearing my own clothes off and pinning her to the bed, so I busied myself with stepping into my shoes.

She ushered me through her apartment to the kitchen by the door. I pulled my trench coat on, my keys jingling loudly in my pocket.

Yup. Awkward as fuck again.

"So, um..." Bella began, clearly not knowing what to say next. "I'll see you Monday?"

"Yes." I stated. "Monday. At work." I punctuated my words with a bizarre swing of my fist. *Real cool, Cullen. Real cool.*

Her eyebrows lifted and her face lit up in a grin. Apparently, she found my inner dork amusing. Involuntarily, I bent forward, ready to kiss her goodbye, but then paused and shifted backwards, not sure what to do.

*Do I kiss her? Would that send the wrong message? Would **not** kissing her send the wrong message?*

I furrowed my brow and Bella hugged her arms around her body, nervously

shifting her weight from one foot to the next. Finding the middle ground, I leaned in and kissed her on the cheek, lingering a little longer than I should have.

"Okay, um...see you later." Twisting the doorknob, I hurried out the door, closing it behind me.

Once I was safely in the elevator, I fell back against the wall, letting my head hit it with a thud. Before I could collect myself, however, my phone buzzed in my pocket. It was a text from Emmett.

You're late for the gym. What gives?

Emmett and I had worked out together, ever since we were two teenagers shooting hoops on my parents' driveway. These days, I couldn't always keep up with 'Goliath McCarty' and his grueling NFL training routine. Personally, I preferred it when the Giants were actually playing; during the off-season, Emmett practically killed me.

Sorry. Late night. I texted back, exiting the elevator and crossing Bella's lobby.

Ahh, The Player returns! Did you finally hook up with some publishing-groupie last night?

I frowned at the phone. I couldn't lie to Emmett, but I couldn't have anyone knowing Bella and me, either - not even one of my best friends.

My fingers paused over the keys as I stepped outside into the frigid morning. If I didn't give him some information, he'd never let up.

Something like that. Rain check on the gym?

His reply came just as I'd hailed a cab.

No problemo. But I want details, bro!

Sighing, I climbed into the car and gave instructions to the driver. Closing my eyes as I leaned back against the seat, I thought about how far away Monday seemed.

I missed Bella already.

****CH&RR****

I spent the rest of the weekend trying not to think about her.

It wasn't working.

Avoiding calls from Jasper and Emmett, I hit the gym alone, trying to banish thoughts of Bella's sweet-smelling skin and adorable laugh with a punishing workout. After six miles on the treadmill, though, she was no more out of my head than she'd been when I got there.

My parents met me for dinner on Saturday night, and that provided a short breather from my Bella-consumed mind. My father was the head of the entire publishing house, along with his long time friend and C.F.O., Eleazar Denali. The building that housed us bore their names, bolted to the wall in the lobby in pewter.

"So, I assume the spring issue is on track to go to pre-press by Tuesday?" my father asked.

Despite the fact that I had a M.B.A. in Business from Harvard and had successfully run *The Guard* for the past three years, when my father questioned me, I still felt like a kid who hadn't finished his homework yet.

"The magazine runs like a well-oiled machine, Pop," I assured him.

He simply raised an eyebrow in response, swirling his glass of wine. I didn't know what it was, maybe a job requirement of being a C.E.O., but he was being a real prick lately, checking up on me all the time.

*Even more reason to shut things down with Bella. He'd be livid if he found **that** out.*

My mother intervened, insisting she was sure everything was running according to schedule, and changed the subject.

Another good thing about dinner with my parents: it was easy to avoid having a boner if I felt like shit.

But once I returned home, I couldn't get Bella off my mind. I kept wondering how she was doing, if she was okay with what had happened between us. Her fucking perfect body kept finding its way into my thoughts, too. It was frustrating at hell, and it was only after I finally gave in, taking myself in hand and stroking to images of her coming apart beneath me, that I was afforded any relief.

It was short-lived.

I woke up Sunday morning thinking about her again, and apparently, so did my dick. Not wanting to resort to jerking off again in less than eight hours, I forced a muffled groan into one of my pillows and decided to get the hell out of my apartment.

Surprising the members of my staff that never usually saw me on a weekend I tried to bury myself in work. I locked myself in my office, planning to get a jump on finalizing details for the April issue. I couldn't concentrate on anything, though, because outside my door was the Editorial Assistant area, where Bella's desk sat.

"Come on, Cullen! Get a fucking grip!" I muttered to myself, trying to recover the player mindset of my past. *Just stop thinking about her, damn it!*

But I couldn't do it, not in such close proximity to where she sat every day. Where she would continue to sit until she got another job. I slammed my laptop shut and hurried down the hallway, punching the elevator button with such force, I was surprised it didn't fall off.

*What **the hell** is the matter with me?*

Sure, I'd liked other girls in the past before, but no one ever haunted my thoughts like this.

By the time I got back to my apartment, the sky-high bachelor pad that looked over the river, I really needed a drink. Grabbing a beer from my fridge, I thought back to the girls I'd slept with recently. Chelsea, Leah, Maggie, Jane...and those were only the ones whose names I could remember. There'd been an endless string for a while.

I really wasn't *that* guy; the kind who just slept with women and then threw them aside...not anymore, at least. I told myself I had no time for a relationship. With the long hours required at my job, my life constantly revolved around the publishing schedule, and that had a tendency to get in the way of dating. Besides, all of the women I'd met since taking over the magazine had been shallow, our connections empty.

There was a time I'd been proud of my player status, though. I'd worn it like a badge of glory.

It was the chase that would get me going, and in the end, I'd always been able to

just sleep with them and walk away. I'd leave a note, or, as ashamed as I was to admit it, the occasional text message. There'd sometimes be a follow-up phone call, or even a second date once in a while, if the sex was good, but never more than that. I never thought about them afterwards; Edward Cullen never pined for anyone.

So what's your problem now, Cullen?

I tried to think back to the last girl I'd had sex with, and realized with a start just how long ago it had been. The last girl I could remember was Kate, whom I'd met at a conference the summer before. She was nice enough, a decent lay, and in town for the weekend from L.A., which made walking out of her hotel room that much easier.

After some quick calculations, I sank into one of my living room chairs, acknowledging to myself that I had, in fact, been on a dry spell since I'd first noticed Bella at that staff meeting last July.

She'd been at the magazine for at least six months, and was quiet, shy. I knew from the editors that she was doing a spectacular job, but I'd never talked to her. She always seemed intimidated by me.

And at that one meeting, she'd raised her hand when we hit the "suggestions" section of the agenda, planning out an upcoming issue. Everyone was shocked that an assistant would speak up, but her idea for a feature was brilliant. I'd been mesmerized by her spunk, and suddenly found myself eager to know more about her.

So I watched her.

For months, she'd remained an enigma to me, laughing and smiling with Jacob Black and Angela Weber, the other Editorial Assistants. But around me, she'd clam up, her lips pressing into a thin line. It bothered me, not only that her entire demeanor would change when I was near, but also how much *I* wanted to be the one making her laugh.

A few months later, I came across her looking at the painting in the lobby at work. She was waiting for an elevator, probably being sent out on some random errand by one of my editors, and was gazing up at the piece of artwork my father had bought years ago in Italy when they were young, seeing the world after college.

"It's called '*The Guard*,'" I'd said, seeing her start as I stepped into the lobby. "My father bought it years ago in Italy. It's where he came up with the name for the magazine."

I explained the tale the artist had told my parents years ago, how the painting depicted three men in the early renaissance, whose presence guarded the all aspects of the arts.

"It's so beautiful," Bella breathed. "The colors, the brush strokes, how real it all looks."

She was so serious, so still as she took in the beauty of artistry, but I noticed then that *she* was the true beauty in the room. Despite her straight-laced clothes, she was absolutely breathtaking, like a prized gem that no one had discovered yet. I couldn't take my eyes off her face, the soft curve of her cheek, the slant of her nose, the intensity of her gaze.

I didn't even realize I'd been staring until she turned my way and caught me.

That was November. And since then...I hadn't even so much as flirted with anyone.

*How could I not have realized it had been **that** long?*

I'd made plenty of excuses over the last several months about why I was going home alone from events where girls were all but throwing themselves at me. I kept saying that I was too busy, had to get up early, giving them the typical explanations. All the while, I was telling myself I wasn't into in this blonde or that redhead, and any brunette I met simply couldn't hold my interest.

Emmett and Jasper had joked that I'd lost my touch, that my player days were a thing of the past.

In high school, we'd practically made a sport of catching girls; the three of us working through the prettiest ones in our grade. We each had our own 'thing' that drew them to us like moths to a flame:

Jasper was a transfer student. His family had moved from Texas after junior high, so it was his southern drawl that made the girls drool for him. For Emmett, it had always been his massive arms - all he had to do was show his bicep muscles and some cheerleader would be squealing, asking if she could touch him.

And for me, it was The Cullen Wink.

I'd developed a system that had worked so well throughout high school and into college, I should have fucking patented it. It was just a flash of my smile, a slight

lean forward, a hushed word or two, and a wink. Every time, it made whatever conquest I was hunting down sway a little bit, cause their eyes to dilate with lust, and then they were mine.

So it was with that in mind that I'd tried it on Bella the week before, the morning we'd both been alone in the office.

She had blushed as soon as she saw me, but then seemed to relax as we talked. She poked fun at the gifts Emmett had been sending non-stop that week for Rosalie, my Life and Style Director. He had gone a little crazy since he'd met her at Sundance, and in each of the days leading up to Valentine's Day, had sent some kind elaborate of token of his love. It had gotten pretty ridiculous.

"Yeah, Emmett has gone a bit overboard lately," I had admitted to Bella, shaking my head.

"Do you know Mr. McCarty?"

I sipped my coffee and grinned. "Who do you think introduced them? Yeah, the three of us go way back!"

"Three?" she asked, and I pointed my coffee cup in the direction of Jasper's office.

"Jasper, Emmett and I all went to high school together. We knew Emmett before he was big and famous."

I waggled my eyebrows, and then it finally happened - she giggled. It was a sound I'd been waiting far too long to hear. Knowing I'd finally made her laugh made my chest tighten; a feeling I wasn't entirely familiar with.

"You have a very pretty laugh, Bella." The words were out before I could stop myself.

She froze, her mouth dropping open a bit. "I...what?" she stammered.

"You're always so serious!" I laughed, thrilled to see her smile appear. "Not that it's a bad thing. I appreciate focused staff, but..."

I leaned closer to her, the second step in my routine. I wanted to play, wanted to flirt, wanted to see if it would work on her. "It is nice to see you smiling."

I went in for the kill, speaking huskily. "You should laugh more often."

And then, the source of all my powers: The Wink.

Bella looked a little dazed in response, flustered, and blushed fiercely. Just then, the sound of the elevator ding interrupted our exchange, and I triumphantly made my way back to my office, sipping my coffee with a smirk firmly planted on my lips.

The Cullen Wink strikes again.

But as I sat down to work, I realized that what had just happened didn't sit right with me. The oddest thing was that, as happy as I was to have seen my effect on Bella, I didn't actually *like* the feeling of playing her.

After all the time I'd spent wondering about her, I didn't want to just chase her to her bed and leave the next morning.

I wanted to *know* Isabella Swan.

And a few short days later, I did. I'd discovered how amazing she was; how articulate and intelligent, and fuck, was she ever sexy.

It figured. When I finally came across someone who was everything I'd ever looked for in a woman - smart, dedicated, funny, seductive and beautiful - she had to be a fucking employee.

The sun began setting over the city and I sipped my beer in my darkening apartment, wondering if the person I had ended up playing in this whole mess was actually myself.

****CH&RR****

Monday really fucking sucked.

My day was hectic, the stressful demands of being the Editor in Chief making themselves known. The deadline to send the April issue to print was Tuesday, and there were always last minute problems that threatened meeting the cut-off.

I spent the morning checking content, pouring over the pages and calling in staff members for some light-edits. When my assistant, Jessica, brought in my lunch, I discovered I needed a fork, and jumped at the chance to run to the kitchen, hoping to catch a glimpse of Bella on the way. I got an uncomfortable, sickening kind of feeling in my stomach when I walked past and saw her desk was empty.

You're going soft, Cullen.

Shaking my head, I reminded myself that I needed to focus. My father had always reminded me that a publication's standards of performance depended almost completely on the editor in chief. Any problems whatsoever would reflect solely on me. I didn't want any crap from him, so I bore down, double checking for errors and cross referencing facts.

By the time I finished, it was already dark out, and Bella had most likely gone home for the day.

"You up for a round?" Jasper asked, appearing at my door. We usually went out in celebration of putting an issue to bed, but I was completely wiped.

"Nah, I'm beat, man. Another night?"

"No worries. I didn't really want to hang with *you* anyway," he teased, throwing my coat at me. "I've got a dancer waiting to hear from me."

Fuck, that's right! Alice!

With all my thoughts so wrapped up in Bella, I'd forgotten that Jasper had clicked with her ballerina roommate.

"Nice." I nodded in typical macho appreciation, sounding like I was channeling Emmett. "How's that...going, anyway? With Alice."

"Dude, she is amazing. We had, like, an *instant* connection."

I flipped off my light switch and followed Jasper down the hall to the elevators. "After Emmett's thing ended, Alice and I just talked for hours."

"Talked?" I joked, quirking an eyebrow at him.

"Yeah, you perv! We *talked*." He got this really weird, dreamy look on his face when we stepped into the elevator. "It's like we knew each other in another life or something. It was awesome."

I know the feeling.

"You and Swan seemed to get along pretty well," he mentioned casually as we exited the building and walked toward the row of black Towncars that waited for the

executives.

"Oh, yeah..." I stammered, waiting for a good excuse to come to mind. Jasper had been so involved with Alice, he probably didn't hear most of our conversation, so I lied. "Bella's looking to um, transfer to a different publication. She just needed some advice."

"Well, aren't you the chivalrous one," he joked. "Helping our best admin to go off and work at some of our competition."

"Oh yeah, that's me," I answered uncomfortably as we both made our way to separate cars. "Mr. Chivalrous."

That is, if chivalry these days means fucking her until she screamed.

We said goodnight, heading toward opposite sides of the city. As my car followed Park Avenue uptown, I turned and looked south, as if I could somehow see down to the East Village, to Bella.

****CH&RR****

The next day was really low-key at the office. As a matter of fact, I usually never came into the office on the Tuesday after an issue was completed. But, that Tuesday, I was up at the fucking crack of dawn, unable to sleep.

I needed to see her.

I arrived mid-morning, and my eyes sought out Bella as I headed across the floor. She noticed me and stiffened, staring intently at some papers on her desk. But as I passed closer, I could see that fucking delicious blush coloring her cheeks, and the tiniest smile playing at the corner of her lips.

Jessica was slacking, obviously not expecting me in. Her computer screen clearly showing her Facebook page, but she jumped to attention and closed the browser when she realized I was there. That was the difference between people like her, and Bella.

Bella actually cared about her job; she did it right, no matter what ridiculous tasks were asked of her, like picking up a life-sized Valentine's Bear delivery from a florist. I chuckled as I walked into my office, thinking back to bumping into her last week when she was sent on that errand.

After reading my email and going through a few items on my desk, I sat back in my chair and grimaced.

How long do I have to stay in here before I can find a reason to go talk to her?

Jessica buzzed in through the intercom. "Mr. Cullen? Do you want me to get your coffee?"

Coffee! That's a good excuse!

"No, that's fine, Jessica. I'll get my own cup this morning."

Before she could finish her confused sputtering, I cut her off, grabbed my coffee mug and walked briskly to the kitchen. Bella saw me coming and tried not to look at me as I neared, but we were like magnets, drawn to one another. Her eyes snapped up to mine as I walked past.

With a subtle nod in the direction of the kitchen, I kept moving, hoping she would catch my drift and follow me there. Thankfully, there was nobody there, and I had just finished pouring my cup when Bella shyly appeared by my side.

No longer clad in the serious, boring clothes she'd previously worn to work, today Bella's outfit just seemed to exaggerate every curve, making my dick start to twitch in my khakis. She looked good enough to eat.

"Hi." Her smile was breathtaking, but then her brow furrowed, and she caught herself in her informal greeting. "I mean, *good morning*, Mr. Cullen."

I grinned. Looking over her shoulder, I checked to make sure no one was about to walk in. "You look beautiful today, Bella," I murmured.

Her cheeks flushed pink and her eyes widened at my statement. We were crossing a line here, but I couldn't help myself. "Thank you," she replied softly.

Her eyes flashed a line of heat down my body, then back up to my face. I inhaled a sharp breath, my body tightening with need, my head reeling with memories from our night together.

"God, you're so fucking wet," I had gasped, amazed by how much she wanted me, the proof slick and hot against my fingertips.

I stared dumbly at her, licking my lips as I remembered her hips pushing up

toward my thrusting fingers, desperate for more.

"I need you!" She'd shouted. "Edward, fuck! I need you so fucking bad!"

My breathing sped up, my heart pounding in my ears.

"Can I call you tonight?" I whispered, knowing we probably only had seconds before someone else walked into the room.

Bella nodded quickly. "Yes." She was breathless, too. I could hear it.

We quickly picked a time before she scampered back to her desk. I turned toward the counter and tried to steady myself. Walking through the office with a raging hard-on was not really a good idea.

Our little secret...Fuck. This was going to kill me.

****CH&RR****

Our phone call lasted for hours. It was so long, in fact, that we were both yawning by the end of it. We talked about everything and nothing, from family to our college experiences, from office issues and finally, to each other.

"This is hard!" Her petulant whine was so adorable; I could visualize the pout on her perfect, pink lips. "All this time wanting you, and now that I know you like me, too, I can't have you."

"It's driving me crazy, too." I assured her. There was no sense trying to hide it, no point in trying to act like this wasn't torturing me just as much.

She went quiet for a moment. "You looked really sexy today...Edward."

The way she said my name, all breathless and wanting, made my pulse quicken. I wanted to hear her scream it in pleasure, over and over again.

"I couldn't stop thinking about Friday night...when we were in the kitchen today." I admitted, visions of her naked body flickering through my mind.

"Mmm, me, too." Bella nearly purred. "But it's late. I should probably get to bed."

Her bed. The bed I had lowered her onto, peeled off her clothes, watched her face twist with pleasure as I rocked in and out of her delicious little body.

"Yeah, I guess so," I sighed. It was nearly one in the morning. "Goodnight, Bella."

"Sweet dreams," she whispered before hanging up. But my dreams would have to wait, as images of her shuddering beneath me flooded my mind.

Reaching into my boxers, I squeezed the base of my needy cock, stroking quickly a few times before freeing it from the confines of the fabric. Replaying the memories I'd thought over countless times in the past few days, I picked up where my thoughts had left off in the kitchen that morning.

I slid my fingers from her wet heat, thrilling to her soft whimper, and sat up quickly, searching for my discarded pants. Frantically pulling a condom from my wallet, I lay back down. My hands were clumsy with excitement, I wanted her so fucking bad.

Suddenly Bella sat up, kneeling next to me.

Fucking my fist harder now, I ran my thumb across the head on each upstroke, remembering with anticipation as Bella arched forward, licking the sticky fluid from the head of my straining flesh.

"Oh, fuck, Bella!" I cried out. She sucked the tip into her mouth, deftly exploring it with her tongue, making me gasp and pant. Bella's lips and tongue were fucking perfect. She bobbed her head forward, sliding me deep, and the delicious suction of her mouth was just too fucking good.

On Friday, I had begged her to stop, knowing I'd cum in seconds if she kept that up any longer. But the truth was, I was dying for her to suck me like that, to gaze up at me from between my thighs, to let me pulse in her mouth and drink down every drop.

I shuddered and exploded in my hand at the images my mind created, my fist slowing and dragging out the sensation, groaning her name through gritted teeth.

And at the staff meeting the following afternoon, Bella looked down the table at me while Jasper talked fielded some questions from the staff about May's issue.

She was doing better than I was, keeping her gaze serious, just as it always was. But playing with Bella had proved to be far too much fun. I knew all eyes were on Jasper, so I looked her way until she caught my stare, and gave her a quick wink.

Bella's lips pursed together, and I could tell she was trying not to smile.

Our little secret... maybe I could do this after all.

But after the meeting, Jasper stepped into my office, closing the door behind him.

"What are you doing?" he asked me. He'd crossed his arms over his chest in mock-anger, but was still smiling.

"Reading my email?" I answered, not knowing what he was talking about.

"Edward, I saw it. You just dished out The Cullen Wink."

Oh shit!

"Not that I'm unhappy to see you finally in the game again." Jasper cocked an eyebrow at me as he stepped toward my desk. "But you know, it's a really bad idea to sleep with the interns."

I let out a relieved exhale, realizing he hadn't seen me wink at Bella at all.

"Uh, no, I'm *definitely* not sleeping with an intern," I assured him, wincing inwardly at having to lie to my friend again. "Sorry to disappoint you."

He twisted his mouth to the side, looking like he didn't believe me, and I held my breath for a minute. But he finally relented.

"All right. I believe you. But Emmett and I are taking you out this weekend. Maybe you'll try the wink out on someone you actually *can* sleep with."

Jasper stepped out of my office, and through the open doorway, I could see Bella walking back to her desk. Our eyes met for a second, the brief connection making my stomach twist with anxiety and need. She smiled faintly before quickly looking away.

Fuck. We were both already in way too deep.

Reviews are love! See you next week!

Chapter 3: Secrets Really Suck

Thank as always to my beta Kyla713, and to Awesomesauce76 and Agoodwich for pre-reading. Thanks also to AmberDK, who has made the amazing polyvore outfits for the entire story! For this chapter and the last ones, check out my blog [www\(.\)aylahfanfiction\(.\)com](http://www(.)aylahfanfiction(.)com)

Disclaimer: All things Twilight belong to Stephenie Meyer.

BPOV

I really hated keeping secrets.

Mostly because it was such an awful thing to do, but I was also totally and completely horrible at it.

I'd been lying for days – since the morning after Valentine's Day, when Edward left my apartment. The moment the front door had clicked shut and his footsteps disappeared down the hallway, I'd scrambled to hide the flowers he'd given me, placing them devoutly on my nightstand.

I had just set a fresh pot of coffee to brew when Alice appeared in the kitchen, her wet hair wrapped in a towel and her face bright with memories from her evening with Jasper. She floated down into a chair at our table, a smile she could barely contain on her tiny little face.

"So, you had a good night?" I asked, my back to her as I poured my cereal. *Stupid, rhetorical question.*

"Oh, Bella," she breathed and I turned to see her eyes closed, her hands cupping her chin and her expression dreamlike. "It's like he and I have known each other forever already."

As I sat there listening to her talk how amazing Jasper was, I was glad my mouth was full of cheerios, stopping me from babbling everything. The strain of keeping it in was coiled so tightly inside me, my foot bouncing rapidly against the table leg.

All I wanted to do was tell my best friend about my night with Edward – the flowers, his words...his kiss. But I couldn't say anything. I couldn't talk about how he

had wanted me for as long as I'd been pining away for him. I wasn't able to tell her how amazing it was when he finally touched me, how perfect it had felt.

And I also couldn't say how we'd resolved to put everything on the back burner until I found a different job, how we'd agreed our night together would be our little secret. So, once Alice finally came down from her Jasper-induced-high and gently asked me what had happened when I'd left the club on Friday, I lied.

Making up stories on the spot wasn't exactly my strong point, so I babbled out something about how Edward had been waiting for Tanya all along, that he'd only spent the evening talking to me to be polite.

Her brow furrowed as she listened, her suspicions evident in the puckering of her lips. Alice knew I could never make eye contact when I was lying, so I forced myself to look at her, twisting my fingers together underneath the table as I spoke. I tried to force a tear out; after all, I'd just had my heart broken by the man I was hopelessly in love with. I should have been inconsolable, right?

But none would come out.

What the fuck? When I don't want to cry, the tears flow like the Nile, and now, nothing!

"I guess it was pretty stupid to think he'd actually want me, huh?" I sighed dramatically, rubbing the pads of my fingers over my eyes, trying to force them to water.

There's no way in hell she's going to believe me. I don't even believe me.

Completely certain she could see right through me, I peeked out from between my fingers to chance a glance up at her. A faraway look of confusion on her face turned slowly into one of sympathy.

"I'm so sorry, honey." She reached out to squeeze my arm and I lowered my hands, forcing a weak smile. *Maybe I'm a better liar than I thought.*

As I gulped down my last spoonful of cereal, Alice stood abruptly, banging her fist against the table like a gavel. "I think this calls for a little retail therapy!"

Oh great. Shopping with Alice again.

But, I stayed in character, sighing and nodding. And my best friend bought it all.

I'd spent the rest of weekend in a whirlwind of activities - Alice kept me busy with SoHo boutiques, mocha lattes and spa treatments.

The truth was that I was glad for the distraction, because all I could think about was Edward. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw his body over mine, felt his breath hot and hushed in my ear. I remembered each whisper, each pleased groan, re-playing them over and over again in my mind.

When I finally crawled into bed on Sunday night, I let my thoughts settle into my memories of him - how he gently ran the rose petals along my body, his wet lips on my skin, the nearly unbearable pleasure of his long fingers caressing and stroking me until I cried.

I hadn't thought it was possible for me to ache for him more than I had before. But, as I gave into my throbbing frustration, my hand drifting under the cotton waistband of my panties, I whimpered at the loneliness of my own touch. The instant I knew what his kiss tasted like, what his body *felt* like, my need became a thousand times more desperate.

And I had no idea when that desperation would end.

****CH&RR****

It turned out that the more I lied, the easier it got. On Monday, I'd managed to make both Jake and Angela believe I was finally giving up on my pathetic crush. I'd relayed to them the same sob story I'd told Alice, hating myself for lying but knowing I had no choice.

"So he just...*stopped* talking to you when Boob Job showed?" Angela gasped across our desks. When she realized how loud she'd been, she lowered her head, as if that somehow could make the question fall out of the air and back down into her mouth.

I grimaced at Angela's tone, and she offered me a small apologetic smile. "I don't get it," she continued, her face twisting into a confused pout. "He seemed totally into you at the club."

"Totally. I thought he was going to eat you alive in that outfit." Jake sighed. "Paul will be so disappointed in his makeover skills."

Actually, Paul is a freaking genius.

"Well, it doesn't matter now," I announced, taking a deep, assertive breath, effectively cutting off the conversation. I reached for some papers on my desk and began busying myself with starting the day. "It's time for me to get over him anyway."

Ignoring the sympathetic looks that she and Jake were exchanging, I directed my attention toward my computer, even though I felt so drawn to Edward's closed office door. It was as if there was a freaking tractor beam pulling me to it.

I could just picture him sitting there, his eyes sharp and focused, scanning every page in its final draft. I knew I wouldn't get to see him all day - the editors were crazy the day before an issue was put to bed, but I still hoped to at least catch a glimpse of him.

I didn't, though; not even for one tiny moment throughout that entire day. I came into work with a pout on Tuesday, sure he wouldn't be there - the editorial staff never came in the day after we went to print. But, when he showed up that morning, looking dangerously sexy in khakis and a gray sweater, it took every ounce of restraint to stop my lips from sliding up into a huge grin.

I couldn't function that entire morning, I was so desperate to be near him - to see his smile, breathe his scent. My heart nearly stopped when he suddenly emerged from his office, catching my eye and nodding toward the kitchen.

Angela and Jake didn't notice, engrossed as they were in discussing Emmett's proposal to Rosalie and how grand their wedding plans would be. I slipped quietly from my desk, mumbling something about needing more coffee.

I'd worn a soft, cozy sweater-dress to work that day - it wrapped snugly around my body, leaving just a few inches of leg to show between the hem and the tips of the insanely overpriced Uggs Alice had insisted I buy. She had hollered at me that morning through the walls of our apartment that I was forbidden to return to my "pre-Valentine-makeover-old-lady" ways.

I was glad I listened, because the way Edward's eyes tracked down the lines of my body when we met up in the kitchen made a fire pitch in my stomach. And when he leaned in to whisper that I looked beautiful, I thought my knees might give out and I would fall to the floor in a puddle of goo.

I felt my cheeks flash hot as I thanked him, and then, he just stared at me, his tongue darting out to moisten his lips. I swallowed hard, my breathing heavy, wanting to press him up against the office fridge and lick those beautiful lips myself.

"Can I call you tonight?" he whispered. I nodded quickly in response.

As if I'd ever say no!

I forced a stoic expression as I emerged from the kitchen, returning to my desk without meeting either Jake's or Angela's eyes. I knew if I looked at them, I'd never be able to contain my excitement. Edward Cullen was calling me that night! I wanted to shout it from the rooftop, or do a tap dance on my fucking desk, I was so happy.

Back at home that evening, I was relieved to get a text from Alice saying her rehearsal would be running incredibly late. Her performance was only a few weeks away from opening, and her schedule would be getting increasingly busy.

Leaving me plenty of time for clandestine phone calls with the boss I'd slept with the weekend before.

I'd buried my head in my hands at the thought. The whole situation was so messed up. Sure, it seemed simple enough to say we'd just put it on the back burner; that I'd get another job, that it would be our little secret. In the light of day though, when it came down to it, secrets really sucked.

But, the second my phone buzzed in my hand, all that quickly flew out of my head.

"I thought today would never end," he murmured after my breathless hello. He sounded relaxed, so at ease - I could have just drowned in the soft waves of his voice. "Bella?"

*It might help to actually **speak** when I finally get to talk to him.*

"Sorry!" I giggled. "I'm here."

Edward let out a little sound that sounded somewhere in between a sigh and a groan. "I missed that laugh."

Finally, I was able to let my lips curl up into the smile I'd been forcing into hiding for days.

"I'll bet you're blushing now," he added, his voice low and husky.

"It's hard not to with you," I admitted. "I missed talking to you."

"Me, too. These last couple of days have been tough." He exhaled and I heard the sounds of cloth rubbing against leather. I could picture him, leaning back on a chair, in what was probably an incredible apartment, his arms folded behind his head and phone cradled against his ear. "So, how was the rest of your weekend?"

"Crazy. My roommate dragged me around half the city trying to 'cheer me up'."

He snickered, and I told him about Alice's endless array of pick-me-ups. He responded by telling me about his evasion of Jasper and Emmett. We both complained how frustrating it all was, but it felt good, in a weird way, to know we were both backed into the same screwed up corner together.

We talked for ages, and it wasn't until I heard Alice's key pressing into our front door's lock that I finally told him I needed to go. It was a really crappy time to have to hang up, too, because the moment I heard her padding through the living room was just when he told me he couldn't stop thinking about me. His voice was hushed and deep when he spoke, and a shiver ran through my spine at the sound of it.

Crap! Phone sex with him would have been really hot!

I managed to wish him sweet dreams just before her hesitant knock sounded on my door.

"Bella? You doing okay?" Alice asked. I had just enough time to throw a blanket over me, stashing my phone underneath it before she poked her head into my room.

"I'm fine." I was sure my face was glowing from my conversation with Edward, and tried to hide it with a drawn-out yawn. "Just had a long day."

She smiled softly, tilting her head. "Well, I just wanted to check on you."

"Thanks. I'm okay, just tired." Man, how much did *I* suck? She was coming in to check on her distraught best friend, and there I was, lying to her face. "How was rehearsal?"

Alice rolled her eyes and pushed the door open, coming in to settle on the edge of my bed. "Ridiculous. Half of the principals don't know their routines, and Alec *still* can't hold me up for long enough during the lifts. We're nowhere near ready to go up."

I stretched my arms up over my head as an actual, genuine yawn pushed its way through me. "It will come together, I'm sure. You'll be great."

"I hope so." She nodded, and then paused, a look of uncertainty creasing her brow. "I hope you don't mind...but I invited Jasper to come to opening night."

I sat up in bed, an uncomfortable feeling pitching in my stomach. "Of course, I don't mind," I told her. "Why would I?"

"Well, I know how close he is with Edward, and I really wanted you to come to it, too..." she trailed off, knitting her fingers together in anxiety uncharacteristic for her. "I just didn't want you to feel weird about it."

I shook my head, sitting up and stretching my arm across the bed to where she sat. "It's fine," I promised, squeezing her hand.

"Thank you! Because I really, really like him, Bella." Alice swiftly stood, graceful as always, looking as if she might float away with happiness.

She said goodnight, pirouetting across the room and switching off my light for me. As she made her way down the hallway, I heard her humming softly to herself.

For someone who, just a few days before, insisted that she had sworn off dating, it was nice to see her head-over-heels in love.

I burrowed myself under the covers, placing my palm over my cell, which was still warm from my hours-long conversation with Edward. Smiling in the darkness, I let my own happiness bubble up in me, my eyes closing as Edward's soft voice still rang sweetly in my ears.

****CH&RR****

I was keeping up the act at work, trying to seem as if I was getting over him - stiffening whenever he walked by, refusing to look in his direction. I barely glanced his way during Wednesday's staff meeting, except for one errant moment - and it was a glimpse that nearly unraveled me.

While the entire staff had their eyes trained on the dry erase board, listening to Jasper talk us through plans for the next issue, I could practically feel Edward's eyes on me. His stare was heavy, unyielding, and I shifted uncomfortably in my chair as I tried desperately not to look his way.

But, I couldn't help myself, and finally gave in.

He looked like sex on a stick in a grey long-sleeved button down that framed his

slim torso deliciously, charcoal slacks and a matching silk tie. Edward rocked from side to side in his chair; his head perched in his hand with his thumb on his chin and pointer finger resting on his temple. He had the tiniest bit of a smirk on his face, and then the bastard winked at me.

I sucked back my gasp, squeezing my thighs together as my body flushed with heat. I wanted to crawl across that conference room table straight into his lap. I could tell from his smug expression and the mischievous twinkle in his eyes that he knew exactly what he was doing to me, so I stubbornly refused to turn his way for the rest of the meeting.

Even though the only thing I wanted to do was stare at him.

Afterward, though, I headed back to my desk, confused. When the meeting was over, Jasper walked swiftly behind Edward to his office, and closed the door behind them. Our managing editor looked particularly concerned, and for a minute, I wondered if Edward and I had been found out.

*But, would that really be **so** bad? We'd get to be together then...wouldn't we?*

No. I reminded myself that he was still my boss, and I was letting my fantasies run away with me. We still had a shot at making it work if we could just hold off until I got another job.

"Bella? You okay?" Angela asked tentatively, noticing my plaintive stare and snapping me out of my thoughts. She and Jake stood on either side of me as we walked, flanking me like bodyguards.

"Oh...yeah." I shook my head, forcing back on my down-in-the-dumps mask. I sighed, long and deep. "I'm fine."

"Fine, my ass," Jake said, then took in my outfit, which included the ridiculously expensive Seven jeans Alice had said made my ass look great, and a pair of ballet flats which were actually surprisingly comfortable. "At least you *look* good."

"Yeah, well, what's the point?" I hung my head. Although, I'd hoped Edward had actually noticed the outfit. His wink flashed in my memory again, and I fought back the grin it brought to my lips with another heavy sigh.

"Well, *I* think we need to go out this weekend," Jake declared. "Take you out and get that Bella Swan Smile back on your pretty face."

"Oh, I don't think-"

"Great idea," Angela interrupted, smiling conspiratorially at Jake. When she saw my pained expression, she reached over and patted my forearm. "Come on, Bella. It'll be good for you. We'll have fun, I promise."

I could see there was no getting out of it, so I tried for that sad-yet-hopeful look. "Are you guys sure you want to spend your Friday night with me when I'm such a downer?"

Lying, lying, lying through your teeth, Bella.

"Absolutely! I'll even turn off my gay-dar for the night and help find you a man." Jake danced in place, singing Salt-N-Pepa's *What a Man* in a high-pitched falsetto.

We reached our desks, and Jake tugged on my hand pulling me toward my seat. "Please say you'll come. We'll make you forget all about Mr. Not Nearly Good Enough For You."

I shook my head and sighed again, looking forlorn. In reality, I was amazed by the plethora of absolute suckage I was finding myself in. Glancing quickly back over my shoulder, I saw Edward opening the door to his office. Jasper stepped out, a wry smile on his features, but Edward looked...tense.

When I was sure no one was looking, I offered him a quick smile, needing to feel connected to him in the whole giant mess we were in. A brief turn of his lips sent a grin flickering in my direction, and I steadied myself, turning back to my friends.

"All right," I told them. "I'll go."

****CH&RR****

But by Friday evening, I was already regretting my decision.

Edward and I had exchanged text messages and furtive glances for the remainder of the week. Including one tense moment on Thursday, when we were stuck in the elevator with about a dozen other people, including Mr. Denali. The doors opened revealing the two of them, having come down from a meeting on a higher floor. They remained still, obviously on their way down to the lobby.

I stepped carefully into the compressed space, keeping my eyes downcast as I turned around to face the doors. Everyone shifted to find space for the lunchtime

crowd, all the employees eager for their lunch breaks, and sucked in a breath as Edward moved to stand directly behind me.

"Excuse me, Ms. Swan." Edward apologized politely, as he brushed against me, nothing in his tone or the gruff clearing of his throat belying the fact that it was the closest he'd been to my body since Saturday. We were pressed together, the air heavy with tension, crammed so tightly into the tiny space that I could feel his breath coming out in soft waves against my hair. I tried not to move, torn between the desperate desire to shift back against him, to feel his body solid and warm behind mine, and the terrifying reality that we could so easily get caught.

And when the elevator had settled on the ground floor, the doors opening into the busy, light-filled atrium, I reluctantly walked away from him, feeling cool air fill the space that had laid between us as we headed in separate directions.

On Friday night, Alice was curling her hair in the bathroom, wrapping her shocking black tendrils around the iron and pulling it away to reveal soft, bouncing ringlets. Never one to miss a night out, she'd been ecstatic when I told her Angela and Jake were dragging me out, and insisted on joining in on the fun.

It was hard enough to keep silent at work. As it was, I was busting at the seams to tell *someone* what was going on between Edward and me. Now, I was going to have to find a way to keep the secret from my three closest friends, all at the same time. There was no way I was a good enough liar for that.

So I tried to get out of it.

"Alice, I really don't think I'm-" But I couldn't get the sentence out before she interrupted.

"*That's* what you're wearing?" Her refection glared at me, curling iron paused in mid-air. I was dressed entirely too casually in jeans and an old t-shirt, and Alice's disapproval was glaringly obvious.

"I don't know if I'm up for this, Alice." I tried to look crestfallen, too moody to be out on the town. The truth was that I would have preferred to stay home and wait for a call from Edward, pathetic as that was. I wasn't even sure if I would hear from him that night at all. He told me earlier in the week that he had plans with Jasper and Emmett.

"Forget it, Bella! You're not getting out of this!"

"But, I—"

"What? Do you have something *better* planned?" she accused, smiling at me in the mirror, her eyebrows raised playfully. When I told her no, she continued her lecture. "As your best friend, it is my duty to cheer you up."

I'm cheered! I yelled in my head. *I'm happy as a clam! I just can't tell you about it!*

"And I can't cheer you up dressed like *that!*" She gestured the iron with disgust to my clothes. Clearly, in Alice's world, fun could only be had in designer apparel.

"Go on! Go change!" As I headed reluctantly back to my room, she hollered at me, "Put on the True Religion jeans!"

Alice's retail therapy had blown a serious hole in my wallet. I didn't understand what on earth could make a pair of jeans worth over two hundred dollars. However, as I slid the soft, buttery denim up my legs and tugged on a white cable knit jumper, I had to admit I did look pretty damn cute.

"Can I at least wear my Uggs?" I asked when she came to approve my hair and makeup. Pointing to the high heeled 'fuck-me' boots she'd also insisted made me look fierce, I said, "I'm afraid I'm going to kill someone wearing those. Probably me."

She rolled her eyes at me. "Fine."

By ten, we were taking a cab to Union Bar, a hotspot that Alice and Jake both insisted would have "plenty of fresh meat". The night air was bitterly cold, and we held our coats tightly to our bodies as we hurried from the taxi doors to the bar's entrance. We were greeted by a rush of heat, the warmth from inside a soothing welcome, as well as the loud pitch of conversations held by Manhattanites relishing in the start of the weekend.

The lounge was dark, with cozy, half booth seating against a mirrored wall, and sleek black coffee tables surrounded by plush, velvet ottomans. The crowd was so elite, and with me used to my Friday nights at home watching T.L.C., all I could think of was how much I didn't belong there.

We pulled our jackets off, and Alice scanned the crowd for Angela and Jake, waving maniacally when she caught them sitting in a booth against the wall. As she pulled me in their direction, the crowd hovering around the bar parted, and I was frozen to the spot when my eyes caught a shock of auburn hair.

Oh, crap!

I gasped as I saw Edward, sitting on a stool with his elbows resting lazily on the bar. He was wearing the same clothes he'd worn to work that day, his tie loosened and his hair slightly more mussed than usual.

In a city with eight million different bars, what were the odds of us both ending up at the same one?

He didn't see me, but I couldn't move, frozen to the spot and drinking him in. Edward was smiling, his lips turned up on one side into a gorgeously crooked grin. He looked so relaxed, so much like how he was with me in my apartment on Saturday, and I wanted to sidle up beside him and stake my claim.

But he's not mine. Not really. Actually, not at all...yet.

"Bella, what are you—" Alice began when I didn't move, but stopped and followed my gaze. The people standing around him shifted a bit, and the space revealed Jasper and Emmett sitting on either side of Edward. The tiny, sharp inhale that came from Alice drew my eyes back to her, and I grimaced at the lovesick smile that graced her features.

I wish I could smile like that, too, right now.

Thankfully, she took my expression as one of heartbroken despair. "Bella, I had no idea they would be here tonight. I won't talk to Jasper all night, I promise."

I rolled my eyes at her. "Alice, I told you, it's okay. Go say hi."

She shook her head and began tugging me in the direction of Angela and Jake's booth. "Nope. I promised you I'd cheer you up tonight, and that's what I'm going to do!"

As we settled into the booth, me next to Angela and Alice sliding down beside Jake, they both looked at me pointedly. "We're so sorry," Angela said. "We saw him when we got here. We can go someplace else, if you want."

"No!" I said a little too loudly. They all stared, and I waved my hand dismissively at the noise around us, as if that were enough to explain my tone. "It's fine, seriously. Let's order drinks."

I craned my neck, looking for a waitress, but it was really just an excuse to look at

Edward again, hoping he'd see me. He was cracking up over something Emmett was telling him and my heart ached, wanting to be near enough to him just to hear his laugh.

I am so pathetic.

We ordered a round of margaritas and I forced my attention on my friends, even as I watched Alice's eyes drift back to exactly where I wanted to be looking. Suddenly, though, her brow creased in irritation, a scowl darkening her usually light features.

"What's wrong?" I was answered by the pursing of her lips into a thin line, followed by the narrowing of Jake's eyes as the stared toward the bar.

"Uh, it's nothing—" Alice backtracked, but I had to know what she was looking at.

I turned to look over my shoulder, my heart pounding steadily in my throat. My eyes settled on Edward, his torso turned and his head propped up by his hand. His eyes were wide, engaged and the object of his interest was a gorgeous woman with long, dark, lustrous hair. She was wearing insanely high heels and had legs like a super-model.

He must have said something to make her laugh just then, because she threw back her head and reached an arm up to squeeze his shoulder flirtatiously.

My stomach lurched as my mouth fell open, my hands clutching my drink so tight I feared it might break. I couldn't take my eyes off him as he smiled at her - that perfect, beautiful smile.

My smile.

*What is he **doing**?*

And then, his attention shifted, something in the room catching his gaze. For a split second, his eyes flickered in my direction, passing by me for a second before snapping back. His stare was intense, his eyebrows knitting together as he blinked in shock, and then refocused, turning his attention back to the girl in front of him.

Tears welled up in my eyes. He'd seen me. He knew I was here, and he went right back to flirting anyway? How could he do that?

"What a creep," Alice muttered. "Let's get the check and go someplace else."

"No! Guys, really. It's okay." I reached out to stop Angela from waving down the waitress, even as my chest ached with despair. "Let's just...stay."

I did want to get out of there, I wanted to run, but I had to know what Edward was doing, so I turned around again. Like a rubber-necker passing by an accident, I couldn't help but stare at the horror before my eyes.

But Edward seemed to be excusing himself, stepping away from the beautiful woman at the bar. I thought for a second he might come over to me, but my heart sank once again as I watched him head toward the men's room, not even looking my way.

"Are you *sure* you want to stay, Bella?" Angela asked softly.

Gulping down a sip of my drink, feeling the soothing burn begin to dull my senses, I nodded furiously. "Yeah, I'm good." Even as I spoke, though, I was still staring at the men's room door.

"Well, isn't this a pleasant surprise?"

I glanced up at the sound of a voice to my left. Jasper was sauntering toward us, an elated grin on his face, Emmett close by his side.

"I didn't know you'd be here tonight," Jasper continued, his eyes locked on Alice.

Her face washed over with a bright smile. "It was kind of a last minute thing."

"What an extremely lucky coincidence that we both ended up at the same place."

Yup. Just great, I thought dryly as he reached over to take Alice's hand, placing a chaste kiss on her knuckle. An awkward silence settled over the table as they stared at one another longingly.

Emmett finally broke the uncomfortable quiet, reaching his hand out to shake Jake's. "I don't believe we've met. I'm Emmett McCarty."

"Jacob Black." Jake grasped his hand firmly and winked. "And we *have* met your florist. We're the ones who've been collecting all your deliveries for Rosalie Hale."

"Hah! I guess you've got some strong arms then! We may need to see about getting you on the team."

"Oh, I doubt any of the NY Giants play for *my* team, honey," Jake quipped.

Emmett laughed boisterously, and then introduced himself to Angela, as well. She gave him an embarrassed wave, congratulating him on his engagement. I just nodded at Emmett, quietly mumbling my name. As they talked, I continued to stare at the men's room door, but felt my phone buzzing incessantly in my purse, and yanked it out in annoyance.

My eyes opened wide at the screen readout - I'd gotten three text messages from Edward. Shifting the phone below the table, I tried to look disinterested as I opened the first one.

It's not how it looks! Emmett and Jasper are grilling me like crazy!

The second had been sent only a few moments after the first. My eyes darted around the table, making sure no one noticed my absence in the conversation, before reading the other messages.

They forced me out tonight, saying I had to get 'back in the game'! They made me get some girl's number.

Forced him? *Made* him? What was he, twelve years old?

You know I don't want to, but we have to play our parts for now...right?

Anger flashed red before my eyes as I texted him back, pushing down on the buttons with a vengeance.

I didn't know that keeping us a secret meant asking out other people.

I took another deep pull of my drink and waited for the buzz of his reply.

Bella...I don't know what else to do.

He didn't know what else to do? How about telling his friends he just wasn't up for it? How about not flirting with incredibly beautiful, Bella-intimidating women? Hadn't I already been through the same scenario the week before with Boob-Job?

It also didn't escape my knowledge that he'd never actually said he was sorry.

I threw my cell back in my purse, too annoyed to answer him. With my foot tapping at a frenetic pace under the table, I breathed angrily and crossed my arms

over my chest in a huff.

"Ow!" Angela yelped, rubbing the spot on her arm where I'd apparently just jabbed her with my elbow. "Bella? You...okay?"

Suddenly, I realized all eyes at the table were on me. And then, I saw men's room door swing open.

"Yeah!" I announced as Edward appeared at our table, a worried look on his face when he came to stand behind Jasper. His expression changed instantly when Emmett turned to greet him. "I'm great!" I added a little too loudly, my eyes boring into his.

Just then, the drop-dead-gorgeous woman Edward had been talking to at the bar emerged from the crowd. Her long, perfect locks of hair cascading down her shoulders made her look like one of those models from a Pantene commercial, and her eyes were some unearthly color of violet. She had to be wearing contacts - no one's eyes *really* looked like that.

"Edward," she crooned, her voice deep and sultry. "I gave you my number, but I didn't get yours."

"Oh...uh, yeah!" he replied meekly, pausing before he awkwardly reached into his pocket. I tried not to watch as Edward handed her his card, but I couldn't look away. His expression was serious, his eyebrows pushed together as he seemed to search for something to say. "It was nice meeting you, Heidi."

I rolled my eyes. It figured she'd have a supermodel's name.

She smiled, her lips in a perfect, sexy pout, seemingly leaning in to kiss his cheek. Before I could watch any more, I jumped up, bolting from my seat and startling everyone.

"I need another drink!" I shouted, grabbed my purse, and high-tailed it to the bar.

Humiliated, I pushed my way through the crowd, trying to force back the hot tears that were threatening to blind me.

Wasn't I just doing this last week? What is this, Groundhog's Month?

Once safely at the bar, I shoved my elbows onto the smooth wood, and tried to flag down a bartender.

"Bella!" A breathless voice cried out, but it wasn't Edward. It was Angela, with Jake close on her heels. Their faces were a mix of concern and exasperation, both of which I ignored as I ordered a Long Island Iced Tea.

"Bella, honey, screw him," Jake said soothingly.

I already did. I dissolved into stupid, tired, angry giggles at the thought. Angela and Jake exchanged worried glances, but I ignored them, putting a twenty on the bar and greedily reaching for my drink.

"Yeah, he doesn't know what he's missing!" Angela agreed. I was barely listening, though; the thundering voices in the bar drowning everything out as I knocked back the first sharp swallow of my drink. After downing half of it in one gulp, I let out a satisfied exhale and placed the half-empty glass back on the bar.

Then, Jake raised an eyebrow at me.

"You know what? I told you I'd find you a better man than Hot-shot Cullen tonight..." He turned his head and scanned the bar, a Cheshire-cat grin curling up on his lips. "And I think I just did." Nodding over his shoulder, I leaned forward to look behind him.

When I saw whom he was gesturing toward, I laughed loudly. "Um, hello? Can you say 'out of my league'?"

"That's bullshit," Jake admonished. "You're freaking adorable and you know it!"

I craned my neck to look again. Perched languidly on a stool at the other end of the bar sat James Hawkings. Hair shorn close to his scalp, piercing blue eyes and dressed sharply in a grey suit and black shirt, he was certainly prime New York City, single bachelor real estate. James had a reputation of being a real player, a total douchebag, but women flocked to him nonetheless. He was also the Executive Editor of our biggest competition, *Red and Black*.

"James Hawkings?" Angela gasped, her eyes the size of saucers behind her cat-eye glasses. Her face in that moment reminded me of a female Puss-in-Boots. I started to laugh to myself, swaying slightly, and held onto the bar. "Jake, I think Bella might be a little too drunk for that."

"Not drunk," I muttered, reaching for my drink again. Using a high-pitched, whiny voice, I recounted Edward's words before sucking down more of the potent liquid. "I'm just *playing my part!*"

"Do you have any idea what she's talking about?" Jake asked Angela.

"Not in the slightest."

Moments later, I had just made it through the entire cocktail when Alice appeared by my side. I squealed and put my arms around her. "I thought you got sucked into Jasper-land." My words came out a tiny bit slurred. Okay, maybe more than a tiny bit.

"Nope. I told him it was a girl's night out," she replied, then winked at Jake. He rolled his eyes at her. "So, I told Jasper I'd talk to him later. But Edward doesn't seem to want to leave, so they've taken over our table."

Oh, really?

He didn't want to leave? What exactly did he have in mind? Was he going to flirt with more wanna-be supermodels in front of my face?

"So what are we doing now?" Alice asked cheerfully, waving the bartender back in our direction.

"Trying to get Bella to talk to James Hawkings," Jake answered, nodding in James' direction.

Alice took one look, and then clapped gleefully. "He's hot, Bella! You should totally go for it!"

I shook my head, causing the room to swim slightly. "I don't know..."

They all started encouraging me, throwing around compliments and 'you'll show him' lines. I glanced back to our table, where Edward sat, his face sullen, spinning a beer bottle around and around in his fingers. He caught my gaze and then frowned, averting his eyes quickly.

He wants us to play our parts, doesn't he? Well then, play the part I will!

Pushing away from Alice and the bar, I started walking toward James. "I'm goin' in!" I hollered over the noise of the crowd.

Just steps away from him, I faltered. What the hell was I doing? I wasn't gorgeous like Heidi, or cute and chipper like Alice. I was just plain, old, boring Bella. Why would James Hawkings be interested in me? And why was I even doing it at all when

the person I really wanted sat ten feet behind me?

Taking one last glance over my shoulder, I saw Edward leaning forward, suddenly alert, his gaze focused intensely on me, and where I was headed.

Edward was jealous!

I smiled smugly, wanting him to feel exactly how I had felt when he was talking to Heidi. A nagging voice in the back of my mind tried to yell at me to stop, but I turned on my heel anyway and moved to stand right in front of James. He was talking to a few other people I recognized from the industry, but I interrupted them, holding a hand out for James to shake.

"I'm Bella Swan," I stated simply. *Stupid, stupid, and more stupid.*

Surprisingly, he grinned, taking my hand in his and bringing it to his lips, kissing it, just as Jasper had done to Alice's.

"That's a pretty name." He let my hand down gently, his eyes raking over my figure. But his lustful glance left no blush on my skin in its wake. "I'm James—"

"Hawkings. I know." I was rambling in my drunken state. "I know who you are. I work for *The Guard*." *Stop blabbing, Bella!*

James raised an eyebrow at me. "Really? And you don't mind conversing with the enemy?" He leaned forward, smiling seductively.

I shook my head, trying to blink away the dizziness accompanying the movement. "Not even one little bit."

"Ahh, she's got bravado, brains *and* beauty." His smile widened, his tongue moistening his lips and running over his teeth. "Well, you've got my attention, Bella Swan. Tell me, how long have you worked at my competition?"

I had just opened my mouth to answer him when I felt a warmth behind me. The shock of Edward's closeness radiated through the air, sending a shiver through me before I even heard him speak.

"Excuse me," Edward said through gritted teeth. I glanced up to see his eyes bearing down on me, his irritation clear.

"Cullen! How nice to see you!" Sarcasm was dripping from James's tone as he

leaned back against the bar. "To what do I owe the honor?"

"I need to speak to Ms. Swan." Already, Edward's fingers were grazing my forearm, subtly trying to pull me away, and I felt my resolve melting at his touch. "*Work matters.*"

"Oh, does she work for you?" James' feigned innocence, taking a sip of his beer. "I had no idea."

Edward's lips were in a thin line, the look in his eyes fierce as he bent down to speak into my ear. "Can I talk to you outside?"

"I'm sorry, Edward, but I was just in the middle of talking to James." I gazed coldly back up at him, the hurt from that evening's events still fresh in my mind. Still, my heart was screaming at me to just shut the hell up and go with him.

Edward shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other, pleading with his eyes.

"Actually," James interrupted, sliding down from his stool. "I was just on my way out."

He took my hand in his, placing his business card in it, then raised my fingers to his lips for another brief kiss. "I'd love to hear from you again, Bella." As his mouth brushed against my knuckle, I saw Edward stiffen behind him.

James nodded at Edward. "See you around, Cullen." He was barely out of our sights when Edward grasped my arm.

"Come with me." His voice was gruff. He wasn't looking at me, either - instead, his eyes were darting around the bar, probably making sure no one saw us.

Defiantly, I held my ground, refusing to budge. But then, he glanced down at me, a pained look marring the perfect jade sparkle of his eyes.

"Bella," he whispered, his tone strained, pleading. "*Please.*"

And just like that, I gave in.

Slipping my hand into his, I followed close behind him as he led me around the opposite side of the room, steering clear of all our friends until we'd reached the entrance. He turned around and scanned the bar again before urging me in front of him, his hand warm and reassuring on the small of my back.

When I pushed the heavy wooden doors open, the cold night greeted me. I'd forgotten how frigid it was outside, and wrapped my arms tightly around my body, bracing myself against the bitter wind.

"Here," Edward said softly, pulling off his suit jacket and placing it over my shoulders.

"But, you'll be cold, too," I protested, but stopped when he shook his head at me. Letting my arms settle into the sleeves, I breathed his scent from the stiff fabric. I felt a jolt of desire rush through me, remembering the same scent on my sheets, on my body.

"Thanks." I gazed up at him and he sighed, his brows knit together forlornly. It made my heart hurt to see him that way.

"What are we doing?" he asked softly. I shook my head and shrugged, not even sure myself at that point how to answer him. My teeth began to chatter, despite the warmth of his jacket. "Bella, you're freezing."

"I'm f-fine," I insisted, but my shivering was obvious. Edward took my hands in his, looking around us once more. There was a line of people waiting to get into the bar, and we walked past them a few paces down, out of sight from the entrance.

"Come here," he entreated, tugging my hands and pulling me close to him, folding me into his arms. I let out a contented sigh as I relaxed against the strong lines of his chest, closing my eyes when he rested his chin on the crown of my head.

"I'm sorry about tonight," he whispered against my hair. The apology made any lingering frustration I'd had over the evening's events disappear.

"Me, too."

"I never meant for you to see that, Bella. I was just doing it to get Emmett and Jasper off my back." Edward paused, his arms rigid around me. "Jasper saw me wink at you in the meeting on Wednesday."

I gasped, pulling back to look up at him, my eyes wide with worry, but Edward quickly shook his head. "It's nothing, it's fine. I made something up and he seemed to believe it."

"Why didn't you say something?" I asked.

Edward sighed. "I didn't tell you because...because, fuck...I don't know why I didn't tell you. But that's why they were pushing me to go out tonight."

He pulled back to look at me, his gaze sincere. "I'm just trying to figure this out. How to bide my time until we can be together."

The reminder that he still wanted to be with me made my heart do flip-flops, and I laid my head against his chest again. "I'm sorry I overreacted. I just wish you'd told me what you were doing. It's bad enough we have to keep secrets from everyone else. I don't want to keep them from each other, too."

"I know." He held me tightly, rocking my body gently in his arms. Despite the cold and the noise on the street, I could have fallen asleep right there. "Bella? You're not really going to see James Hawkings, are you?"

I could feel his body tense with the question. I wanted to tell him of course not; that *he* was the only person I wanted. But, I had my own worries as well. "Are *you* going to go on a date with Heidi?"

Edward's face crumpled slightly. "I don't want to, but it could be hard to get out of," he answered before sighing, letting go of me with one hand to reach up into his unruly hair and tug roughly on the strands. "Crap, this is so fucked up."

My phone began to buzz again. Reluctantly breaking from the cocoon of warmth and *us* he was holding me in, I pulled it out of my purse.

"Alice wants to know where I went."

He sighed heavily once more, his expression dejected. "You should go back inside."

I knew he was right, but I didn't want to let go of him. I wanted to hide inside the safety of his arms and never come out.

"Go," he encouraged sadly. "I'm going to head home."

I nodded and pulled my arms out of his coat, my shoulders curling inward against the cold as I handed it over to him. Taking it back, he reached up with his other hand and gently grazed my cheek with the backs of his fingers. The one simple touch sent a shudder through me and I sighed softly, my teeth sinking into my lower lip as I gazed up at him.

Edward saw.

"Bella," he murmured, his voice heavy with frustration. He cupped my face gently and I leaned into his palm. His coat still between us, Edward stepped closer to me as his thumb skimmed along my cheekbone, and then bent his head, bringing his lips to mine.

I melted against the tender brush of his kiss, feeling every inch of my body drawn to him. He took a breath, starting to pull back, and I whimpered quietly from the loss. Edward groaned, sliding his lips along mine again. My hips pressed against his and I moaned as his hand sank into the hair at the base of my neck, his kiss hotter, deeper. Needier.

"Bella?" I heard Alice's voice ring out into the night, even over the noise from all the people outside. Without another word, Edward pulled away sharply, turning away from me and disappearing into the crowd.

A single tear slipped down my face, but I wiped it away with a hard knuckle to my cheek, forcing a smile as I turned and waved down my best friend.

"We were wondering where you went!" she called out as she came toward me.

"Oh, yeah, sorry." I stumbled for yet another lie. "James and I were just talking out here for a bit. He gave me his card." I pulled it from my purse to show her, as if that were proof enough.

Alice's lips pulled to the side - her signature look when she was trying to figure out something. But if she suspected anything, she wasn't pushing it.

"Well, come on back inside," she entreated. "It's freezing out here."

As she pulled me back toward the entrance, I scanned the swarm of people behind me, hoping to see Edward's face, but he'd vanished; leaving me cold and aching with the memory of his touch.

"Hey, do you think maybe James could help you get a better job?" Alice asked as we stepped inside. "He must have connections."

For the first time in a week, a real smile found its way onto my lips, a plan forming in my mind.

"You know, Alice, I think he just might."

Let me know how you're liking the story!

Until next week!

Chapter 4: Playing Our Parts

Happy Friday all! I'm so sorry I haven't been able to reply to all your reviews! RL has been kicking my rear! However, I did catch some concerns about what's going on with the story, so here goes:

- Unfortunately, Edward can't just tell everyone about Bella. Not only is he the boss, but he's also the son of the owner of the company, and has a reputation to uphold. In addition, most big corporations, such as magazines, have no-fraternization clauses in hiring contracts, so the boss violating that would be a very big no-no!

- The friends are all acting (however misguided) in an attempt to make both Edward and Bella happy. Don't be too hard on them - they're just doing what they think is best! :) (Although after this chapter you might want to slap them around even more!)

- Edward and Bella can't tell their friends to just leave them alone, because that would raise even more eyebrows. Our couple is just in way over their heads here!

Hope that helps!

Thank as always to Kyla713, Awesomesauce76, Theladyingrey and Agoodwitch for their never-ending support and mad betaing/prereading skills. Thanks also to Tarasueme, for giving me awesome advice just when I needed it.

Disclaimer: All things Twilight belong to Stephenie Meyer.

EPOV

James Hawkings! James-fucking-Hawkings!

I couldn't believe that douchebag had shown up at the bar, or that Bella had talked to him. Or that she'd seen me get Heidi's number. Or that Alice had almost caught Bella and me kissing on the sidewalk. *Fuck!* How could so much have gone wrong in one single night?

I hadn't gone back into the bar after leaving Bella outside. I'd just walked away, sending Jasper and Emmett a text that I was beat and heading home. There was no fucking way they were buying that, though— they'd known me too long and were going to start asking questions soon. I really needed to work on coming up with better excuses.

I wish I could just tell them the truth.

No. I shook the thought out of my head. That's so not an option.

Walking briskly to the corner of Park and 17th, I raised my hand to hail a cab. I shook my head as I stood there—I couldn't believe how royally I'd fucked things up that night.

I hadn't wanted to go out in the first place, hoping Jasper would forget about what he saw at the meeting on Wednesday. But sure enough, he and Emmett had shown up at my apartment door Friday evening, telling me to 'get the fuck ready because we were going the fuck out.'

Emmett's words. Not mine.

"It's too damn cold to go anywhere," I'd complained.

"Don't be such a wuss. Throw on a freaking jacket or I'm dragging you out there without one."

Emmett's warning was veiled with a smile, but I wouldn't have put it past him to actually do what he said.

"Come on." Jasper threw a brotherly punch at my shoulder. "We're just worried about you. You need to get out."

His tone was sincere, but when I muttered out an exasperated, "Fine," I could have sworn I saw some conspiratorial nod exchanged between them.

So I'd reluctantly thrown the suit jacket I'd worn to work that day back on, not even bothering to fix my hair— which was out of control, as usual—and hoped that the night would end quickly.

It didn't. I'd sat there for an hour, nursing a beer and making small talk while I'd put off talking to anyone other than the two of them.

Finally, Emmett lost his patience.

"Dude, this is unacceptable. There's plenty of hot girls in this place. Get the fuck off your stool and go talk to someone." I'd rolled my eyes at his words, until he leaned toward me, an eyebrow raised. "*Unless* you want to tell us about the intern you're sleeping with?"

I lightly banged a fist on the bar in frustration and glared at him. "I *told* you, I'm not fucking an intern!"

An Editorial Assistant, yes. An intern, no. There was a distinct difference.

"*Sure*, we believe you." Jasper grinned. He got his kicks from getting a rise out of me. Bastard. "So, then, what's the hold-up?"

"Why do you two care so damn much about my sex life?"

"Because you've been on a dating sabbatical since the last ice age," Emmett answered, perching an elbow on Jasper's shoulder. "What kind of friends would we be if we didn't try to get your ass back out there?"

I was losing the battle, so I tried another approach, throwing the spotlight back on them.

"Who are you guys to judge? It's not like either of you are acting normal." I turned toward Emmett. "*You're* engaged after a fucking *month*." He chuckled as I faced Jasper next. "And *you*, jackass. You're smitten with some chick after a *week*?"

My attempt at evasion wasn't working. Emmett and Jasper grinned at each other, and then back at me.

"All the more reason for us to live vicariously through you," Jasper responded with a self-satisfied smile. Smug bastard.

"Exactly!" Emmett agreed, clapping Jasper on the shoulder. "But *you*, Edward Cullen, are turning into a fucking monk. Now go! Get some chick's number or I'm ordering us a round of Bacardi."

I groaned. Emmett knew that shit was the one thing that could make me sick as a dog. I'd sworn it off years before, when I'd spent the night before we took our S.A.T.'s hovered over my toilet. It had been Emmett's favorite thing to tease me with over the years.

I knew getting someone's number was the fastest way to get them off my case, so I quickly scanned the bar, looking for an easy catch.

I knew that the brunette a few seats down had already been eyeing me - I had felt her gaze hot on my back for a while. She had a pretty face, a decent rack, nice hair, long legs, but she did absolutely nothing for me. There wasn't anything *wrong* with her, and there had been a time when we would have already left the bar together, her body hot against mine in a cab headed uptown. But there was no warmth in her eyes, nothing genuine in her expression.

She just...wasn't Bella.

With a heavy sigh, I forced eye contact and a smile, watching as she meandered, snakelike through the crowd, in my direction. Heidi and I talked for a few minutes, and within that time, she proved to be just as empty and vacant as she'd seemed at first glance. She told me what she did, which I promptly forgot anyway. She prattled on, her voice droning in my ears as she leaned closer to me, trying to speak above all the noise in the bar.

I was actually concerned she might bore me to death.

Come on, Cullen—focus! All you have to do is get her number.

Then I could just throw it away, lie and tell Emmett and Jasper she was a lousy lay or some bullshit like that. I took a deep breath and forced myself into the player mindset. I made myself look interested in whatever mindless bullshit she was talking about, made a joke and gave her The Cullen Wink.

It worked like a charm. She threw her head back in laughter, reaching up flirtatiously to rub my arm. I was just about to claim victory, knowing it was only now a matter of time before I could get the fuck out of there.

And then, I saw Bella.

The memory of the crushed look on Bella's face made me cringe. Even all that time later, standing on the frigid street corner, I winced at the epic clusterfuck of my timing. The whole situation kept getting worse and worse.

I sighed deeply, getting frustrated that there didn't seem to be a single empty cab in all of downtown. I raised my arm higher, trying to wave down a taxi, my jaw hurting from how tightly I was gritting it against the cold.

As a string of off-duty cabs flew by, my phone buzzed in my pocket. It was a text from Emmett.

I'm heading out too - Jazz is being a fucking buzzkill now that he's drooling all over the dancer.

I sighed with relief, both because a taxi finally slowed to a halt in front of me, and also because Emmett didn't seem to be asking me any questions. I'd really had enough of him that night, good intentions or not.

I pulled the door open, but then paused as another vibration from my phone came along.

Hey, WTF was up with you and Hawkings? You looked like you were going to puke when he hit up that Swan chick from your office.

So much for no questions.

The truth was, I hadn't paid attention to how it looked when I bolted out of my chair, unable to tolerate the thought of that prick so much as breathing near Bella. Even from across the room, I saw his insipid, leering smile. Of all the guys in the bar, of course she would end up talking to James Hawkings. To James I-didn't-think-this-could-get-any-worse-but-fuck-it-just-fucking-did Hawkings.

Not only did he head up *Red and Black*, the up-and-coming magazine that was quickly pulling away a good portion of our readership with poorly written, dumbed-down articles. But, in addition, Hawking's track record with women was worse than mine.

And I'd known that about him ever since we'd both competed for Valedictorian at Harvard.

I stared at Emmett's text message, stalling, unable to come up with a single fucking reply.

I'll explain tomorrow, I finally texted back. What the fuck I was planning to tell him, I had no idea, but at least I had a little more time to figure out something.

Fine. No rainchecks this week, bro. I'll see you at ten.

"Hey, buddy! You in or out?" the cab driver suddenly barked at me. I didn't know how long I'd been standing there, with the door halfway open.

"I'm in!" I grunted at him, and then turned to look back toward the bar as I opened the taxi door. Hoping Bella was still standing outside with Alice, I strained to catch a glimpse of her. There were dozens of people milling around, but I didn't see Bella's face anywhere.

Who was I kidding? Did I really expect her to make an excuse to her friends and rush after me? We both had to play our parts here - just as I'd said.

Sighing, I climbed into the cab and slammed the door behind me. "Fifty-eighth and Eighth Avenue, please."

As we pulled away from the curb, I took a breath and inhaled the warm, sweet scent of Bella from my jacket. In a move that couldn't have been more pathetic - and not at all Edward-Cullen-like - I brought my nose down to the collar and took a whiff. The aroma lingering on my clothes somehow smelled like sex and flowers and the clean scent of newly printed books, and I didn't even know how the fuck that was possible.

Letting my head fall back against the headrest, I closed my eyes. If I concentrated hard enough, I could still taste her kiss.

I was relieved that Bella and I had worked out most of the fucked up misunderstandings that had happened that night, standing outside in the freezing cold, but *fuck*, I hated leaving her like that. Those doe eyes, the way she looked up at me, her warm soft lips...

I shifted uncomfortably in my seat, the memory of her going straight to my dick. Nothing, no one I'd ever been with, compared to the feeling of Bella in my arms.

I'd almost forgotten how fucking *good* it felt to kiss her in the week that had passed since Valentine's Day. It was just one kiss - one tiny little insignificant kiss - but it was enough to set me on fire; every motion of her lips against mine shooting down my spine. I tried to pull back, but then she'd fucking *whimpered* at me, and it was all I could do to stop myself from finding a dark alley to hide with her in, desperate for a another taste of her flesh, for her hands on me.

I groaned, rubbing my fists into my eyes. This really fucking sucked.

The driver turned down 58th, coming to a stop in front of my building. Pulling some bills from my wallet, I jumped out quickly, trying to swiftly trade the warmth of the car for the heated lobby where my doorman greeted me. I nodded back to him gruffly and headed down the marble hallway to the elevator.

I was aware that most twenty-seven-year-olds in New York didn't live as I did. Most people my age lived in tiny walk-ups in Brooklyn, or in dilapidated townhouses in Hoboken. Taking in the expansive rooms of my top floor apartment, the hardwood floors and the view of the city skyline my windows afforded, I knew I was extraordinarily lucky to live where I did. I should have been grateful for where my career, my education and my parents had gotten me. But that night, the walls felt more like a prison, keeping me trapped in a life I wasn't sure I wanted.

I wandered into my bedroom and started to undress, tossing the jacket that still smelled of Bella onto my bed. A sudden longing for her ripped through me, a sharp tugging in my stomach that ricocheted through my chest and tightened my pants. Sitting down on the edge of the bed, I slumped forward, resting my elbows on my knees and gripping my hair with both hands. I had no idea when my casual infatuation with her had turned into an incessant need.

Not getting you anywhere...

"Sleep. I just need sleep," I told myself.

Even though it was still early, I climbed into bed, but ended up staring at the ceiling and listening to my hallway clock tick for what seemed like forever. I turned on the T.V. and channel-surfed for a while, but nothing held my interest for long—not even porn, which was really freaking sad. I even picked up one of the unread books sitting on my nightstand for a bit before discarding it to the floor in frustration.

Another hour passed and I paced my apartment, uneasy. As I made my way into the kitchen, the empty hallways of my home echoed with my footsteps. I peered into the fridge, but I had no idea what the fuck I was doing that for—I wasn't even hungry.

With an aggravated sigh, I let the door swing shut and leaned back against it.

"What the hell is the matter with me?" I asked the kitchen. Thankfully, it was too polite to answer, because if it could, it would have said something I really didn't want to hear. And, of course, it would also have proven that I was going certifiably insane.

But I had to admit it, just to myself: I needed to talk to Bella. I hated how we'd left things, and I needed to hear her voice.

Heading determinedly into my bedroom, I picked my phone up off the charger on

my nightstand. The time read out twelve forty-nine. I didn't know if she'd still be out with her friends or asleep already, if it would be too late for me to call. Maybe I could just send a text?

I started typing out several, erasing each one as I got halfway through. I wanted to know that she was home safe in bed; that no other dipshits I'd gone to college with were hitting on her, but I didn't want to say that. Finally, I managed to write something halfway decent.

Just wanted to know if you made it home okay.

There. That was simple, to the point, and didn't make me sound like a total asshat...right?

I stared at the words on the screen, knowing that sending the text would mean admitting that Edward Cullen, the Player, was no longer on the premises. Edward Cullen, Obsessed Lunatic, seemed here to stay.

Fuck it.

I hit send.

Falling back onto the bed, I waited, listening to my heart pound in my throat as the seconds ticked by.

And when exactly did I become such a fucking pussy?

A minute later, I jolted upright when my cell buzzed in my hand.

Yes, thank God! They subjected me to karaoke, but I finally broke free a little while ago. Jasper came with us, you know.

I didn't know that twat went with them, but I didn't want to hear about him and Alice. I needed to know that Bella was okay about...about everything. I texted her back right away.

Can I call you?

There was no response, but a few moments later, my phone rang. "Hi," she breathed. "I didn't want Alice to hear my phone ring."

"So you're not allowed to get phone calls now?" I joked, but it fell flat.

"I am...I just didn't want any more questions from her, that's all." Even her voice sounded like it was frowning. I could picture her, curled up under her soft blanket, nervously chewing her lip with her little fingers wrapped around her phone. "I don't like lying."

I sighed. We were both in the same fucked up situation. "I'm sorry things got so messed up tonight."

"It's okay, Edward. I understand."

It *wasn't* okay, and she was too fucking incredible to see what a douchebag I was for putting her through all that.

"Can I see you this weekend?" The words were out before I let myself think about them. I didn't care - I needed to be around her again. And not at work, or not at some bar where we were surrounded by half of Manhattan.

"I want to..." Bella began hesitantly and I held my breath. *Please say yes.* "But won't seeing each other more only make things harder?"

She was right, but I didn't care. The intensity of my need to be near her surprised me, but I had to see her. I *had* to make things right after that night.

"Just...coffee or something?" When she didn't answer right away, I added. "Please?"

She let out a tiny laugh. "Of course."

I closed my eyes, feeling my lips curve up into a relieved smile. We decided to meet on Sunday at a little café in the Village she liked, where we weren't likely to be seen together by friends or co-workers. Then I asked her about the rest of her night, and she laughed softly, telling me about Jasper and Alice's horrific attempt to do a karaoke rendition of 'Sweet Caroline.'

As she spoke, sounds of fabric rustling came through my speaker and I pictured her stretching, raising her arms over her head, the creamy, soft skin of her arms resting against her pillows. Images of how she'd looked that night ran through my mind like a slideshow; the soft sweater she'd worn had hugged her curves in all the right places. I'd had to keep my fingers busy, constantly cracking my knuckles, to keep from touching her. And *fuck*, her ass looked amazing in those jeans—I wanted to peel them off, revealing every inch of her, as I pushed them down her legs, watching her shiver and her teeth sink into that full bottom lip.

I stifled a groan, pushing a palm down on my growing erection. That God-damned lip bite. How the fuck could such a tiny little movement get me so worked up? The allure, I realized, was in knowing how turned on *she* was whenever she sank her teeth into the soft skin of her lip, her mouth opening to unveil the briefest flash of her wet, pink tongue. Inhaling sharply, I let myself imagine once again for a moment what it would be like to be licked and sucked by that perfect mouth...

"Edward?" Bella's voice was brought me back to reality. I was so distracted I realized I had no fucking clue what she was saying.

Forcing thoughts of her mouth out of my head, I refocused my attention on the real Bella—the one on the phone and not the one I was getting imaginary head from.

"I'm here." I had to clear my throat, my voice breaking as I spoke.

"You got so quiet."

Well I was too busy imagining your mouth on me to talk, baby. "I'm sorry. I was listening though." *Liar.*

Bella laughed softly, stifling a yawn.

"Go to sleep, beautiful," I urged.

Bella breathed softly into the phone, more a sigh than anything else. "I still can't believe you're saying things like that to me."

"Why not? It's the truth." Even if she'd made some peculiar fashion choices in the past, she had to know how incredibly breathtaking she was.

"Well...no one's ever told me that before."

"No one?" How was that possible? I silently cursed the idiots in her past who had made her feel anything less than perfect.

"Nope. My last boyfriend, he...well he barely remembered I was around half the time." Bella's voice suddenly caught and she gasped. "When I said '*boyfriend*,' I...I didn't mean to imply...I mean...you're not my...we're not....ugh!"

The sound of rustling sheets and the muffled groan that followed proved that she was most definitely hiding under her covers. I couldn't help but chuckle - Bella was ridiculously endearing when she was embarrassed. I would have bet money that her

cheeks were a flaming shade of scarlet at that moment.

But I was sure she needed some reassurance, given what she'd said. "You're beautiful, *and* you're adorable, too." I didn't want to touch on the subject and risk furthering her embarrassment.

"Thank you. So...I guess I'll see you Sunday?" She yawned again through her words.

"Definitely."

We both murmured our goodnights, and I lay back on my pillows in the resounding silence, my mind reeling.

Boyfriend.

In the past, that word coming from a woman I'd slept with had made me bolt, but when Bella accidentally stumbled upon it, I had actually smiled. For the first time in ages, that word actually felt...right. I hadn't been with anyone I'd called a girlfriend since college, and that had ended up in disappointment for everyone.

I'd met Gianna Allbright during my sophomore year at Harvard. She was an Economics major, borne from New York City elite. Our fathers knew one another; she was high society, the same as them - the kind of connection my parents could be proud of. It felt like something out of another century, a match that would strengthen the bond between wealthy families. She was beautiful, all long legs and dark skin, but our connection never went past sex and posed photographs at formals. We never really *knew* each other at all.

We dated for three years, with summers spent at the Cape and the Hamptons. I didn't plan anything, didn't make Gianna any promises, but then, the day before graduation, my mother came by herself to my dorm room and handed me my grandmother's engagement ring.

Staring at that piece of jewelry, I saw my entire future laid out sickeningly before me. I'd been running on autopilot, going through years of papers and exams, preparing for my eventual takeover of *The Guard*, but suddenly found myself staring down a path I wasn't sure I wanted to be on. My parents expected so much of me—it was as if my life wasn't even mine to live.

Unable to tell my parents how I felt, I went out to Shay's Pub with my roommate. After a few rounds, I was sloshed enough to find the courage to stumble to Gianna's

dorm and tell her it was over. She was shocked and surprised, and closed the door in my face when I told her I didn't think we wanted the same things anymore.

By the end of the evening, I ended up stark raving drunk, punched Hawkings in the jaw and nearly slept through the graduation ceremony the following morning.

The memory of that punch rattled me, the memories of the conversation that brought it about unsettling, but I pushed them out of my head.

After that day everyone was disappointed in me - my parents especially - something I felt I'd been trying to make up for ever since.

Gianna quickly found someone else. I found out later she married a wealthy stockbroker and moved to Westchester. And in the years since then, I'd returned to my high school M.O., sleeping with random girls and avoiding relationships like they were the plague.

But Bella was everything that Gianna wasn't. She was everything *all* of the girls I'd ended up in bed with over the last few years weren't— intelligent, warm, genuine....

*And she still **works** for you, moron!*

My thoughts screeched to a halt. What the hell was I thinking?

A week ago, I was harboring a secret infatuation for a member of my staff, then we became covert lovers, and now, I am imagining ways for her to become my girlfriend?

I was the one who told her nothing could happen at the moment, and nothing could change that.

Shutting off the light, I rolled over, only to see the jacket that still carried Bella's scent taunting me from my laundry basket.

Fuck.

I turned over the other way and tried to go to sleep.

****CH&RR****

On Saturday morning, I arrived at the gym right on time and found Emmett

warming up on the treadmill. For him, however, a warm up meant a three-mile sprint.

"I've already got a half mile lead on you here! You'd better hurry up, Squirt," he said, his talking barely even labored from his exertion.

I gave Emmett a tight-lipped grin as I stepped onto the machine next to him, tempted to stick a foot out and trip him. He'd dubbed me 'Squirt' in the ninth grade, before my growth spurt. He still liked to use it on me, despite the fact that I had grown to six foot one and had been captain of the Harvard Track team.

"I'm not worried." I started up the machine, moving into an easy jog. "I've always been faster than you." It was probably the only physical feat I had over him.

Two hours of heavy lifting and all-out pain later, I was following Emmett into the locker room.

"So," he began, grabbing a towel and shooting it at me. "When are you going to call Heidi?"

Crap.

I'd planned to come up with something the night before, some way out of it, but my thoughts had been so consumed by Bella, I'd completely forgotten.

"I don't know, man." I turned away, opening my locker and pulling my off sweat-soaked shirt.

"Dude, what's gives? She's gorgeous. Isn't she a model or something?"

I strained to remember my conversation with Heidi, searching for something, anything, about her. "I think she does something in fashion," I finally told him.

"Well, you're calling her," Emmett replied definitively, yanking his own shirt off and revealing the cut abs that had gotten him on the cover of *Men's Health*. He gazed down appreciatively at his own form, flexing his muscles with satisfaction, and I glared at him. I didn't have any real issues with the way I looked, but when standing next to Emmett, I felt like a pre-pubescent kid who wasn't even tall enough to get on the Ferris wheel.

"Unless you've found someone *else*..." He winked. I could see this was all a ploy to get me to crack about the alleged intern.

I rolled my eyes, ignoring the implication in his words. "I'll think about it, okay?"

"Geez, what gives, Squirt?" I grimaced at the nickname again. "You're acting...I don't know. Weird."

I sighed, pulling my favorite Harvard sweatshirt over my head, trying to appear nonchalant...whatever the hell that looked like. "I just don't know if I'm that into her."

Emmett plopped down onto a bench and made a face, squeezing his lips together and scrunching down his eyebrows. He looked like he was constipated. "Something's up with you."

I slammed my locker door shut. "Emmett—"

"It's because of Hawkings, right? He totally blew the night for you."

I bristled, images of James flooding back to me—his hand on Bella's, his lips on her skin. *Back off*, I had wanted to growl at him. *She's mine! Mine!*

"I thought the two of you got over your little rivalry years ago."

"Yeah, well, that was before Be—" I caught myself, biting my tongue. *Fuck!*

"Before what?" Emmett prompted.

I stammered, frozen. *Think, Cullen! Think!*

"Before *Red and Black* started stealing our readership," I quickly spat out, huffing exaggeratedly to punctuate my words. I glanced at Emmett—it didn't seem like he was buying it. The constipated look was still there. "You should see the numbers. They're horrible."

"Well, that sucks," he finally said, standing up and slinging his gym bag over his shoulder. "Maybe you should have one of your assistants go work there as a spy. Infiltrate the enemy from within!"

He laughed at his own melodramatic joke, but his words caught me off guard. What if Hawkings offered Bella a job? I swallowed nervously, my mind racing over the possibility. She would no longer work at *The Guard*, leaving us free to be together, but the idea of her being around that slimeball every day made me physically sick.

"Dude, you just went like six shades more pale than usual." Emmett clamped a hand on my shoulder. "Come on. Let's get you something to eat."

****CH&RR****

When I awoke Sunday morning, the streets of New York City were covered with snow. The sight of a white blanket coating the pavement took me back to mornings in Massachusetts, with sunlight shimmering off crystalline icicles hanging from the trees on the campus green.

The taxi ride downtown was quick, New York City cabbies being notorious as they were for not caring about things like weather and traffic. It was early; the brunch crowd wasn't quite up and about yet, and that, combined with the snow, made the streets uncharacteristically quiet.

I stepped out of the car, squinting against the wet, falling flakes that were sticking to my eyelashes and opened the café door, scanning the room for Bella. My heart caught in my throat for an instant, worrying that she had changed her mind.

Then I saw her, her smile shy as she waved at me from a table by the window. Her hair was pulled back into a ponytail that rested on her shoulder, falling over her scarf in waves. She wore a huge sweater over a pair of jeans, heavy winter boots laced up to her knees, and looked like everything warm and comforting in the world.

I exhaled a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding, relief flooding through me as I took in her heart-shaped face. All the tension that had kept me wrapped up in knots that weekend began to slowly unravel. I strode quickly over to her table, never taking my eyes from hers, and the flicker of a smile that appeared on her lips as I neared made my breath quicken.

"Hey," she murmured, her voice soft and cheerful, her eyes bright.

"Morning." I unbuttoned my coat, hanging it on the back of the chair before sitting down in the chair opposite her. But the silly grin she greeted me with made me feel like I had something huge and awful stuck in between my teeth. "What is it?"

Bella didn't speak, she simply reached forward, threading her fingers through my hair. She pulled her hand back, turning it over, her palm facing up. "You had snowflakes in your hair."

"Oh!" I laughed, nodding toward the window. "It's crazy out there!"

Bella grinned. "I know! I've never seen snow like this in the city."

"It's pretty rare," I answered, turning to wistfully gaze outside along with her. "It reminds me of college."

"It reminds *me* of home!" She wrinkled up her nose and shook her head.

Suddenly, I realized just how little I knew about her—where she grew up, what her life was like before she came to work at the magazine. "You're not from here?" I asked, thanking the waitress as she poured us two steaming mugs of coffee.

"No, I'm from Washington. The wettest spot in the continental United States. After being there most of my life, you can see why I'm not the biggest fan of cold, wet weather."

Bella shivered slightly, and lifted her coffee mug in both hands, the sleeves of her sweater falling down over her wrists. She closed her eyes, breathing in the warmth from the steaming liquid before taking a sip, leaving me momentarily mesmerized by her open, full lips. When she set the cup down, the slightest trace of milk dotted her upper lip.

I reached forward without thinking, running my thumb across her skin, feeling a jolt run through me as I touched her, those big, innocent eyes gazing back at me. "You had milk on your lip."

When she smiled in embarrassment, a pink flush highlighted her cheeks. I stifled a groan.

That blush. Always that fucking blush.

We spent the next two hours talking about nothing and everything. I listened with rapt fascination as she told me about growing up in a remote area of Washington, her long-standing friendship with Alice, and her drive to be a journalist. As she relaxed, she became more animated, twisting her fingers together while she talked, occasionally hiding her face behind her hands whenever she said something she thought was silly. She was so open, so honest, and every little embarrassed admission only made me want her more.

Our elbows inched closer to each other's on the table as we leaned toward one another, our feet just barely touching underneath. I felt like a teenager again, getting abnormally excited over the slightest contact. Unable to keep myself from touching her any longer, I finally reached over and took her hand in mine. Making

sure the contact remained somewhat hidden, I pulled our entwined fingers to the side of the table closest to the window, the cold from outside pressing at our arms through the glass.

She smiled softly, blushing as she gazed down at our hands, but her brows came together and she looked up at me with a question in her eyes. I wondered if Friday night's events were bothering her just as much as they were eating at me, so I bit the bullet.

"Listen, I just...I really needed to talk to you about what happened at the bar the other night," I began. Bella looked down for a moment, hiding her expression.

Please don't hide from me, sweet girl.

"The woman you saw me with—you have to know it was nothing! Emmett and Jasper are just really on my case to get back in the game. They have good intentions, honestly." Laughing through my own embarrassment, I continued. "I uh...I haven't been on a date in a really long time."

She raised her head, her brows knit together in confusion. "You haven't?" When I shook my head, she asked, "How long?"

Letting out a nervous chuckle, I looked down at our intertwined fingers, then back up at her again. "Since that day I told you about the painting in the lobby."

Bella gasped, her eyes widening in understanding, her smile brightening her face. *God, she's beautiful.*

"Listen, Bella, I—" I wanted to tell her how I was feeling, how crazy I was going thinking about her every goddamn second, but my phone rang, interrupting us. Using my free hand to fish it out of my pocket, I saw a number I didn't recognize flashing across the screen. "Sorry, I'll just be a second."

I should have let it go to voicemail.

"Edward Cullen," I answered distractedly, but the cooing, saccharine voice on the other line made me freeze.

"Hi, Edward! This is Heidi, from Friday night?" Apparently, her voice was loud enough for Bella to hear as well, because she immediately pulled her hand from mine, wrapping her arms protectively around herself.

"Oh...uh, hi." *Brilliant conversationalist you are, Cullen.*

If Heidi noticed any discomfort on my end, she chose to ignore it. "I was calling because I found out we have a mutual acquaintance!"

"Oh yeah? Who is that?" As I spoke, I held out my hand toward Bella across the table, my eyes pleading with her to understand. While I knew I had to at least be polite to Heidi, my brain was screaming at me to 'accidentally' disconnect the call.

"Rosie Hale!" Heidi squealed. My stomach churned, pushing acid and coffee up into my throat, and my eyes slid shut in defeat. *Fuck.* There was no way I was getting out of this now. "We're sorority sisters! Isn't it a small world?"

"Sure is," I agreed, laughing nervously. *Hang up the phone, dipshit!* "Uh, look, Heidi. Can I call you back?"

At those words, Bella seemed to wince slightly, her arms squeezing her torso tighter, her beautiful lips sealed into a thin line.

"Oh, of course...you have my number." Heidi's voice was full of suggestion, an innuendo I wanted nothing to do with. Quickly rushing her off the phone, I leaned in the direction of Bella's gaze, which was steadfast and out the window.

"Bella?"

She wouldn't look at me, but released a hand from where it had been trapped against her side, and began picking at her sleeve. "Bella, please look at me." But she kept staring outside, and I pressed my palms against my forehead in frustration, gripping my hair as I sighed through the silence.

"You're not going to...to sleep with her...are you?" Her voice was so small, so nervous, and when I looked up at her through the cage of my arms, I could see the hurt in her eyes.

"Bella, no!" Swiftly reaching a hand across the table, I squeezed her fingers gently, running my thumb across her knuckle. "This is just...it's only to...*damn it!*"

I slammed my other fist down against the table in frustration, causing the coffee mugs to shake and Bella to jump, startled. It was uncanny how I had just managed to fuck everything up even farther simply by picking up the phone. I gazed at her in desperation, willing her to understand that the only person I wanted to sleep with was right there in front of me.

She finally took a deep breath, speaking quietly. "I get it, Edward. I'm sorry I overreacted...again. We both have our parts to play in this. I just hate the idea of you...*with* anyone else. It makes me worry that..."

"That what?" I coaxed, trying to soothe her. I'd have done anything possible to make her feel better.

"That this is all in my head. That none of it's real," she finally admitted, her cheeks aflame, her eyes suddenly downcast. "That you don't really want to be with me."

"Hey." I tried to get her to look up, my fingers squeezing hers harder in reassurance. When her eyes finally met mine, I reiterated the words we spoke in her apartment only a few weeks before. "It's real, I promise. All this lying and pretending crap is just for now. Until you don't work at *The Guard* anymore."

"Well...actually," A slightly devious, coy grin graced her lips. "I think I have a plan for that."

Did she have a lead on a job? "Oh yeah? Tell me."

"Well..." she paused, uncertain. "I was thinking that I *should* meet up with James Hawkings."

No!

My body went rigid at the mention of his name, all my concerns from the day before coming to light. Bella seemed to notice, speaking quickly, her words tumbling awkwardly past her lips.

"But just professionally - for lunch or something. You know, networking."

"Bella, he's a slimebag. He'll never see you for just your hireability," I insisted.

"Why? Because I'm not qualified enough?" she bristled, obviously annoyed.

"No, because you're too sexy."

She seemed to soften at that, her lashes coming down to hide her eyes. It was nice to see I could make her smile, but I had to focus - I had to warn her. "Listen, Hawkings and I go back a long time. He's not...well, he's just a real douchebag."

Bella made a face at me, but I knew him, knew how he treated women. Gianna had

been friends with several of the girls he'd tossed aside, thrown away after a night or two in his bed. There were even rumors of him being violent at times when he was drunk, and there was that one time...I flinched at the memory, pushing it out of my mind. While over seven years had passed since then, I couldn't believe he'd managed to change all that much.

"I just really don't want you to see him."

"It might be the quickest way out of this, though," she said sadly, her thumb caressing mine. "It's all I have to work with right now, so that I can try to get another job."

I gritted my teeth and sighed heavily. There *had* to be a better way.

At that moment, the noise in the restaurant seemed to increase, and we both looked around, realizing how crowded it had gotten since we'd arrived. Bella quickly pulled her hand away, but this time it wasn't in anger. "We should probably go...you know...before..." She trailed off, but I knew what she was saying: before someone we knew could see us.

I motioned to the waitress for the check, and before I knew it, we were wrapped up in our coats, the snow piling up swiftly on the sidewalk. Bella looked so uncertain, standing on the corner, and I knew I couldn't let her out of my sight just yet.

"Can I walk you home?"

That beautiful smile I'd been hunting so many months for appeared on her lips. "Sure."

I took an instinctive step toward her, wanting to reach for her hand, but I knew how dangerous that could be out there in the light of day, so I rocked on my heels awkwardly, gesturing for her to lead the way.

Her apartment wasn't far, and we made small talk as we walked, the tension in the air between us lessening slightly. When we were a few yards away from her building, we both suddenly stopped as we heard familiar laughter, our heads whipping in the direction of the front door.

"It's Alice and Jasper!" she whispered frantically. They hadn't seen us, but were leaving Bella's building and heading straight toward us. Shit, this just could *not* get any worse!

Grabbing Bella's arm, I noticed a small alley to the right, and pulled her into it, pushing her flush against the brick wall to hide us. We froze, listening to our friends' laughter follow their fading footsteps as their shoes crunched against freshly fallen snow.

When it was clear they were safely gone, we both exhaled. Bella's breath, soft and warm, washed over my face, and I realized with a start just how close we were, my chest pressed up against hers in the shadowed alleyway. Her hands were grasping the lapels of my coat, her eyes wide with worry, her lips just an inch from mine.

"Do you think they saw us?" she whispered.

But I couldn't respond; not with her body so soft and warm and near. In the snow-covered silence that surrounded us, I was unable to tear my eyes away from her, all pale skin and pink lips and smelling so fucking good.

Bella's eyes darted from mine down to my mouth, and as her breathing picked up, I felt her move, just the slightest shift of her hips toward mine. My pulse thudded in my ears and my body began to ache from the strain of holding back when all I wanted to do was kiss her again.

"Edward," she whispered plaintively. Then, goddamnit all to hell, she sank her teeth into that perfect, succulent lower lip, and I was a goner.

I closed the space between us, crashing my mouth against hers with a groan, the sound swallowed by her answering, hungry kiss. Her fingers slid up to my neck, one hand sinking into my hair as she pulled me closer to her, her lips parting to allow my tongue to slide along hers. My hands yanked her jacket open, chasing up her jeans and under her sweater until I palmed her hips, my thumbs brushing against the smooth skin of her belly. The heavenly sensation of touching her again was almost excruciating - it felt so fucking good, but I knew it couldn't last.

We have to stop! My brain managed somehow to shout at me through the lust-driven fog I was in.

"Fuck, Bella," I grunted when I abruptly broke the kiss. I could barely hold still with how badly I wanted to devour her, but we were being too reckless, uncaring that we were out in the open, so easily exposed.

"I shouldn't have...I'm sorry...I just can't..." I was babbling, the words pouring out of me before I could even think them through. Our foreheads pressed together, I kept my eyes squeezed tightly shut, drowning in the sensation of her curves

pressing against where I was hard and desperate for her. "I just can't help myself. I want you too badly."

"God, Edward," she whispered, her breathing as heavy as mine. "You're making me crazy."

"I know! *Crap!* I'm sorry!"

Releasing her hips, I took a step back, putting some distance between us before I lost all control. Not wanting her to feel rejected or unwanted or read anything into what I was doing other than trying not to fuck her in a freezing alley, I reached up and laced my fingers through hers, pressing her palms harder to my skin.

"I know I'm only making things worse for both of us." Finally opening my eyes, I gazed down at her needy, worried expression. "But I just can't stay away from you."

Her eyes fluttered closed for a moment, and when she opened them, her expression was determined. She tugged my hands down and held them between us. "Then I'm going to meet with James Hawkings."

"Bella," I growled in protest, but she hushed me sharply.

"I'm *going* to get another job. It's the only way out of this, Edward."

I swallowed back bile, my heart pounding but no longer from arousal. Lifting her hands to my face, she pulled me close to her, and kissed me once, chastely. That time, *she* was the one doing the reassuring.

"Hey, it's going to be okay. Our little secret, remember?" I let out a frustrated laugh and nodded, feeling the loss of her warmth as her hands fell from my face. "Walk me to my door?"

My hands stuffed into my pockets to stop myself from touching her, I followed her to the single glass door of her building. I wanted to go upstairs with her, wanted to hide in the warm, comfortable world I'd found in her room, in her bed - the world where I wasn't Edward Cullen, Editor in Chief, and could just...*be*.

Bella turned back to face me. "See you tomorrow," she murmured softly, before turning and going inside. The door closed behind her, and I stood there alone for a moment, feeling the snowflakes settle onto my scalp before finally moving on.

Every time I had to let go of her, it got harder and harder to watch her walk away.

****CH&RR****

The next few days passed quickly, the hours filled with work and responsibilities. I had business dinners with advertisers, meetings with the editors, and especially avoided phone calls from my friends.

Bella and I never emailed one another at work, as we both knew the company servers were monitored. Text messages and a few stolen moments here and there were all we had. I'd learned her schedule by that point, and those of her friends. When Jake and Angela left each morning to do a Starbucks run for the executive staff, I had exactly seventeen minutes to talk to Bella.

And I knew when she left for lunch earlier than usual on Thursday that she was heading to her 'business lunch' with Hawkings.

I paced my office like a caged animal while I waited for her to return, my hands clasped tightly behind my back as I crossed back and forth across the floor. Despite the pile of articles on my desk and God knew how many voicemails waiting for me, I couldn't concentrate on a damn thing.

"You're gonna wear out the carpet, if you keep that up," Jasper's voice joked from the door. I turned to see him standing there with Emmett, and Jessica next to them with my schedule in hand.

"Your two o'clock with marketing has been pushed back to three," she informed me, batting her eyes. I sometimes wondered if maybe there was something wrong with her, like her contacts were too dry or something.

"Great," Emmett mused as he and Jasper stepped into my office. "Plenty of time for lunch with us."

My eyes flickered toward Bella's desk out on the main floor. She still wasn't back.

"I don't think I have time to go out, guys." I waved in the direction of my desk. "I'm pretty swamped."

"No worries," Jasper smiled, holding up a heavy brown bag with the label of our favorite deli stamped on the side. "We brought in."

I groaned as they invaded my office, planting themselves in the chairs meant for clients. Jessica did her eye-batting thing, and started to close the door after us, but I held it out to stop her. I wanted to be sure I could see when Bella returned.

"So, a little birdie told me you haven't called Heidi yet," Emmett said through a mouth full of sandwich. I groaned, feeling an ambush coming.

"Would that 'birdie' happen to work in this office and have a ridiculously ostentatious diamond on her hand?" I shot back as I walked over to them. Jasper snorted, nearly choking on his sandwich.

Emmett smirked. "That's the one."

I reached into the bag, taking my own sandwich out. I bit into it, but as I glanced quickly toward Bella's still-empty desk, my usual sub suddenly tasted like ash.

I am really losing it.

Placing it back down on my desk, I sighed, steeling myself for the interrogation.

"You're calling her," Emmett insisted once again.

"What are you, a fucking dating service?" I asked. "Leave me alone!"

"Aww, come on. Just call her, Edward!" Jasper said, reaching across my desk and grabbing my cell phone, but I yanked it out of his hands. "You need a date to the Sky Vodka party tomorrow night anyway."

My mouth fell open and I slapped my forehead - I'd totally forgotten about that stupid event. It was going to be yet another night filled with meaningless conversation, name-dropping and photo-ops.

I suddenly realized the night wouldn't be so awful if I was able to go with Bella.

Just then, I saw a flurry of excitement on the floor as a delivery man walked a large bouquet of flowers through the room. "You still buying shit for Rose? Valentine's Day is over, you know."

Emmett shook his head. "I didn't buy anything." A stifled squeal erupted, and I cringed when I realized it came from Jake, and that the flowers being placed on Bella's desk.

"It's from James Hawkings!" Angela said a little too loudly, and then clamped a hand over her mouth.

Fuck!

Distracted as I was, I didn't expect the sudden attack from my two best friends. Or, as I felt in that moment, the two douchebags who were my *former* best friends.

Jasper swiftly pulled my cell from my hand. "Number!" he shouted.

Emmett had somehow pulled my wallet from my pocket, finding Heidi's card tucked in the back. "Dial!"

Jasper pressed the phone to my ear, reaching his free hand up to Emmett for a high five. "Mission Dating Intervention - accomplished!"

It began to ring just as Bella appeared at her desk, her eyes meeting mine across the gulf of reality that stood in between us. I swallowed hard, wondering how the fuck we were going to get out of this mess.

"Hello?" I winced at Heidi's voice, sharp and nasal.

Bella and I needed more time, and as much as I hated it, I supposed this was the easiest way to buy us some.

"Hey...Heidi. It's Edward Cullen. I was wondering if you had plans tomorrow night."

It's going to be a bumpy ride from here, so if I've still got you as a reader, hold on tight! And I promise, next week's chapter will have Edward and Bella reaching their limits - sexytimes will commence! (And don't worry, I'm a strictly canon-pairing, HEA writer!)

Don't forget to stop by my blog to check out the amazing polyvore outfits AmberDK has made for each chapter!

Until next week!

Chapter 5: Masquerade

Thanks everyone for all your lovely reviews! Big hugs to Kyla713, Awesomesauce76, Agoodwich and Theladyingrey for dealing with my neurosis and constant chapter changes!

Disclaimer: All things Twilight belong to Stephenie Meyer.

BPOV

The morning of my lunch meeting with James Hawkings, Alice set out yet another new outfit for me. She'd insisted my old trusty interview suit was so bad, it needed to be burned and buried like a Ouija board.

I stared at the expensive clothes with trepidation. The entire situation was starting to make me feel sick.

Alice had been ecstatic when I told her I'd gotten in touch with James earlier that week. I put on my best smile, acting as if I was excited, but I didn't share her enthusiasm, of course. I'd barely been able to make the stupid call in the first place. Despite how certain I'd seemed with Edward on Sunday, the truth was that I was petrified.

I'd started to dial and hung up several times as Edward's face, so hurt and worried, kept flashing through my mind. But I reminded myself I was doing this for us, so that we could actually have a relationship, and finally punched in the whole number.

As soon as I heard James on the line, I quickly put on my most professional voice, saying I was eager to discuss my qualifications with him.

James' answering chuckle was unnerving. "I'm sure you are." His voice was low, suggestive, a veiled implication behind his words. "How about lunch this Thursday?"

I agreed, and it was on that Thursday morning that I stood in a towel, staring into my closet, feeling like it belonged to somebody else.

The new outfit hung from the door, amidst several more items I'd never seen before. Alice's shopping sprees were going to end up costing us our rent. Still, I

couldn't help but admire the clean lines and creases of the sharp grey suit jacket she'd found for me, with a slim skirt that would ride just above my knees. She'd paired it with an ivory ruffled blouse that showed just the slightest bit of cleavage, and matching heels I'd be lucky not to break my neck in.

And all that morning at work, I felt Edward's eyes on me, his gaze a mix of lust and anxiety. I hated not being able to reassure him. As it was, we were chatting at the office much more than we ever had before. I was worried people were starting to notice, so I made sure to keep my distance from him that day. I left the office at noon with wishes of good luck from Angela and Jake, but also with my heart in my throat, wondering if I was getting in over my head.

Get a grip, Bella! I told myself as I stepped out onto the busy street corner. *You've been wanting out of this job forever. This is the only shot you've got right now!*

Determined, I tightly gripped the bag holding my portfolio and joined the crowd making its way up Broadway. Passing the shops and wide-eyed tourists converging in Times Square, I walked down 44th Street to Carmine's, a classic bistro in the theater district.

I wonder how soon Edward and I will be able to go out to dinners together.

Bolstered with hope by the thought, I entered the restaurant with renewed drive. My determination proved my downfall, though, as I moved too swiftly, causing my ankle to roll in the death-stilettos I was wearing. Dropping my portfolio bag, I held tightly onto the brass handles of the heavy wooden door, trying to recover from practically pitching forward into the hostess' podium.

"Are you all right? Can I help you?" Her eyes were wide as she hurried over to me.

Why, yes, thank you. Could you please magically change my life so that I am not a complete klutz, am able to get a fantastic new job and have an actual relationship with the man of my dreams?

"Yes! I'm meeting someone here." I tried to stand, but then my heel slipped on the floor and I nearly crashed backwards, holding onto the door for dear life once again.

The hostess took my arm and helped to set me upright again, which could not have been more humiliating. Once I was able to stand on my own, I bent down to pick up my portfolio, and made a mental note to kill Alice when I got home that night.

"So, did you have a reservation, Miss?"

"Yes, I believe it's under Hawkings?" Running my hands over my coat, I tried to smooth down my outfit, not wanting to look like...well, like someone who'd just practically fallen on her face.

"Oh!" The hostess's eyes widened. "Mr. Hawkings has been expecting you. Right this way."

I followed her, expecting to be led into the large dining room with dozens of tables filled with loud customers. Instead, she walked me past the busy lunch crowd and down a hallway, opening a door labeled "private". There, seated at a quiet table by the window sat James, an expectant grin on his face and a bottle of wine chilling in front of him.

Oh, shit.

"Bella, it's so nice to see you again." He stood, reaching out to take my hand and kissing the knuckle, just as he had at the bar, his eyes never leaving mine.

The hostess motioned to take my coat, which I mercifully managed to unbutton and hand it to her without falling over again. She turned away as James and I both sat down, leaving us in an otherwise empty room.

"Wow...I guess the main dining room was full?" I asked. Around us, long tables were lined with crisp white linen. Lush, red drapes frame the windows and a cherry wood wine cabinet filled up the entire back wall.

"I asked for the private room." He shrugged, smiling devilishly. "I know the owners. I thought this would be more comfortable than trying to talk over the noise out there."

James seemed to be waiting for a reply, so I finally sputtered out, "Oh, well...thank you!" *Way to be professional, Bella.*

"I hoped you'd be open to some wine," James asked smoothly as he poured me a glass of the sparkling white beverage. It looked expensive.

"I don't usually drink during the workday," I began. He paused, raising an eyebrow at me. I realized my refusal might be insulting, so I quickly backtracked. "But, I guess *one* drink couldn't hurt."

"Of course." He winked at me, sliding the glass across the table. "It will just be our little secret."

My stomach lurched, my breath momentarily stolen by the sensation of my rib cage caving in around my heart. *Those words were mine and Edward's.* Suddenly I missed him intensely, longing for the safety and comfort of his arms.

"Something wrong?" James asked.

Realizing I'd gasped out loud, I shook my head. Laughing uneasily, I quickly took a sip of the wine and then began reading through the menu. "Wow. Everything looks so good."

"It certainly does."

I glanced up, but James was not looking at his own menu. Instead, he was staring at me. Intensely.

I cleared my throat and busied myself by reading the entrée choices. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see James' amused expression as he swirled the liquid in his glass. Our waiter arrived a short time later to take our order, and when he left, I nervously lifted my portfolio from my purse.

"So, Bella. Tell me about yourself." James sat back in his chair, taking no notice of the leather-bound assortment of articles I'd placed on the table.

I launched into a quick recap of my background, speaking as if I were on an interview. I told him about my choice to go to Northwestern and the highlights of my time there, my experience at *The Guard*, as well as my steadfast determination to become a serious journalist. I chattered on as our food arrived, but James didn't really seem to be listening. He just held that same entertained expression, his eyes occasionally darting down to my cleavage.

Eyes front and center, slimeball! I wanted to yell. There was no shyness at all in the way he was sizing me up, but I swallowed down my frustration, continuing to talk up my experience, hoping I'd actually get somewhere.

When our plates were cleared, I opened my portfolio, pulling out my resume, but he clucked his tongue at me, placing a hand over my own.

"I don't need to see that, Bella. I'm sure your background must be impeccable if Cullen hired you."

The casual way James mentioned him made me think of the words of warning Edward had spoken at the coffee shop on Sunday: "*Hawkings and I go way back.*" I couldn't help but wonder just how familiar their connection was.

"I've heard all I need to hear. You're obviously very qualified." James waved over the waiter and asked for the dessert menu. "But I don't want to talk business anymore when I've got such a lovely lunch date."

His smile made me uncomfortable and my cheeks burned. I quickly looked at my lap when what I really wanted to do was sock him straight in the jaw for being such a presumptuous prick.

James chuckled and was just about to order some kind of decadent sweet pastry when his cell rang.

"What is it, Victoria?" he asked, irritated. I suddenly felt very bad for whoever Victoria was. He sighed heavily, folding up his napkin and shaking his head at our waiter, abruptly handing him back the dessert menu and motioning for the check. "All right. I'll be back shortly."

He slipped his cell back into the inside pocket of his suit jacket and smiled apologetically at me. "I'm so sorry, but it looks like I'm going to have to wrap things up."

James moved to stand and I quickly did as well, still frustrated that he hadn't so much as looked at my damn resume yet. "Well, I appreciate you taking the time to meet with me. Perhaps I could email you my resume and you could keep me in mind if any positions become available."

He paused, giving me a wry, quizzical look. "That desperate to leave *The Guard*, are you?"

You have no idea.

"I'd just really like the opportunity to show my worth, Mr. Hawkings."

"Hmm." James ran a hand across his jaw, scratching at his chin thoughtfully, sizing me up, I supposed. The hostess reappeared with my coat, handing it to James instead of me.

"I'll tell you what," he said, pulling the coat over my shoulders. "Why don't you accompany me to the Skyy Vodka party and we'll take some time to further discuss

your...qualifications."

Oh, yuck.

"Skyy Vodka party?" I asked, trying not to recoil from his touch as he lifted my hair from where it had gotten trapped underneath my coat collar.

"It's an event they're hosting tomorrow night to kick off a new product line."

"Oh, right." I vaguely remembered seeing something on Rosalie's schedule about it. Skyy Vodka often hosted glamorous parties, and that one was going to be a masquerade-themed event. Jake had put a reminder in that she needed to order a mask. "So you want me to be your date?"

"Yes, but, strictly business, of course," James chuckled, his smile reeking with malevolence.

I weighed my options. If I said no, any chance of getting a job at *Red and Black* was in the toilet.

He plucked my portfolio off the table, handing it back to me. He took my arm, walking me through the restaurant, nodding at a few people on the way out. We stepped out onto the chilly street, the winter sky gloomy overhead, and paused at the corner.

"Until tomorrow?" he said, finally acting somewhat professional by reaching out to shake my hand instead of kiss it.

I took a deep breath. Oh, hell. People did this, right? It was all part of the networking game. I could handle it - it was just one night, after all! And hopefully, I'd have a possible job offer from it.

Hopefully. The desperation to be with Edward surged through me, and in that moment, I realized that I'd do anything under the sun to make it happen.

"All right," I told him.

"I'm looking forward to it," he replied smoothly. "Oh, and Bella? Please, call me James."

So much for professional.

We parted ways, heading in our separate directions. It wasn't until I got back to my desk, seeing Angela and Jake flipping out about a flower delivery that I really got concerned. With them squealing next to me, I opened the card, confirming that the bouquet was from James, thanking me for lunch.

Across the room, I heard loud voices coming from Edward's office. I looked up, feeling a shock barrel through me as his eyes met mine. There was a fleeting moment when he looked relieved to see me. My entire being wanted to go to him, the draw between us like gravity, and getting so much harder to ignore.

But the look on his face quickly morphed, his chiseled jaw setting as Jasper suddenly pressed a phone to Edward's ear, and Emmett grabbed his arm so tightly it looked like it hurt. I watched him speak into the phone for a few moments, wondering what the hell was going on.

Edward broke our gaze, his head lowering as Jasper pulled the phone away. He and Emmett exchanged a high five as Edward walked slowly to his office door, not looking my way again as he closed it.

"Bella! I can't believe James sent you flowers before you even got back to your office!" Angela yanked my attention back to them. "So? How did it go?"

"Oh ...he asked me to be his date to the Skyy Vodka party tomorrow night."

"Shut up!" Jake exclaimed. Rubbing his hands together with excitement, he quickly dashed off a text to Paul, saying that his makeover services would be needed once again.

Ignoring them, I sank into my chair. Glancing up at the huge bouquet in front of me and Edward's closed door behind it, I began to worry that everything was about to go very, very wrong.

****CH&RR****

Later that night, I sat in Alice's bedroom, listening to her tell me of Jasper's dramatic request for her to be his date to the Skyy party, which he, of course, was going to as well. The two of them had seen each other nearly every night, and Alice's face was radiating with happiness.

I hadn't heard from Edward all day, and had my phone in my hands, hoping I would get a call, a text...anything. Wondering what had gone on in his office that afternoon was making me crazy.

"So he showed up just as we were wrapping up for the night," Alice gushed, practically dancing across the room, spinning a ballet of her own with the story. "He was wearing a mask, trying to hide his identity, even though everyone knew who he was since I can't stop talking about him!"

She twirled around, telling me how Jasper had knelt in front of her, presenting her with a mask that matched his own, except hers had a brilliant plume of black feathers on one side, held in place by a glittering gem. She was so excited that she suddenly began to rifle through her closet, anxiously searching for an outfit to go with it.

"Nothing!" she declared after a few minutes, discounting each and every one of her beautiful dresses, then giggled. "I guess we're going to just have to go shopping!"

"Alice, we're not going to have any money for food at the rate you're buying new clothes," I sighed, picking at her comforter. The word 'food' must have triggered a memory in her, because Alice suddenly spun around.

"Oh my God! Bella! I completely forgot to ask about your lunch with James!" Even when Alice shouted, her voice still sounded like music. It must have been something about being a ballerina - everything about her was filled with song.

She rushed over to me, folding her long, graceful legs under her as she sat down on the bed next to me. "I've been so wrapped up in Jasper, I've become a terrible friend. Tell me everything!"

"Well...it was...all right." I shrugged, but Alice wasn't having it.

"All right?" she prodded, holding her hands out in a gesture that demanded more details.

I sighed. "He asked me to be his date for the Skyy party, too."

She threw her arms around me, hugging me tightly. "That's great! Bella, I'm so happy for you! Maybe you'll get a new job *and* a boyfriend out of this."

"Maybe." I nodded, trying to mimic the hopeful smile she wore, but the idea of dating James made my stomach lurch. I wanted to tell her what a slimeball he was. The feeling of continuously lying to her was starting to push in on my chest, choking me.

I almost cracked, right then and there, but Alice the Shopaholic went into action.

"I've got to shop for both of us, now!" She reached for a pen and paper, starting to make a list of all the stores she would need to hit the following afternoon.

"Do you think you can get out of work early?" she asked. I started to tell her I probably couldn't, not looking forward to the following evening at all, but then my heart jumped into my throat as my phone lit up with Edward's number.

Clasping it to my chest, I jumped from her bed. "Alice, I've gotta take this. It's...my Dad."

She nodded distractedly, still focused on her list. "Say hi for me!" she called out after me as I hurried down the hallway.

I was breathless by the time I reached my room, quickly shutting the door behind me. "Hello?"

"Hey." Edward's voice was soft, tired. Sad. "How are you?"

"I'm okay." I settled onto my bed, confused by his tone. Something was wrong. "How are *you*?"

He laughed. It was a bitter, tense sound. "I don't even know anymore."

"What's wrong?"

Not answering my question, he changed the subject. "How was your lunch?" Edward spat out the word 'lunch', as if the entire meal in itself offended him.

"Well, you were right about James being a slimebag," I answered. "Not exactly what you would call professional."

Edward practically growled on the other end of the line. "What. Did. He. *Do*?" He spoke every word carefully, his anger charging the air like static.

"Nothing *bad*." I was stalling. "He just leered a little bit, and he didn't really listen to much of what I said about my experience as a journalist."

Edward chuckled. "Told you so." His mood lightened slightly, teasing me like a little kid. But I still had to tell him the worst of it.

"And he...um...well, he also asked me to come with him to the Skyy Vodka party tomorrow night."

"Motherfucking son of a bitch!" Edward's outburst was so loud, it caused me to yank the phone away from my ear in surprise. "I *knew* he would do that!"

His anger was sudden, intense. I could hear him breathing, hard and heavy on the other end of the line. To be honest, it was a little frightening....and ridiculously sexy.

"Relax, Edward. He said we'd get a chance to talk more about job possibilities. It's not a *date* or anything."

That's not technically true.

I caught myself in the lie, wishing I could reach up into the air and grab the words back. "Well, I *did* agreed to be James' date, but it's not like he thinks it's a *date* date."

He laughed—a disdainful, mocking sound. "Bella, let me ask you. Did Hawkings ever actually say there was an opening at *Red and Black*? Did he even look at your resume?"

"No," I confessed, my voice small, conceding defeat. Edward was right, but he was also chastising me. He'd never spoken to me that way before – it made me uncomfortable.

He rumbled out another angry sigh and was silent for a few beats. I could imagine him gripping his hair in frustration, his long fingers tugging on the silky locks the way I wanted to, the way I did on Valentine's Day. Suddenly, that night and all of its pleasures seemed so far away, mired underneath the mess we had found ourselves in.

When Edward finally spoke again, he was calmer, more himself. "I just hate the idea of Hawkings anywhere near you, baby."

Baby?

I inhaled sharply. Edward Cullen was calling *me* baby? The way he said the word made my eyes flutter, a floating sensation buoying up in my chest.

"It'll be all right," I assured him softly. "Nothing is going to happen. Don't worry, I can handle myself."

"Well, I'm glad at least I'll be there to keep an eye on you."

"Edward, you don't need—" I paused. *Wait. What did he just say?* "You're...you're going to be there, too?"

Of course he is! It was a huge, high profile, publishing event. I already knew that Rosalie and Jasper were going. Obviously, Edward was going to be there too.

"Oh, well yeah...uh..." Edward sounded uncharacteristically timid, setting off alarm bells in my head. "I was kind of forced into asking Heidi to it."

What?

Here I was, placating myself to this sleaze ball, about to spend a night on his arm all so that I could make it possible for me and Edward to be together, and he was asking the tall, gorgeous model-from-hell to go with him?

"How on earth were you *forced* into something this time, Edward? Were you immobilized with a phone tied to your head?" I snapped angrily, shocking even myself at my tone.

"Well, actually, yes. Kind of."

"Oh, really," I responded dryly.

"Remember when you saw me in my office earlier today?" He proceeded to tell me how Jasper and Emmett had ambushed him, stealing his phone and calling her before he could even react. Good intentions aside, those two were starting to sound like a bunch of rowdy, prank-playing teenagers. They were also starting to piss me off.

"I don't like this any more than you do, I swear."

This time I sighed, exhausted. "Well, I'm glad at least *I'll* be there to keep an eye on *you*."

Edward chuckled softly at my repetition of his words. "Nothing's going to happen, baby. You know that." There was that word again, melting me. Then, his voice lowered. "You looked incredible today, by the way."

I closed my eyes, beginning to unravel at the deep, sexy pitch of his voice.

"I wanted to drag you into my office and lock the door," Edward continued, speaking softly. Huskily.

"Yeah?" I shivered, his words stoking flames in my belly. "What would you have done to me in there?"

"Oh, Bella. The things I want to do to you." He chuckled darkly. "I'd have you screaming my name so loud, you wouldn't be able to talk for days."

"Wouldn't people hear?" I breathed.

"The walls in my office are sound-proof, Bella."

Oh, God...

Suddenly, there was a rapping on my door just before it burst open, Alice chipper and breathless behind it, her laptop in hand. "Bella, look! I found the cutest dress online for you to wear tomorrow night!"

"Alice!" My hand immediately flew to cover the mouthpiece of the phone. I sat up straight in bed, looking embarrassed and flushed.

"Oh, sorry! I didn't realize you were still on the phone with your Dad!" Oblivious, Alice scampered over, leaning toward the phone. "Hi, Chief Swan! How are the fish biting?"

"Actually, Alice...my...*Dad* has to go now."

Through the speaker, I heard Edward groan. Alice flopped onto my bed, turning the screen of her laptop to show me what she'd found. It was obvious she wasn't going to be leaving any time soon.

"I guess I'll see you tomorrow?" Edward offered, his voice strained. The needy quality of his words caused me to squeeze my legs together in my own frustration.

"Yeah." I nodded at Alice's dress find, giving her a thumbs up. "Tomorrow."

"Good night, sweet girl." He disconnected the call, leaving me breathless in the wake of his words, my body throbbing and desperate in the torturous absence of his touch.

As Alice rattled on about what store we could pick the dress up in, I wrapped my

arms around my pillow, wondering if it was ever going to smell like Edward again.

****CH&RR****

The following morning, I lay in bed, thinking about the word masquerade.

Mas·quer·ade. **Noun**. Meanings:

1. A costume party at which masks are worn; a masked ball.
2. A costume for such a party or ball.
3. A disguise or false outward show; a pretense.
4. An involved scheme; a charade.

Considering how everything was going lately, the theme of the evening couldn't have been more accurate.

Alice had Friday off from rehearsal, so she was spending the day shopping, a thought that made me fear for my bank account. I dragged myself to work and opened my email to find an updated version of the executive schedule - Edward was going to be out of the office all day at meetings. I sighed, sagging down onto my desk and burying my face in my hands. Despite my disappointment, I was also a little relieved he wouldn't be around. It was getting harder and harder for me to stay away from him.

Throughout the day, Alice sent me photos of all kinds of masks for me to wear to the party that night - one was covered in glitter, one had large ribbons hanging down from it. Another was made entirely of black ruffled lace, looking like something that belonged with a French Maid costume. Everything was ostentatious, gaudy. None of them felt like something I would ever wear, even after my incredible, boyfriend-getting, new-job-procuring makeover.

Veto, I texted her over and over again, until finally, she found the perfect one.

The mask was black satin, cat-eye shaped and outlined in a thin braid of silvery-black sequins. A delicate teardrop fringe was threaded along the lower edge. It was elegant, sophisticated, and looking at it, I felt powerful. Sexy. Almost a little...badass. And ready to handle anything that James Hawkings, or Heidi the uber-perfect-super-model, could throw at me.

After hours of Alice's incessant requests, I finally ended up leaving work early. Jake took the subway down to my apartment with me, where we found Paul and Alice blasting Lady Gaga. He and Jake weren't invited to the Skyy party, but wanted to get in on the fun beforehand nonetheless.

We ate Chinese while Paul ironed my hair, pulling it up into a sleek half-ponytail, and shaded my eyes to a dark smoky black. When I escaped into my bedroom to slip into the sleeveless, black satin dress Alice had found, I was relieved to see the bargain cost on the price tag. There were accordion pleats throughout, meeting at the neck in a smooth bow. It had a swooping, open back and was gathered at the waist with a wide ribbon. The dress was lovely, and I was also thankful that it didn't show any cleavage - I didn't need any more of James' gaping that night.

When I reappeared in the living room, Alice held out a box labeled Christian Louboutin. "The pièce de résistance!" she beamed. I eyed her warily.

"Alice, what did you do?"

"Aw, come on, open it!" she pleaded, her eyes sparkling.

Nervously, I lifted the shoebox cover to reveal a pair of black platform heels. Jake whimpered, reaching up to stroke the smooth straps criss-crossing along the shoe, and I moaned in fear. "No! Bella plus heels equals humiliation! Haven't you figured that out yet?"

Alice frowned. "But they're beautiful! You won't fall, I promise - they have an ankle strap and everything! And you're going to look so sexy in them."

Then I eyed the Saks Fifth Avenue bag she'd pulled them from.

"Alice...how much did these cost?"

She started to back away from me slowly, as if she were going to have to run for her life. "Seven hundred dollars."

"Alice!" I cried, gazing down at the shoes in despair.

"They were half off!"

Paul jumped from the couch in Alice's defense. "That's a deal!" he implored, Jake nodding emphatically by his side.

"It's worth dipping into my savings a bit. Come on we've been like hermits since we moved here!" When I didn't look up, Alice sighed. "I'll take the shoes after if you really don't want them-"

"I second that!" Jake broke in, and I shook my head at both of them.

"But you simply *have* to wear them tonight!" she concluded.

I sank to the couch, carefully slipping the shoes on, watching as my feet became delicately wrapped in soft straps of suede. They were lovely, and I stood easily, my balance kept in check somehow.

"Crap. They do look sexy," I admitted, making Alice squeal in delight. "Fine. You win."

A half hour later, I was climbing into a cab next to her, for once not feeling like The Ugly Duckling by her side. She was graceful and feminine as always, wearing a black mesh top with ruffles around the neck, a gold, sequined mini skirt and a pair of Alexander McQueen heels she'd pulled from another Saks bag when she thought I wasn't looking.

I hope we can learn to not need food and electricity for a while, I thought as we waved goodbye to Jake and Paul.

When the taxi came to a stop at and 40th Street, we slipped on our masks, a Cheshire-cat grin appeared on Alice's tiny, pixie face. For a moment, I needed to look away, wishing I was as excited as she was, and that I was going to this party on Edward's arm, not James'.

The elevator took us to the 34th floor of a lavish hotel to the lobby of Sky Room, location of the Skyy Vodka Masquerade Ball. At the entrance were a dozen photographers, flashes snapping at a smattering of celebrities and publishing bigwigs.

We gave our names at the door, where a few baskets held piles of simple, plain, zorro-esque looking masks for people who hadn't brought one. Inside the ultra-hip lounge, the music was loud, the conversations even louder, the bar lined with an array of brightly hued cocktails in shimmering glasses. And the sheer variation of facial costumes made the night feel more like Halloween than the middle of winter.

The guests were adorned in all kinds of masks - ones in the shapes of butterflies and bats, some with bright feathers in peacock and leopard print. A few people wore

full headdresses, others in Venetian-style masks with obscenely large noses. The room was awash with color, everything flickering under the smoothly shifting colors of an L.E.D. light display on the ceiling.

"It's like the Lord Capulet's party in Romeo and Juliet! We've staged a scene just like this!" Alice was enamored. "Everyone dressed in disguise – it's so seductive and romantic!"

"It certainly is," a smooth voice murmured behind her.

Alice turned quickly in the direction of Jasper's voice and danced into his embrace, kissing him sweetly on the cheek. My heart panged with sadness, longing to be able to do that with Edward.

Jasper nodded at me. "Bella, it's good to see you."

"Yeah...you, too!" I shouted over the loud, pulsing beat. He turned his attention to Alice, asking her if he could steal her away for a drink. She looked plaintively back at me, pouting that she didn't want to leave me alone.

"Oh, she won't be."

James appeared suddenly by my side, dressed in dark jeans, a black shirt and vest over a blood-red tie. His eyes were covered by a shiny red mask with black streaks of lightning sewn across it, his gaze behind it leering and shameless. I couldn't help but admit he looked slightly dangerous.

He offered me his arm. "May I show you around?"

Gulping, I nodded, lacing my arm through his uneasily, glancing back at Alice as Jasper pulled her toward the bar. There was the slightest exchange between the two men—a silent, terse nod—making me even more curious about his history with Edward and his friends.

"This place just opened recently," James told me as we strolled through the bar, filled to the brim with people, floor to ceiling windows showcasing an outdoor terrace. "It's the tallest rooftop lounge in the city. Outside, you can see every skyscraper in Manhattan."

He opened a door, leading me to a lounge encased within a glass roof, a stunning view on all sides. It was more like an oasis than a bar, with lush white couches atop lit floor tiles. Accenting every seating area were smooth, ivory leather end tables,

sprawling umbrellas and heavy white draperies creating intimate, private spaces. Illuminating the whole area were glass enclosed pillar candles, large towering space heaters and torches. It was so warm and cozy, for a moment, I forgot I was outside.

"Wow," I murmured in amazement.

"You like it?" James mused, taking a sip of his drink. "I helped open this place. I'm friends with the owners."

Turning toward him, I raised an eyebrow. "You seem to know a lot of people in this town, Mr. Hawkings."

"That I do," he chortled, his head tilting to the side, appraising me. "And Bella, I told you to call me James. Now, why don't you have a seat while I get you a drink?"

As James strode away toward the bar, I caught my reflection in the window, my image superimposed over all the people inside. I almost didn't recognize myself in my dress, heels and mask, my lips red, full and pouty. A smile quirked up the side of my mouth and I lifted my chin, feeling confident.

*I am **going** to get James Hawkings to hire me.*

*Edward **will** be my boyfriend and we **will** live happily ever after.*

But my determination dissolved as a flash of red filled my view, interrupting my fantasy vision of myself.

It was Heidi.

Arm in arm with Edward, she made her way toward the patio. Her supreme figure was wrapped in a red sleeveless cocktail mini-dress, her legs showcased in insanely tall, red heels looking like something out of 'Sex and the City'. With her luscious hair piled into a smooth up-do, a flamenco-style black lace mask only enhanced her sickeningly perfect beauty, a flaming red rose over one eye.

They sauntered outside, Edward greeting people he knew, his striking face hidden behind a dark mask trimmed in gold-swirling designs. It matched his exquisite black suit, gold tie and crisp white button down underneath.

I swallowed hard. They were so beautiful together—she looked like she belonged with him.

The couple was still far away enough that they hadn't seen me yet, and I tried to hide behind an umbrella, all my self-assurance stolen by her superior beauty and her manicured hand on Edward's forearm. A piercing, high-pitched scream filled the air just as Rosalie emerged from the crowd to launch herself at Heidi, hugging as if they had known each other for years. They spoke excitedly as Edward stepped to the side to talk with Emmett, his colossal form recognizable even behind his silver mask. Together, they momentarily abandoned their dates, heading toward the bar.

And then, Edward saw me.

Our eyes locked, the connection between us rippling through the air like heat lightning. I couldn't move, my hands gripping the umbrella stem in front of me. It was as if the entire world disappeared in that moment, the heavy bass from inside and all the conversations around us fading out into a dull hum. His mouth opened slightly, his eyes raking over my figure, and I nearly sank down to the couch behind me, my knees growing weak under the lustful weight of his stare.

"Here you are."

James stepped into my line of vision, breaking my contact with Edward. He handed me a martini glass filled to the brim. "The house special - Chocolate Vodka, Creme de Cacao, and Chambord. Delicious. Just like you."

His free hand came up to brush along my cheek, and this time, I did pull back. "Thank you for the drink, *Mr. Hawkings*." I glared, purposely still not using his first name. *I will remain professional, damn it.*

His grin was salacious. "Still so stubborn! I like that in my editors."

Hope flared in my chest as I sipped the heady drink, lapping up the chocolate shavings rimming the edge of the glass. It really *was* delicious, but I realized how he was looking at me, so I lowered the drink, determined to steer to conversation to work. "So, you do have an opening at Red and Black?"

James pursed his lips, a smile playing on it. "We'll see."

"Hawkings!" A massive hand clamped down on James' shoulder, momentarily startling him. His eyes narrowed—I could tell he was a man who did not like to be surprised. It was Emmett, and he lowered his hand to shake James'.

"This place looks great! A much better showing than I'm getting down at my place!" Emmett admitted, flashing his dimpled grin, looking cheerful and relaxed.

Behind him, Edward was seething.

"Well, our bars cater to different...clientele," James replied. "Evening, Cullen."

Edward's jaw tightened as he exhaled a hot, angry breath through his nostrils, his eyes darting from mine to James' behind the shadow of his mask. Emmett looked uneasy, and attempted to lighten the conversation by reaching over to shake my hand. "I'm Emmett McCarty."

"Yes, we've met several times," I replied, smiling. Emmett raised an eyebrow, not understanding. "At the bar? Last weekend? I work at *The Guard* and I'm Alice Brandon's roommate."

His eyes widened, gaping at me, giving me a quick once-over, as if I didn't at all resemble the pale, depressed girl who'd pouted sullenly the previous Friday. "Wow! Bella! I didn't recognize you. You look great!"

"Yes, she's quite the fetching little thing, isn't she?" James slid an arm around me and I froze, not knowing what to do. "And looking to take a step up in her career, it would seem."

I looked back and forth from James to Edward, whose fists were now clenched by his sides. What the hell was going on here? Why was James goading him?

"Well!" Emmett smacked his lips loudly, trying to deflate the tension. "I think Edward and I should get our dates some drinks. It was good chatting with you." He guided Edward away from us, and I squirmed out of James' hold on my arm.

"I'm sorry about that," he sighed, acting forlorn. "If you don't already know, Edward Cullen and I had a bit of a rivalry going on back in our college days."

Well, that explains something, at least.

The party went on for another hour like that, Edward and I stealing glances at one another, not talking. Every chance I got, I tried to initiate conversation with James about job opportunities, but he made it impossible, thwarting my attempts by introducing me to people left and right. I also continued to politely brush his hands away whenever he tried to touch me. He excused himself to refill his drink, and I slumped into a couch not far from the bar, just out of sight.

God, this is horrible. The entire thing was a waste of time. Edward was right—James was not going to take me seriously as a job candidate, just a piece of

ass.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" I heard a voice growling severely.

It was Edward, just a few paces away, but he wasn't talking to me. I stayed perfectly still, straining to hear his conversation.

James' amused chuckle followed. "What's your problem, Cullen? Is Bella next on your list of notches on your headboard?"

My heart stopped beating for a second. *Notches?*

"Don't fuck with me, Hawkings. You need to back off. Now."

"You know, Edward, you always acted like you were so much better than me, but we're really exactly the same. At least *I* don't pretend to be something I'm not."

What the hell is he talking about?

My heart resumed its rhythmic pace, speeding up to the point of panic. The sound of bar stools screeching across the laminate floor was the next thing I heard, and Edward's lean form came into view, walking briskly away from me. As he neared Heidi, he leaned in to say something to her, my stomach lurching at how close his lips were to her ear. She looked confused and mildly irritated, but rose to her feet, nodding her apologies to the people she'd been speaking with and began to follow him to the door.

They were leaving. Together.

I stood quickly, my eyes following him as they made their way to the lobby. Edward looked furious when he placed Heidi's coat over her shoulders, our eyes finally meeting through the glass.

Tell me what's wrong! I pleaded with my eyes. *Don't leave!*

But he turned around, and they were gone.

I exhaled a shaky breath, feeling as if I were going to be sick. I was next on his list? He was pretending to be something? I was so confused, my head was starting to hurt.

A short time later, I saw James sauntering back toward me from the bar, two

drinks in hand.

"Bella, I think I'd like to take a look at your resume after all." My eyes shifted toward his, untrusting. James flashed a grin, his teeth glinting in the strobe lights reflecting off the window. "I've just gotten some interesting information. You may become quite valuable to me."

He has no idea I heard their conversation. My head was spinning—was I about to become a pawn in some game between them?

I needed answers, but for the moment, I nodded, making it look as if I were taking his bait. "Wonderful. I'll send it off to you in the morning. Will you excuse me for a second?"

He politely stepped aside and I pushed my way through the crowd, heading back inside through the pulsing beat, flashing lights and grinding bodies. Finally, inside the safety of the ladies' room, I wrenched my cell phone from my purse, expecting to read some kind of explanation from Edward.

There was nothing.

I shook my head. Why did it always seem as if I were halfway in the dark when it came to him? One minute, I felt like we were both on the same page, and then the next, I was hurt and confused, grasping at straws for answers.

Replying to a message from Alice asking how my night was, I took a few moments to steady myself. After several deep breaths, I steeled myself to return to James, to put Edward out of my mind. I stepped out toward the lobby and through the crush of people in the bar when suddenly, someone grabbed my arm.

"Where are you going?"

Edward!

He was standing in the shadows, and I gasped as his long fingers wrapped around my wrist, pulling me flush against his chest. "I *said*, where...are...you...going?" His voice was deep, hushed. Angry.

With my body pressed against his, I glanced up over my shoulder. His tie was gone, his shirt unbuttoned at the neck, showing off a taste of his chest. No longer wearing the elegant disguise from earlier, he now donned one of the simple masks that had been offered at the door, and behind it, his eyes flashed with hunger.

"Back outside," I whispered, my mouth going dry.

"Yes, you can go back to *him*, but only to say you're leaving." Edward nipped at my ear, his breath hot against my skin. "You are *mine*, Bella! He can't fucking touch you."

Hidden in the gyrating bodies moving to the beat around us, Edward's other hand came around to press against my belly, holding me tighter against him. His thighs rocked forward, pressing his growing erection against me, and I whimpered softly. He felt so good behind me, so solid and firm, and my knees grew weak with need.

"Make your excuses. There's a car waiting for you downstairs."

In a sudden move I could barely comprehend, he vanished, my body immediately reacting in the absence of his heat. Gathering my wits, I moved quickly through the bar, finding Alice tucked into a cozy table with Jasper.

"Alice, I'm not feeling so great. I think I'm going to head out."

She jumped up quickly, fussing over me, saying that she was going to go home with Jasper that night, but she could cancel if I needed her. I quickly shooed her off, insisting that I was fine; I just needed some sleep, burying myself even further into a quagmire of lies. I found James just outside the entrance to the terrace and made the same excuses.

"That's a shame, Bella. I hope you feel better." James' unexpected compassion was hard to believe, and I swallowed down bile as he lifted my hand to his thin lips, so cold and different than the burning ones I wanted on my body. "I'll be in touch."

Rushing through the crowd as if my life depended on it, I raced for the coat check, my foot tapping nervously against the floor while I waited for the elevator. My phone buzzed in my purse as I stepped inside, the doors mercifully closing in front of me.

Black town car. Corner of Fortieth and Eighth.

Bracing myself against the cold, I wrapped my coat tightly around me, not bothering to button it before I ran outside. Moving as quickly as I dared in my heels, I hurried down to the street corner, heading for a car idling by the curb.

My pulse pounded in my ears when I neared, and the back door swung open quickly. I bent down, climbing into it, and then, Edward's hands were on my face, crushing me to him, his lips attacking mine. His kiss was desperate, searing, wet

and fast - our teeth carelessly scraping against one another's, as if we were trying to devour one another.

"What happened to Heidi?" I gasped as I pulled back for air.

He let go of my face with one hand and reached for the door. "I took her home. I couldn't stand to be around her for another second."

Slamming the door, Edward ordered the driver to go, and a privacy screen rolled up between the front and rear seats. I had no idea where he was taking me, but in that moment, I couldn't have cared less.

As the car moved forward, merging swiftly with the traffic on Eighth Avenue, Edward placed open-mouth kisses down my neck, a deep, possessive growl rumbling out of his chest. "Mine," he breathed.

All the questions still rattling around in my head melted away, my body responding instantly to his touch as he bit gently just behind my ear. "Yours," I gasped.

Our masks still on, his right hand wandered down my side while his left sank into my hair. Edward's fingers tightened and tugged my head back, exposing more of my neck for his delicious assault.

"You look so fucking hot in this dress, Bella. I've been out of my mind all night."

He squeezed my side, tugging me by the waist until I rolled, climbing onto his lap. My coat fell to the floor as I settled my legs on either side of his, and I moaned when I felt his length push against me through his trousers. "Want you," I mumbled through kisses. "So much."

"I want you, too. *Fuck!*" His back arched slightly against the seat as I shifted in his lap, grinding against him. "God, you have no idea what you're doing to me."

Both his hands were on my hips, pushing me down onto him, and he panted heavily, drinking me in from behind his mask. I gripped his hair with both hands, kissing him hard and sucking his lower lip into my mouth, relishing in his deep groan.

The car pulled to a stop, the driver waiting, and Edward released my hips, cradling my face in his hands. "Say you'll come up with me." His plea was breathless, his eyes searching mine. "Fuck the consequences. I don't care. Please?"

I nodded vigorously, my body barely able to keep still above his.

"Good. Come with me." He exhaled shakily, nudging me off him and handing me my coat from the floor. Opening the door with one hand, he reached back and grasped mine, swiftly leading me onto the sidewalk and into a luxurious lobby.

An older couple accompanied us into an elevator, nodding politely at us, despite our costume. We rode silently upward, and I tried to control my breathing as Edward's thumb began stroking my palm in an erotic rhythm, anticipation charging the air between us. The doors opened to his floor, and he fumbled with his keys, sliding them into the lock and letting them clatter to the floor as he pulled me inside.

"I can't fucking take this." Edward pushed me against a wall, his palms pressed to it on either side of my face. "I need you constantly. It's driving me crazy."

I let my coat and purse drop from my hands, sliding my fingers into his belt loops, demanding more contact, needing to feel him against me. "Me, too. Edward, *please* !"

He shuddered out a breath as our mouths found each others' once again, and I reached up to claw at his shirt, desperately pulling buttons through cloth. His tongue was making me dizzy at it slid against mine. Edward slipped his hands behind my back, undoing the tie that held my dress together as he began to walk me backwards through the dark hallways of his apartment.

I had just freed his arms from the sleeves of his button down when we reached his bedroom, dragging the hem from the confines of his pants as the backs of my knees hit the bed. Edward tugged on my dress and cool air chased up my skin as it slipped down from my body, pooling at my ankles.

Bare-chested, he stared at me as I stood before him, wearing only a black satin bra and panties. "You're fucking perfect, you know that?"

I whimpered, my fingers inching out in the air between us; my body wound so tightly, I could cry. The backs of my knuckles grazed his length, still trapped within his clothes and he groaned, his head sinking back. I tried to make quick work of ridding him of his belt, gasping as he swept my hair off my neck and leaned down to suck and bite the sensitive skin there.

Finally freeing him of his pants, I palmed his cock, feeling the damp spot where the tip met his boxers, reeling at how much he wanted me.

I reached around to unhook my bra, letting it fall from my shoulders. When I slipped my thumbs into my panties, he let out a snarl. "I want to do that."

I dropped my arms to my sides and let myself sink into the feeling of his hand running down my belly, brushing under the waistband of my panties and sliding between my legs. Edward grinned at me wickedly, eyes glittering behind his mask. His fingers danced over my wet skin, stroking me until my thighs started to tremble, and then he skimmed lower, deftly sliding a finger inside me. I cried out at his touch, bowing forward, my eyes squeezing shut.

"So wet for me," he murmured and then stopped abruptly to tug my panties down my legs. "Lie down."

I slid down to his bed on trembling legs. Edward rid himself of his boxers, unveiling his impressive length, and I licked my lips.

"Don't!" he warned suddenly, climbing onto the mattress in between my thighs, his breathing hard. "Don't you *dare* bite that fucking lip - unless you want me to completely lose control."

Loving that I could cause that kind of reaction in him, I shimmied backwards and smiled innocently at him. Reaching up to his face, I tugged the mask over his head, needing to see his face. He did the same, sitting back on his knees as he freed my hair from my own costume, kissing me passionately when we were finally both completely bare.

His breathing erratic, Edward reached over me to his nightstand, retrieving a condom. I grabbed it from him and ripped it open, rolling it down and stroking my hand over the latex.

"Edward?" His eyebrows rose in answer, a strained look on his face as he hovered just at my entrance.

Then I opened my mouth wide, bearing my teeth, and sank them into my bottom lip. Hard.

His breath caught, and he hissed out a curse. Edward's gaze was feral, barely reigned in, and he suddenly gripped behind my knees, spreading my legs wide.

"You're going to be my undoing, Bella Swan." Edward growled, pushing inside me with one swift and delicious thrust. I moaned his name, pleasure surging through me, as he began a steady rhythm, kneeling over me, his arms on either side of my

body keeping my legs trapped against his chest.

"God, you feel so fucking *good!*" he gasped, rocking into me over and over again, his forehead sweaty against mine. "I don't know how I stayed away from you this long! I can't-I just fucking *can't* do it anymore!"

I couldn't either. It was useless to try.

Reaching up, I dug my fingers into his shoulders, pulling him closer, and groaned loudly when he shifted his angle, thrusting against blissful spots inside me I'd never known before. My thighs trembling, I felt my release bearing down on me, all the pent up need from the past two weeks driving me quickly to the edge.

"You're mine!" Edward repeated, lifting one hand to slide down to where we were joined, a new wave of pleasure rushing through me as he began rubbing my clit. "Mine! Mine to touch, mine to fuck! Do you hear me?"

Writhing from the ecstasy of the heavy push and drag of his cock inside me, the sensation spiking as his fingers found just the right spot, I cried out. "Yes! I'm yours, Edward....please...*oh God!*"

He kissed me fiercely just as my orgasm shuddered through me, swallowing my moans as I thrashed beneath him, my release tearing through me with blinding force. I trembled with aftershocks as he buried his face against my neck, stilling and moaning my name as he came apart above me.

We lay quietly together a short while later, my head on his sweaty chest and his fingers trailing languidly through my hair.

"I missed this," he murmured, pressing his nose to the crown of my head. I hummed in response, loving the feeling of him so close to me, but the events of the evening were pressing heavily on my mind. Doubt flared. Was Edward suddenly unable to stay away from me because he wanted me *that* much? Or was it only jealousy from seeing another man's hands near me.

James' hands.

"Edward, I have to ask..." My voice was small as I asked the question. "Why do you hate James Hawkings so much?"

He tensed, immediately making me regret asking at all. "It's a long story, Bella. I don't want to talk about it right now." Edward sighed, his inhale long and deep. "Just

please, promise me that you won't see him again?"

"But, he might—"

"I don't care!" Edward grumbled loudly and I flinched at the sound. Swiftly his arms came around me, his nose nuzzling my hair in apology. "We'll find some other way," he whispered, kissing me softly.

Not wanting to spoil the moment or risk flaring his anger again, I decided not to mention James' last minute request for my resume, and cuddled closer to Edward.

We were silent for a moment, and then Edward's thumb was on my chin, tugging gently until my eyes met his. "Go away with me next weekend."

"Away?" I turned, pushing myself up on my elbows to look at him. The need in his eyes was so clear, and I felt myself starting to melt. "Where?"

"Anywhere. It doesn't matter." Edward traced my face with his fingertips as he spoke. "I just want you all to myself for more than a few hours."

I frowned slightly, thinking about the lies I was going to have to cook up next; torn between the desire to be with him and exhaustion from all our deceit.

Edward's response made it seem as if he could read my mind.

"I know it means more sneaking around," he said, dropping his hand to his chest. But then, Edward looked up at me from underneath his lashes, his voice going low, soft. "But I can't stay away from you anymore, Bella."

I smiled, his words sending a rush through my body from head to toe. *He really wants to be with me.*

"Me either."

Edward's face slowly lit up. He was so beautiful, it made my chest tighten, my breath stop in my lungs. "So, is that a yes?"

I nodded. "Yes."

He pulled me down into the warm circle of his arms. "Thank you," he whispered, his kiss a gentle press to my forehead. "Stay here for the night?"

As if it had ever occurred to me not to. I would spend every night for the rest of my life in Edward Cullen's arms, if I could.

And never leave.

"I'm too tired to go anywhere," I joked, pressing my lips to the smooth skin of his bare chest. "I think you wore me out."

"Good, I like you that way." He inhaled deeply, almost in relief. "Good night, my Bella," he murmured.

It felt so good to be laying there calmly with him, his apartment a bubble, separate and away from our real lives. It felt so safe, so peaceful—I never wanted it to end. I wanted that so badly, it made me ache.

So I pushed out of my head the thoughts about hiding from our friends, about the consequences of what we were doing, about James Hawkings and whatever ghosts lingered in the corners of his history with Edward. And I let the soft sounds of Edward's breathing lull me quietly to sleep.

Still with me? ;)

Make sure you drop by my blog to check out the *amazing* polyvore outfits AmberDK made for this chapter!

Till next Friday!

Chapter 6: Veritas

Hugs and nutella to Kyla713, Awomesauce76, Agoodwich, Theladyingrey and AmberDK. You ladies rock my socks.

Disclaimer: All things Twilight belong to Stephenie Meyer.

EPOV

I woke Saturday morning to the sensation of warm, soft skin pressed against mine. Half awake and underneath a cocoon of blankets, I hummed quietly, sliding closer to the source of the delicious warmth. Everything around me smelled and felt so good, I was sure I was dreaming.

A contented sigh brought me closer to consciousness and I blinked, peeling my eyes open and looking for the source of that sound.

Bella was on her side in bed next to me and it wasn't a dream. The sight of her did strange things to my chest—a frantic tightening sensation that I couldn't make sense of. With her back to my front, she held my arm tight across her body, and I could feel her chest rise and fall with every breath. Still asleep, with her hair spilling down on the pillow between us, she looked like an angel.

She was also still completely naked.

Propping my head up on one hand, I let my eyes trail down her upper body, just taking her in. Her neck and shoulders had a few small bruises on them, which I realized after leaning closer, were unmistakably hickeys.

I had *marked* her.

I should have felt embarrassed that I'd practically bitten her like a horny teenager, or worried that she had bruises on her skin she'd need to hide, but I didn't. I fucking *loved* it. It just reminded me that she was mine.

Mine.

The word made me inhale sharply, reminding me of the previous night's events at the Skyy Masquerade party. My patience had already been worn thin by that dim-wit

Heidi, who I'd been forced to spend the night with. She had been chewing my ear off all night, her voice like the sound of nails on a chalkboard. When I saw Bella, it took every ounce of restraint I had to stay away from her. She looked unbearably sexy in her mask, dress and heels; I tried to keep it together. But then Hawkings put his fucking hands on her and all reason was shot to hell.

He knew what he was doing—putting an arm around her the way he did, taunting me. It was all a fucking game to him. I knew all along James was just leading her on about having a job opening for her. The things he'd said about her at the bar were enough for me to want to rip his fucking head off.

She can never find out what he said.

Realizing my teeth were gritted, I tried to relax. Burying my nose in Bella's hair and taking a deep lungful of her scent, I reminded myself that she was with me - in my bed, not his. She'd wanted me, ditched that slimy prick at my demand when I snuck back into the party. I'd taken her home and fucked her hard, claiming her and making her scream my name.

The memories made my morning semi come to life, and I groaned into my pillow. As much as I desperately needed her again, I didn't want to wake her just yet—the moment was just too perfect. Willing my erection away, I pulled her closer to me, shut my eyes and just concentrated on the feel of her in my arms.

She felt...perfect.

All those mornings with every other woman, I wanted to run—to get out as soon as possible. But that morning, with Bella in my arms, I never wanted it to end.

Unfortunately, I knew reality would come crashing down on us all too soon.

"G'morning," Bella mumbled sleepily and yawned, stretching her body enticingly along mine. "What time is it?"

I glanced at the clock. "Nine-thirty." *Shit!* Emmett would be expecting me at the gym soon for his weekly round of torture.

Briefly letting go of Bella, I reached over and shut off my cell. If it wasn't on, at least I'd have a better chance of pretending I'd simply overslept, not having heard any calls from him.

I ignored the tiny sting of regret I felt from shutting out my friends. I didn't like

lying to him and Jasper any more than Bella enjoyed hiding us from her own friends. However, after the "let's force Edward to call Heidi" stunt, Emmett and Jasper's feelings weren't exactly on the top of my priority list.

"Ugh, is it that late? Crap. I need to find my phone." Bella started to sit up, but I quickly threw my arm back around her, pinning her to the bed.

"No!" I shouted, my leg tightening over both of hers.

"Edward!" Bella giggled, trying to struggle out of my hold. *God, I love her laugh.* "Stop! I have to see if Alice called!"

"I don't care if she called!" I shouted, laughing into her hair. "I don't care if there's a fucking tarantula in this bed. You're not getting up!"

Bella gave out an exasperated sigh, and squirmed until I let her turn around to face me, still holding her in a playful vice grip.

"Alice is expecting to find me home sick when she comes back from Jasper's. If I'm not there, she'll freak." Bella looked up at me with those big, puppy-dog eyes of hers. "I just have to see if she's called."

Knowing she was right, I gave in and let her move. "Fine," I pouted.

Bella climbed out of the bed, giving me a sweet view of her fantastic little ass, and reached down to the floor—hunting for her panties, most likely.

"Oh, and Edward?" She popped her head up over the edge my mattress as she shimmied her underwear up her legs. "If there *are* any tarantulas in this bed, I'm calling the Board of Health."

I growled and reached for her, but she squealed and jumped out of my grasp. Bella grabbed my button down from the floor, where it had been discarded the night before in our eagerness to get each other naked. She slipped it enticingly over her shoulders, flashed me a teasing smile, and then left the room to search for her phone.

Lying back on the bed, I folded my hands behind my head, a huge smile on my face. Reaching over to grab the pillow she'd be sleeping on, I pulled it over my face and took a deep breath. *Oh, hell.* The scent of her immediately shot waves of desire rippling through me, my erection reappearing and tenting the sheets.

*Just her fucking **smell** and I'm turned on already.*

No woman had ever had such an effect on me before.

As I lay there, I gave in to the truth of the situation—whatever Bella and I had was more than just physical. That wasn't to say our attraction wasn't completely fucking overwhelming. I thought over the night before—how we'd made out frantically in the car, the way I'd slammed her against the wall of my apartment, the animalistic *need* I'd felt to be inside her again. It was fucking mind-blowing. But having her in my apartment that morning, just having her presence there, relaxed and smiling, made me feel so damn happy.

I decided then and there that I wasn't giving her up. There was no fucking way I was going to be able to stay away from her anymore. We were just going to have to find a way around it somehow.

When I heard her footsteps coming back down the hallway, I quickly threw the pillow I'd had over my face back onto the bed and laced my fingers nonchalantly behind my head. Bella came into the room, my shirt rolled up to her elbows, hanging open so that I could see a hint of her breasts and her flat, smooth belly.

Fuck, she looks good dressed like that.

"Well it's almost completely dead since I left it on all night," she told me, holding up her phone. "But it had just enough juice left for me to text Alice that I was feeling better. She won't be home until after noon."

"So you can stay for a while?" I asked. Bella nodded, and my face must have lit up like a little kid on Christmas.

"Do you have a blackberry charger anywhere?"

I nodded, pointing to my nightstand, enjoying the fact that it meant I got to watch her walk around the bedroom. In nothing but my shirt. And her panties.

"Thanks." She smiled brightly after unplugging my phone and attaching hers to the cord.

"No problem." I grinned back at her, but I couldn't stop myself from letting my eyes trail down her chest. Her hair hung softly over her shoulders, the tips of each strand brushing against the outer swell of her breasts. She blushed as she caught my gaze, her smile turning heated. Sultry.

I turned on my side, reaching one arm out toward her, trailing my fingertips over her skin. Bella's eyes fluttered shut, her smile dropping into a soft 'O' shape.

"You look so sexy like this."

My voice was deeper, the air charging with heat. I let my hand drop an inch lower, stroking gently just over the lacy edge of her panties. Bella's breathing hitched and she opened her eyes, her gaze hungry. I thought back to how she'd played me the previous night, biting that delectable lower lip just to drive me crazy.

There were so many sides to the sweet girl standing in front of me—so shy sometimes, so easily embarrassed, and at other times, so determined, and unbearably, ridiculously sexy.

I wanted to know every side of her. I wanted to take her away for a weekend and have her all to myself for hours upon hours, like I'd asked her the night before.

But in that moment, I just really, really *wanted* her.

"Get back in bed," I growled, tugging on the edge of the shirt. As much as I liked her in it, she looked even better out of it.

Bella climbed onto the bed, her weight delicious and soft on top of me. Without the intensity we'd felt the night before, we kissed deeply, languidly. And when I finally pushed inside her again, I kept my eyes open, holding my own pleasure at bay. I watched Bella move over me, drinking in her face until she fell into a beautiful, shuddering climax, my hands sliding against the sweaty skin of her waist as she pulled me over the edge along with her.

We lay quietly a short time later, our sweaty bodies pressed against one another's and her head on my chest as I gently stroked her arm. "What are we going to do now?" Bella asked softly.

Kissing the top of her head, I asked, "You mean about us?" She shifted to look up at me and nodded anxiously.

"Well, we're just going to have to find a way to keep this hidden."

Bella chewed her lip, in a way that didn't wake my flagging arousal, but instead made my brow crease with worry. I shifted her in my arms so we were face to face, our heads resting side by side on the pillow. "What is it?"

Bella was quiet, soft. Hesitant. "Why is it so easy for everyone else?"

"What do you mean?"

"Jasper and Alice fell in love at first sight. Rosalie and Emmett got engaged after only a month. Hell, even Jake and Paul are practically married now. Everyone else seems to have it so easy, but you and me..." She sighed, looking down, not meeting my eyes. "Why does it have to be so hard?"

The sadness in her voice made my chest ache.

"Hey." I cupped her face gently with one hand, encouraging her to look at me. When she did, a single tear spilled over, running in a wet path down her face.

For a second, I panicked – a woman hadn't cried in front of me in ages. Not since the obligatory show of tears Gianna had displayed when we broke up, and even that was almost certainly forced. But when it came to Bella, every protective instinct that had lain dormant inside me for so long suddenly came roaring to life, and all I wanted to do was take her pain away.

"It's going to be all right," I whispered against her skin, kissing her tears away. Bella sniffled, her hands on my bare chest, her eyes still downcast with lashes that were wet with tears. "I promise, baby. We're going to work it out."

She gasped softly at the endearment, her eyes finally flashing up to mine. I didn't know when I'd started using the word with her, but it seemed natural and just...right. I smiled and brushed a stray hair behind her ear. "We're going to find a way, because there's no way in hell I can stay away from you anymore."

Bella's smile was breathtaking, and she took a slow, deep breath. "Me either."

Kissing her chastely on the lips, I suggested, "I can make some calls. I know people at other magazines..."

"No! Think about how horrible that would look if it ever got out!" Bella shook her head vehemently "I'm just going to have to work harder to find another job."

I stiffened, hoping she wasn't still thinking of going to *Red and Black*. "Without James Hawkings."

Bella sighed. "Are you ever going to tell me the deal with you two? He said you went to college together?"

"Is that all he told you?" I traced my fingertips along her chin, stroking her jawline, hoping to distract her. But then I saw the determined look in her face and sighed—she wasn't going to let it go. "All right. I'll make you a deal. I'll tell you that whole story...when you go away with me this weekend."

Bella groaned. "I want to...but what am I going to make up to tell Alice *this* time? She's on me like a hawk."

I shrugged. "Tell her you're going to visit a friend from Northwestern or something."

Bella paused, thinking, and then smiled at me mischievously, her decision made. "Where are we going?"

"I'll think of something." I leaned in to kiss her sweet skin once more, but froze when I heard a pounding knock on the door.

"Where the hell are you, Squirt?" a voice boomed from the doorway. "You skipped out on another workout!"

"Shit! It's Emmett!" I hissed. We both jumped out of the bed, frantically searching through the clothes strewn about on the floor. As he relentlessly banged on the door, I stepped into my boxers, practically falling over my own feet in my rush to get them on.

"Where's my dress?" Bella whispered, fastening her bra and throwing me the button-down she'd borrowed.

Pulling on the shirt, I picked her dress up from the floor and handed it to her, yelling out a brief, "I'm coming, dickhead!" in the direction of the door. Bella started gathering her things, combing her fingers through her hair and stepping into the killer heels she'd worn the night before.

"Wait, you're not leaving, are you?"

"I have to go home and play sick, remember?" Then, Bella's eyes widened. "You don't think Emmett's going to stay, do you? How will I get out without him seeing me?"

Thinking for a minute, I took her hand and led her out of the room. "Come on."

We hurried down the hall where Emmett was practically banging the door off its

hinges. Bella picked her coat and purse up from the floor, and I put a finger over my lips, urging her to be quiet.

"What the hell do you want, McCarty?" I yelled.

"Well, you didn't come to the workout, so I figured the workout would come to you!" he boomed. I looked through the peep hole, to see my hulk of a friend holding a heavy bag of workout equipment.

I groaned, running a hand through my hair and whispering to Bella. "Man, my friends *suck!*"

"What was that, Squirt?" Emmett bellowed and I cringed at the word. Bella stifled a giggle, mouthing my least favorite nickname and raising her eyebrows.

I wish I was stronger than him, because he deserves a serious beat-down!

Shaking my head, I pointed to the hall closet door and silently said, 'Hide.'

Nodding, she reached for the doorknob and slipped inside. Finally I opened the front door, where Emmett's scowl quickly turned sheepish.

"Dude, I-" He paused, looking at my open shirt and hair in disarray. "I didn't think. You seemed so pissed last night...but," Emmett leaned in to whisper, pointing at the bedroom. "Is Heidi here?"

A loud thump came from the closet, which I quickly covered up with a cough. "No! No, man. That's not happening. At all." I tried to hide my smile, knowing that Bella had probably banged into something when she heard Heidi's name.

"Oh." Emmett frowned, pushing his way past me into the apartment. "Then why'd you flake?"

"I...well...um..." *Think **faster**, Cullen!*

His back was turned, dumping his bag onto my living room couch, so I quickly wrenched open the closet, causing Bella to nearly topple out of it. She looked toward Emmett, and I pantomimed for her to hurry to the front door. Stifling a giggle, she leaned in to kiss me quickly, then rushed through the entry way. I slammed it shut just as Emmett turned back my way.

"You...um?" he asked, raising his eyebrows.

I grinned, thinking how I'd had just spent one of the best mornings of my life with a girl I was sure I had completely fallen for. "I guess I overslept."

****CH&RR****

I spent that evening thinking about masks.

Once Emmett finally left, hours after he dragged me through an NFL-worthy circuit training routine, I collapsed on the couch, fingering the mask I'd worn to the party. The satin covering my eyes had helped me hide how frustrated I was with Heidi—her empty conversations and high-pitched, nasal voice. It had also been a way to shield from everyone how much I wanted to be with the soft, beautiful brunette on the other side of the patio. But, the costume wasn't the only way I'd been hiding.

I guess I've been wearing a mask for a very long time.

I wasn't exactly sure when I'd put it on, but at some point, I started covering up who I really was. It had become clear I needed to ignore the things I wanted in order to take on the role I was destined to fill - Edward Cullen, heir to a multi-million dollar publishing company. The mask defined me—the player, the Editor in Chief - and nothing about who I truly was under that façade really mattered anymore. I'd had it on for such a long time that I forgot I was even wearing it.

But then Bella came along and pulled it off.

I never felt more myself than when I was with her, never felt more *known* by another human being. She saw me for who I was—not a way to climb the corporate ladder, not a meal ticket, and not a way to show up on the front page of the gossip rags.

The time I spent with Bella reminded me of the stolen moments I had to myself when I was an undergrad at Harvard. There was one semester when I signed up for a creative writing class, at the persistent nagging of my roommate, Riley. One day during our sophomore year, he'd found a journal I'd been writing in and ribbed me to hell about it, until he actually paused to read.

"Edward, this shit is good!" He'd sounded amazed, tossing the beat up spiral-bound book back to me. "You should do this for real."

"What? Write?" I laughed, and slid the journal back into my nightstand. "Like my father would ever let me do that."

"Who says you have to tell him?" Riley grinned.

So, I did exactly that. The spring semester, I added an elective into my course load without informing my father, telling myself it wouldn't interfere with any of the classes for my business major.

However, I quickly fell in love with writing, ignoring the work for my other classes and stowing away with my journal in the library, coffee shops, and the dorm lounge. I filled long hours with words that didn't lead me to any particular goal, but rather, just let me *be*.

That was, of course, until my G.P.A. began to slip. The Dean informed my father immediately, and before I knew it I was dropping the class, refocusing on the major that would prepare me for the future unavoidably being handed down.

Never once did Carlisle actually ask me if I *wanted* that future.

Still holding the little piece of black satin, I stood slowly, walking into my bedroom to the nightstand. Pulling the drawer open, I reverently removed a worn, tattered journal, my brow creased as I perused the pages. With a sigh, I sat down on my bed, staring at the items in my hands.

I realized I didn't want to wear a mask anymore.

****CH&RR****

Is it Friday yet?

I smiled as Bella's text came through on my phone. It had been a ridiculously busy and long week. The stress level around us at the office was high as everyone clamored to make their deadlines. I was counting down the minutes to the weekend, and, as it seemed, so was she.

It was after I'd unearthed my old journal that I figured out the perfect spot for us to travel to that weekend -Harvard.

Almost. Just a day and a half. Did you tell Alice?

Jessica knocked softly on my door, bringing me this week's updated production schedule and reminding me I had an executive staff meeting at three. I thanked her, acting like I was wrapped up in something very important on my computer, even as my eyes darted back to my phone, waiting for Bella's reply.

Yes. I said I was going to visit a friend from college who goes to grad school there.

I typed back quickly. ***And she believed you?*** With as depressed as Bella had been pretending to act, Alice was probably thrilled at the idea of Bella not moping around for a weekend.

Surprisingly, yes. She's been so wrapped up in Jasper, her usual insight isn't as keen as usual.

Another text arrived a second later.

She did say it would be good for me to get away from "things" for a bit, though. :P

I laughed at her playfulness. Bella had said that according to Alice, I was 'just a stupid man who didn't know Bella's true worth.'

If Alice only knew the half of it.

Eventually, Bella had an errand to run and I needed to review the June issue's progress before my meeting, so we reluctantly agreed to talk later.

Sighing, I stashed my phone in my pocket and surveyed the papers in front of me. Drafts of the monthly regular content had already been sent in, but a few of the features were running late and the editorial closing date was only a few days away. We were also dangerously close to our advertising deadline, and still missing content. That meant I was going to have to lay down the law with some of my staff at the meeting—something I was not at all looking forward to.

The only part of being Editor in Chief that I did enjoy, however, was writing my editor's note. I pulled up a new document, pre-dating it for the upcoming issue. On the blank page in front of me, I had the freedom to write whatever I wanted, as long as it tied in to current events or the issue's content. But lately, the single page allotted didn't feel like enough, and I found myself writing lines in my head, words spilling through my thoughts like paint on a canvas.

My intercom buzzed rudely, jarring me. "It's three o'clock, Mr. Cullen."

Apparently, being an Editor in Chief also meant I was no longer capable of telling time on my own.

Rising, I thanked Jessica and gathered up my paperwork, taking a deep breath and steeling myself for the part of my job I really fucking hated.

Needless to say, my staff was not at all pleased with me for the remainder of that afternoon. Or the following morning, for that matter. I'd been stricter than usual in the editorial meeting, and on Friday, everyone was stressed—yapping at one another and their writers, racing to get things finished before the Monday deadline. It meant a lot of them would be working over the weekend.

I, however, would not be.

By Friday afternoon, only a few hours lay between me and my weekend away with Bella, and my fingers kept twitching over my car keys.

She and I had planned to slip out quietly at four, staggering our exits so no one would suspect anything. Bella had already come in that morning, packed with her bag and a story about heading to the Amtrak terminal at Penn Station after work. We'd really be meeting in a garage on 41st Street, where my seldomly-used car sat with a suitcase in the trunk. Every time I palmed the brass keychain sitting in my pocket, I grinned.

"What the hell are *you* smiling so much about?" Jasper grumbled as he strode into my office, slumping into one of my chairs. He looked completely exhausted. "This issue is in the crapper if people don't get their articles in on time."

"It will all work out," I assured him. *I seem to be saying that a lot days.*

"Oh really? Well, I'm glad you're so sure, because we're only a few hours away from o-fuck-hundred here." He yawned, rubbing his eyes. "You want to order in tonight? Burn the midnight oil with the rest of us?"

I shook my head. "I'm heading out of town for the weekend."

Jasper's hand dropped to his lap. "Out of town?"

"Uh, yeah." I laughed, uncomfortable. "I just need to...you know...get away. Clear my head."

He narrowed his eyes. "You're acting really bizarre. It's been going on for, like, a month now. Emmett's noticed it, too."

"Mr. Cullen?" Jessica buzzed in suddenly, relieving me from having to explain

myself again. "Your father would like you to come to his office at five o'clock."

At five? You've got to be fucking kidding me!

"Did he say what for, Jessica?" I could almost hear her shrinking away from the irritation in my voice.

"No... just that you should be there, sir."

Shit. That was not good. Not good at all.

"Somebody's in trouble," Jasper sang after I cut Jessica off, sounding just like he had when I dinged the hood on Carlisle's Mercedes with a basketball in the eleventh grade.

"Shut the fuck up, Jazz," I barked, at which he put his hands up in mock surrender. Jasper wished me luck, hurrying out of the room, and I was at once relieved at being freed from his questioning, and worried I was going to receive worse when I went upstairs.

I dashed out a quick text to Bella, asking her if she could wait in a Starbucks for a bit, since I'd be running a little late. Well, probably a *lot* late.

A short time later, I swallowed nervously as the elevator opened onto the top floor of the building, where my father and Eleazar had their offices.

Nodding at his secretary, Mrs. Banner, I sat down apprehensively at one of the empty chairs outside his door. The clock ticked by to five-thirty, my stomach churning with acid as I sat there and waited.

Finally, the phone on her desk buzzed. "You can go in now, Mr. Cullen," Mrs. Banner advised after hanging up.

Warily, I stepped inside Carlisle's office. I found him sitting behind his large mahogany desk, glancing up at me disapprovingly from behind his reading glasses. As I stepped closer, I saw duplicates of *The Guard's* production schedule on his desk.

Fuck. Why is he always checking up on me?

"Looks like things are a little bit behind." Carlisle didn't look up, still frowning over the paperwork. "Why isn't your team more prepared?"

I gritted my teeth as I stood before him, feeling like I was a teenager about to get grounded. "I've taken care of it."

"Have you?" He looked up, pulling off his reading glasses and raising an eyebrow at me. "Magazine editors must be well-organized. Your leadership skills are critical here, Edward. You *must* adhere to strict print deadlines and not deviate, or your staff will never follow through."

"I know, Dad." Restraining myself from rolling my eyes at him, I clenched my hands into fists at my sides. "Like I said, I've taken care of it. At the staff meeting yesterday—"

"And what were you planning on filling your empty ad-space with?" he chuckled. "Crayon drawings?"

His condescending tone pushed me over the edge and I snapped, my fist slamming down on his desk. "I said, I'm handling it!"

All the strain of my job, of hiding things with Bella, of the possibility of her going to work for my arch-enemy, came rushing through the floodgates I'd been hiding them behind, and suddenly, I was furious.

"Honestly, Dad. Did you ask me here to lecture me, or did you actually give a crap what I had to say?"

Carlisle sat back in his chair, regarding me carefully. "Go on." But I was done explaining myself, finished with being judged by the people who were supposed to care.

"I told you, it's under control. The issue *will* be ready on time," I said through gritted teeth. "It wouldn't kill you to have some faith in me, you know."

"Edward, there's no need to—"

"If I'm doing such a horrible job, maybe you should find someone else to run your precious magazine." With that, I spun around and walked out of his office, leaving him in a stunned silence.

It may have been the first time I'd ever turned my back on him.

By the time I finally reached the garage, it was already six—we wouldn't get into Cambridge until after ten. I'd been hoping for a leisurely dinner with Bella, and after

that meeting, almost our entire evening had vanished. I'd texted her to meet me when I left the office, but even as I saw her standing there at the garage entrance, wearing a warm coat and a soft smile, I was still too angry to relax.

"Let's go," I growled, walking briskly past her and through the lines of cars. She called out my name and hurried after me, obviously confused, but I just had to *move*. I had to drive, had to get the fuck out of the city and the stranglehold everything there had on me.

Bella didn't speak as I gunned the engine and pulled into the city traffic. We raced along the Hudson up the West Side Highway, heading east at the lights of the George Washington Bridge. When the grey buildings of the Bronx gave way to the sprawling highway of I-95, I finally started to calm down.

Reaching over the console, I took Bella's hand in mine. "I'm sorry."

"What happened?" Her question was gentle, patient, and not laced with any of the judgment and finger pointing everyone else in my life seemed to be doing.

"My *father* happened," I muttered, still stewing.

Bella was quiet for a minute. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Squeezing her hand gently, I briefly turned to smile at her. "Later," I promised.

She seemed content with that and switched on the radio, searching through the stations. As we passed from the quiet suburbs north of the city and through the Connecticut border, Bella began talking to fill the time, telling me stories about Jacob and Angela. I asked her to tell me how she and Alice had met.

"Ballet class." A sardonic tone weighed down her words.

"Did you like to dance?"

The idea conjured images of a tiny Bella, her hair tied up in a bun as she spun around, testing her childlike limbs in front of a wall of mirrors.

"No. I really sucked," she laughed, the sound affecting me as always. Part of me wanted to laugh along with her, and another part wanted to pull over, pin her to her seat, and turn her laughter into keening moans.

It was difficult to ignore the second part.

By the time we reached New Haven, I'd nearly forgotten about my argument with my father, Bella's voice a panacea to my anger. We passed signs for Yale, at which I regaled Bella with tales of the age old rivalry between the two top Ivy League schools.

"You really loved college, didn't you?" Bella asked softly, reading me so easily, as always.

"Best time of my life." I wanted to add 'until I met you,' but that would have sounded really fucking dorky. And, I wasn't sure I was ready to tell her that...or for it to be true.

The interstates shifted, signs flashing by. I-95 became I-84, and then I breathed a sigh of relief when we hit the Massachusetts border, welcomed by the Pilgrim Hat sign of the Mass Pike.

"Hungry?" I asked, seeing a rest stop up ahead. But, then I felt the heat of Bella's stare on my face.

"Starving."

The fire flashing behind her eyes made me wonder if she was hungry for food, or for me. The thought made me harden uncomfortably in my trousers, and as it occurred to me that I might want to look for a secluded parking space, she suddenly yelled out with glee, "They have Ben & Jerry's here!"

Food it is, then.

We laughed over French fries and ice cream in a Formica booth—not at all the elegant evening I'd hoped for, but more fun than I ever could have imagined. She spent the remainder of the drive singing off-key along with the radio, poking me playfully until I joined in. And when the familiar sight of the Boston skyline came into view, I felt like I'd finally come home.

Turning off I-90, I took us into the quiet streets of Cambridge, and to the hotel. It was a small but elegant inn, one of the most luxurious in the area, sleek but modern. I'd booked us the largest suite they had, complete with a private balcony. We stepped inside our room and I set down our bags, taking Bella's coat. Quietly, she ran her hand approvingly over the wallpaper, her fingers trailing behind her as she crossed the room.

"This is beautiful." Her face nearly glowed, and it made my chest tighten to see

her so happy.

Then her eyes settled on the bed, which she promptly collapsed upon, her entire body shuddering with an intense yawn. Kicking off my shoes, I glanced at the clock - it was after eleven. As much as I hated to admit it, the drive and stress of the day had taken its toll on me as well - I was completely exhausted.

"So much for our romantic evening together," I grumbled as I fell against the pillow next to her, pulling her close to me.

"We have all day tomorrow," Bella replied sweetly, placing her palm over mine. "Tell me what happened earlier with your Dad?"

In that moment, I was sure I'd never been more comfortable with anyone in my life. So there, with my arms around her, I talked until my throat grew raspy, telling her everything until my eyes fell heavy with sleep.

****CH&RR****

Waking to Bella's smiling face the next morning, I greeted her with a gentle kiss. But her lips slid into a wide grin under mine as she succumbed to a fit of giggles when her stomach rumbled loudly in between us.

Her blush at the sound of her body craving food just made me crave *her* even more. Fighting back the desire to keep her locked inside our hotel room all weekend, I threw off the sheets and climbed out of bed.

We dressed quickly and walked down Massachusetts Ave., where I treated Bella to a large breakfast at the Atrium Dining Room. After experiencing dates with so many salad-eating girls, I was thrilled to watch Bella order the largest dish on the menu, shrugging and simply stating she was hungry.

As we leisurely walked into downtown Cambridge, I held her hand in mine, thrilled at the prospect of so many hours uninterrupted together. The New England air was surprisingly balmy despite still being entrenched in the firm hold of winter, and I animatedly recounted dozens of memories for her as we strolled down the red cobblestone streets.

A rush of recollections hit me as we stepped through Johnston Gate and onto the campus. I inhaled a deep, steady breath, and led Bella past the traditional brick buildings that housed the dorms, pointing out the ones I'd lived in, and then onto the snow-covered expanse of Harvard Yard.

I glanced fondly at the busy students hurrying across the campus, carrying projects, books and papers, remembering a time when final exams were the only thing that mattered. We wandered around the buildings, with me chattering on about this building or that route for the track team. She paused in front of the wide staircase of Widner library, staring up at it in wonderment.

"You know, I believe I was promised a story when I came here with you," Bella scolded me jokingly, turning my way. I frowned and she tugged on my hand. "Come on, I'd really like to know what happened with you and James."

Above our heads, the crimson flags bearing the university motto "Veritas" fluttered in the breeze.

Veritas. Truth.

If there is anyone who should know the truth of why I hated James Hawkings so much, it should be her.

Pulling Bella with me, I sat down on the cold cement stairs. "James Hawkings was always...jealous of me. He always had a problem with something—my grades, my girlfriends, my money. He was here on a scholarship, and I guess he hated how easy he thought I had it."

Exhaling deeply, I continued. "He was a real pig, too, sleeping around constantly, a different girl in his dorm room every weekend." I winced, trying not to think about how much he and I once were alike in that respect. "There were always rumors about how he treated women, but I just kept my distance from him, socially."

I recounted the rest of the story—how throughout school, he and I were always in competition in our classes. "We were neck and neck for Valedictorian by senior year. My getting chosen pushed him over the edge, and right after that, he went out with this girl Bree, a friend of Gianna's—my girlfriend at the time."

Looking at the ground, I struggled to finish the story - the one I'd tried so hard not to think about over the years. "He got pretty drunk, and apparently, wouldn't take no for an answer, trying to force his way into Bree's dorm room. The whole story never really came out — Bree never pressed charges, but she was pretty messed up. When I ran into Hawkings at a bar later, I overheard him saying he'd wished it had been Gianna he'd gotten black and blue."

I took a breath. "So I beat the shit out of him." I caught a glimpse of Bella's wide eyes before pinching my own shut and sucking in a breath.

"I always felt like whatever happened to Bree was my fault, because of some fucked up dynamic between Hawkings and me. And now, here he is in my face again, trying to sink his claws into you. I just can't let him get anywhere near you, Bella. I don't trust him, and you're too important to me to risk."

Bella slid a gloved hand over mine and squeezed gently, but when our eyes met, there was something distant and faraway in her gaze. She blinked, though, and whatever had flickered there before was gone.

"I understand." Bella reached over and hugged me, and I slid an arm over her back, holding her close. For a few moments we sat there quietly together. As if she could sense I was eager to let the topic go, she pulled herself to stand, holding her hand out to me. "Let's keep walking?"

I took her hand, and rose, kissing the soft patch of her forehead that was visible beneath her hat. Relief flooded through me, feeling that the topic of her working for James Hawkings was officially closed.

Before long, we strolled off campus and back into Harvard Square. "I spent ages in there," I mused when we found ourselves in front of the towering columns of the Coop. Bella urged me inside, where we roamed amidst the stacks of books, comparing classics and defending favorites.

"You know, I felt like my life was actually *mine* when I was a student here," I told her with a smile, eyeing the wrought-iron staircases leading up to reading nooks, where I'd spent many hours with my journal. At Harvard, it felt like I was free from responsibility, spending my days under the false impression that my choices were my own.

"Do you not feel that way now?"

"No. Not really. I guess it's pretty selfish for me to feel like that, huh?"

"I don't think so." There was no pity in Bella's eyes. "What else would you want to do with your life, if you could?"

I answered without hesitation. "Write."

When I told her how much I enjoyed writing my editor's note, her lips pursed into a wry smile. I playfully nudged her side as we continued through the store, trying to coax the thought out of her.

Finally, she caved. "Your writing was what made me apply to work at *The Guard*, okay?" Her admission made my breath catch and she looked down at the floor, her tell-tale blush bringing a pink rosiness to her cheeks.

I want to see that blush cover her entire body.

Leaning in, I grazed my nose along her jaw and across her cheek, feeling the flush from her heated skin. "Why are we not back at the hotel yet?" The desire in my voice was matched by Bella's sharp inhale.

Stepping quickly out of the bookstore, we hurried down the street, the temperature dropping swiftly as the sun fell below the tree line. And we were barely in the door of our suite when my mouth crashed against Bella's, our hands fumbling with clothing as we chased the feeling of flesh beneath our fingers.

Our coats, jeans and shirts in a puddle around our feet, she kissed me hungrily, her nails scratching at my back as she pushed me toward the bed. But I wanted to go slow, to savor her, and I slowed the kiss, sucking on her lower lip and biting it gently.

"I could fucking devour you, Bella Swan," I whispered, as her eyes fluttered closed. "But I want to take my time with you tonight."

I ran my open mouth in a heated path down her jaw, over her neck and back up again. Bella's breathing became ragged as my fingertips brushed feather light touches along her back, dipping into the smooth curve of her spine. My name was a pleading whimper on her lips as I unhooked her bra, pulling the straps down her shoulders.

"Fuck, you're beautiful. I want to taste every inch of you." I leaned forward, keeping my eyes on hers as my tongue darted across her nipple. Bella gasped, and then her hands were on my chest, pushing me so roughly that I fell onto the bed with a laugh. Apparently, she was not in a mood to be savored.

"I want you," she rasped, climbing on top of me, and my laughter turned to a groan at the sensation of her cloth-covered heat pressed wantonly against my erection. "I want you *now*."

Bella raked her nails enticingly along my chest and I palmed her waist as she rocked her hips over me. She pulled my hands away, though, and shimmied down my body, turning so that she lay sideways on the bed, her hot breath washing over me through my boxers.

She dug her fingers under the elastic, pulling them down my legs and licking her lips as my cock sprang free. My breathing uneven, I swallowed dryly as she wrapped her warm hand around me and stroked slowly, teasingly.

"I want to taste every inch of you." Bella smiled, her mouth just inches away from my straining flesh, and then lapped teasingly just around the head of my cock. Then she flattened her tongue and licked down to the base and back up again.

A loud groan rumbled out of me, shivering at the sensation I'd been craving since the first night we were together. She was fucking talented, her lips and tongue drawing intense pleasure out of me with every move, bringing me desperately close to the edge before she'd barely begun.

Craning my neck, I watched as she sucked the tip between her plump lips, moaning loudly when she hollowed out her cheeks and plunged my entire length deep into her mouth.

"Oh, *fuck* that feels so good," I panted.

Reaching down, I pulled her silky hair off her neck, tugging it to the side, and fought to keep my eyes open as I watched her take me in over and over again. My head fell back against the blanket when she added her hand, stroking wetly against the skin she couldn't reach with her mouth. My breathing grew shallow, curses falling from my lips, and when she moaned around me, I lost it.

"Bella! *Fuck!* I can't...I'm gonna..." I warned her but she smiled, sucking harder, and I felt my release begin to rip through me. My jaw dropped open and my eyes slid shut as I gripped her hair as tightly as I dared, crying out her name and erupting in her mouth with a shudder.

Grinning shyly, Bella sat back on her heels. "I've been wanting to do that forever, but never thought I'd have the chance," she admitted, one shoulder rolling up toward her ear in a half-shrug. "Sometimes I still think this isn't real."

Panting, I reached for her, cupping her face and running a thumb over the freckles on her cheek, hating the insecurity in her eyes. *Why doesn't she know how fucking perfect she is?* Sitting up quickly so my back was against the headboard, I said softly, "Come here."

She scampered toward me on her knees, and I held her still in front of me, staring at her smooth skin while my hands ghosted up and down her sides. "Don't you know how beautiful you are?"

Bella blinked repeatedly, her uncertainty a shadow across her face.

"Because you are." Pulling her by her hips, I shifted her around so her back was lying against my chest. "I wish you could see yourself the way I do."

I hooked my chin over her shoulder and ran a palm across the smooth flesh of her breast, while the other hand trailed lower, stroking her thighs until they rolled apart from one another. Bella whimpered, her breathing growing uneven.

"Don't you know how fucking sexy you are? How much you turn me on?" Both of my hands slid over her thighs, spreading her legs wide, and I watched her mouth fall open in an agonized combination of pleasure and need. "How much you have turned me on for *months* now?"

I kissed wetly below her ear and listened to her gasp as I slipped my hand into her panties, just barely caressing her folds.

"Edward," she whined.

Her voice was coarse and needy, but I relished in teasing her, in watching her legs tremble between mine. My eyes flashed down to the erotic vision of my fingers moving underneath the fabric of her panties.

"Look at yourself, Bella. Look how fucking perfect you are." Her hips rocked against my hand, her thighs trembling under the torment of my barely-there touches.

"Can't...oh, *God* - please!" she begged, and let out a jagged cry when I dipped a finger just inside her, probing, drawing her wetness out onto my fingertips.

"You are everything I could ever want, Bella," I murmured, feeling her jump as I dragged my sopping finger along the sensitive protrusion of her clit. Biting down gently on her earlobe, I breathed into her ear, "You're *mine*."

Finally giving her the friction she needed, I began rubbing tight circles against her clit. "God...right there...*oh!*" Bella's head fell back against my shoulder, her voice breaking on a moan.

One of her hands gripped my leg tightly as she moved rhythmically with the motions of mine, while the other dug into my arm pressing against her belly. With my free hand, I reached down to tug her panties away, reeling at the sight of my fingers rubbing her wet flesh.

"I wish you could see it." My voice was a gritty whisper against her skin, and Bella's gasp a desperate plea as I stroked her faster. "I wish you knew how beautiful you are when you come."

She pressed her face into my neck, a fine sheen of sweat coating her skin as she writhed against me. Bella's eyes clamped shut and I stroked the same spot, unchanging, until her back arched and she cried out. "Edward...love...you...oh, *God!*"

My gasp at her words was drowned out as her little body exploded into a breathtaking series of intense shivers and quivering moans. As she came down in my arms, I held her close to me, her words ringing in my ears.

She loves me?

I wasn't sure if she knew what she'd said, if it had been an 'in the moment' thing or if she really meant it. But as she grew quiet with sleep, I let my mind wrap around a truth I couldn't ignore:

I was in love with her, too.

Make sure to check out the Fictionators Teaser Monday for a sneak peak of Chapter 7, which will be posted next Friday!

Chapter 7: Bad Timing

Thanks to my girls Kyla713, Awesomesauce76, Agoodwich, Theladyingrey and AmberDK.

Disclaimer: All things Twilight belong to Stephenie Meyer.

BPOV

Oh my God! I told Edward I loved him!

Bolting upright in the barely-lit room, I started panicking, unable to believe what I'd said the night before. Regardless of the fact that it was completely true, and had been for some time, I couldn't believe I'd said it out loud! That was the kind of stuff that sent guys running for the hills!

I searched the bed blindly for Edward, half expecting him to have taken off in the night. But, then my hand brushed over his sleeping form, quiet and breathing softly under the blanket, and relief flooded through me.

Okay, so, he hadn't left. Maybe I hadn't totally freaked him out by letting those tiny, little words slip out of my mouth. However, as I searched my memories from the previous evening, I realized he hadn't exactly replied when I'd said it, either.

Maybe he hadn't heard me?

Yeah, right.

I had to laugh at myself for that thought—there was no way he hadn't heard me. As a matter of fact, I was fairly certain there was no way anyone on the entire floor hadn't heard me, given how loud I was. I closed my eyes in embarrassment, hoping that would somehow make the memories disappear.

It didn't, though, and soon I was lost in remembering Edward's hands on me, his body under mine.

I'd been half-drunk with lust already from the act of taking him in my mouth by the time he started teasing my skin, whispering sweet words into my ear. His touch turned me inside out, and his words set me on fire. I couldn't believe the things he

was saying, and when he told me how beautiful I was when I came, I lost all ability to think, or have a verbal filter at all, it would seem.

Afterward, I guess I must have passed out, because I woke up to Edward a short time later, saying he was going to call for room service. I'd forgotten all about what I'd said as we ate and ordered a movie, letting it flicker in the background as our need for each other grew too intense to ignore again. He'd taken me hard and deep, his hands holding mine captive, pinned above my head, our fingers entwined and his eyes burning into mine as we brought each other to peaks of pleasure I'd never thought possible before.

And all that time, he never said anything about my blurted admission at all.

I groaned, burying my head in my hands.

The sun hadn't risen yet, but I was too nervous to sleep anymore, so I slipped quietly from between the sheets and padded into the bathroom's big, marble tub. Stepping into the steaming hot stream of water, I let it wash over me and tried to relax.

It wasn't working.

As I ran the bar of soap down my body, my hand slid wetly against all the places Edward had touched, feeling that delicious soreness that only comes from a night of non-stop sex. But, each sensual memory only brought me back to that huge, awful, stupid one, and I cringed, leaning forward and letting my forehead fall against the tile with a thump.

Towelng off, I wrapped myself in one of the big, fluffy bathrobes that came with the hotel room, and tiptoed back out. Edward was still sleeping, curled up on his side, but one of the pillows I'd slept on was now pulled against his chest, his arms wrapped around it. My chest tightened at how sweet he looked - how he seemed to reach for me, even in his sleep. Needing to feel his skin under my fingertips, I gently brushed the hair off his forehead, smoothing it down lovingly, my heart thrilling to his contented sigh.

Careful not to wake him, I stepped away and pulled open the double set of gold, iridescent curtains that hung by the bay doors that led out to the patio, letting the rosy light of dawn fill the room.

The waking light made everything around me glow with warmth. It was so opulent - I'd never been in a hotel with such breathtaking finishes. The sheets on the bed

had all been Egyptian cotton. The wallpaper was overlaid with Victorian-style silver leaves, perfectly setting off the tones of a pale blue, velvet settee.

I looked out onto downtown Cambridge where the streets were still quiet, it being too early on a Sunday for most students to be up. Pressing my hand against the cool glass, I thought about how lovely my day with Edward had been the day before—how happy he was telling me about college, opening up to me more than I'd ever dreamed. I had literally never seen him so happy...all up until he told me about what really happened between him and James Hawkings.

That is going to be a problem.

After what he'd told me, I finally understood why Edward was so adamant about me not having any more interactions with James. And I knew there was no chance that he would be accepting of the one, tiny, insignificant remaining detail:

I had already sent my resume to James.

And I had an interview scheduled.

On Monday.

It was all such a giant mess. I hated the idea of going behind Edward's back - he would be pretty pissed if he found out. I truly felt that it was our only chance at the moment, and had to do it with the hopes that it all worked out. Even if James was a tad on the inappropriate side, it would be worth dealing with him if it meant I got to be with Edward.

But what if he's more than just inappropriate?

Was there a chance that James could be dangerous? I mentally recounted the story of what he'd done to Edward's ex-girlfriend's friend. The idea of James hurting anyone and getting away with it made me sick. But, I had to believe it wasn't true, because this plan just *had* to work. And besides, Edward never *really* found out what had happened with Bree - it could have been just a misunderstanding. Either way, that was all years before. He had to have changed by now, right?

Doubt and indecision plaguing my mind, I turned around quickly, planning to see about ordering some coffee, when I tripped over both of our bags, falling straight on top of them.

Bags: 1. Bella: 0.

Miraculously, Edward managed to sleep through it, which was excellent, because I really didn't need him to see me splayed out over our luggage with my ass in the air. However, as I pulled myself up, I saw I'd accidentally knocked a worn, leather-bound journal out of Edward's bag.

I had planned to put it back, but curiosity got the better of me. Fingering the surface of the book, I gingerly opened to the title page, which stated in a confident script: *The Journal of Edward Anthony Cullen.*

Astounded, I suddenly felt as if I had a combination of the Holy Grail and a porn magazine in my hands. Edward had a journal?

Recalling his admission that he wanted to write, it all suddenly made sense. He was a beautiful writer—his words had been what brought me to *The Guard*. To him.

Put it down, Bella! It's private! My conscience shouted at me to put it down, but I couldn't. I had to see what kinds of words he'd put to paper.

Carrying the journal reverently, I sat down on the settee and curled my feet up under me. Quietly, I turned to the first page.

"December, 2003.

I walked across the campus late last night, the quiet surrounding me, my footsteps echoing on the snow. It's so different here in winter."

I pictured a young Edward, stowed away somewhere out of sight, gazing out at his classmates, his pen furtively stroking against page after page.

"Just three months ago, when the weather was warm, the students were frolicking on the green, acting like foals in the spring. Now they walk with heads bowed, quiet. Hurried. They pour over books and papers, a scholarly aura as thick as the snow blanketing the canvas around them.

They look tired. Worn out.

But I prefer the cold.

I prefer the crunch of my footsteps in freshly-fallen snowflakes, my shadow long and thin in the waning sunlight of a December afternoon."

"What are you reading?"

Startled, I glanced up in embarrassment to see Edward smiling at me from the bed, his head propped up on his arm.

"I'm sorry..." I stammered. "It fell out of your bag. I just...I wanted to..." His laughter interrupted my apologies. "You're not mad?"

Edward shook his head and extended a hand toward me, beckoning me back toward the bed.

"Did you like what you read?" he asked when I settled next to him. He had one eyebrow raised, a teasing smile on his lips.

I nodded enthusiastically. "I didn't get to read much, but it's really beautiful. So poetic."

Leaning into me, Edward ran his nose along my cheek and jawline, brushing down my neck and up again. I shivered and he noticed, chuckling as he pressed tiny kisses just below my ear. "What was your favorite part?"

"Oh, I don't know." I was struggling to remember any words at all with the way he was making me feel.

"Nothing specific?" He lifted the hair off my neck and gently tugged away the collar of the robe, exposing more of my neck to caress with his mouth. He was making me dizzy, starting a fire in my belly with the lightest of kisses.

"Um..." I could hardly speak, and when he bit down playfully on the spot where my neck met my shoulder, a shudder jolted down my spine. When I finally found my voice again, it came out as a moan. "I loved all of it."

The word was out before I could stop it—love. I froze and Edward paused his ministrations on my neck, looking up at me with an intensity so fierce, all I could do was stare.

Our breathing grew heavy as he slowly, *so slowly*, moved in toward me, his mouth brushing against mine in a kiss so soft, so tender that I whimpered in a sudden rush of need, his journal falling out of my hands and onto the floor.

Edward's hands slid into my hair, cupping the back of my neck as he tenderly dragged his lower lip along mine. He hovered, his open mouth just a breath away, then deepened the kiss, teasing me with a gentle slip of his tongue.

"I love that you loved it," he murmured, tugging gently on my hair and urging me to lie down.

When I was lying beneath him, my hands fell back against the sheets, and I watched him fan away the edges of the bathrobe. He pushed the thick fabric away, exposing first one breast, then the other, his eyes never leaving mine as he leaned in to kiss the tip of each one.

"I love that you're the first person I've wanted to have read it."

He moved up to press kisses against each of my shoulders, and pulled my arms out through the sleeves. He then began kissing down my chest, removing the lower half of the bathrobe as he moved until it slid off my sides, leaving me naked and desperate for his touch.

"I love the way your skin smells."

Edward dipped his nose along my belly, nuzzling it sweetly before passing lower, his mouth running paths of fire back and forth just above my sex. I watched him, my entire body trembling as he grazed my thighs with his fingertips, his breath warm and lustful against my skin.

His gaze bore into mine as his expression grew mischievous, a wicked smile turning up the corners of his lips. "And I'll bet I'm going to love the way you taste."

Before I could react, or become self-conscious, Edward's hands were wrapping around the outside of my thighs, spreading my legs open and pinning them to the bed. At the first long, hard lick of his tongue along my clit, a tortured cry escaped my lips.

His licks quickly turned from teasing to insistent, sliding down to circle my entrance and back up to my clit again. My back arched and my head sank back into the pillow, my hands finding purchase in his hair as he lapped at me hungrily.

"Oh...God...yes!" Each startled word could barely express the pleasure he was bringing me with his mouth.

"So fucking good," he growled against my wet flesh, releasing one of my legs only to bring that hand lower and push two fingers inside me.

I thrashed on the bed, unable to keep still, my hips grinding up against his face. When Edward opened his lips to gently suck my clit into his mouth, running his

tongue in quick strokes over it, I couldn't contain my moans. Gripping his hand and the sheet beneath me, I writhed in unbearable pleasure as he drew my orgasm from me, pulling me over the edge faster and harder than I ever had before.

"Edward...oh my God." I was a quivering mess when he raised himself onto his hands and knees, reaching over me to the nightstand and ripping open a condom with shaking hands.

"You. Are. Fucking. Incredible." Edward's words came out in hot pants as he positioned himself at my entrance, thrusting swiftly inside me with a loud groan. Wrapping his arms underneath me, crushing his body against mine, it was as if he couldn't get close enough.

"Love the way you taste, the way you feel, the way you-*oh!*" He shouted out as I shifted underneath him, causing him to bury himself more deeply with each thrust. "Fuck, Bella! Everything about you...you have no idea, no *fucking* idea."

I tried not to wrap my mind around how many times he'd said the word 'love' and instead focused on the way he was driving exquisitely into me, holding on to me and groaning into my ear.

He changed his angle, making me gasp sharply as he stroked against a blissful spot deep within me. A shudder raced through my body as I felt a second orgasm taking over and I dug my nails into his back, whining, "Gonna come again. Oh fuck, Edward!"

"God, yes, baby!" he groaned through gritted teeth, a thin sheen of sweat on his forehead. Edward pushed himself up on his arms, his head dropping down to glance at where we were joined before snapping back to my face. "Give me another one, beautiful girl. I want to feel you come."

With one arm over my head grasping the pillow, I brought the other to my already sensitive flesh, gasping at my own touch. The sensations were too much, and after a few short strokes, I shattered beneath him, riding endless waves of pleasure.

Edward fell down on top of me once more, grunting fiercely and pounding into me relentlessly. "Yes! Love watching you come! So...*fucking...ungh!* Oh, Bella...I...love-"

He...loves...?

Then Edward cried out, his words breaking apart into a mass of curses and groans, his sweaty forehead pressing into my neck as he stilled and shuddered

above me.

My mind reeling, I stroked his back gently as he came down, then he shifted back to pull out of me and dispose of the condom. He pulled me to him, a tired, satisfied smile on his face.

Do I say something?

We were both silent, lying there as our heartbeats slowed, and he kissed my cheek sweetly. "Guess you're going to need another shower," he said meekly.

Definitely don't say anything.

Instead, I simply smiled and allowed him to pull me from the bed, leading me to the bathroom.

****CH&RR****

A short time later, we had checked out of the hotel and were looking for a spot to have lunch. Edward was so relaxed, so content, our fingers laced together as we lazily strolled down the street. But my mind was back in our hotel room, replaying over and over again what he'd started to say to me in bed.

Was it possible that Edward loved me, too?

"How about here?" His question startled me out of my thoughts, and I looked blankly at him until he nodded over to a little café. "Here? For lunch?"

In attempt to not look like I'd totally lost my mind, I smiled and followed him inside. As I paged through the menu, my eyes kept flickering over to Edward's face. Butterflies stampeded through my stomach as my mouth kept trying to work out the question.

'Hey, Edward - that thing you said earlier in bed. Would you mind finishing your sentence please?'

Nope. Definitely not lunch-table conversation.

After we ordered, Edward folded his arms on the table, leaning closer to me with a bashful grin on his face. "So...you really liked it, huh?"

I blinked. Did he mean all the sex? Cause if that was the case then I sure as hell-

"My journal?" He broke into my thoughts, and I flushed immediately, which of course he caught. "Did you think I meant something *else*?"

Ignoring the teasing implication of his words, I bent over the table as well, inclining my head toward his. "No, of course your journal. And yes, I loved it."

He chuckled uneasily, reaching back to absent-mindedly run his palm along his neck. "Really?"

The sparkling green of Edward's eyes were suddenly shrouded in vulnerability. How could he not know how beautiful his words were?

"Seriously, Edward. It's really good. Why haven't you shown your writing to anyone? I mean...like...professionally?"

He shrugged. "It was never going to happen anyway, so why bother?"

Edward's face saddened, and I remembered him telling me about his talk with his father on Friday. I couldn't imagine having that kind of crushing expectation hanging over my head.

"Because you're amazing at it?" I encouraged softly. His eyes met mine, making my stomach drop and my heart fluttered as I added, "Because you love it."

After a few beats of silence, Edward sighed, looking defeated.

"You're right, I do." He leaned in close, brushing my hair back over my shoulder. "But my father would kill me. *The Guard* is...my life, whether I want it to be or not."

"Your job doesn't have to be a life sentence, Edward."

His eyes snapped up to mine suddenly, as if my words had struck a chord in him. "That's how it's always felt," he admitted quietly. "Like I never had a choice in it."

It was the saddest thing I'd ever heard him say.

We were interrupted then by the waitress bringing our meals over, and as we ate Edward downshifted into small talk. He didn't say anything incredibly meaningful, but I relished those last, private moments together all the same - in a few hours, we'd be back in New York, where we wouldn't be able to be like that anymore.

After lunch, we were heading slowly back toward the car when a soft snow began

to fall. Edward paused and looked up at it.

"The last gasps of winter," he mused, watching the white flakes flutter to the ground. "Trying so desperately to hold on, even though it's hopeless. Spring will inevitably take its place."

His words were so sad, and my heart ached for him. He was capable of creating such beauty, and yet unable to do anything about it. I couldn't fathom how trapped he must have felt.

I reached up to place my palm against his cheek. He closed his eyes, leaning into my hand. "Edward, you have to do what makes you happy."

He smiled faintly and placed his hand over mine, trapping my fingers between his own and the warm skin of his face. His long lashes lifted to reveal a look so pained and yet loving at the same time, it made me ache. Edward slid my palm over his mouth, pressing a soft kiss to the center of my hand, then brought it down to place it over his heart.

"Thank you."

His words were simple, but through his sweater I could feel his heartbeat. It quickened as we stared at one another.

And then, for the first time, without worry or fear of being caught, he kissed me, long and deep, out in the broad daylight for anyone to see.

****CH&RR****

Our drive back to the city was uneventful, relaxed, until the New York buildings came into view. We both knew that the sight of that jagged skyline meant the end of our perfect little bubble together.

He drove us into Chelsea, finding a parking space near my building. There was an uncomfortable silence between us for a minute in the parked car, and I picked at my jeans nervously, not knowing what to say.

"Is Alice around?" Edward finally asked.

Relieved at the sound of his voice, I shook my head. "No, her show goes up on Friday. She'll be rehearsing around the clock until then."

"Can I walk you up?" Edward's eyes were so hopeful, and I could see he didn't want to let go of our time together any more than I did. I told him of course, and he reached over to grasp my hand, bringing it to his lips and gently kissing each of my knuckles, before releasing my fingers with a quiet sigh.

As he took my luggage from the trunk, Edward resumed the familiar stance of looking over his shoulder, keeping a healthy distance from me until we were inside. When we were at the door to my apartment, he sighed, twisting his fingers and cracking his knuckles awkwardly as I searched for my keys.

"Listen, Bella..."

I froze, my arm buried in my purse. My stomach churning, wondering what he was going to say. I tried to shake it off, telling myself I was overreacting.

"Yeah?" I replied tentatively.

"About what you said...on Saturday night...you know, when you...when you said..." He trailed off, looking at the floor awkwardly.

When I blurted out I loved you? My pulse began to race, my palms getting sweaty. Maybe he was finally going to say what my heart had been desperate to hear.

Edward took my hand in his and stared at it, his brow furrowed, swallowing hard.

"I want to tell you...I need to say that, that I l-"

"I *knew* it!" The door to my apartment suddenly flew open, revealing Alice, a triumphant grin on her face. "I *knew* you two were together!"

Oh...crap.

My mouth dropped open as Edward froze and I quickly yanked my hand from his. "Alice! What...how...what are you doing home?"

She giggled and clapped, clearly unfazed by my aggravation, chanting that she knew it over and over again. My eyes flashed from Edward's terrified expression back to Alice's jubilant one, and I thought for a minute that I was going to hyperventilate.

"Why aren't you at rehearsal?" I asked. Not that it mattered—she'd already seen everything. But it was all I could think of to say.

"The director got food poisoning, although, I think one of the stagehands might have put something in his lunch." Alice waved her hand dismissively. "But I'm glad, because then I got to hear you two skulking around the door and confirm my suspicions!"

She clasped her hands together and grinned devilishly at Edward, who didn't seem able to say anything, or even close his mouth. "So, Edward? What were you going to say to Bella before I opened the door?"

"Okay! Inside we go!" I yelled, pushing Alice back with one arm while Edward cleared his throat uncomfortably.

But she clearly didn't get that I meant for her to go in the apartment, not all of us. Alice grasped my arm and pulled me inside with her. Edward followed, clearly still panicked, holding my bag with a frantic expression in his eyes.

I slammed the door behind us and turned to face Alice, pleading with my eyes for her not to ask more questions.

"So? How? When?"

Questions like those. Alice floated down into one of our kitchen chairs, cupping her chin in her hands and waiting to be told everything.

I stood there mutely and Edward set my bag on the ground. He then stuffed his hands into his pockets, and began shifting his weight from one foot to the other. I gazed at him longingly, desperately wanting to know what it was he had been trying to say before Alice interrupted us.

We could not have had worse timing.

"Was it at the Masquerade party?" she pressed, winking at Edward.

"Valentine's Day," I suddenly spat out.

"On *Valentine's Day*?" Alice shrieked, her eyes wide and accusatory at me. "You've been together *that long* and you didn't tell me?"

"I thought you knew everything," I yapped at her and Edward started turning in half-circles, back and forth, one hand gripping his hair.

"Well, I had a hunch you two were together, with the way you were eye-fucking

each other last weekend." Her grin was salacious and I blushed furiously.

Edward finally pulled his fingers from his hair and wrapped them around the back of an empty kitchen chair. "Look...you can't...tell *anybody*. Especially not Jasper."

"But this is *huge*!" she cried out. "Bella has had a crush on you forever and-"

"Alice!" I hollered, begging her to stop.

She suddenly clamped her hands over her mouth. "Sorry!" Her words were muffled through her fingers as she gave me an apologetic look.

Edward shook his head, looking like he didn't know if he wanted to laugh or sigh. I wanted to go back in time and actually think to check if Alice was home or not. And I still didn't know what the hell he was trying to tell me earlier!

"It's...complicated. We just can't tell anyone, yet."

Yet! My heart soared on the word.

"Fine." Alice pouted, and then pushed backed her chair, rising gracefully from the table. "Well, I guess I'll give you two some privacy."

I was momentarily shocked that she didn't want to be front and center for the rest of our conversation. But then she gave me a quick kiss on the cheek and whispered, "I expect details later!" before dancing away on the balls of her feet backward into the apartment.

I buried my face in my hands. "Could our timing have been any worse?" I laughed before lifting my head to gaze at him.

Edward's hair stood up at crazy angles from the way he'd been tugging at it. "Sure," he joked. "There could have been a horde of photographers waiting at your apartment door, too."

I giggled, feeling the mood shift back to playful for a moment between us.

"So...what do we do now?"

"Well." He pulled his hands from his pockets and folded me into his arms. "We just have to make sure you get another job. Soon."

Crap. I still had yet to tell him about my interview at *Red and Black* the following afternoon, but this was definitely not the right time to bring it up. I'd just have to hope everything would go okay, that his fears about James were unfounded, and I would tell him about it after.

For that moment, I stood there with my head against his chest, breathing in his scent, and wondered if what he'd been trying to tell me before had been the three little words I'd thought I'd never hear him say.

****CH&RR****

The next morning, I fished my old, boring suit out of the back of my closet, where I'd hidden it before Alice had it tarred and feathered. It was boxy, outdated and not at all flattering, but that was what I was aiming for—if James didn't see me as attractive anymore, maybe he'd be more likely to hire me for my brains.

At least, that was what I kept telling myself, anyway.

"Why are you dressed like *that*?" Angela scrunched up her nose at my suit the minute I sat down at my desk. Jake gave me a once over, gaping.

"All of our hard work, and this is how you thank us?" he cried melodramatically.

I sighed. I had a hard enough time slipping out the door without Alice seeing, already having stayed up far too late the night before telling her everything that had happened between Edward and me. She'd apparently had her suspicions since we both disappeared from the Skyy party, and was ecstatic for me that my dream of being with Edward had finally come true. Next, I had to deal with those two.

"I have an interview," I hissed at them.

Angela gasped. "With James?"

I waved my hands frantically at her. "Shh!"

A pang of guilt sliced through me. Edward wasn't in the office yet that morning - I knew he had a meeting with marketing, so I knew I could slip out without him noticing. However, I didn't want to risk anyone overhearing and sending rumors flying through the office.

"Yes, at Red and Black. I sent Mr. Hawkings my resume last week and he asked me to come in."

"Mr. Hawkings', my ass," Jake balked. "He's hot for you, girl."

I shrugged and booted up my computer, looking through my tasks for the morning. "Doesn't matter how he feels. He's going to hire me because I'm qualified, nothing more."

And for a moment, I almost believed it. My confidence began to falter, however, when I found myself sitting in the waiting area of the *Red and Black* executive offices at noon, where the secretary insisted there was no need for me to fill out an application.

I waited for a short time in their flashy, modern lounge—bright red couches surrounded by shiny black end tables, and magazine covers in clear, plexi-glass frames hung on the walls. A huge, flat screen TV hung on the wall, showing an endless loop of press-coverage for *Red and Black*, including interviews and events the staff attended. Each time the camera showed James, he had a different woman on his arm.

"Isabella Swan?" a chipper voice called out. I looked up to see a woman with a brilliant mane of fire-red hair waking toward me. She wore a smart, forest-green skirt suit and cream-colored heels, suddenly making me wish I looked a bit more professional, and a little less frumpy.

I stood quickly, reaching a hand out toward her to shake. "It's Bella, actually. Bella Swan."

"Nice to meet you, Bella. I'm Victoria Brown, managing editor here at *Red and Black*." When she beckoned me forward, I followed her out of the waiting room and down a long hallway.

"I have to say, I was very impressed with your resume," Victoria told me. "Why, may I ask, are you looking to leave *The Guard*?"

My mouth closed and opened dumbly. With all the practice interview answers I'd rehearsed in the shower that morning, that wasn't one I'd prepared for. "Just...looking for a change," I lied.

"Well, I can certainly understand that." Victoria's smile was tight-lipped, and I wondered what meanings lay hidden behind it. "Right this way."

She led me into a conference room similar to ours, where a long, polished oak table reflected the light washing in from the floor to ceiling windows the filled up an

entire wall.

At the head of the table sat James, his grin expectant and, I guessed, slightly confused by my attire as he rocked from side to side in his chair. A few other executives were seated around him. They all stood to greet me politely while Victoria offered me a seat and a glass of water.

"So, Ms. Swan," one of the other men began. He was a hulking colossus of a man, probably a full head taller than Emmett. "We see you're a graduate of Northwestern's Medill School of Journalism. Why don't you tell us a little bit about your experience there?"

Regaining my composure, and making sure not to make eye contact with James, I began talking about my college years, rattling through my accomplishments robotically while everyone took notes.

The blond man sitting across from the first began questioning me next. "We'd like to hear why you think you'd be a good addition to our staff."

Typical interview question - one that I was more than prepared to answer. Before I could speak, however, James sat forward, and everyone at the table stiffened. For the first time since I sat down, I glanced his way. The knowing smile on his face made me very uncomfortable.

"Demetri, Felix—I think we all know Bella is quite capable of becoming an excellent member of our team." He never took his eyes off me as he spoke, and his smile made me shift nervously in my chair. "Victoria?"

"Oh, yes." She turned to face me, and while I focused on her, out of the corner of my eye I could see the irritation in Felix and Demetri's faces. "We'd like to offer you a job as the new Entertainment Editor here."

Entertainment? I reached for the paperwork she was pushing across the table to me.

"The woman who previously held that position is moving on and we'd love for you to take it."

Moving on? A weird vibe pricked at my stomach at Victoria's comment. I glanced up quickly, but her face gave nothing away. I passed the errant thought off as nerves.

I flipped through the paperwork, which entailed a job description and a contract, as well as a list of benefits and the salary I could expect. It was a lot more money than I was making currently, but it wasn't at all the kind of position I had hoped for. It would probably mean I'd have to cover a lot of the kinds of events Rosalie currently attended—not at all the cerebral job I'd been hoping for. A frown creased my face, and I suddenly realized all eyes were on me.

Beggars can't be choosers, Bella! It's your only way to be with Edward! Take the damn job!

But something about it didn't sit quite right with me.

"Thank you so much for the offer," I began. "I'm honored, but I need some time to think it over. When do I need to give you an answer by?"

Around the table, eyebrows were raised in surprise to my response, but they were nothing in comparison to the menacing look James gave me.

"Oh, of course!" Victoria stammered, obviously uneasy, catching the grimace that flickered across James' face. "If you could let us know by the end of the day on Friday, that would be great."

No one seemed to know what to do, myself included, until James finally spoke. His face had morphed back into his most gracious smile. "Ms. Swan, if you wouldn't mind, I'd love a word alone with you."

The others stood, leaving the room without another word, closing the door silently behind them. James and I sat at opposite ends of the table as he regarded me carefully. "I thought we had an understanding, Bella."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Hawkings. I don't know what you mean." My tone was all business.

He tapped a pen against the table for a moment, then rose, circling around the table and prowling toward me.

"I got the feeling you understood that I wanted you here." James lips turned up into a smirk, his eyebrow raised. "I know how much you're worth, with the way Cullen guards you like some precious *treasure*."

I hated the way he spoke Edward's name, and hated even more the way James objectified me. As he stepped closer, I stood up, not wanting to feel more vulnerable than I already was, and held my head high, crossing my arms in front of me.

"I was hoping that you would come on board here, and that *our* relationship would grow as a result."

James measured his words carefully, saying nothing that could implicate him for harassment, except for his tone and the uneasy balance of lust and anger flashing in his eyes.

Nausea and anger flared, my eyes narrowing at his implication. "I hope I didn't give you the impression that our...*relationship* would be anything other than professional, *Sir*." I tried to keep my tone relaxed, polite, but on the inside, I was shaking with rage.

"Of course not," he chuckled, his eyes raking down my body. "Well, I hope when we hear from you on Friday, you will have made the right decision."

If I don't make the decision to kick you in the balls, first.

"I'll be sure to let you know," I said evenly, turning on my heel and walking quickly out of the room.

By the time I burst through the double glass doors leading out onto the street, though, the tears were streaming down my face. Wiping my eyes abruptly with the heel of my hand, I hurried back to the office.

What was I going to do? Edward had been right all around—James was a dick and would be expecting some kind of reward from me if I accepted the position. But the idea of staying at The Guard any longer, having to keep things between Edward and me under wraps was killing me. Maybe I could handle a year at *Red and Black*—I would be incredibly busy as an entertainment editor. James probably wouldn't have the time to even try anything and I'd get a lot of experience there. I'd be able to move on to another job fairly quickly.

One thing was for certain—there was no way in hell I could tell Edward about this. I hated not telling him, but I knew he wouldn't react calmly or rationally. At least I had the rest of the week to make up my mind.

My worries plagued me all the way back to the Cullen-Denali building, my teeth biting so furiously into my lower lip, I could taste blood. I was so lost in thought that I didn't realize I'd stepped into the elevator with Rosalie.

"Bella?" she asked tentatively. "Are you all right?"

"Um...yeah. Fine." I blinked, shocked that she'd even ask. "Why?"

"Well, you have mascara all over your face."

"Oh, fu—" I pinched my lips together, cutting myself off before I finished the word. Wincing in embarrassment, both from how I looked and for cursing, I turned away from her, fishing around in my purse for a tissue, but I came up empty handed.

I closed my eyes and leaned back against the elevator wall with a groan. Why couldn't things for once go right in my life?

Rosalie chuckled as the elevator doors opened on our floor. "Come on back to my office. We'll get you cleaned up."

Confused at how nice she was being to me, I followed her to her office nonetheless, keeping my head down so no one could see what a mess I was. She patted twice against the seat of a chair next to her desk and pulled a giant make-up case from one of her shelves.

"I've always got to be prepared!" She winked at me as she clicked the suitcase-size box open, revealing an unfathomable number of shadows, glosses, pencils and other things I had no clue what they were.

*So **that's** how she looks perfect all the time.*

"Here, go ahead and wipe off what you've got on," Rosalie said as she handed me a tissue with some kind of white cream on it. "We'll have to start from scratch anyway."

I dabbed at my eyes, wiping away all trace of the makeup I'd managed to apply myself that morning. "Thanks, erm, Ms. Hale, but I should really be getting back to work."

"You've been working here long enough to call me Rosalie, Bella. And I think Jake and Angela have got it covered for a bit." Rosalie leaned down and smiled sadly at me. "Besides, you look like hell."

She turned her attention back to the makeup case, but not before adding. "And you might want to take off that suit jacket. It would be a *crime* to get anything on it."

I could hear the sarcasm dripping from her words. Shimmying my arms out of the sleeves until I only wore the plain blouse underneath, I took in Rosalie's perfect

appearance. Her dark hair was perfectly tousled, her makeup flawless. A crisp white blouse peeked out from under a sharp, grey hound's-tooth jacket, her outfit completed with designer trouser jeans and shiny, black heels.

It was the second time that day that I'd felt like a troll. Then Edward's words from the weekend flashed through my mind:

"Don't you know how beautiful you are?"

A blush covered my face at the memory, but I quickly hid my smile when Rosalie turned back to face me. "Okay now, keep still."

I sat there quietly while she applied all kinds of liquids, powders and blushes to my face. "You have such flawless skin. I'm totally jealous."

"Jealous?" I laughed, looking up at the ceiling while she penciled eyeliner on my lower lashes. "Of me? You've *got* to be kidding."

Rosalie gave me a look of gentle chastisement. "You're smart and you're pretty and everyone knows it. Now, open."

I let my jaw fall open, feeling a little like a doll while she spread gloss along my lips, then sat back and gave a satisfactory nod. "Perfect. All better."

She handed me a mirror and sank back into her smooth, leather chair. My eyes widened in surprise at my reflection—she really knew what she was doing. "So, why don't you tell me what happened that got your makeup looking like that?"

"Oh..." I shook my head. "It was nothing. I...I just have a decision to make."

Rosalie smiled. "Guy troubles?"

You have no idea.

"No..." She raised an eyebrow and I decided to level with her. "I kind of have to decide if I'm going to take another job. At *Red and Black*."

"What?" Rosalie bolted forward in her chair, surprising me and catching me so off-guard that I nearly dropped her mirror on the floor. "Absolutely not! No way in hell are we losing your talent to that rat bastard!"

"My...my talent?" Her words floored me, let alone the fact that she knew about

James' character, as well.

She turned toward her computer, clicking on her mouse and scrolling through emails. "Of course, Bella," she answered distractedly. "We've all seen how good you are at your job. Even Edward has noticed."

I gulped, but before I could say another word, she yelled out, "Here it is! Our copy editor just put in his resignation. Is it a job you think you could stay here for?"

"Copy editor?" I squeaked excitedly. That was the kind of job I'd always wanted. I couldn't pass the chance to have that up, but it would make it impossible for Edward and me to be together.

Rosalie nodded. "Yes. You'd be a perfect fit for it and we were hoping to do an internal hire anyway. I can guarantee we'll beat any salary James Hawkings is offering you."

My head was spinning so much I couldn't even answer her. "Um...I, well...I think-"

"You know what? Hold on. I'd better run this by Edward first." She stood quickly and reached for the doorknob. "Stay put. I'll be right back."

No!

"Rosalie, stop! Wait!"

I hurried out the door after her, where she was making incredible time across the room in her heels. She was already walking past Jessica's desk and knocking on Edward's door before I could catch her. I knew everyone was staring as I ran across the floor, but I didn't care. I couldn't let her tell him I'd gone to see James.

But it was too late. By the time I arrived, panting at Edward's office door, I could already hear Rosalie telling him. "Bella Swan got an offer from *Red and Black*. I wanted to check with you before I put her name in for the copy editor vacancy."

"Bella got...*what?*"

The venom in Edward's voice was palpable. I entered the room swiftly, bracing my arms against the doorframe as I tried to catch my breath. He took one look at me in my sheath blouse and my face done to the nines, and immediately, I knew he was getting the wrong impression.

Shit! He thinks I put all this makeup on for James!

Rose repeated her first comment and Edward's hand came up to cover his mouth, his index and middle finger rubbing across his lips. When his eyes met mine again, there was no mistaking the anger in them.

Rosalie looked back and forth between the two of us, as if we'd each grown a second head. "Well?"

Edward closed his eyes, swallowed hard and was frighteningly quiet for a moment. "I think Bella is more than qualified for the position," he replied quietly.

My heart sank. I hadn't even had time to think everything out, and now all my decisions were being made for me. What would this mean for Edward and me?

"Great." Rosalie looked at Edward strangely and then flashed a smile my way as she headed back out. "I'll head down to Human Resources and get the paperwork started."

Once she'd left the room, neither Edward nor I spoke for a moment. After a few painfully silent minutes, he finally spoke, his voice quiet and grave.

"You went to him. Even when I asked you not to. Even after I told you..." His lips pursed shut into a thin line and he shook his head.

He had every right to be angry, but how he was looking at me was ripping me apart. Everything that had blossomed between us was crumbling in front of my face, and it felt as if my lungs were caving in.

"I didn't think it would...I never meant to..." I couldn't get a complete sentence out. Gulping back a fresh round of tears, I whispered. "This is all just really bad timing, Edward."

Jessica knocked on his door, her squeaky voice startling the both of us. "Your two o'clock is here, Mr. Cullen."

"Send them in, Jessica," Edward replied, his piercing gaze still boring into me. "If you'll excuse me, Ms. Swan."

Nausea swelled in the pit of my stomach at the way he dismissed me. Swallowing back bile, I fled from his office, pushing the bathroom door open with such force it slammed back against the tile wall.

I barely made it to the toilet before I heaved violently, tears streaming down my face as I vomited until there was nothing left in me, until all thoughts of love and a future with Edward were gone.

Chapter 8 will be up next Friday, and teasers will be on The Fictionators and my blog.

Don't hate me too much for leaving it here? *Runs away*

Chapter 8: Face the Music

*So sorry to leave you all hanging at the end of the last chapter! I hope you got to catch the teasers on *The Fictionators* and my blog!*

Kyla713, Awesomesauce76, Agoodwich, Theladyingrey and AmberDK are freaking rock stars. That is all.

*Disclaimer: All things *Twilight* belong to Stephenie Meyer.*

EPOV

I couldn't believe I'd let her walk out the door like that. But, *fuck!* What the hell was she doing?

Of course, it had to have been Rose who rushed into my office like a fucking hurricane in spiked heels, telling me about Bella's offer from that two-faced prick. I hadn't even absorbed the fact that Bella had an interview with Hawkings before Rose threw the next thing at me—the option to offer Bella an editorial position at *The Guard* instead.

It was too much to handle at once—my brain was going on fucking overload, and just when I thought it couldn't get any worse, Bella arrived at my office door looking like she'd just jumped off a modeling runway. She looked incredible...and when I realized who'd seen her looking like that, I suddenly felt sick.

*She went to **him** looking likethat?*

Every cell in my body seized up with the sudden realization—Bella had lied to me, gone behind my back to meet with Hawkings. I couldn't believe she would do that after the weekend we'd just spent together. After she'd said...after I almost said...

My mind was a mess, my mouth hanging open as I stared across the room at her. There was a fucking ocean in between us now, with a bewildered Rosalie staring at me from the middle of it. It wasn't until she let out an irritated huff that I realized I hadn't said anything—that I was actually expected to give a response. What the hell was I supposed to say?

On the one hand, I could advise Rose to give Bella the copy editor position and

shoot down any chances of a future for the two of us. The only other option was to let her go work for—

No.

The thought made me see red, made my teeth grind fiercely in anger. There was no way—just no fucking way in *hell* I could stand back and watch that happen. The thought of Bella being there, right within his grasp every day made my hands clench into tight fists.

I couldn't let it happen.

So I ignored what I wanted—it should have been easier for me to do, considering how fucking used to it I was. Swallowing down my feelings, I gave Rose the green light to promote Bella, effectively wiping out any chances of us ever being together.

It's for the best.

Once Rose left, it was nearly impossible for me to look at Bella, let alone talk to her. How could she have acted so heartbroken, when I was sitting there trying to shut my own emotions off?

It took every ounce of restraint to hold back my wince when I asked her to leave my office—her crumpling expression fucking destroyed me. She looked so lost, her eyes starting to fill up with tears before she ran out the door. I wanted to go after her, to comfort her, but I just fucking *couldn't*. I was rooted to my chair, just too angry and confused to move.

And besides, I had another fucking meeting to deal with.

Swallowing down the crushing feelings of betrayal, I steeled myself, forcing my concentration back to the jabbering client sitting in front of me.

I could barely function throughout my whole stupid appointment. I nodded in all the right places, talked at all the expected times, but I wasn't really there—my mind was consumed with what had just happened with Bella.

What the fuck had changed her mind? I had thought we were on the same path - that we were going to figure out another way together. That was sure as hell how it felt to me back at Harvard. But then she'd gone and met with Hawkings anyway. If Bella could do something like that without telling me, how much trust did we really have between us?

After my meeting finally ended, I stared at my desk. Drafts of the May issue were waiting for my approval. All the articles had come in over the weekend - the staff had worked tirelessly to meet their deadlines, and all the while, I'd been tucked away in Massachusetts with Bella.

The memories sent fresh waves of frustration coursing through me.

I sat back in my chair, rubbing my hands roughly over my face. Maybe Bella had called while I was in my meeting—providing some kind of explanation for everything. Hope flaring, I reached for my phone, checking the screen for missed messages or calls.

There were none.

My fingers twitched over the keypad, trying to figure out if I should text or call her, but after a few uncertain moments, I decided against both. I had no idea what to say to her, and even less of an idea if I really wanted to hear whatever she had to say to me.

Cursing silently, I stared around my office—the large, elegant, empty space I found myself in. It felt more like a prison than anything else, and like an inmate, I needed to do my time.

So, I shut off my phone and forced myself to work until long after everyone else went home. Until the hallways were dark and the only sound was the hum of the vacuum run by the night shift janitorial staff. I worked until I couldn't see straight anymore. And when I finally got home, I fell into my lonely bed and waited for sleep to take me.

****CH&RR****

I woke up the following morning, harsh sunlight streaming in through my window, and the brightness of it made me wince. When I finally peeled my eyes open, I found myself on the far side of my bed, not in the middle where I usually slept. Instead, I had my arms wrapped around the pillow that Bella had slept on the last time she was there, my face pressed against the fabric, searching for the last breaths of her scent.

An ache for her hit me like a mack truck, a yearning I couldn't place in my half-awake state. Sitting up in bed, I rubbed my eyes, and as I did, the events of the day before came back to me in a rush. My stomach lurched with the stinging resurfacing of reality.

But instead of being angry as all hell, all I could feel was pain.

Fuck.

I fell back in bed, rubbing a palm across my chest, trying to push away the persistent ache that had set up residence there. The unrelenting question of "why?" rattled through my brain.

Why didn't Bella talk to me first?

Why hadn't she had more faith in us?

I needed an explanation from her, some reason why she'd ripped the rug out from under us.

Reaching to my nightstand, I powered up my phone, checking it for new messages from Bella. Still, there weren't any. Not that I could blame her for not wanting to talk to me after I'd practically told her to keep working at *The Guard*.

After I'd basically said, in so many words, that there was no future for us.

I let the phone slip from my hand onto the bed and gripped my hair, pushing my palm against my forehead. How had everything gone so sour so quickly?

My phone rang then, startling me, and in the hopes that it was Bella finally calling, I scrambled to answer it. The called ID read out as one of *The Guard's* outgoing lines.

"Hello?" I asked breathlessly, but it was Jasper's voice on the other end's, not Bella's.

"Dude. Where the fuck are you?"

I groaned, letting my head sink back against the pillow. "Where do you think? I'm still in bed, jackass."

"Well, I hope you've got the flu or something, because you're two hours late."

Whipping my head around to check the time on my alarm clock, I cursed and threw the sheets off. Apparently, being heartbroken also made me sleep like the dead. Lovely. "I'll be there soon."

I showered and dressed quickly, hurrying out the door with a piece of toast clamped between my teeth, my hair still wet on my forehead.

When I arrived at the office, my anxiety spiked, since I was still clueless as shit about the whole situation with Bella. Trying to not look like a moron who'd spent the better part of the night brooding, I made a concerted effort not to look in the direction of Bella's desk.

A conviction that lasted approximately five seconds.

Like a man possessed, I started walking toward the bay of cubicles where she sat. I just had to talk to her, to get some answers, whatever they were, and I was past caring who saw.

But when I reached her desk, it was unoccupied, her computer screen dark.

"Bella called in sick," I heard a voice suddenly say. It was Angela, who had apparently caught me staring at Bella's empty chair.

She's sick?

Unease crept over me, and I immediately felt horrible. Was Bella really sick? Or was she just not able to be in the same building as me?

Angela cocked her head at me, probably thinking I'd just lost a marble or two with how I was standing there, not saying anything. "Did you...need something, Mr. Cullen?"

Yes. I need to rewind time and change the past so none of this ever happened.

"Uh, no." I cleared my throat quickly when my voice broke on the word. "No, I don't need anything. Thank you, Angela."

I could feel her eyes on my back as I turned and walked into my office. Everything felt so...wrong. All the questions I'd had running through my mind suddenly fizzled out to a feeling of intense emptiness. The memory of her anguished face as she bolted from my office once again flickered across my vision.

*See? This is why you don't do relationships, Cullen—because you **suck** at them.*

Before I even had time to take off my coat, Jessica sprinted into the room, rattling off all the appointments she'd had to shift around because of my tardiness.

The day carried on, filled with endless meetings, other people's articles to edit, and art mock-ups to approve. I finally had time to check my email in the afternoon, hoping for some contact from Bella, but there were only two new messages in my inbox, and neither one was from her.

The first message was from my father, and I left it unread. There was no way in hell I was dealing with him at that moment. The next one was from Human Resources, confirming their plan to give Bella a formal offer, which she'd have until Friday to accept.

How did this all get so goddamned fucked up?

I stood and paced in my office, wearing a hole through my carpet in the process and turning at a sharp angle whenever I got close enough to the door to look out onto the floor.

Maybe I should just call her.

No. She had made it pretty clear from her silence that she didn't want to talk to me.

Communication 101. Now *that* was a class I should have taken at Harvard.

Sighing heavily, I walked over to the windows, staring out at the grayish-pink clouds of sunset as they settled over the skyline. Just forty-eight hours before, everything had been so different—Bella's soft hand in mine as we walked around the campus. The sweet, embarrassed look on her face when I caught her reading my journal. The sounds she'd made when I brought her to the edge over and over again—it had been perfect, every minute of it. The future had felt as though it were brimming with possibilities, and then, in a blink, it was all over.

Over. The word hit me like a fastball going one hundred miles per hour.

Bella and I were over.

The sudden, intense feeling of loss was like a knife in my chest. It made my stomach twist and my heart pound painfully in my chest.

Nothing in my life had ever hurt so fucking much.

Maybe if I'd told her, maybe if I'd been able to say it before...

No, it didn't matter anymore. I tried to remind myself that it was for the best - it was better for both of us if she took the copy editor job and we just let the whole thing go. We'd never have to tell anyone about us—it would all just fade away.

"Never should have started it to begin with," I muttered to myself.

"Never should have started what?"

Startled, I whirled around to find Jasper strolling in through my open office door, Emmett directly behind him.

Oh, great. Tweedle-dumb and Tweedle-dumber are here.

"Whoa, for someone who got a whole lot of extra sleep this morning, you look like shit." Jasper grinned.

I grimaced at the ribbing. But even as I turned away from them, heading back to my desk, I could hear the sincerity in his tone.

"Seriously, dude, you look like death warmed over." Emmett added. "What gives?"

I braced my hands on the edges of my desk, letting my head drop. What was the harm in telling them some part of the whole mess? Everything had fallen apart anyway.

They both waited silently and I could feel their stares on me. And the truth of the situation came crashing down on my head in just three simple words. "I fucked up," I finally said.

That was the gist of it. I'd completely fucked up, in every way I possibly could have.

A few seconds later, I heard the door click and looked up. Emmett had pushed the door shut and was walking back to where Jasper stood, a frown on his usually cheerful face. "What happened, bro?"

They fell into the chairs across from me and I did the same, sinking into my leather desk chair. Exhaling, I ran my hands through my hair before clasping my fingers together, pressing the sides of my knuckles against the bridge of my nose. *Why shouldn't I tell them? It doesn't matter anymore*

"I had something, something really good going on and now it's over."

Emmett shifted in his chair, his lips quirking up into a smile as he turned quickly to Jasper, speaking in a whisper, "See? I knew it."

"Dude, shut it." Jasper elbowed him.

What did he just say?

"What do you mean, 'you knew it'?" My gaze was cold, untrusting, and they both froze, like deer caught in the headlights of a moving car.

Emmett sank back a little into his chair, laughing nervously. "We've thought something was up with you for a while." He looked uneasily over at Jasper for help.

We?

I glanced at Jasper, who shrugged uneasily. "You'd been borderline celibate for months, and then I caught the Cullen Wink at the staff meeting. We thought you'd finally come back from the dead."

I winced at his joke - the memory of that day was painful. The idea of using that player method on Bella seemed so trashy, so much lower than how she should ever be treated.

Yeah, instead, you make her cry. Fuck-awesome way to treat her, idiot.

"But then, you started acting weird. You wouldn't tell us what was up, so..." Jasper's eyes flickered to Emmett, who looked like he didn't want to finish the sentence.

I stared at them - it all suddenly made perfect sense. "So that's why you forced Heidi on me."

They both nodded meekly. *Fucking idiots.* I turned solely to Emmett. "And why *you* showed up at my apartment the morning after the Skyy party."

He grinned and shrugged. "Was trying to get you to fess up, bro."

"Thanks a lot," I said dryly, rolling my eyes. "But it doesn't matter now, because it's never going to happen."

"Because she works here, right?" Jasper asked, confirming his suspicions. I nodded, and he responded with a low whistle. "Carlisle's not gonna like that."

"No shit." I sent a wary glance in the direction of his unopened email, still glaring at me in bold from my inbox. Although, at that point, I couldn't really have given a rat's ass what my father wanted.

"Dude, who's the chick?" Emmett's dimples showed with an impish smile. It was amazing how he still sounded like a fucking teenager.

I shook my head. "No way. Not going there."

"Why not?" he whined but I held firm, despite his ear-splitting chorus of the word 'please'.

"Not. Gonna. Happen."

Emmett pouted, but let it drop, and then Jasper shifted into therapist mode.

"You could try to pass it by him? See how it goes?" he offered. "He might be okay with it, you being his only son and all."

I snorted, thinking back to my conversation with my father the previous week. "Like *that* makes a difference."

"It's worth a shot," Emmett prodded.

"Guys, enough."

Jasper rolled right over my words. "You could at least try to—"

"No, I *can't*! All right?" I shouted, silencing both of them. "It doesn't matter anyway! It's *over* now! It has to be, even though I love—"

I froze, my mouth hanging wide open, the word 'love' still on my lips. The fucking words I hadn't been able to get my dipshit mouth to say since Saturday night, since Bella had said she loved me.

I had almost said it at the door to her apartment, right before Alice found us out. It was just as well I hadn't. It would be easier for Bella to move on, to take her new position and shine at *The Guard*, if she thought I didn't love her back.

But I do.

Jasper raised his eyebrows expectantly. "Even though you...?"

A cloud of shock settled and then cleared as I was finally able to say it, out loud. "I love her."

Jasper bounced a fist on the armrest of his chair like it was a gavel, a satisfied, shit-eating grin on his face. Emmett simply gaped at me, eyebrows raised.

"Dude, we thought you were just screwing someone, not that you were in 'l-o-v-e' love!" He pretended to wipe a tear from his face, turning to Jasper. "Our boy's all grown up."

"Fuck off." But I wasn't angry anymore. Instead, a feeling of untapped energy rushed through me, tugging at my chest in the oddest way. I pressed a palm over my chest. "Does being in love make you feel like your rib cage has flipped inside out?"

"Yup." Jasper nodded and laughed. "Welcome to the club, my friend. It fucking sucks."

I could barely even respond; my thoughts were frantic as they bounced from one idea to another. Would telling Bella I loved her change anything? Maybe I could persuade her to give this whole thing just a little more time.

"But Edward?" Jasper began. "You might want to tell *her* this, and not us."

Reality brought my feelings of elation to a sudden halt. "But she's still an employee. I can't...we can't..."

"Can't, shmant." Emmett shrugged. "You have to go after what makes you happy, Squirt."

Sage advice from someone who's been such a dickhead.

They both stared at me, but I didn't move, as if my brain and my body had somehow forgotten how to work together.

"Well?" Jasper asked. "You gonna pick up your phone, or are you just gonna stand there like an idiot?"

I let out a clipped chuckle. Leave it to these two to help me get my own head out of my ass after all the crap they'd put me through. I reached for my phone, but paused, my hand in mid-air as they both looked up at me expectantly.

"Do you mind getting the hell out of my office?" I asked them with a smile. "I have

a phone call to make."

Emmett faked a snuffle as he moved to stand. "That's the thanks we get."

I made a face, giving him a dismissive nod as Jasper pushed him in the direction of the door. When they'd closed it behind them, I sat down, trying to gather my thoughts.

What the hell was I going to say? Why was it that wherever Bella was concerned, I could barely get a fucking thought out?

Sighing, I dialed her cell. Several rings passed, and then it went to voicemail. *Crap!* I didn't have time to think of something to say, and when it beeped, I practically fucking stuttered.

"Bella...it's Edward. I...I'm sorry for what happened in my office yesterday. I know things are weird right now, but I really need to talk to you. Please call me?"

I ended the call, fairly certain I'd sounded like a complete pussy. My fingers drummed against my desk as I waited, but ten minutes later, she still hadn't called back. I tried her number again, only to hear the same voicemail message. "Damn it!"

I need to go to her.

Bolting out of my seat, I didn't even bother to shut my computer off. I grabbed my coat and ran swiftly out the door. "Jessica, I'm leaving for the day," I barked.

She stood quickly, bewildered. "But you have a conference call in twenty minutes with—"

"Cancel it!" I shouted from halfway across the floor, not bothering to stop for her reply. My steps turned to a run when I saw the elevator door about to slide closed.

I made it just in time, and stared at the blinking lights as the elevator flew downward, willing them to move faster. When the doors finally opened to the lobby, I pushed through the crowd of people as politely as I could, heading for the line of taxis waiting at the curb.

As we wound through the traffic on Sixth, my stomach was in complete knots. And when we arrived at her building, I stared up at it, wondering if I was doing the right thing. By the time I was standing at her door, my hands had gone clammy and my mouth went dry.

Time to face the music.

Shaking my head, as if I could somehow clear out all the shit running through my head by doing that, I stood a little straighter and knocked lightly on the door.

After a few moments, it creaked open. Through the crack, a shrewd pair of eyes stared at me, right from underneath a shock of short, spiky, black hair. I smiled cautiously, raising a hand in greeting.

And then, Alice slammed the door in my face.

Shit.

Muffled voices inside the apartment got progressively louder behind the door as I knocked again. This time, it swung open wide, startling me so much that I nearly jumped back.

"What do you *want*, Edward?"

I swear to God, in that moment, I was actually a little afraid of Alice. Despite her size, she looked like a miniature Marisa Tomei in *My Cousin Vinny*, and I didn't doubt that she could probably take me out in a second. When I failed to speak, she raised her eyebrows and crossed her arms over her chest.

"I'm here because...I owe Bella an apology." She narrowed her eyes at me, but I continued. "I acted horribly yesterday and she has every right to turn me away."

"Yup, she does. And she should." Her eyes were fiery in defense of her friend. "Where the hell were you yesterday, Edward? Because you're about twenty-four hours too late."

Those two words - too late - made my stomach lurch. *Please don't let me be too late to fix this.*

I sighed. "Look, I was stupid and confused! But, please, I really need to talk to Bella."

She was silent for a moment and then I heard a small, tired voice call from the living room.

"Alice, let him in." Bella sounded awful—hoarse, tired, drained, and it was killing me not to be able to run in and go to her, like I should have done the day before.

God, I'm such a dick.

Finally, Alice shrugged and nudged the door open, watching me shrewdly as I passed. When I entered the living room, I saw Bella on the couch, wrapped in blankets and looking pale as hell, as if she'd been crying for days.

"Hey," I said softly.

Bella nodded, twisting some tissues in her hand. "Hey."

Alice shut the door and stood behind me, judgment for my actions across her face. "I'll give you two some space to talk," she muttered before disappearing into her room.

Stepping closer to Bella slowly, I treaded lightly, as if I were approaching a frightened animal. She looked so fragile, so breakable, huddled on the couch with her arms hugging her knees tight to her chest. I wished I knew the magic words to fix everything that had gone wrong between us.

I was about to start talking, to let out the jumbled mess of thoughts, worries, and apologies in my head, when Bella's lips parted.

"I thought...I thought I'd be able to solve everything by going to James." She cleared her throat, wincing as she did it, as if it hurt to speak. "I should have told you, but I really thought I could make it work."

I stayed still, my hands hanging limply by my sides, even though they were itching to touch her, to brush back the strands of hair that were falling in front of her face, to stroke the skin of her cheek.

"I'm really sorry I didn't tell you." Her words were barely a whisper. "I just wanted to make everything right. And now..." Bella turned her face to the side, and I watched as a tear slid down her cheek. "Now everything's fucked up."

Gingerly sitting down on the couch next to her, forcing myself into her line of sight, I reached up and touched her face, wiping the tear away with my thumb. She looked up at me with watery eyes that were full of sadness, regret and hope.

"Don't apologize. I'm the one who fucked it up," I admitted, tracing her cheek gently with my fingertips. "I shouldn't have talked to you that way yesterday. I was just so..."

I didn't want to tell her how angry I'd been. It didn't seem to matter anymore—all that mattered was fixing this.

"I was stupid." I swallowed hard, feeling the warm weight of her face in my palm. Wanting desperately to close the distance between us, I took a breath. "I love you, Bella."

Her gasp was soft, barely audible, and her eyes searched mine as if she were trying to figure out if I was telling the truth. And then, her lips turned up into the sweetest smile. "You do?"

Nodding, I laughed, cupping her other cheek with my free hand. "I do."

Tears filled her eyes once again, and her voice cracked when she spoke. "I love you, too, Edward. So much."

Relief flooded through me, and I needed to be close to her. I leaned in to kiss her forehead gently, and Bella's eyes slid closed. I tenderly pressed my lips to each closed eyelid, feeling her wet eyelashes against my skin. I kissed her nose and both her cheeks, sliding my hands down to her shoulders and capturing her mouth with my own

She moaned softly, and when we broke for air, I pulled Bella into my arms, aching for the feeling of her body soft and relaxed against mine. I closed my eyes and exhaled, stroking her hair. "I'm sorry I wasn't here yesterday. I should have come."

Bella laughed softly, pressing her face into my chest. "It wouldn't have been a pretty sight, trust me."

As the sun sank down behind the horizon, we sat in the darkening room as Bella quietly recounted the events of the day before, right up through her getting sick at work and the hours she'd spent emptying her stomach afterward. I told her I wished I'd known what she was planning, but she knew me all too well—I would have grumbled about it until she gave up.

"Tell me the truth," I pleaded, tenderly brushing her hair off her forehead. "James didn't seem like he wanted more from you? More than just a job? I have to know."

Her eyes darkened slightly, her lips curving down into a frown. "It's nothing I can't handle."

My blood began to boil. "What did he say?" I growled, but Bella hummed

soothingly, putting a calming hand on my face.

"Stop, it's nothing. He's a jerk, you're right, but he's not going to *hurt* me." She paused, taking a breath. "I'm going to take the job at *Red and Black*."

"No, you don't have to-"

"It's my choice to make," she insisted, cutting me off. "It's not my dream job, but it's worth it, if it means I get to have you."

I hated what she was saying - that she was willing to sacrifice her happiness for me. "Bella," I ground out, my voice hoarse, but she pressed her fingers to my lips, silencing me.

Her eyes were wide, imploring. "Please, Edward. Have faith in me that I can handle this."

Faith. The idea slashed through me like a lightning bolt.

I'd spent the last twenty-four hours fuming over the thought that she didn't have faith in *us*, when the truth was that I hadn't had enough faith in *her*.

I sighed. "Will you at least give it a few more days? Wait and see if we can come up with another option?"

The look of anxiety on her face softened, and she smiled. "We have until Friday. Then I'm accepting it."

Friday. I had three days to figure something else out.

Not wanting to face reality anymore, I pulled her close, wrapping my arms around her and pressing my nose to the top of her head. "Tell me again?" she whispered.

"Tell you what, baby?"

A small sigh fluttered from her lips. "That you love me?"

Pressing kisses to her hair, I smiled, surprised at how easily the words of love came. And I repeated it over and over again, holding her tightly until she fell asleep in my arms.

CH&RR

Later that night, after Bella was safely tucked under the covers, I stepped quietly out of her bedroom, my stomach growling loud enough to wake the dead.

After she'd woken from her nap in my arms on the couch, during which I'd dozed right along with her, she groggily said something about a shower. Her sleepy words were laced with an edge of lust, though, and even though I wanted to be close to her, she looked completely exhausted.

So I carried her tired body to the bathroom, letting her rest on the toilet seat lid as I ran the bath. Wordlessly, reverently, I slid her shirt up over her slender arms, caressing the backs of her arms soothingly with my palms when she shivered. After undressing the rest of her, I stepped out of my own clothes, leaving them in a rumpled heap on the bathroom floor. Then I settled down in the bath, pulling her in with me, my fingers sending rivulets through the steaming water as I ran a bar of soap along her skin.

She settled against me, her eyes closing again, and we stayed like that for what seemed like hours. When the water finally ran cold, I helped her to her feet, trying to ignore the way drops of water ran down her shoulders, spilling in slippery tracks across her body. Bella swayed on her feet and I moved quickly, catching her before she fell. Christ, she must have barely slept the night before.

I wrapped us both in towels, plucking her bathrobe from a hook on the door and draping it across her shoulders. I led her to her room and helped her into a soft t-shirt and shorts. She settled into her bed, struggling to keep her eyes open. It was almost as if she were forcing herself to stay awake, as if she were worried I'd disappear if she didn't.

"Stay," she begged.

"I'm not going anywhere, baby." I would have done anything she asked.

When she drifted off, I stepped back into my boxers and went hunting for something to eat. For some unfathomable reason, I didn't expect to find Alice sitting at the kitchen table, nursing a bowl of Cheerios.

She looked up, and when our eyes met, the fury that had been there before was gone. What was there now was a cool indifference, and an uncomfortable silence filled the room as she looked back down, stirring the little floating O's with her spoon.

"I still think you're a dick, you know."

I chuckled. "I still think I'm a dick."

Despite the lack of welcome in her words, Alice pushed the box of cereal toward the other side of the table. I took it as an invitation, a peace offering, so much as it was, and gestured to the kitchen cabinets until she pointed me toward one that contained bowls.

We sat quietly for a few minutes, the sounds of crunching and silver scraping against ceramic echoing off the walls. When she finished, Alice settled her bowl on the table and regarded me carefully.

"Bella is prepared to take a job she doesn't even want, just to be with you."

I winced. Alice sure did shoot straight from the hip. Sliding back in my chair, I slid my spoon into the little pool of milk at the bottom of my empty bowl and folded my hands.

"Is that what you want? For her to work someplace she doesn't like, every single day?"

Her comments sliced me to the bone. I knew what that was like—I'd lived that way for years. I didn't want Bella to go through what I had. "No. That's not what I want."

"Then *do* something about it!"

"I want to!" I said in a heated whisper. "But how am I supposed to find another job for her in three days? I tried weeks ago, but Bella wouldn't let me."

Alice shrugged. "Who says *Bella* has to leave?"

Her voice was quiet, but her words were like a hot streak of lightning across the sky. They hung in the air, heavy, permeating, and we stared at one another in their wake, our bodies still, like two snakes poised to strike. All I could do was blink—could I do it? Could *I* be the one to step down?

"Edward?"

I turned suddenly in the direction of Bella's voice as she croaked out my name. Her blanket on her shoulders and trailing behind her like a cape, she leaned against the wall, her brow furrowed. I stood quickly, the chair squeaking against the linoleum as I moved toward her, wrapping a supporting arm around her waist.

"I thought you'd left," she murmured softly, dropping her head against my shoulder.

Placing a kiss on her forehead, I whispered, "Nope. Never leaving you again, baby."

Bella's arms went around my stomach and Alice rose, clearing both our bowls from the table. They hit the bottom of the sink with a clatter.

She came toward us, leaning forward to kiss Bella's cheek. "Glad you're feeling better. I'll see you tomorrow night after my dress rehearsal." Alice glanced up at me pointedly before she went back toward her bedroom, her piercing glare a reminder of her words.

At the quiet click of her door closing, I walked Bella back to bed. She wrapped herself around me under the sheets and blankets and I let myself drift off, closing my mind to the world outside those four walls.

It was the most peaceful sleep I'd had in years.

And early the next morning, before the sun had barely brightened the room, I came hazily out of a heavy sleep, feeling Bella's fingers dancing shyly across my hip.

"Baby?" The question died on my lips with a sharp hiss as she stroked me through my boxers, making me hard for her in an instant.

"Need you, Edward."

The desire in her voice stoked the flame already roaring inside me. "God, Bella," I croaked as I reached for her, desperate for what she was offering with her sweet touch.

We were a tangle of hot breaths and sweaty limbs after that, our bodies undulating beneath the sheets, Bella's lips trembling under mine. Clothes were peeled off and I chased after her most sensitive spots with my mouth, listening to her gasp as I pressed kisses from her neck to the soft curve of her breast, and back up to her face again. And as I felt her fingers trail down my belly to wrap enticingly around my cock, my head dropped down to her shoulder. Her name rumbled out of my throat as a broken groan.

I was frozen above her as she stroked me, every cell in my body completely focused on what she was doing with her hands. She twisted her wrist, her thumb

rubbing over the wet tip with every pass, making my hips jerk. *Fuck, what this girl does to me.*

And I was going to come in her hands if she kept doing it any longer.

"Bella, you have to stop," I begged. She tugged once more, drawing an involuntary hiss from my lips, and then complied, reaching to her nightstand for a condom.

When finally pushed inside her, I closed my eyes tightly against the sensation, trying to savor the feeling of being inside the woman I loved before I lost it completely. Slowly, deliberately, I caressed her with my body, worshiping her with every deep thrust and shallow retreat. It was all too much, and I felt my orgasm cresting far too soon

I stilled inside her and squeezed my eyes shut, savagely beating back my release. I didn't want it to be over yet. I wanted to focus solely on Bella—to savor every gasp, every moan. Her fingers brushing against my skin urged my eyes open, her expression asking why I'd stopped. Reverently kissing her perfect, pink lips, I felt my emotions rush over me just as my release nearly had.

"You're everything to me, Bella," I whispered as I began to move within her again. "Everything."

"Edward," she whispered, and I knew she felt the same way.

I watched with adoration as Bella's mouth fell open with every thrust and retreat. Her eyes fluttering closed as I went a little deeper, a little faster, Her body arched and she curled her fingers into the ends of my hair, gripping it tightly as her body surged with pleasure, and she cried out with a gasp as she finally writhed and shivered beneath me.

Unable to hold back any longer, I dipped my head down as the sensations became too much. With my face pressed to her neck, I mindlessly whispered how much I loved her as my release rushed through me. My entire body went rigid, and I spasmed uncontrollably, moaning her name. The ecstasy was powerful, intense and beautiful, and I felt her caressing my sweaty skin as I came down, panting breathless and raw.

By then sunlight had warmed the room, the yellow light making her face glow as she gazed up at me. And then, we both winced as her alarm began to buzz, a reminder that the outside world was waiting for us.

My eyes were trained on her naked body as she climbed out from under me, and I silently prayed I was worth the sacrifice she was about to make.

****CH&RR****

The morning that followed at the office was crazy, with everyone fixated on the May issue's looming due date. Bella and I had barely been able to sneak a glance at one another, and she'd been on an errands when I had to head to meeting in midtown.

When I was on my way back, threading through the pedestrian traffic, I passed a familiar face—a rarity on the busy streets of Manhattan.

"Edward!" It was Peter Whitmore, another fellow Harvard grad, greeting me with an outstretched hand and a wide smile.

Peter and I had met in the one writing class I'd been forced to ditch. He'd grown up in a family that actually encouraged creativity. We'd been workshop partners, trading short stories, and he'd been bummed when I'd had to drop. He'd stayed the course, though, graduating with a B.A. in English. We'd both moved to New York, and he'd worked his way up the rungs of a decently-known literary critique rag.

He gave my hand a firm shake. "How the hell have you been, man?"

"Same old, you know. Working my ass off." He grinned and nodded, like he knew exactly what I meant. "You?"

Peter shrugged. "Work is good, Charlotte's great. We had a baby girl last May." His grin was nothing short of goofy as he pulled a photo from his wallet. It showed his wife looking back over her shoulder, her dark hair spilling down her back, a smiling baby in her arms.

The photo sent a pang deep in my chest, putting images into my head I'd never thought of before: Bella, wide eyed and smiling with a white veil caressing her cheeks. And another of our fingers laced together over her growing belly, our matching rings glinting in the sunlight.

The thoughts brought that inside-out rib cage feeling back and I pressed a palm to my sternum. Thankfully, Peter didn't notice. "You in a rush, or do you have time for a drink?"

I checked my watch—still an hour yet before the Wednesday staff meeting. "Sure,

why not."

We sat for an hour at the nearly empty bar in Playwright's Tavern on 49th, trading war stories from the publishing business. Despite the fact that his magazine had a significantly smaller circulation than *The Guard*, he sure knew what it was like in the trenches.

Peter took a sip from his half-finished beer. "You still write at all?"

I started to shake my head, but paused, thinking back to my journal and the words that had been swimming through my head. "Not for a while, but I'm trying to find the time to get there again."

He laughed. "You should come work for me, man. We'd give you all the pages you want."

It was a joke, but I froze, my glass poised to my lips. Alice's words echoed through my head: *Who says **Bella** has to leave?*

Taking a careful, quiet sip, I asked him lowly, "Is that a possibility?"

Peter turned toward me, his eyes wide. "Is it?" he scoffed with a smile. "You're Edward-freaking-Cullen. You think I'd turn down a story from you? I remember your shit, bro. You were good."

I stared at my reflection in the mirror across the bar, my face visible between the vast array of bottles of alcohol. Could I do that? Leave *The Guard*, disappoint my father and abandon my legacy? Could I escape from the trap I'd been caught in for the past five years and spend my days writing?

"It would be a serious pay cut, you know," Peter continued. "We don't have the budget of the Cullen-Denali publishing name."

I swallowed hard. "When can I let you know?"

He sat back, as if he couldn't believe what he was hearing was real. "Whenever you want, man. Just give me the word."

Placing my beer down on the dark wood of the bar, I drummed my fingertips on the table. "I'll let you know by Friday."

****CH&RR****

On Thursday afternoon, Bella called my cell as she was leaving work. I quickly closed the door to my office, then settled back into my chair, listening to the sound of her voice. I wanted to spend the evening with her, but Alice's ballet was opening that evening at Lincoln Center.

"I have to make a decision tonight, Edward. Rosalie has been on my case all week," she told me. "I haven't been able to give her a good reason why I'm holding out. You know how much I suck at lying."

"You're good at sucking other things," I joked. I knew it was a stupid thing to say, but I was trying to lighten the mood.

Bella giggled, and then changed the subject. "What are you going to do tonight?"

I'd planned to spend the evening at home, weighing out the possibilities that lay before us. I hadn't told her about my conversation with Peter, wanting time to mull it over myself. I'd sent him some pages the following evening, and barely an hour had passed before he'd replied to my email, restating his offer.

Everything I wanted was being offered to me, hanging in the balance of one single decision. And I didn't know what the fuck to do.

"Oh, I guess I'll be here for a bit longer. Then I'll probably just head home." I wanted to tell her, wanted Bella's thoughts on the whole damn mess, but then I heard her walking down the steps into the subway terminal, the rattling and screech of the wheels sharp in my ears.

"Call me later?" she pressed and I could hear the anxiety lacing her words. I assured her I would, and then, so softly I almost couldn't hear her, she said, "Love you, Edward."

I breathed deeply letting my lungs fill up with the sounds of her words, giving them back to her in equal measure. "Love you, too, baby."

The evening stretched on before me, and I walked past the line of cabs and town cars, enjoying the surprising balminess of the mid-March evening. I walked for a while, enjoying the freedom of the streets. Not exactly looking forward to the solemnity of my apartment, I considered calling Emmett, hoping I could bounce my predicament off him. He and Jasper had helped me get my head out of my ass on Tuesday—he'd probably be able to see this decision clearly, too.

Stealing into the nearest bar and finding a quiet booth in the back, I ordered a

beer and dialed his cell, but hung up when the call rolled over to voicemail.

Guess I'm on my own with this one.

I rubbed my face with my hands and started balancing out my options, making a list of pros and cons in my head, when I heard a familiar voice from the booth behind mine.

"Man, you should see the hot piece of ass I just hired."

My teeth immediately set on edge. *Hawkings.*

"And guess where I'm stealing her from?" He didn't wait for a response from whomever sat with him. "From *The Guard*. Cullen's gonna be pissed. And in more ways than one."

The sudden recollection of his words from the masquerade party startled me and I struggled to remember exactly what he'd said. I'd been so focused on getting Bella away from him, that I hadn't completely registered his snide comments.

"What's your problem, Cullen? Is Bella next on your list of notches on your headboard?"

My heartbeat picked up, worry creeping in. *Oh, God—he knows about us.*

Fear, however, quickly gave way to fury. What the hell was his plan? To hire Bella just to keep her away from me?

My fists curled by my sides, my entire body coming to action. I stood and turned to face him, catching his eye as he was about to drink from a prissy-ass martini.

"Well, speak of the devil. If it isn't Edward Cullen himself. Evening, your highness." Hawkings sneered, then raised and lowered his glass in a sarcastic toast. "Come looking for some career advice, Cullen? I hear you might be losing an employee."

He chuckled over his own words. I wanted to wipe that shit-eating grin off his face.

"A word, James? *Alone.*" I spoke each word carefully, my upper lip curling away from my teeth in a snarl.

"Ooh, a personal invitation. How could I resist?" he balled up his napkin and threw it on the table, excusing himself from his friend. I followed Hawkings as he led the way toward the back of the bar, into a narrow hallway near the restrooms.

He crossed his arms over his chest, leaning back against the wall and resting one ankle across the other. Hawkings looked nonchalant, unconcerned, like he had me backed into a corner and he knew it.

"So, you didn't think someone would find out you were dipping your pen in the company ink?" he asked with an evil glint in his eyes.

Fuck. I hated it when I was right. He was going to try to expose us.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I growled, trying not to say anything that would confirm his suspicions.

"Cut the crap, Cullen. I saw the way you looked at Bella weeks ago, at the Union Bar. That's when she first piqued my interest." Hawkings leaned forward, a disgusting grin on his ugly face. "But then, at the Skyy party, when you practically peed on her like a dog marking your territory, I could tell she was something you wanted. Badly."

My nails dug into my palms and I tried to keep my voice low and my fist from breaking his jaw. "I thought I told you once to back the fuck off."

He laughed and shook his head. "I'm so goddamn sick of your fucking ego, Cullen." Hawkings kicked off the wall and began pacing in the small corridor.

"Back at school, you were such a fucking hotshot, so much better than everyone. So perfect—your grades, money, looks, even your girlfriend." He was spitting out his words, and my breathing was tense from the strain of keeping myself in check.

"I wanted Gianna, all through college, but she wouldn't even give me a second glance, not even after I heard you gloating about dumping her." Hawkings looked at the ground. I stared hard as he relived the past. "I went to her, you know, that night. But apparently she still wasn't interested."

Hawkings' words were clipped, and he swallowed hard, glaring up at me. Understanding dawned—it all was finally making sense.

"So *that's* why you said what you did about her. And why you went after Bree. For revenge."

He scoffed. "That skinny bitch? She was just in the wrong place at the wrong time." Hawkings shrugged, his eyes narrowing. "Bree was an easy target. And she was asking for it."

The only thing that stopped me from slamming my fist into his face at that moment was the bouncer, who paused in front of us before stepping into the restroom. We both took it down a notch in unison, not wanting to draw attention until the men's room door was closed.

"And then after graduation, you had your Editor in Chief job waiting for you like some fucking birthright," he continued. "I've had to bust my ass to get where I am, and you had it handed to you on a silver platter."

Hawkings moved quickly so he was nose to nose with me. "And I think it's about time you knew what it felt like to want something *you can't have*."

I saw it all perfectly clearly in that moment—Hawkings just wanted to fuck with me. He didn't give a shit about Bella, except maybe for a cheap thrill. My teeth set on edge. I was barely keeping it together. I wanted to fuck him up so badly, he wouldn't even be able to say her name.

"Leave. Bella. Alone."

Hawkings raised an eyebrow at me in challenge. "And what if I don't? Are you going to tell your *daddy* on me? Oh, wait, you can't, because you're screwing her, and that would mean everyone finding out. No, Cullen, I don't think you'll be saying a goddamn thing."

I seethed at his laughter as he moved in closer to me. "And I *will* have Bella Swan. One way or another."

Like hell you will!

Rage flooded through my veins and I lost it. Grabbing him by the collar, I slammed Hawkings up against the wall, enjoying his pained wince as his head knocked head back against the wood. My forearms pressed against his chest, his arms nailed to the wall with my elbows.

"You will stay away from Bella, or I swear, I will make sure everyone in New York finds out what a scumbag you are."

Hawkings laughed, but it came out a hoarse wheeze as he struggled, fists pressing

against his throat. "You got nothing on me, Cullen."

I forced him harder against the wall, hating that he had a point. I couldn't prove anything he'd done in the past...but then a memory was triggered: "*It's nothing I can't handle.*"

Suddenly, I remembered Bella's reluctant explanation of her interview with James. He must have said something to her that made her uncomfortable.

A grin crept across my lips. "You think so, huh, *James?*"

His eyes narrowed and I tightened my grip on his lapel. "Well, I'm willing to bet that if you got away with hurting a woman once, you've done it again. In fact, I'll bet there's plenty of women you've harassed into doing what you want. There's probably a whole fucking *list* of them."

His eyes widened slightly and I knew I'd hit a nerve. "Watch what you say, Cullen. I know a lot of people in this town."

I gave a good, strong tug on his collar again, pushing my knuckles harder against his jugular.

"So do I," I growled through clenched teeth, my voice a low hiss. "I'm Edward *fucking* Cullen. And I will see to it that you and your little magazine are brought down. I will *destroy* you, you fucking son of a bitch."

Hawkings looked like he was about to reply, his mouth hanging open, but then the men's room door creaked, catching both our attentions. I released James with a shove just as the bouncer stepped out.

He eyed us carefully. "There a problem, *gentlemen?*"

James ran a palm over his button-down, soothing the wrinkles. "No problem. No problem at all." He sent a last lingering glare in my direction, lifting his chin in a show of bravado, but I could tell he was shaken.

And he hurriedly returned to his table, not once looking back at me.

The bouncer followed, an eye on each of us as he lumbered toward the door. I leaned against the wall, adrenaline rushing out of me like a deflating balloon, and thought about what James had said. During all those years, each and every thing he'd been jealous of me over had been things I hadn't ever actually valued or

wanted.

Except for Bella.

Faces and words rattled through my head, a hurricane of the past churning up my thoughts: My father's disappointed glare, and me straining under the heavy weight of what he felt was lacking in me. Jasper and Emmett's blind encouragement. Alice's low voiced suggestion. Peter's offer. And finally, Bella's palm, soft and warm against my cheek, her eyes loving and clear.

"Your job doesn't have to be a life sentence, Edward. You should do what makes you happy."

My breath quickened, my heart pounding in my chest as realization took hold. The only thing I really, truly wanted was Bella.

At that point, I knew deep in my soul that there was no force on earth—not my career, my father or James Hawkings—that could stop me from being with her. In one single moment of clarity, my decision had become clear.

I walked back to my table, completely ignoring Hawkings, who had slumped back into his seat. As I slid my jacket over my shoulders, I pulled my cell from my pocket, seeing I'd missed a call Bella about ten minutes earlier. I held the phone between my shoulder and ear, letting the message play as I signaled the waitress for the check.

"Hey, it's me." Bella's voice sounded breathless, almost excited. "I just wanted to tell you I made up my mind. I'm going to contact James tonight and take the job at *Red and Black*. It's the only way...you know it is. I don't want to wait any longer to be with you. Call me...love you."

Fuck! Has she made the call already? Frantically, I called her back, pinching my eyes shut in frustration when it went straight to voicemail. I glanced over at James, certain that if he had received a call from her, he'd be gloating at me already. But he was hunched over his beer, doing his best to ignore me.

Maybe there was still time.

With no time to wait for the check, I threw some money on the table, probably grossly overpaying for my dinner. Taking it at a run, I raced through the bar, pushing through the doors and to the street. I whistled loudly as a flash of yellow bounded past me, hailing the cab like a mad man.

"Lincoln Center!" I barked to the driver and slammed the door shut.

Go get her, Edward!

Till next week -

hugs

Aylah

Chapter 9: Star Crossed Lovers

I wouldn't know what to do without Kyla713, Awesomesauce76, Agoodwich, Theladyingrey and AmberDK. Love you all!

Thanks so much for all your reviews!

Disclaimer: All things Twilight belong to Stephenie Meyer.

BPOV

I sat in my front row seat at Alice's opening night performance of Romeo and Juliet, staring blankly at the shining, golden curtains masking the stage. Excited conversation buzzed around me in the Lincoln Center theater, but my mind was racing, my thoughts drowning it all out.

Time was running out for me to make my decision.

Just a few weeks earlier, joining the editorial staff at *The Guard* wouldn't have taken a second thought. I would have seen it as a chance to be around Edward more. But with all that had transpired since then, taking the job meant I'd have to stay even further away from him.

All week at work, Rosalie had been hounding me, wanting know why I was dragging my feet. I didn't exactly have an excuse that made any sense. What was I supposed to say? "*Sorry, Rosalie. I'm trying to figure out if I should continue working for our boss, who I'm secretly sleeping with, or take a job with his arch enemy.*"

Yeah. That sounded like a *great* plan.

And in the time since my interview, James had me left several voicemails. Every time I heard his voice saying how much he was looking forward to having me on his staff, the gruff timber of his voice sickeningly suggestive, my skin began to crawl. And something still wasn't sitting right with how quickly a vacancy at *Red and Black* had become available.

I wanted to accept the copy editor position so badly. I'd spent just as long pining away for Edward as I had praying for the chance to become a serious journalist.

Now both opportunities lay in the palm of each hand, but I could only choose one.

I sighed heavily. I had less than twenty-four hours to make a choice, one way or another, and the pressure was killing me. I was so wrapped up in my thoughts as I sat there that I hardly noticed the seat next to me unfolding.

"Wow, if the curtain is so interesting to look at, I can't wait to see the actual performance!" Jasper's voice jostled me from my musings, his smile bright as he settled into the red, plush chair beside mine.

I greeted him with a nervous chuckle, blurting out the first words that came to mind. "Yeah, uh, haven't you heard what they say? The curtains make the show."

Jasper raised an eyebrow, giving me an odd smile, and I cringed at the nonsense that had just tumbled out of my mouth. *Why do I say such stupid things?*

"Well, I'm betting it's going be great." Jasper bent down to stash a huge bouquet of roses under his seat. They were for Alice—it was tradition to throw flowers at the feet of the prima ballerina during her bow.

At seeing the fragrant, lush petals, a pang of sadness flared in my stomach and resonated up through my chest. I wanted to be living in a world where the man I loved could hand me flowers in front of hundreds of people. It had been nearly a month since Edward had shown up at my door on Valentine's Day with red roses, and still, we had to hide our relationship, skulking around like thieves in the shadows.

It wasn't fair.

"You trying to drill a hole through the floor there, Bella?" Jasper pointed in the direction of my leg. It was bouncing like a jackhammer from the incessant tapping of my foot.

"Hah, um...yeah. Just wondering what Australia looks like this time of year."

As Jasper flashed me another strange grin, I had the errant thought of jumping into the orchestra pit to escape the embarrassment of my own mouth. He started flipping through the program, and I tried to calm the ceaseless movement of my foot. Awkwardly clasping my hands around one knee, I leaned forward, probably wrinkling the hell out of the dress I wore in the process.

I looked down at the cream sheath I'd borrowed from Alice. I'd forbidden her from

buying me any more new clothes, and thankfully, she'd been too busy that week to protest. Instead, I'd plucked what I was wearing from her closet after she left to prepare for her performance. The dress was overlaid with a layer of sheer black fabric that gathered over one shoulder, and fit snugly around my curves. The round-toed ankle strap heels made my legs look longer than I thought was humanly possible, and were thankfully secure enough that I didn't feel like I was going to topple over.

I laughed quietly to myself. Underneath my made-up exterior was still a clumsy, mousy girl, but Edward wanted me all the same.

Edward *loved* me all the same.

My heart spasmed at the thought, my chest constricting with a heavy longing that made my arms ache with wanting. I'd loved him for so long, thinking it was impossible he'd ever feel the same way about me. Now that my fairy tale had actually come true, I wanted to shout our love from the rooftops.

I wished Edward could have been at the theater, too; sitting beside me, looking debonair as always in a suit cut to fit his tall, lean frame. I wanted him holding my hand when the theater went dark.

But, unless I accepted James' offer, the dark would be the only place Edward and I *could* touch—hidden and out of sight from the world.

My heavy sigh was eclipsed by the orchestra tuning in unison to Concert A. Then the lights dimmed and the low hum of voices in the audience faded out into a hush as the curtain rose.

Alice had told me it was going to be a modern production, and right away, I could see what she meant. With no lavish sets to speak of, the stage was nearly bare. As the music rose, the dancers entered—men of the houses of Capulet and Montague circling one another carefully, setting the scene. Behind them, words from the prologue were thrown haphazardly in white light against a cement backdrop. Each flash of lines struck me as oddly pertinent.

"From ancient grudge break to new mutiny."

The rivalry between Edward and James' seemed like an ancient grudge, their hatred for one another lasting nearly a decade.

"Misadventur'd piteous overthrows."

Our mutual desires could certainly have been considered misadventures—our own reckless behavior had sent us headfirst into our crazy, heart-wrenching, fucked up mess.

"A pair of star-cross'd lovers."

At those words, my heart caught in my throat, my thoughts going into overdrive.

Romeo and Juliet were kept apart by circumstances beyond their control, their relationship thwarted by outside forces. From the very start, they were doomed, their love destined to end in tragedy.

I couldn't help but see the connection: Edward and I had an impossible relationship as well, our situations in life forcing us apart. Just like Romeo and Juliet, we didn't think logically, or prepare ourselves for the consequences of our affair—we just lost ourselves to passion. From Valentine's Day on, everything seemed to be working against us. Every twist and turn of fate made a happily ever after ending seem impossible.

Were we destined for failure as well?

The sharp sound of Jasper's breath catching brought my attention back to the stage. The nurse was calling for Juliet with a frenzied wave of her arms toward the wings, and then Alice pirouetted across the stage for the first time. She was poised as ever, all gracefulness and fluid limbs. Her gossamer costume flared with every turn, each movement portraying a child-like innocence as she twirled around Lady Montague, spelling out the scene's conflict with her body.

She looked amazing, and I was so proud of her.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of Jasper's expression as he watched Alice dance. He was positively beaming; the look in his eyes a mix of pride and utter longing. The love he felt for her was written clearly on his face, his emotions completely out in the open, there for all the world to see.

The two of them were like a fairy tale—able to fall in love at first sight in a world that held no obstacles for their happiness.

I want my happily ever after—to have my Prince Charming. I want Edward and me to be real.

And there was only one way to make that happen—I had to take the job at *Red and*

Black.

As the performance continued, my mind whirred - all the indecision that had been crippling me began melting away. It was all so clear—it didn't matter what James Hawkings wanted, because I belonged to Edward. And once I left *The Guard*, everyone would know that.

With the music swelling in the background and Alice and her Romeo gazing longingly across the stage at one another for the first time, I realized I'd made my choice. And I wanted that decision solidified as soon as possible.

My pulse pounded rapidly as I waited for the intermission. At the last smattering of applause, I hurried past Jasper before the curtain fell, making a beeline for the outside aisle. Once the door slid shut, its carpeted edges muffling the sounds of conversation within, I pulled my cell phone from my purse and dialed Edward's number.

It rang several times and then fed into voicemail. I frowned, wanting to hear the reassuring cadence of his voice. Flustered words poured past my lips, my brain too eager to form a cohesive message.

"Hey, it's me... I just wanted to tell you I made up my mind. I'm going to contact James tonight and take the job at *Red and Black*. It's the only way...you know it is. I don't want to wait any longer to be with you." I paused to take a breath. "Call me...love you."

The last words of my message were nearly drowned out by the sounds of the audience thundering into the aisles, hurrying toward the bathrooms or outside for a smoke during the ten minute break.

As time passed, I paced in the hallway, waiting anxiously for Edward's return call. When I still hadn't heard from him by the time the lights started flickering, signaling the beginning of the second act, worry stabbed briefly at my stomach. Two halves of my mind fought for dominance: I was desperate to have everything settled, but I didn't want to miss any of the show, either.

The lights flickered once more.

I guess the call can wait one more hour.

I powered my phone off and headed back into the theater.

****CH&RR****

For the hour that followed, I was captivated by Alice's performance, letting myself be drawn into the plight of Romeo and Juliet as they danced their sorrows across the stage. When the show ended and the dancers reappeared to take their bows, Jasper instantly stood, his eyes bright with anticipation. As Alice took her turn, stepping to the front of the stage and bending low in a humble curtsy, the audience roared with thunderous applause. I cheered as loudly as I could, my hands going numb from how hard I was clapping them together.

Jasper arched forward, his long arm reaching out to toss the bouquet over the orchestra pit. It landed smoothly at Alice's feet, and she knelt, lifting it lovingly, cradling the flowers in her arms. When Alice's eyes met Jasper's, the knowing smiles they exchanged made my heart long for Edward. But for the first time, the concerns I'd carried about our future was finally buoyed up on a ribbon of hope.

As the theater emptied out, Jasper headed in the direction of the stage door.

"You're not joining us for drinks?" he asked, gauging my hesitation. I looked down at my phone, already powered up in my hand. I wanted the deed done, the whole ordeal behind us, so Edward and I could start again, for real.

"You two go on ahead. I've uh...I've got a call I need to make."

He inclined his head in a polite nod and didn't ask any more questions, although his lips were quirked up in the oddest way, one eyebrow raised. "We'll catch you later, then."

Jasper turned away and I moved swiftly in the opposite direction, following the crowd out to the second-level landing looking over the lobby. It was grand and open-aired, with three-story high windows showcasing the brilliant fountain outside. The double-arched staircase was wide and curving, with its lush red carpet and handrails shined to a high buff. Starburst-shaped chandeliers hung from the ceiling, illuminating the atrium in a warm golden glow. People in all kinds of finery were milling about in front of me, taking their time and slowing my hurried steps to a snail's pace.

Fine. I can walk and talk at the same time.

As I stepped down slowly onto the first stair, I started to dial James' number, the digits burned in my mind from the amount of time I'd stared uncertainly at his business card. With each descending footfall, a ring sounded in my ear, a harsh

accompaniment to my quickened heartbeats.

"James Hawkings." His voice was abrupt and grainy, but slurred, too. Like he'd been drinking. Heavily.

I opened my mouth to reply, my breathing thin in my chest as I prepared to seal my fate—

"Bella!" A voice rang out, echoing loudly across the lobby.

Edward!

My head shot up and I froze midway down the staircase. There he was, scanning the mass of people at the foot of the steps. His eyes were frantic, his shirt untucked and hanging loosely behind his jacket, his hair a gorgeous, haphazard mess.

"Hell-O?" James was growing irritated with the lack of response on the phone, but I was mute, too shocked by Edward's actions to speak.

As if he could suddenly sense my presence, Edward looked up, his eyes finding mine. The distressed expression he'd been wearing melted into a look of utter relief. Then he darted wildly in my direction, sidestepping people left and right. I watched him race toward me, taking the steps two at a time, and my body finally took action, stumbling quickly down to meet him halfway.

"Don't make that call!" Edward rasped, out of breath. His chest was heaving, as if he'd just run for miles. Before I could ask him what he was doing, or why he had stopped me, he took my free hand in his, lacing our fingers tightly together.

My breath caught as I felt the warmth of his palm against mine. We were in public, surrounded by hundreds of people. *What is he doing?*

"Hang up the phone, *please*," he begged softly.

Shell-shocked, I hit the end button with my thumb, silencing James' irritated grumbling and lowering my arm. And then, the corners of Edward's mouth turned up into that perfect, lopsided smile—the beautiful grin that made my heart trip and stumble, made me come alive and undone all at once.

"Edward, what—"

"Shh." He swiftly put a finger to my lips, a tender movement that both stunned

and silenced me. "Come with me."

Edward tugged my hand and turned, leading me down the stairs. Tethered behind him, I followed quickly to the courtyard outside, where the brilliant yellow glow from the theaters warmed the circular designs in stone on the ground. The buzzing of dozens of conversations surrounded us, the usual hum of honking traffic on the Manhattan streets drowned out by the soothing backdrop of the cascading water.

He walked us directly to the stone edge of the fountain. Most of the crowd had emptied out by that point, but we were far from alone. Edward finally stopped and turned around to face me, taking both my hands in his. My eyes widened once again, glancing nervously around us.

"Edward!" I whispered his name harshly in protest. "Why did you stop me from making that call?"

He grinned widely. "Because you don't have to anymore."

Any more? "What do you mean?" I asked warily.

Edward smiled, his long eyelashes brushing against his cheeks as he glanced down at our joined hands, studying them. His broad chest surged with a deep inhale, and I waited, my breath tight in my lungs.

"Bella, all my life, I've been doing what other people wanted me to do. For years, I was sleepwalking through life. My job, my career, everything I did was just blindly following other people's expectations."

He lifted his gaze back to me, his eyes intense and determined. "I forgot about everything *I* wanted...until you came along."

A soft, startled gasp escaped my lips. He spoke so softly, so sweetly, and my knees grew weak, my entire body turning to liquid.

"You never expected anything of me. You made my feel like...*me*...again. With you, I remembered what it was like to be truly happy. And now you're willing to give up everything for me."

He took another breath, his brows knitting together as he stood a bit taller, his words bolstering, preparing him for something.

"I want to be with you Bella, and I don't want *you* to sacrifice *anything* to make

that happen."

Edward let go of one of my hands, his fingers skimming into his pocket to retrieve his phone. His eyes never left mine as he lifted his phone to his ear.

"Peter, it's Edward. About that position you offered me." He paused and squeezed my hand, taking a deep breath. "I'll take it."

What?

For a minute, I forgot how to breathe. I stared at Edward, convinced my ears were playing tricks on me as he hung up without another word. He stashed his phone in his pocket and then tenderly captured my face with both hands. A tear slid down my cheek, only to be brushed away gently by his thumb.

"Edward...what did you just do?"

He smiled triumphantly. "I ended our professional relationship."

And then his lips were on mine, his mouth brushing against my own in feather-light touches that grew deeper with every pass. His kiss lit a fire in me and I responded with a passion I didn't know I possessed, opening my mouth to welcome the soft stroking of his tongue. I held him to me, my fingers wrapping around his neck and twisting into his hair. Edward moaned softly when I tugged at the silky strands, the contented sound of pleasure he made vibrating through me.

Needing a breath, I gently pulled back, letting my eyes slide closed as our foreheads pressed together.

"I still don't understand," I breathed, my head spinning. Edward's nose nuzzled mine, and his hands dropped slowly to my waist, curling around to press against the small of my back.

"It's simple," he replied with a soft chuckle. "I'm quitting."

"But...but your career! Your family!" I sputtered, drawing back to look at him.

"I don't care!" Edward laughed loudly, craning his neck to look at the dark sky above us. "I'm finally doing what *I* want to do!" He inhaled deeply, closing his eyes, acting like a man who'd been starved of oxygen and was finally able to breathe again. His eyes twinkled when he reopened them and I drank in his happiness.

"You're going to write, aren't you?"

Edward nodded. "Peter is an old friend from Harvard and I ran into him a few days ago. He runs a literary magazine and offered me a job."

"Oh, Edward! That's amazing!"

I couldn't help but grin—his joy was infectious. But then, a strange kind of frustration welled up inside of me, and despite the fact that I was grinning from ear to ear, I smacked him on the arm. Hard.

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?" I shouted, ignoring his yelp of pain as he drew his arm away from my reach.

Edward's expression shifted. "Well, something happened tonight that made me realize what I wanted...I ran into Hawkings."

"Oh." I chewed my lip nervously.

Edward eased back, giving me a level stare. "You weren't exactly honest with me when you told me about your interview, were you?"

Unable to meet his eyes, I shook my head slowly, but he lifted a hand from my waist and captured my chin, gently tugging it so I had to look up at him. "What happened?"

In as few words as I could manage, I told Edward about James' thinly veiled harassment.

"Shit," Edward growled. "I suspected as much."

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you. I know we said no more secrets, but...I thought it was our only shot to be together."

He cocked his head to the side, his gaze soft. "You didn't want that job, though."

"No, I wanted *you*." I admitted. "I can't believe you're leaving the magazine...*for me*."

"Not just for you." He pressed a gentle kiss to my lips, hovering there, his breath washing softly against my cheeks. "For me, too. For both of us."

Air rushed out of my chest in a tight laugh - I couldn't believe what was happening.

"There's my laugh." His eyes were bright as he leaned in for another kiss. "There's my perfect, beautiful laugh."

Edward pulled me in close, and I collapsed against him, resting my head on his chest as the weight of his words took hold. "You're too good to be true." I pressed my face to his shirt, breathing in the scent of him.

"I could say the same for you." As I turned my face up toward his again, inches away from lips I was desperate to feel on mine once more, my phone began to chime.

"Crap. Alice," I muttered, stepping back from him and fishing around for the thing in my bag.

Edward laughed quietly. "She certainly has a prophetic sense of timing."

"No, no, it's just...crap! I told her and Jasper I'd meet them for drinks." I answered just as the fourth ring was coming to an end.

"I'll tell Jasper you were too tired to join us." Alice's voice was smug, and I wheeled around, searching the corners of the courtyard.

"Are you here?" I asked in a harsh whisper.

Alice only giggled softly in reply. "Tell Edward I said hi." The call ended, and I glanced back toward the theater, where, against the glowing lobby, I saw the silhouette of a tiny body and short hair backing away from the window.

I could only guess she'd watched us, out there on the promenade, and while she couldn't have heard anything from so far away, Edward's body language spoke volumes. She must have seen how affectionate he was in public and figured out what that meant. Her approval was apparent in her tone and I breathed a sigh of relief.

"Everything okay?"

I turned back to face Edward. With his hands in his pockets, he tilted his head to the side, gauging my expression with a raise of an eyebrow. Too dazed by the reality of what had just happened to speak, I silently drank him in.

My eyes first traveled up his face to his wild hair, the soft locks that felt so good between my fingers. I then studied the angular lines of his jaw, his dimpled chin, the fine smattering of stubble across his skin. I knew how that beard felt as it rasped against my mouth, my chin and between my thighs. The thought made my legs quiver. My gaze then raked across his perfect lips, which were turned up into an expectant grin. Lastly, I met his stare, letting myself get lost in the sparkling green.

Mine. He was all *mine*.

Without thinking, I flew forward and threw myself at him, giggling wildly. His arms came around me, lifting me up and holding me to him as he spun me in a circle. When my feet met the ground again, his laughter exhaled in a rush.

"You want to get out of here?" he asked, his breath hot against my ear. Edward's voice was warming, like hot chocolate on a blustery day, and suddenly, I was very much aware of how much I wanted to be alone with him.

I nodded quickly and weaved my arm through his. We hurried down Columbus Avenue, eager to cross the few blocks that lay between us and his apartment.

There was no hesitation - or conversation, for that matter - once we were in the quiet safety of his elevator, which was blissfully empty. Edward pushed me against the wall, his hands braced on either side of my head as he leaned in to nip at my flesh. My gasp echoed within the confined space as heat licked up my spine.

"I love when you make those little noises for me," Edward purred, his breath hot against my ear. "Do it again."

I couldn't help but comply as he licked a wet trail up my neck. "You're making me crazy."

His chuckle warmed my skin as he nuzzled my collarbone, running his nose along my throat to the other ear. "That's just how I want you—crazy for me."

He had to know I always had been.

The elevator doors opened and Edward quickly walked me forward, his palm insistently rubbing at the base of my spine. He fumbled with his keys, forcing them hurriedly into the door, and his eagerness made my entire body flush with heat.

When we stepped into the darkened entryway, Edward slid the door closed and came up behind me. My purse and coat slipped from my hands and fell to the floor

as his hands smoothed over my hips.

"Bedroom. Now." His words were followed by the delicious sensation of his teeth dragging exquisitely along my neck. His teeth dug playfully against my shoulder, and our labored breathing was almost as loud as our footsteps as he guided me down the hallway.

He didn't bother to turn the light on, leaving us bathed in moonlight. He found the zipper of my dress, and pulled it down in sinfully slow movements, making me shiver with need and impatience. He kissed his way down my spine as each new inch of skin was exposed, then followed the same path back up with his tongue as the dress puddled at my feet. Edward peeled my bra off next, then pulled his own clothes from his body, leaving them in a rumpled heap on the floor.

His hands ghosted up my bare sides, and then he stepped forward to press his bare chest to my back. He felt so good—so warm and strong behind me—and I sighed, letting my head roll back against him. He pulled me in closer to him, and I could feel his thick length as he ground against my ass. "Edward," I whimpered.

With a gentle tug against my hips, he turned me around to face him, but then paused. He pulled back, taking a breath, and his stare was both tender and lustful, as if the two emotions were battling within him. He reached up to tuck my hair back behind my ears, his fingers settling gently on my neck.

"You're so beautiful," he breathed, his thumbs sweeping along my jaw.

The way he gazed at me took my breath away and when he leaned into kiss me again, it was a tender brush of skin against skin, his lower lip dragging teasingly along both of mine. I tilted my head up as he lapped gently at my mouth, a wet request for entry.

At the hot slip of his tongue sliding against my own, I lost all control, my fingers shooting up and twisting into his hair. With a groan, he responded, settling one hand at the small of my back, drawing me to him, and wrapping the other around my shoulder.

He kissed me still as he walked us backwards to the bed, dropping down onto it and pulling me on top of him. My body brushed over his erection, and a guttural moan bubbled up from inside him.

"God, Bella, I want you so much."

With one hand on my hip to steady me, Edward's head dipped down to my breast, licking a circle around my nipple before capturing it in his mouth. I arched against him, my head rolling back as his other hand gently twisted and plucked at the bud he wasn't suckling.

I let out a whine as he stopped and urged me up to my knees. He looked up at me as his fingers traced along the edge of my panties before sliding lower, running his knuckles gently along my folds.

Clearly, he was determined to tease me beyond the last remnants of my sanity.

"Edward..." I sucked in a hiss, and our eyes locked as he prodded and stroked, watching my reactions and grinning at me wickedly.

I was panting and aching, grinding down against his hand, the sensations too much and not nearly enough. As his knuckle rubbed against a sensitive spot, my teeth sank into my lower lip. Hard.

He caught the movement, cursing under his breath as heat flashed behind his eyes, and I knew I had him. That lip bite always did the trick. I tugged at the soft flesh harder, pouting at him. "*Please*, Edward."

"*Fuck*, baby! Don't beg me." Edward lost his rhythm with his fingers, his voice tight with need.

He palmed my thighs and looked down between us. As I settled down onto his lap, Edward's body swiveled under mine, the head of his cock rubbing against my clit through the fabric separating us. "I...I wanted to go slow—to take my time with you, tonight."

"There will be other times for slow." I bent down, taking his earlobe into my mouth, biting it and relishing in his gasp and the jerk of his hips. "Right now, I *need* you. I need all of you, fast and hard and not stopping until I'm screaming your name."

Edward let out a strangled sound, something between ecstasy and torture. His mouth crashed against mine and then he was tearing my panties from my body, his desperation surging past the desire to keep me on the edge.

I kneeled above him, hovering on my knees as he arched his hips and yanked his boxers down his legs. I groaned with wanting as I settled back down onto him, the warm skin of his thighs against mine. He rocked upwards and his cock slid through

my folds, hard and glistening at the tip as it stroked against my clit.

"God...*ungh*...wait....condom." Every word coincided with a pass of his erection on my wet skin, and he threw himself backward onto the bed, his long arm extending to his nightstand for a foil packet.

As he sat up and rolled the slippery material over his hardened flesh, I bent my head down to watch. "I can't wait until we don't have to use these. I can't wait to feel you. All of you."

"I can't wait for that, too." His breathing was shallow as his hands lifted to skim over my open thighs, his voice raspy with need.

I bent down to kiss him, feeling the press of his head against my opening. "I can't believe you're all mine."

His eyes closed slowly and when his lids lifted, he gazed at me hungrily. "Say it again."

"You're." *Kiss*. "All." *Kiss*. "Mine."

He growled and the sound made my toes curl. "Fuck. I love hearing you say that."

Edward arched his hips up, sliding inside me with one smooth thrust. I cried out, overwhelmed with pleasure. Wrapping my arms around his neck for leverage, I met his thrusts, feeling him hit spots inside me that made me gasp and moan.

"Bella...oh, *Jesus*, you feel good." His eyes were shut tight, his mouth open as he panted, his face a mask of ecstasy. The vision was every fantasy I'd ever had of him.

My hair fell over my shoulder as I rode him hard, brushing against the tips of my breasts. Edward moaned as he watched me move, sweat starting to coat our skin. His hands were everywhere—tweaking my nipples, scratching down my back, reaching down between our bodies, his thumb starting an insistent stroking on my clit, and I cried out.

His sensual chuckle sent shivers down my spine. "Right there, baby?"

"Oh, yes! *Please*."

I writhed above him, shivering as he fucked me deeper, rubbing my clit until I thought I would shatter from the white-hot pleasure. It was so good I could barely

speak, moaning loudly as I felt my orgasm sparking. "Edward...oh, God! Gonna...come."

"*Fuck*, yes. Give it to me, Bella."

There was no holding back my screams as the sensations rushed through me, and I spasmed uncontrollably above him, my nails digging into his shoulders as I held on for dear life. I was still shivering and panting through the aftershocks when he deftly rolled us over, staying inside me as he inched our bodies up the mattress.

"You said you wanted it hard and fast, right?" His eyes sparkled with mischief. "Not stopping until you scream my name?"

Still dizzy from my release, I nodded weakly. Edward propped himself up on his arms, pulled out of me almost all the way, so deliciously slow, and just when I thought he was going to pull out completely, he slammed back inside.

"Fuck!" I arched underneath him, every part of me still so sensitive. Edward laughed quietly in response, his voice smug and ridiculously sexy.

"Well then, I aim to please."

He rocked into me, our hips slapping together so intensely the bed began to shake. It was wild, wet, animalistic fucking, and he complied as I begged for harder, faster, more, wanting to feel the ache between my thighs the next day. I could feel him beginning to tense, his cock even harder inside me, and then his head arched backwards, his body stilling and shuddering magnificently above mine.

But when he came, it was him who did the screaming.

It was the single most erotic sound I'd ever heard.

****CH&RR****

I woke up early that morning, and consciousness arrived slowly as I blinked against the waxing sunlight. Sated and delectably sore from our night together, I'd rolled over to cuddle against Edward, who was already awake and scrolling through his emails on his phone. His chest raised and fell with a heavy sigh.

"What's wrong?"

He grimaced. "I've been putting off reading an email from my father for a few

days."

Edward turned the screen my way so I could see a clipped message from Carlisle that simply read out: '*Please see me.*' Edward just shook his head and laughed softly. "Time to go into the lion's den."

He dialed into his father's secretary's office, leaving a message that he would be there first thing. When he hung up, Edward reached over to take my hand in his. He closed his eyes before placing my palm against his lips for a gentle kiss. He seemed to draw strength from our closeness, so I pressed my body along the length of his.

I couldn't believe that in a matter of hours, he was going to give notice and I would be turning down James' offer, accepting my new position at *The Guard*. It felt so amazing to have everything in my life come together, but I swallowed back the sadness I felt at the price Edward was going to have to pay.

Edward heard my shaky sigh. "Hey, none of that now." His eyes reopened, his lips turning up into a smile against my palm before kissing it once again. "This is what I want, too, remember?"

Those were the words I repeated in my head a short time later when I arrived at the office, staring at the Cullen-Denali building. Edward and I had shared a kiss goodbye outside his apartment before he put me in a cab downtown, and it felt as if it were burned into my lips, a badge of courage propelling me forward.

I craned my head backward, looking up at the looming grey skyscraper before me, and an early spring breeze danced in my hair, making it rise and flutter around my face. Steadying myself and looking forward, my thoughts mixed with an overwhelming sense of freedom...and dread.

Then I caught my reflection in the glass doors ahead of me. I'd changed into flats, a pale blue pencil skirt and a cap-sleeved blouse on a quick run-through back in my apartment, and I looked like the old Bella again. There was no made-over woman taking charge of her future today - just the girl who'd left a small town in Washington with plain hair and big dreams.

All those dreams were about to come true.

Heading through into the lobby and up to our floor, I marched past Mrs. Cope's desk and thought, *Here goes nothing.*

As I glanced toward Edward's office, I saw it was dark, and I could only imagine

the conversation he was having upstairs with his father. It helped to know that on the other side of that chat was a job Edward had always wanted.

Jake and Angela were off on errands, and as I sat down at my desk, I saw the mountain of notes and paperwork for me to go through. *First things first*. I took a deep breath, swallowing back my nerves as I called the offices of *Red and Black*.

"Victoria Brown." The cheerful voice of James' managing editor picked up, confusing the hell out of me.

"Oh...I'm so sorry, hi, um. It's Bella Swan." *Could I sound a little less like an idiot?* "I thought I'd dialed Mr. Hawings' line?"

"Hi Bella. And yes, you did. He's out of the office today, so I'm taking his calls." I noticed a tinge of annoyance behind Victoria's words, but I was too relieved at the prospect of not having to turn down James himself to care. Still, it was strange that he was out of the office, considering that he had to have known I'd be calling that day.

"Okay, well, the thing is...about the job...I'm actually going to turn it down." There was a sigh on the other side of the line, and I spoke quickly over it. "I appreciate the offer, I really do. But it's just not the right choice for me."

Victoria paused, and then exhaled again. "Hold on a second for me, will you, Bella?"

I heard the sound of a door closing, and her voice was hushed when she came back to the phone. "This may be out of line, but I have to ask...was Mr. Hawings at all...inappropriate with you?"

I froze, my mouth hanging open, and my jaw working against the lack of sound coming out of my throat. Did I tell her the truth? And how in the hell had she figured it out?

"Because, you see...we've had some trouble with that here. It's why our last editor vacated the position."

Holy crap! "Um, to be honest...yes. He did imply...some things."

Victoria let out a huff. "Bella, I don't want to put you on the spot here, but you're not the only one this has happened to. And I'm sick of working with the creep. If I managed to start a harassment suit, would you be willing to step forward and say

something?"

I blinked repeatedly, my brain trying to take in the bizarre and fortunate turn of events: girl gets job, girl gets boy, bad guy gets carted away. It felt like a sitcom...or an episode of *Scooby Doo*.

"Absolutely."

Victoria thanked me, promising to call me again when she had more news. I sat back at my desk, relief flooding through me. Glancing up and around me, I took in the flurry of early morning activity at the office. Editors, writers, photographers were all balancing their paperwork and coffees as they rushed to get everything into place for the May issue deadline. The crazy pace of it all was what I'd always dreamed of doing.

A small smile crept across my lips as realization set in—I was finally going to be an editor here.

It was time to make it official.

Pushing back my chair in excitement, I dodged the steady stream of people running around the office and headed for Rosalie's. Her door was open, and true to form, she was having her weekly manicure, sitting at a desk spilling over with fresh flowers. I loved that the sight no longer made me wince.

As I gently rapped my knuckles on her door, her head whipped around, brunette locks swimming over her shoulders. She grinned at me. "Well?"

Of all the allies I'd ever imagined having at *The Guard*, I'd never supposed Rosalie Hale, soon-to-be-McCarty, would be one of them. My smile mirrored hers, and I blushed as I nodded. "I'll take the job."

She cheered, making her manicurist jump back in alarm, and then told me she'd be taking me out for a lunch to celebrate. It was eerie, surreal, and a strange sense of calm settled over me. And as I turned from Rosalie's door, I could swear I felt Edward's presence nearby.

As if in slow motion, I took a few steps into the hallway, the mad rush of people scurrying around the office seeming to disappear as I saw him, his head down as he walked in from the lobby. In a sharp grey suit, he was the picture of the man I'd desperately pined over, and as his gaze lifted, I met sparkling green eyes.

I was beyond frantic to know what had happened and I wanted to run to him. Time seemed to freeze as his stare bore into mine, his lips in a thin line, then slowly softening into that perfect lopsided grin.

And then, he winked at me.

Just one more chapter and a short epilogue to go!

Till next week -

****hugs****

Aylah

Chapter 10: Gotta Have Faith

Kyla713, Awesomesauce76, Agoodwich, Theladyingrey and AmberDK rock. That is all.

Disclaimer: All things Twilight belong to Stephenie Meyer.

EPOV

The sound of a ticking clock would be enough to drive anyone crazy.

This was probably why, after forty-five minutes sitting in my father's waiting room, listening to the seconds tick by, I was about ready to gouge my own eyes out.

The words from my father's email, '*Please see me,*' bounced across my vision- a spectacular accompaniment to the ticking clock. The combination of the two was a real shit-fest of an orchestra, beating across my brain.

I reminded myself for what felt like the hundredth time to calm the fuck down. No matter what Carlisle had in store for me that morning, I'd made my decision. I was merely an hour away from my liberation and a real future with Bella—that was the only thing keeping me sane.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

"You sure you wouldn't like something, Mr. Cullen?"

My father's secretary, Mrs. Banner, popped her head out from behind the kitchen's open door, a concerned look on her face and a fresh pot of coffee in her hand. I was hunched over in a chair with my elbows perched on my legs and my head between my knees, and must have looked like I was about to be sick.

Which wasn't terribly far from the truth.

"I'm fine. Thank you, though," I assured her once again.

She returned to the kitchen, and I continued listening to the second hand tick incessantly through the minutes. I'd worn a suit - something I rarely wore on Fridays, but figured it would probably be a good idea to at least *look* respectable

when I gave up the family business.

My thoughts were vigorously tumbling over one another, reminding me of clothes twirling around in a dryer. The thought took me back to Harvard, to the day I'd dropped my writing course. I'd sat for hours in my dorm's laundry room, perched on a plastic orange chair, staring at the garments turning round and round.

As I watched my heavy sweatshirts bang against the metal cylinder of the machine in an endless loop, I thought how my life was like those clothes - trapped in a never-ending cycle. I thought I was forging ahead with my own life, when really, I was only going in the direction my father had laid down for me.

The realization was so ridiculous, I'd let out a chuckle loud enough to echo off the glass-domed doors of the dryers. How freaking sad was it that my laundry was a metaphor for my life?

The sense of hopelessness that had pervaded my thoughts back at school was absent as I waited for Carlisle's entrance. Instead, there was only determination.

Well, maybe slightly panicked determination.

Tick. Tick.

I tried to calm myself by thinking over my morning with Bella, drawing strength from the memory of her smile. She had been so hesitant and quiet. I knew she thought I was sacrificing something huge - that the balance between us was off-kilter with how much she felt I was giving up.

I'd stared into her warm, brown eyes and placed a kiss against her palm, trying to find a way to tell her that I wasn't sacrificing anything at all. How fucking ironic was it that, despite the fact I'd finally decided to choose writing as a profession, I suddenly found myself completely at a loss for words?

Tick. Tick. Tick. Tick!

Just when I thought I was going to rip that fucking clock off the wall, I heard the elevator door rumble open in the lobby, followed by the sounds of my father and Eleazar in easy conversation.

Stay cool, Cullen.

Standing quickly, I swallowed hard and took a deep breath, catching my father's

eye as he rounded the corner. He paused when he saw me, an uneasy silence pervading the room.

"Edward, thank you for coming." His tone was all business, and he turned apologetically back toward Eleazar. "I guess we'll go over those numbers later."

Carlisle stepped past me and unlocked his office door. I didn't follow him in right away - I knew by then that it was best to wait until I was summoned. As I stood in the waiting room with my sweaty palms drenching my pockets, Eleazar passed by me, his mug of coffee nearly at his lips.

"Tanya inquired after you." The name of his daughter made my stomach turn. He didn't meet my eye, but simply cooled off his coffee with a puckered breath. "She mentioned she hadn't heard from you in a month."

An image of the last time I saw Tanya crept into my head: how she shoved her way between Bella and me on Valentine's Day, calling me 'Eddie.' I hated that nickname almost as much as I hated Emmett calling me 'Squirt'. But if it weren't for Tanya's misguided affection, I might never have shown up at Bella's door with flowers.

And I might not have been standing where I was at that moment, ready to change my world.

I couldn't help but smile at life's little quirks.

So, for once, I didn't want to tell my father's partner that his bimchette daughter - who had been throwing herself at me for years in an attempt to make a multi-million dollar marriage-merger - could go jump off a cliff. Instead, I said, "I've been really busy lately. But please tell Tanya I said hello."

Eleazar raised an eyebrow at me, but before he could say anything more, my father's voice carried out from within his office.

"You can come in now, Edward."

Here we go.

My stomach lurched, but I steeled myself, standing up tall. I gave Eleazar a polite nod and turned away. I might have been walking into a snake pit, but I reminded myself of the bright side: at least it meant I didn't have to listen to that stupid clock anymore.

The sun was bright as it streamed in through the windows of my father's corner office, warming the Persian rugs and reflecting off the framed awards on the wall. I blinked against the glow, and took sight of Carlisle sitting behind his large desk, his elbows balanced on the edge of it, fingers steepled under his chin. I didn't sit down in one of the high-backed leather chairs opposite his desk – just stood near one instead, and prepared myself for the worst.

After a few moments of weighted silence, he finally spoke.

"I assume you finally read my email?" His tone was different, off.

"Just this morning, actually. Things have been a little...crazed."

The words *I'm sorry* hovered on my lips, but I stopped myself, refusing to speak them. After years of my father's cool indifference to how I wanted to spend my life, I no longer felt like apologizing for anything anymore.

But the way he wouldn't look me in the eye caught me off-guard. It wasn't like my father not to stare me down. And then, we both started talking at the same time.

"Dad, I wanted to-"

"Listen, Edward. I need to-"

Shit.

We both stopped, and his eyes finally lifted to mine. I couldn't place the expression on his face, but something was definitely different about it, as if he were...uncomfortable. "You were going to say?"

I shook my head. "No, you go ahead."

He cleared his throat and gestured toward one of the chairs. I took it as an invitation to sit, something I couldn't remember doing in his office since I was young enough to still be carrying crayons around with me. I settled against the smooth leather, and watched my father let out a heavy sigh.

It was an odd sound—Carlisle Cullen was not often at a loss for words.

"Edward...I, uh...I wanted to apologize."

My eyes popped open, and for a minute, I wasn't sure I'd heard him right—in all

my twenty-seven years, I'd never heard him express regret for anything.

"You're doing a wonderful job with the magazine." His voice lowered. "I'm sorry I doubted you."

Damn. Where's the proverbial feather to knock me down with when I need it?

I blinked several times, not sure what to say. All I managed was, "Thank you."

Carlisle nodded at me, and then leaned back in his chair. "It's just that...you've never seemed like you *wanted* to be here."

*Since when had he finally figured **that** out?*

My eyes followed him as he slowly stood and crossed the room to gaze at the wall of framed articles and awards *The Guard* had won. "This magazine, this company, I built it up from nothing. It means everything to me."

More than I do.

I winced at the childish thought. I'd felt for years that this damn magazine meant more to him than any living thing on the planet - it was a resentment I didn't realize until that moment I'd always harbored. But as Carlisle turned back to face me, the look on his face was not one of a man disappointed in his son.

With his brow furrowed, his hands firmly planted on his hips, he looked at the ground. "I had so hoped it would mean everything to you, too. But I don't think it does."

That was not how I wanted the conversation to go. I moved to stand, a reply forming on my lips. "Dad—"

"No, wait. Let me get this out." He held a hand out to stop me from advancing, and I sank back down into the chair.

"When your mother and I travelled through Europe before you were born, I didn't have any direction in life. When I found the painting that's hanging in the lobby downstairs, I knew right then and there what I wanted to do."

I thought of that painting - of its smooth brush strokes and warm colors - and of the first time I'd told Bella of its origin. I remembered her taking in its lines, her gaze intent as she studied it. Bella had appreciated the painting, and *The Guard*, in a

way I never had.

Carlisle began pacing across the carpet. "I loved the idea of bringing the arts to the people, of this magazine holding in its pages everything refined and intelligent and offering it to the world."

My father finally looked at me again, and I was a deer in the headlights, awestruck by his words.

I'd never thought of my father as creative, as a purveyor of the arts. I'd only seen him as a tyrant, forcing my life in the direction he'd wanted it to go in. Now I saw how deeply connected he was to the magazine, and as I took in his weary expression, I realized that all his questioning, his hovering, his watching over everything I did, was done with the fear that I didn't care about the company he had built.

"You run *The Guard* very well, son. However, I want someone at the helm who cares about it the way I do, and I don't think that's you."

My mouth fell open. Of all the ways I had imagined the conversation going, that was not one of them. I struggled to find the right words, but I knew I had to finally be honest with him.

"You're right," I croaked. "It's not."

He sighed again, nodding slowly before winding his way back to his seat. His chin tilted back, an almost imperceptible nod, as he waited for me to continue.

"I don't want you to think *The Guard* doesn't mean anything to me - that's not the case. And I know how hard you've worked to build it up to what it is. But *running* it isn't what I want to do. It never has been."

Nervous energy fueled me, and I felt the urgent need to move. Standing abruptly from my chair, I began to pace in front of his desk. The words that I'd held back for so many years started rushing over my tongue, a deluge I couldn't stop.

"The meetings, the paperwork, all the crazy deadlines...it just isn't me, Dad." My pulse raced, my stomach in knots, my mouth going dry. I closed my eyes, taking a breath to ground myself. "There have been other things I wanted to do, ever since college. But you never gave me the choice."

I gauged his reaction, waiting for the shocked and disappointed outburst. But as I

caught my father's saddened expression, the anger that had been held under lock and key suddenly fizzled out of me, like a popped balloon.

"I didn't only come here this morning because you asked me to. I came to tell you I'm stepping down from Editor in Chief." I paused for a beat, letting reality sink in to the air around us. "I'm going to write. Full time."

He eyed me carefully, his exhale a heavy, sad sound. Then he pulled open one of his desk drawers, retrieving a large manila envelope.

"I had a feeling you were going to say that."

The thick packet he handed me had Cambridge, Massachusetts on the return address, and the postmark was dated two thousand and two - the year I was a sophomore at Harvard. I cautiously picked it up, tilting it on its end to see what was inside.

I recognized the papers immediately - they were everything I'd written in my Creative Writing class at Harvard.

What the hell?

"Your professor contacted Dean Jenks and told him you showed incredible promise," Carlisle explained. "Naturally, he sent me copies of everything you wrote. Since we were friends, he tried to talk me into convincing you to change your major."

With my mouth gaping open, I stared at him, narrowing my eyes, as if doing so would somehow make me understand what he was saying better. It felt as if the entire world as I'd known it was upside down - as if all the truths I'd relied on, like gravity, the sun rising in the east and my father's disappointment in me, were all figments of my imagination.

"Did you..." I swallowed against the lump in my throat, my fingers pinching the edge of the envelope. "Did you read them?"

Carlisle nodded slowly. "Every word."

"And you hated them, right? You didn't want me embarrassing you, so that's why you made me drop the class."

His brow furrowed, his jaw working. "Quite the opposite. I thought your writing

was excellent."

I didn't even have the strength to yell at him, confusion locking down my chest, stealing my breath. "Then...*why*?"

"I thought it was the best choice at the time. You were so headstrong and wild in high school - I was worried you were throwing your life away, despite how talented you seemed to be."

Talented? I sank back into the leather chair, shock making my knees feel like Jell-O. I should have been mad. I should have been screaming at him for taking my future away. But, all I could do was blink - absorbing his words was all my brain could handle.

In the absence of a reply from me, Carlisle folded his hands together in front of him, bowing his head. "I'm sorry, Edward. I should have let you make your own decisions."

I let out a short bark of a laugh, dazed beyond belief, and then fixed my gaze on my father. "I always thought you were disappointed in me."

"Not at all. If anything, I'm disappointed in myself for not having more faith in you."

Well, that's a familiar sentiment. Hadn't I just had the same conversation with Bella? Maybe that was a problem with the Cullens - we needed a crash course in faith.

"I respect your choice to step down, Edward, if that's what you really want to do." My father lifted his head, clearing his throat and meeting my stare. "It takes a lot of courage to make a leap into the unknown like you are, and...I'm proud of you."

I flushed under his praise - something I never thought I'd hear, especially considering the circumstances. A small smile turned up the corners of my father's lips. "And who knows - maybe you'll be good enough to write for *The Guard* someday."

We both laughed at that, and I bobbed my head in agreement. "Maybe, someday."

My father stood, extending a hand toward me to shake. His grasp was warm and firm around mine, re-forging a connection between us, fixing a bond that never should have been broken to begin with.

"You'll stay on while we interview for your replacement?"

Our hands lingered in one another's' grasp, and for a moment, I considered telling him about Bella right then and there. But I'd had enough good luck dropping one bomb on him - no need to tempt fate. "Of course. Thank you, Dad."

We agreed on meeting for dinner one night the following week, and as I moved toward the door, the heavy weight I'd been carrying for years melted off my shoulders, my lungs easing up, as if the air were physically clearing between us.

And then it really hit me - *I'm finally free.*

Returning to *The Guard's* floor, I hurried through the lobby, anxious to be near Bella, to tell her my good news. Dodging the photographers, writers and editors hurrying around on the floor, I tried to find her. She wasn't at her desk, and my eyes sought her out, darting across the room.

I finally saw her standing just outside Rosalie's office, and breathed a sigh of relief.

Bella's eyes were wide, the deep, encompassing brown enveloping me in warmth, even though we were yards away from one another. Her dark hair tumbled down her shoulders, resting on a crisp white blouse that hid her beautiful curves. She was dressed plainly, but nothing about Bella was ordinary - underneath those simple clothes was an absolutely phenomenal woman, who had rocked my world in more ways than one.

An involuntary smile washed over my face, a grin that echoed across the room, mirrored back at me on the face of the woman I loved. And then, I did what Edward Cullen did best.

I winked at her.

****CH&RR****

"So... what the hell does this *mean*?" Jasper asked.

A few hours later, I was stretched out in a chair in Jasper's office, watching his jaw drop as I told him about my conversation with Carlisle.

"It means I'm out."

"Out?" Jasper's eyebrows rose so high, I was afraid they'd fly off his forehead. "Like, you quit?"

I just nodded, a stupid grin on my face.

"Holy crap!" he shouted. "Dude, I thought you were just telling the mystery girl you loved her. What is this, Edward-Cullen-Tells-Everyone-The-Truth-Day?"

"Well, if that were the case, I'd be telling you that you're a pain in the ass."

Jasper raised his chin in response to my jab, smiling wryly at me. "Man, I can't believe your dad. What a mindfuck."

"You're telling me." I raised my arms over my head, stretching. The day felt like it had lasted forever. And it was driving me crazy that I hadn't been able to talk to Bella.

Just as I'd caught Bella's eye and smiled, Jessica had rail-roaded into me, short of breath as she rattled off my schedule. Despite the fact that I had just given notice, I was still the acting Editor in Chief, and we had an issue to send to print. So all I'd been able to do was text Bella from my desk when I finally had a free moment.

The meeting went fine - more than fine actually. Can't wait to tell you later. See you tonight?

Her reply came swiftly, and I rocked back in my chair, smiling as I read her words.

Yes! I'm so happy for you! I've got lots to tell you, too!

I'd instructed my doorman to supply her with a set of keys, and my body had hardened at just the thought of returning to my bed with Bella, of keeping her there for hours, of never letting her out of it again.

"It's going to be weird here without you, but you're really doing what you want now, right?" Jasper asked, bringing me back to the present. I nodded and grinned, still slightly shocked that it was true. "Who is Carlisle going to bring on to replace you?"

"Don't know yet. They're going to interview for the position."

With an odd expression, Jasper mumbled, "Wonder who they're going to ask."

I gazed at my friend - the one who ran the staff meetings by my side, who had the rapport with advertisers, photographers and competitors alike. He knew the running of *The Guard* inside and out, and the editors all loved him.

How had I never realized my job was so much better suited for him?

It felt right, the idea of *The Guard* in his hands - he would treat it well. And I was fairly certain my father would agree.

"Well, I know who they *should* ask."

Jasper's face was blank, so apparently he did not. I could have been a sadistic son of a bitch and fucked with him, but I was too damn happy for that. "*You, you moron.*"

He blinked for a moment, emotion clouding his face, and then recovered quickly. "Well, of course. Your successor *should* be better looking than you. It's just the natural progression of things."

"Yeah, yeah. First, we'll have to see if you can handle the grueling interview process."

Jasper chuckled. "Oh, I think I can handle that."

I grinned back at him, and then my phone buzzed in my pocket. Seeing it was a message from Bella made my pulse quicken, even before I read it.

Finished at HR. Rose is taking me out for a drink. Warning - I may be tipsy later. See you soon?

"She's got you wrapped around her finger already, doesn't she?" Jasper gestured toward my phone. I ignored him, my smile wide as I typed back a reply to her, and Jasper snorted at me. "You're a grinning fool, my man."

Yes, I am, and I don't give a crap who knows it.

"So, when are we going to finally find out who's made an honest man out of you?"

I rubbed my jaw absentmindedly, my thoughts still flashing back to images of Bella, warm and soft under my sheets. "Soon," was all I replied.

"You suck." He launched a copy of the magazine in my direction, and I caught it with a laugh.

"Come on, jackass." I stashed my phone in my back pocket and tossed the magazine back in his direction. He caught the shiny papers with ease. "Let me show you how an Editor sends a final issue to print."

An hour or so later, the sun was setting over the city as my cab raced uptown. Bella had sent me several more texts as she got progressively more buzzed, and the last one had kept me uncomfortably hard since I'd raced out of my office.

In your bedroom. Will keep removing clothing as punishment for your lateness.

Just the idea of Bella in my bedroom, slowly peeling clothing from her perfect body as she waited for me to come to her was fucking killing me.

And then,

If you take too much longer, you'll miss all the fun. *evil grin*

You'd better not have started without me, I threatened back, although the idea of her touching herself in my bed, aching with so much need that she couldn't help herself, was ridiculously hot.

By the time I reached my apartment building, she'd started texting me pictures. The last one was of the flat expanse of her belly, with one single button of her jeans popped open. The tease was too much, and when I finally wrenched the front door open, I needed her so badly, I thought I'd go completely insane.

"Welcome home, honey," she sang from the bedroom. The sultry sound of her voice made my cock twitch.

I hurried down the hallway, pulling my shirt free of my pants, and stopped dead in the doorway to the bedroom when I saw her. In only a bra and those half-open jeans, she was sprawled out across the sheets, her dark hair splayed on my pillow.

Bella must have been able to tell how much I wanted her, because her wanton expression turned wicked. She rolled herself up demurely, propping herself up on arms poised behind her, causing her breasts to jut out in offering.

Holy fucking shit, she is so god damn hot.

"How was your day, dear?" she purred. The innocence in her voice was all a farce, and I stalked toward the bed. Kneeling on the edge, I crawled closer to her as I drew

my arms free from my button down.

"I think we'll talk about our days later."

I bent down to place a wet kiss just below her bra, and she bowed upward on the bed beneath me. Then my hands went to work on the buttons of her jeans.

"But you haven't told me about your meeting with your father yet."

"*Later*," I growled low in my throat, breathing in the heat that was rolling off her in waves. "Need you now."

Bella lifted her hips as I shimmed her jeans down her legs, revealing tiny black panties that matched her bra. Still propped up on her arms, she bent her legs at the knee and spread them wide, inviting me in. Kicking off my own pants, I knelt between her open legs and leaned forward. Sliding both hands into her hair, I tugged just hard enough to hear her hiss and then kissed her. Hard.

She moaned loudly into my mouth as our tongues slid together, grinding her hips up and against my straining erection. The sensation made me crave more, made me desperate to be inside her tight, wet heat. My hands left her face and lowered quickly to grasp her ass, lifting her so she sat on my knees. With her body flush against mine, I could feel how soaked she was already, even through my boxers and her panties.

"You were going to start without me?" I bit down harshly on one of her nipples through the fabric of her bra, and she gasped, arching closer to me. I gave the same treatment to the other breast, a delicious little punishment for teasing me. "That wasn't very nice."

She let out a sultry laugh. "But look at the response I got."

Making quick work of removing her bra, I settled her back down on the bed. She raised one leg at a time to shimmy out of her panties, making little mewling sounds as I stroked the insides of her thighs. Inch by inch, I moved closer and closer to where we both wanted me to be, until neither of us could take another second.

Standing quickly, I yanked down my boxers and grabbed a foil packet from my nightstand, rolling on the condom. Bella was whimpering my name when I returned to the bed and knelt before her, arranging my knees on the outside of her open thighs. Grabbing her by her hips, I pulled her against me, both of us letting out a rush of air as my tip brushed against her wet flesh.

It felt wrong to be about to take her so roughly, and I paused, asking permission with my gaze. Her big, doe eyes were staring up at me, wide and straining with need.

"Take me, Edward," she whispered. "*Please.*"

Cursing low under my breath, I pushed forward, my head sinking back in pleasure as I filled every inch of her. It felt so fucking good, I almost came on that first stroke. "God, Bella!"

Keeping my hands on her hips to rock her body against mine, I started driving into her with quick, shallow thrusts. Her eyes glossed over as she looked down to where we were joined, then slid closed as I picked up my rhythm.

She reached her arms over her head to grasp the pillow behind her, writhing against me, her breasts bouncing every time I slid in and out. I changed angles, hitting a new spot inside her, and she cried out, grasping my hand.

"Yes! *Fuck!* Oh, God, Edward...please, make me come."

Feeling the same desperate need myself, I gritted my teeth as I continued to plunge inside her, trying to stay in control. Dragging her hand down to her wet flesh, I guided her fingers in circles against her clit, pleasure surging as I felt her get even wetter.

Hanging on by a thread, I watched as she rubbed herself feverishly, groaning every time I felt her fingers brush against where we were joined. Bella turned her face into her own arm, biting her lip and squeezing her eyes shut.

"So good, so good, oh...oh *God!*" She let out a sharp gasp, her entire body arching off the bed as she shuddered and writhed, letting out the most sinful sounds I'd ever heard her make.

Falling forward and bracing my palms on either side of her, I gave in, losing myself to the feeling. I tried to hold her gaze, but my release barreled through me, my eyes slamming shut. The pleasure was so intense I was powerless to it, to her, and I rode each wave out until I was shaking and spent.

And afterward, in the cocooned enclosure of each other's arms, I told Bella all about my meeting with my father. She, in turn, filled me in on her conversation with Victoria. We murmured softly to one another through the early hours of the morning, and as she fell into a quiet sleep, I realized for the first time in my life that

there was nothing more I wanted than to be right where I was.

****CH&RR****

A few weeks later, everything in my life was almost completely unrecognizable from the caged-in existence I'd been living before.

My resignation had been a big shock for everyone at the office. I'd informed the editors at our June issue planning meeting, and then told the rest of the staff, as well. An interview committee had been meeting with candidates, and after several rounds, Jasper's name was at the top of a very short list. In the weeks that had passed, he'd become increasingly eager to get the job, and I personally felt they'd be idiots not to pick him.

Regardless of who the top choice ended up being, I would stay on during the transition, making sure everything went smoothly. Peter was waiting patiently to bring me on board, and I'd started investigating creative writing courses at N.Y.U.'s Continuing Education department, as well.

I knew the upcoming change would signal a massive shift in income, so I'd also started staking out apartments in buildings not as pricey as mine was.

And my father and I had been getting along better than ever. A new mutual respect had been born between us, the tension that we'd harbored for years finally lifted. I even found myself enjoying dinner out with him and my mother, and found myself looking forward to introducing Bella to him as my girlfriend instead of dreading that.

When that was going to happen, though, was still up in the air.

Bella had shifted into her new position with grace, taking on her increased responsibilities with gusto, her energy and enthusiasm blowing the rest of the team away. And luckily, so far, no one had picked up on the fact that my resignation coincided with the very day Bella took her promotion. No one was asking any questions, either.

Except maybe for the freaking Hardy Boys.

Thankfully, Alice had been true to her word about keeping her mouth shut, leaving Jasper firmly in the dark, but he and Emmett had been relentless in trying to find out who my 'mystery girl' was. They threw out ridiculous suggestions, ranging from Mrs. Cope to the nineteen year old who delivered the mail. Apparently, infidelity and

age differences didn't sway their options.

I wouldn't budge, though, and it was a trip seeing how frustrated they got. But Bella and I had decided to keep quiet, staying under the radar until after I'd officially left *The Guard*. Somehow, the waiting didn't seem to bother either one of us anymore.

Especially since she had been spending nearly every night in my bed.

Bella had also put her name on a list Victoria Brown had compiled of women who were willing to testify that Hawkings had harassed them. That redhead was a real fire-cracker - she'd even gotten legal backing. I was thrilled beyond belief to hear that she was trying to bring that fucker down. And I was proud as hell of Bella for having a helping hand in it.

The list of women coming forward was longer than I'd ever imagined, confirming the suspicions I'd laid on him that night at the bar. When news of his behavior hit the print and TV media, the story exploded, and rumors started flying about Hawkings stepping down. I was hopeful that he'd disappear, for good.

By the first of April, *The Guard's* interview committee had made their decision, and the top candidates went in to meet with Carlisle and Eleazar. I was nervous as hell that day, waiting for Jasper to return from his meeting. But when he finally arrived at my door, his face was downcast and sullen.

Fuck. They went with someone else.

"Bad news?" I felt like shit for raising Jasper's hopes, for building him up for disappointment, but then the idiot grinned, his face lighting up like a fucking light bulb.

"April Fools!" he shouted, like a gleeful little kid. "Looks like I'm the head honcho around here now, so, Edward, when are you getting the hell out of my office?"

Mother fucker. Before I had time to tell Jasper just how hard I was going to kick his ass, a massive hand clamped down on his shoulder, and Emmett's colossal form stepped into the room behind him.

"You're taking Cullen's place, huh?" Emmett grinned at Jasper, who nodded. "Good. This place needed a *real* man in charge."

"Yeah, yeah. Welcome-the-fuck-back, douchebag."

I'd been free from Emmett's workout beatings for a week since he'd taken Rosalie on an impromptu Vegas vacation. He flashed me a blindingly chipper smile.

"Thanks, Squirt. It seems like it's a night for all of us to celebrate." Emmett lifted his arm from Jasper's shoulder, revealing a thick silver band on his ring finger. "Rosie and I tied the knot this weekend."

"Dude! She went for that?" Jasper gaped. "Alice is never going to elope. She's going to want the whole song and dance, I know it."

As they jabbered like monkeys, my thoughts drifted to Bella, wondering what kind of wedding she might want. The fact that I was picturing her heart-shaped face gazing up at me, colored with that beautiful flush, her body draped in white as she walked down a long aisle, was surprising.

As was the fact that it didn't freak me out. At all.

It was then that I realized how quiet Emmett and Jasper were. As I glanced up, I saw that their conspiratorial grins matched.

Oh, hell.

"Edward," Emmett warned in a sing-song tone. "I *believe* you haven't bought me a wedding gift."

They both took a step toward me, and I moved backward, raising my hands in defense. "I didn't know you got married!"

"You know what?" Jasper added, advancing further. "You haven't bought *me* a congratulatory gift for my promotion, either."

"Dude, I just found out!"

They closed in, their grins wide as they cornered me against the window. Smiling at one another menacingly, and Emmett folded his arms across his chest. "We'll take one coming-out-of-the-closet-with-your-mystery-girl to make up for it," he declared.

Jasper raised his hand. "I second that!"

I groaned, rubbing my face with my hands. "You guys are idiots, you know that?"

The fact was that I had been dying to come clean about Bella, but I couldn't out us

without her knowing about it. We'd sworn to total honesty between us, no more secrets, because, as Bella had put it, they really sucked.

I opened my eyes to their expectant grins, but I shut them down. I had to. If nothing else, it was payback for all the shit they'd put me through with Heidi. "Let me get back to you on that."

"That's a no-go, Cullen." Jasper's grin was threatening. "We're celebrating tonight, either way. And Bacardi's on the menu unless you've got that girl on your arm."

I rolled my eyes, but the truth was, I was ready to show Bella off. It had been nearly a month since she'd taken her promotion, and I was officially no longer Editor in Chief. I was ready - I wanted to tell the whole fucking world that she was mine - and it felt better than anything I'd ever imagined.

Edward Cullen, commitment-phobe no longer. Who would have thought it?

I just hoped Bella felt the same way, too.

****CH&RR****

"Isn't it too soon? It's only been a few weeks, and you haven't actually *left* yet." Bella chewed her lip nervously, perched on the edge of my bed.

"Bella, I'm not Editor in Chief anymore. It's Jasper's job now." I'd moved in closer to her, skimming my nose along her jaw. Even though we were supposed to be having a serious discussion, with her sitting there on my sheets, looking sexy as hell, it was hard to concentrate on talking.

"But-" Her protest died on a gasp as I bit down gently where her neck met her shoulder. She moaned softly, arching her neck, leaving room for me to kiss and nip at her smooth skin.

I let my voice drop to a whisper, bringing my lips up to her ear. "I'm not your boss anymore."

Bella's head sank back, her eyes half open. She looked practically drugged from what I was doing to her, and I loved that I still had that effect. As my lips and tongue went to work on her neck, Bella's arguments got progressively weaker. "But, I don't have anything fancy to wear..."

My fingers found their way under her blouse, dancing over her smooth flesh.

"Then don't wear anything at all."

Needless to say, a few hours passed before we left the apartment.

When we were finally in a cab heading downtown, Bella was gazing out the window, our hands entwined in my lap. I could tell she was uneasy - her emotions permeated the air around us.

She'd been silent since we'd stopped at her apartment for her to get a change of clothes. As I'd sat waiting on her couch, I was surprised to discover I was tired of keeping our things separate. I wanted to see her clothes in my closet, her perfumes and toothbrush and all the little things that filled her world in my home. But it was too soon for that.

One step at a time, Cullen.

It felt funny to be the one trying to convince her to tell everyone about us, when I'd been the one to put the kibosh on everything back in February. Her uncertainty made me feel like I'd pushed her too far.

"Hey, could you drop us off here, please?" I asked the driver. Bella turned toward me, a question in her eyes, but I wanted to have a minute to talk.

We paused on the corner of West 13th Street, still out of sight of *Howl at the Moon*. Emmett had rallied the club up, NFL-style, to celebrate all of our big announcements. Even as far away as we were, we could hear the loud bass pumping from the club's open windows, letting in the fresh spring air. We were far enough away from the entrance that she could still change her mind.

"Are you sure you're ready for this?" I asked.

Bella turned her gaze down the street and I stood back to take her in, marveling at her beauty. Her hair was off her shoulders in a simple twist at the nape of her neck, showing off glimpses of the smooth, pale skin of her neck I'd tasted just hours before. I had half a mind to hail another cab and take her back home, but I needed to focus on what she wanted in that moment.

And I didn't have a clue what that was.

Time to stop sucking at relationships!

"Baby?" I pulled her in toward me. "Answer me, please?"

She forced a grin. "Are you kidding, Edward? Do you have any idea how long I've wanted to show up someplace fabulous with you?"

Her smile was all bravado, the look in her eyes betraying her courage, and I grazed my palms reassuringly over her shoulders.

"If you're not ready, we don't have to," I reminded her.

"But you are?" Her voice dropped a few notches, insecurity rising to the surface.

I lifted my hand to her face, brushing my thumb across her cheek. "Yes. I'm sorry it took me so long to get there, but I am."

My answer seemed to bolster her confidence and she took a breath. "Then let's go for it."

We walked hand in hand down the street and the beat got louder as we neared the club doors. I pressed a kiss to her knuckle just before we stepped inside, and the irony didn't escape me that we were about to come forward in the very place that had started it all.

Our fingers firmly tangled together, we made our way toward the bar. Alice was the first to see us, and she elbowed Jasper in the side. He turned around, his eyes peeling wide just as Emmett's head whipped toward us.

"I *knew* it!" Emmett roared and then snapped at Jasper. "Pay up, pretty boy."

Jasper cursed, reaching back to pull his wallet from his pocket. He glared at Alice. "You couldn't have given me a tiny hint?" She shrugged innocently and shook her head as Jasper passed a fifty toward a beaming Emmett.

"You did *not* know," I argued as Emmett slipped the bill in his pocket.

"Did so." He grinned. "I just didn't want you to *know* I knew."

Bella curled into my side, her blush fierce. "How'd you figure it out?"

"Simple." Emmett turned to the bartender for a second, accepting two glasses of champagne and handing them to us. "Edward wouldn't fall for anyone less than the prettiest, most intelligent woman at *The Guard*."

Rosalie turned from the conversation she'd been having next to him, raising a

disapproving eyebrow.

"Uh, the second-prettiest and most intelligent, of course." Emmett blathered, looking like he was about to face a night sleeping on his couch. When Rosalie grinned and slipped into his arms, he turned back our way. "Cheers, you two."

As Bella and I took the glasses full of the sparkling liquid from him, I chuckled, feeling relief rush through me. There was no judgment, no horror and shock, and I tilted my head back for a sip of champagne. Before I could drink, though, a loud squeal erupted behind us.

"No. Freaking. Way!"

We turned swiftly to see Jake behind us with Angela to his side. They both stood there, mouths hanging open, looking as if they just been *Punk'd*.

"Oh, no. Who invited you two?" Bella half-laughed.

"I did!" Rose bellowed

When she lifted her hand, I could see a sparkling row of diamonds had been added to her outrageous engagement ring. "Jake here has some *serious* taste. We may need to have a segment entirely on shoes, thanks to all the new designers he's brought to my attention."

"It's so romantic." Angela leaned forward, twisting her hands together and placing them against her heart. "I can't believe you two were secretly dating all this time!"

"I can't believe you didn't tell us!" Jake scowled, then shook his head. "You know what this means, don't you?"

Jake raised an eyebrow at us, and Bella took take the bait.

"What does it mean?" she asked dryly, a giggle spilling through her words.

"It *means* that my boyfriend is a freaking genius!" he shouted, coming forward to point a finger at me. "If it weren't for Paul making you over on Valentine's Day, Edward never would have known what a knock out you are."

I didn't have the heart to tell him I had thought she was amazing all along.

A smug grin flashed across his features, and then he leaned down to peck Bella's

cheek. "Couldn't be happier for you, honey."

As more champagne glasses were passed around, the conversation switched from our big announcement to the new jobs and unions. Emmett and Rosalie started talking about their wedding, with Jake gawking over her ring and demanding to hear all about the dress she'd worn.

And having Bella wrapped snugly against my side, her fingers grasping the back of my shirt in a tiny fist, was the best feeling I'd ever had.

The conversation ebbed and flowed as the evening progressed, drinks passing hands, and for one moment, I met Alice's eye across the group. Things had been so tense between us that night in Bella's apartment, and I'd never gotten to thank her properly for giving it to me straight. I gave her a small nod - it was all I could do in that moment to express my gratitude.

She inclined her head almost imperceptibly, her lips turning up into a slow smile, a quiet exchange between us. Bella craned her neck up at me, no doubt wondering what she'd caught between us, but I just smiled at her and kissed her forehead.

The band reared up, and everyone clapped and pulled out to the dance floor for their rendition of *George Michael's* "Faith." We hung back at the bar, and my hand snaked around to the small of Bella's back, eager to feel as much of her body I could get my hands on in a public place.

Somehow, above all the noise in the club, she heard her phone go off, and reached into her purse. Reading out the message on the screen, she turned it up my way.

James is resigning! He decided to leave rather than face the charges alleged against him. Thanks for all your help - Victoria.

A brilliant smile stretched across Bella's features. "See? Everything worked out! You just needed to have a little more faith in everything."

Yes I've gotta have faith...

Ooooh, I've gotta have faith.

The lyrics were ridiculously fucking appropriate.

All the worries and fears I'd had about us, about our friends' reactions, could all have been erased if only I'd had a little more faith in us. In them. In life.

With nearly everyone we held dear only a few feet away, I dipped down to place a soft kiss on Bella's lips. "I do, now."

She giggled, blushed and bit her lip, and fucking hell if the combination didn't make me hard for her all over again.

I could have told her she was killing me, but it wasn't the truth. What was true was that she had made me feel truly alive again. So instead, I shook just my head and kissed her.

When we strolled out of the club sometime later, waving goodbye to our friends and leaving the months of secrecy behind us, we passed a twenty-four hour deli on the street corner. Lined up outside were tall buckets filled with dozens of different types and colors of flowers, wrapped together in cellophane. But I knew what Bella liked the best.

"Edward, you don't have to-" she began to protest, but I hushed her, picking up the largest bouquet of lush, red roses I could find and stepping inside to pay. When I handed them to her, Bella took a deep pull from the fragrant blossoms, closing her eyes.

"Thank you. They're beautiful."

"I suppose that depends on what you're comparing them to." She blushed and I lifted my hand to stroke her face, the backs of my fingers brushing over her cheek. "You deserve flowers every day, Bella Swan."

Those big brown eyes gazed up at me behind her thick eyelashes, and I swore I'd make good on that decree.

I'd do everything I could to make every day for her as special as Valentine's Day.

Don't forget to stop by my blog to check out the amazing polyvore outfits made by AmberDK!

The epilogue will be up next Friday. Thanks for sticking with me!

****hugs****

Aylah

Chapter 11: Candy Hearts & Red Roses

A million thank yous go to Kyla713, Awesomesauce76, Agoodwich, Theladyingrey and AmberDK.

Disclaimer: All things Twilight belong to Stephenie Meyer.

BPOV

One year later - the following Valentine's Day.

"Edward! I'm back!"

Probably didn't need to holler that one out, I thought as I bounded up the steps.

Although it was relatively quiet that Saturday morning, it was hard not to hear everything that happened in the stairwell of our fifth floor walk-up in Brooklyn. The heavy panting of our dog, Sam, as he scampered through the apartment looking for Edward, was another announcement in itself.

Things had progressed quickly since we'd confessed our relationship to our friends the previous spring. As soon as Edward was settled in working for Peter, he told his parents he'd be bringing someone to one of their weekly Sunday dinners. The meals had become a staple in their lives since Edward had gotten on better terms with his father.

I'd nearly chewed my lower lip off my face in nervousness waiting to meet them - Carlisle was, after all, still my boss. With Edward's hand securely wrapped around my own, he'd walked me into the posh restaurant and to the table where his parents sat and introduced me as the woman who'd changed his life.

Esme's smile had been soft and welcoming, the happiness in her face mirroring that of her son's. Carlisle had seemed a little confused at first, his brow furrowed in suspicion and concern as we were seated in front of them. Any questions he'd wanted to ask, however, were wiped out by Esme's conversation as she asked me about where I grew up and how Edward swept me off my feet.

By the end of the dinner, Carlisle was asking me if I would please join them the following week, and any worries about his bad opinion of us disappeared.

It wasn't very long after that night that Edward asked me to live with him. He'd been so shy when he brought it up, not sure if it was too soon.

Was it ever too soon to spend every night and day with the man of your dreams?

I didn't think so.

The apartment we'd found on St. John's Place was warm and cozy - a one bedroom with enough space for him to have a place to write, although he had a tendency to leave papers and journals on every single surface. I didn't mind the mess - it was physical evidence of his creativity coming to light.

It had also been a move of necessity. His smaller salary as a writer meant he'd needed to move out of the beautiful sky-rise he'd lived in near the park, and that had coincided with Alice and Jasper deciding to move in together, leaving me without a roommate. It seemed a win-win for everyone involved.

I turned to hang my coat up on the hook on the wall, brushing the snow off the back of it. It was positively frigid outside, but when Sam had to go, we went, weather be damned. I didn't care - he was a gorgeous golden retriever we'd picked up from a local shelter - loyal and friendly, and loved Edward to death.

Just like I did.

My phone buzzed in my pockets, one vibration right after the next. The first one was Alice, asking what Edward and I were up to.

Things had been going really well for Alice and Jasper. She had secured another leading role in her ballet company's current production, and Jasper had been an excellent Editor in Chief at *The Guard*, although no one could quite measure up to Edward in my eyes.

The second text was from Rosalie: ***"Just felt the baby kick for the first time! You two got big plans tonight?"***

I grinned - Rosalie and Emmett were expecting in a few months. Rose had become a mentor to me as well as a friend. She'd also bonded like glue to Alice, which wasn't a surprise considering their mutual tastes in fashion. The fact that our significant others were best friends also meant the six of us were almost always together.

Although I couldn't figure out why both of them wanted to know our plans for the evening.

Strange. I texted them both back at the same time.

"Not much - probably just staying in since it's so cold out!"

I tossed my phone onto the bench we kept by the front door, and bent over to unlace my boots, musing over how much had changed in the past year.

Jake was still an assistant, but would be covering for Rosalie when she took her maternity leave, and Angela had moved on from *The Guard*, taking an editorial position at a travel magazine. She was a little bored, but at least she didn't have to get coffee for anyone anymore. And speaking of coffee, neither did I - well, except for myself. Jessica and Lauren, however, were still doing their assistant gigs, and while they were none-too-pleased about my promotion after a year of looking down their noses at me, I'd pretty much learned to ignore them.

And James Hawkings was nowhere to be found.

I'd stayed in contact with Victoria and she'd kept me in touch with the gossip - rumor had it that James had gone out to California and was trying his hand at the restaurant business. Every day, I thanked my lucky stars that I didn't end up having to work for that sleaze, and that Edward and I got our happily ever after.

I kicked off my huge, clunky snow boots one by one, leaving them on the boot tray we had by the door, careful not to step in the puddles I'd left behind.

"Edward?" I called out again, taking a few steps farther into our apartment, and then froze, my eyes widening in surprise.

In the half hour I'd been out with Sam, the entire place had been transformed. Roses now adorned every surface - bouquets in glass vases, in a shocking variation of colors - brilliant reds, pale pinks and a smattering of purples. Petals had been strewn everywhere as well, and flickering votives set the walls to a warm glow.

"Oh wow..."

I couldn't speak as Edward crept out from the bedroom, with Sam happily panting by his side. That beautiful crooked grin was on Edward's face, still stealing my breath away after all that time. His hands were shoved into his pockets and his hair was messier than it had ever been. It was as if he'd spent so much time fixing up the apartment, he'd forgotten to look after himself.

And, as usual, he looked like everything sexy and adorable combined as he looked

up at me, brilliant green sparkling from under the thick line of his lashes.

"Happy Valentine's Day," he murmured softly.

Holy crap! Had I really forgotten what day it was?

I couldn't speak, surprise turning my brain to mush. Edward had made a habit of buying me flowers several times a week, even if it was just a single rose from a vendor in the subway tunnels. But this was a set up of epic proportions, and my heart thudded in my chest.

He looked around the room and laughed, seeming a little embarrassed. "Um, I got you a few more flowers than last year."

I couldn't help but laugh. "You think?"

He took a step toward me, picking up a heart-shaped box that had been on the kitchen table, nearly hidden amidst all the flowers. "I got you something else, too." The bright red, velveteen box of candy he held out toward me made me blush to almost the same color.

"Thank you," I said, holding it tightly, wondering how it was possible I'd forgotten such an important day.

"Open it," he encouraged softly.

Thinking that I'd much rather be kissing him than have the taste of chocolate on my tongue, I reluctantly opened the box, only to discover there was nothing edible inside - just another, smaller box.

This one was also velvet. And dark blue.

"Oh...my...God."

I swore my heart stopped beating, and my hands shook so hard I nearly dropped the box on the floor. I looked frantically from his face back to what was in my hands. "Well," he asked softly. "Aren't you going to look at your present?"

I swallowed hard, my pulse hammering through me, and used my thumb to pop the little box open. When I saw the brilliant diamond nestled inside, my other hand clamped over my open mouth and tears began running down my cheeks.

Movement caught my eye and I glanced up to see that Edward had gone down to one knee. But while I was falling apart at the seams, he was the essence of calm.

From the floor, he pulled the diamond ring from its velvet home and took my hand in his.

"I want to give you everything, Bella. I want to spend every day of my life making you as happy as you've made me." Edward's voice was so gentle and soft that I strained to hear it over my own quivering breaths.

"I'd give you candy hearts and red roses every day of the week, but I'm hoping that promising to give you my love every day for the rest of my life will be better than that."

There were so many tears in my eyes, I could barely see as he positioned the ring at the tip of my finger.

"Bella, will you marry me?"

I tried to stifle the sob that escaped me, but it didn't work very well. Edward looked slightly amused as he gazed up at me from the floor. "That's not exactly the response I was hoping for."

I shook my head adoringly at him, laughing through my tears.

"Is that laugh a 'yes'?" Edward asked, with the ring still poised over my first knuckle.

Was he kidding?

"Of course, it's a yes!" I finally managed to say. "Yes, I'll marry you!"

From the floor, Sam barked loudly in approval, his tail wagging wildly.

Edward grinned, standing up and pushing the ring up my finger. It fit perfectly, the diamond sparkling against the soft light of the candles. He cupped my face in his hands, wiping my tears away with his thumbs.

"I love you," he whispered and kissed me softly, sweetly. Each pass of his lips against mine grew more passionate until his tongue dipped into my mouth and the contact made me moan.

Still making me dizzy with kisses so delicious, they should have been illegal, he lifted me into his arms and carried me into the bedroom. As he laid me down on the bed, a sudden realization took hold.

"Wait," I panted, pushing him away with one hand and glaring at him. "Is this why Rosalie and Alice wanted so badly to know what I was up to tonight?"

He half grinned, half winced, scrunching up his face in embarrassment. "You don't really think they would have let me pick out a ring for you on my *own*, did you?"

Any further conversation was lost as he lowered his lips to mine once again, teasing me with nips of his teeth and brushes of his tongue against mine until I wasn't sure whose clothes I wanted to tear off first.

We made love through that afternoon and into the evening, only emerging from the bedroom to take Sam out for another walk. I quickly texted my two best friends our news before bundling up against the cold. Edward and I walked Sam through the snowflakes and grabbed some Chinese take-out on the way back home. It was simple - just the way I liked things.

And it was the best Valentine's Day I'd ever had.

The next morning, we were up before the sun, Edward's body hard and needy again behind mine as we lay side by side on our bed. As consciousness drew near, I felt him lifting my hair off my neck, pressing a soft kiss to my jaw. His hand slipped around to my belly, pulling me back against him. Holding me close, he took me again, our other hands entwined against the pillow over my head. My release was unending, a continuous wave of delicious spasms overtaking me, and Edward's breath was warm and soft at my ear.

"I love you," he whispered as we both settled back down on the sweaty sheets.

He fell back asleep but I stayed awake, my mind suddenly traveling back to the previous Valentine's Day, when I was certain Edward had no interest in me whatsoever.

I stood from the bed, pulling my robe up and sliding my arms into the fluffy fabric, stepping onto the cold wood floor. Looking around the tiny bedroom we shared, my eyes fell onto our closet. All of our things were strewn about, mixed together, unable to tell whose things were whose in the waxing light of the dawn. But I could still make out my plain comfortable clothes, mixed in with all the fancy outfits Alice had insisted I wear.

It was funny - for so long, I'd felt like the ugly duckling, like I didn't belong. Alice and Jake had dressed me up - had me primped and prodded - but the makeover hadn't changed me at all. Underneath it all, I'd been the same girl all along.

"Come back to bed, Mrs. Cullen," Edward murmured.

I turned caught his eye with a smile. "I could get used to hearing you call me that."

"Please do."

I crawled into bed next to Edward, letting him encircle me in his arms. My ring sparkled in the sunlight, and the brilliant facets reminded me of myself. At one point that diamond was plain and simple, its luster dull and unpolished. It was Edward's love that made me shine.

That, and a couple of pairs of really expensive shoes.

But I no longer needed fancy clothes, or candy hearts and red roses any more - I had everything I needed, right there next to me.

Thank you all so much for reading, reviewing, and sticking with me through the angst! I hope it was worth the ride.

****hugs****

Aylah