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Adore, Adore

by [ooza](#)

Summary

Bella is in a financial pinch and facing eviction. When propositioned by her landlord, she is faced with a difficult decision: give up her apartment or give up her body.

"What do you want to do to me?" she asked.

"Everything."

Notes

Warning: This story was written for the sole purpose of smut. Dirty, dirty smut. The sexual acts that take place occur between two consenting adults. These are not, by any means, safe guidelines for any sexual encounter. If any of the events/circumstances in this story offend you, please stop reading.

Chapter 1

“Thanks for the ride home, Jane,” I said as I opened the passenger door.

“No worries. I owe you one since you’re picking up my shift tomorrow. Sorry about waiting till the last minute to ask.”

“Any time,” I assured her. “I need the hours.”

“Thanks, Bella. See you later.”

“Bye.”

My feet protested as I stepped out of the car. Wearing new shoes for a 12 hour shift at the diner today had been a bad idea, but I didn’t have time to break them in and my old ones were shot. I limped through the front door of my apartment complex, pausing when I came to the cluster of shiny, silver mailboxes. It had been a week since I last collected my mail. There was no point. It’s not like I could pay any of the bills that were sure to be in there. With a sigh, I unlocked the box and removed the stack of mail, trying unsuccessfully not to notice the bright pink envelope that surely denoted something was past due.

Begrudgingly, I made my way to the stairs. As much as I would have loved to take the elevator, I didn’t want to walk clear to the end of the hallway. Thankfully my apartment was on the second floor and not the sixth. I breathed a sigh of relief when there was nothing taped to my door. Yesterday was the first of the month, making me officially 90 days behind on rent.

I kicked off my shoes before the door finished closing behind me and dropped the stack of mail onto the ever growing pile on my kitchen table, opting to sort through everything tomorrow when I get paid. I wasn’t used to getting a check every other week; it made it hard to budget. At least I had a job, even if it was a crappy one.

I plopped on the couch before glancing at the clock. If I went to bed now, I would get almost six hours of sleep, and that was without eating dinner and showering, both things I desperately needed. Maybe if I closed my eyes for a couple of minutes . . .

A loud knock on the door caused me to jump. It was way too late for a social call. I looked through the peephole and was met by a familiar face. I didn’t know the man personally, but I did recognize him. I assumed he lived on one of the upper floors as our paths had crossed in the stairwell on more than one occasion. He was tall and thin with a messy mop of bronze colored hair that always fell into his green eyes. He had a nice ass, too. I knew this because, whenever he walked by, I always turned around for a view from the rear.

My heart pounded in my chest. I looked down at myself and groaned. I was still wearing my work clothes—a black skirt and a tight white T-shirt with a giant mustard stain across it. Not that it mattered. He probably got some of my mail by mistake or something and was just being neighborly.

“Hi,” I greeted shyly after opening the door.

He seemed surprised to see me at first, as though our roles were reversed and I was the one who knocked on his door. He smiled, boyishly, mischievously, and I couldn’t help but notice his lips and the straight row of pearly whites. I was a sucker for guys with nice teeth. “Hello, are you Miss Swan?” he asked in a voice so smooth, so velvety, it made me weak in the knees.

“Yes,” I answered uncertainly. His overly formal tone took me off-guard. “Please, call me Bella.”

“Bella,” he repeated. “Beautiful name. May I come in, Bella?”

“Um—” The situation sent up a red flag, and I instinctively gripped the door handle tightly. “What is this about?”

He leaned toward me, a smile still playing at the corner of his lips. He was so close I could smell him. Damn, he smelled good, too.

“We need to talk about your past due rent.”

A maniacal sounding laugh escaped my lips, and I clapped my hand over my mouth. “I’m sorry, but who the hell are you?”

“Your landlord.” He stood up straight and crossed his arms over his chest, obviously displeased by my reaction.

“Oh, yeah? Since when?” I challenged.

“Since now.”

My amusement quickly turned to annoyance. “In case you aren’t aware, Carlisle Cullen owns this building, and last I checked, you’re about twenty years too young to be him.” I tried to slam the door in his face, but he moved quicker. His outstretched arm prevented it from closing.

“My name is Edward Cullen.” He dropped his hand from the door and held it out. “Sorry, I should have introduced myself first.”

“Oh.” I shook it, not wanting to be rude, and truthfully too shocked to know what else to do.

“My father’s a busy man. I’ve recently taken over for him here. Trust me, if I was in charge three months ago, your failure to pay wouldn’t have been overlooked for this long. Actually, I’ve been trying to find you for the past few weeks, but you never seem to be home.”

“What can I say? I work a lot.”

“Hmm.” He regarded me for a moment, a slight frown forming on his face. “May I come in now?”

“Why?” I asked harshly but stepped back anyway. Edward entered my apartment and closed the door quietly behind him.

“I need a payment. Can you pay half of what’s due?”

“No.”

“One month?” I shook my head, and he sighed. “You have to pay me *something*.”

“I can’t, okay?” I snapped. “I get paid tomorrow. Come back then.”

“How much?” he asked skeptically.

“I don’t know. A month’s rent, maybe.” This time my answer came out sounding defeated instead of indignant.

“Look, I don’t want to evict you, okay?”

“So don’t.”

He ran his hand down his face and sighed again. His eyes scanned my apartment, finally settling on the large stack of mail on the table. “Bills?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“Ooh, feisty. I like it.”

I scoffed loudly.

“Bella—”

“Miss Swan,” I corrected through my teeth.

“*Miss Swan.*” Edward smirked. “Would you be open to coming to an . . . alternate agreement?”

“Like what, a payment plan? It’s not necessary. I’ll give you the money when I get it. I promise.”

“No, not like a payment plan.” His tongue darted across his lips as his eyes scanned my body hungrily. It took me a moment to figure out what he was referring to.

“No! Absolutely not.”

His expression darkened, and he quirked an eye brow.

“No,” I repeated.

“Come on. It’ll be fun.”

“I’m not a prostitute!” I yelled. “How dare you?”

“How dare I? I’m trying to help you.”

“You’re taking advantage of me. This is sexual harassment! I could press charges.”

“I’m not sexually harassing you,” he argued.

“Yes you are. You’re threatening to evict me if I don’t have sex with you.”

“No, I’m threatening to evict you if you don’t pay the rent you owe. In case you forgot, you signed a lease. I’m simply offering you an easy opportunity to erase some of that debt. Besides, I didn’t say anything about sex.”

“Yeah, but that’s what you meant. It still counts.”

“Look, if you want to pay, that’s fine. But I can’t give you more time. If you don’t have at least one month’s rent by tomorrow . . .”

“You’re gonna evict me?”

“I’ll give you an official notice, yes.”

I wiped my eyes before glaring at him through angry tears.

“I’ve obviously outstayed my welcome.” Edward removed a wallet from his back pocket and pulled a business card from inside. “Call me when you have the money. Tomorrow,” he clarified.

He placed the card on the table and let himself out.

I slept horribly, haunted by the events of the day. I dreamed of being dragged out of my apartment, of coming home and finding the whole building and all my belongings missing, of calling my estranged parents and begging to come home. The most vivid dreams involved Edward. Everything felt so real. The weight of his body as he moved on top of me. The sound of his grunts with each thrust of his hips. The warmth of his breath as he whispered how I was his dirty little whore.

I bolted upright in bed. My heart pounded, and I was covered in a cold sweat. I tried to block the vision from my head. What disturbed me most was that, for the life of me, I didn't know whether I had been enjoying my mind's creation or not.

Unable to sleep, I got out of bed. I'd rather get to work early than stay here. Hopefully it would distract me from my current predicament. I showered, dressed, and left my apartment as quickly as possible. Walking sucked. Luckily it wasn't too far. My feet felt a lot better than they did yesterday.

It was a slow morning at the diner, and working didn't create the distraction I was looking for. My mind kept wandering back to Edward and his offer and the pile of bills stacking up on my kitchen table. I hated asking for help, and I wouldn't take money from anyone even if they offered it. Doing nothing wasn't an option, though. Jane might let me crash with her until I got back on my feet, but she wasn't around to ask.

"Slow day," Tanya, the other waitress, commented as I sat down for my break. "Checks are ready, by the way." She tossed an envelope on the table in front of me.

Seeing the little white rectangle brought instant relief. It felt like a giant weight had been lifted from my shoulders. Unfortunately, when I opened it, the weight fell right back down. "Damn taxes," I muttered.

"Tell me about it."

"I need to find a high paying job. A high paying *cash* job. This is ridiculous."

"You could always sell yourself for money." Tanya was teasing, but the comment hit too close to home. I felt nauseated.

"That's a horrible idea."

"Not really," she mused. "I mean, getting paid for sex? Sounds like fun to me. Well, you'd have to watch out for STDs and creepy psycho men, but other than that . . ."

"Thanks for the suggestion," I said sarcastically.

"Sugar Daddy?"

"Har, har."

She threw a wet rag at me. I ducked at the last minute, and it flew over my head.

"Or, you know, we can just work here for the rest of our lives."

Wasn't that the truth?

I sat in the back room after my shift was over. In one hand I held my measly paycheck; in the

other I twirled Edward's business card. The check was just enough to cover one month. It would get him off of my back, but for how long? Would I find myself in the same situation two weeks from now? And what about my other bills? If I could get out of paying rent, even for one month, my other accounts would be current.

Edward's offer was sounding better and better.

Against my better judgment, I picked up the phone and dialed his number.

"I'm just going to get more details," I told myself. "I'm not committing to anything."

"Cullen Properties," answered a voice like velvet.

"Edward?"

"Speaking."

"This is Bella. Bella Swan," I said nervously.

There was a bunch of shuffling on the other end, followed by a momentary silence.

"Miss Swan." His voice was quiet. "I didn't expect your call so soon."

"Yeah, well—" I paused to take a deep breath. "Listen, I wanted to talk to you about what we discussed yesterday."

"Oh?"

"About . . . alternate payment methods." I cringed as I forced the words from my mouth.

"Oh." He sounded surprised. "Have anything specific in mind?"

"Actually, I was hoping you would tell me more."

"Hmm." I held my breath as I waited for him to continue. "That's not something I'm comfortable discussing over the phone."

"Please." It came out more pathetic than I intended. "I just want to know what you expect from me. What I'd have to do."

He sighed and spoke softly. "I'm not going to *make* you do anything; you understand that, right?"

"I know," I said, although him confirming it was a big relief.

"I don't want you agreeing to something you're going to feel bad about later."

"That's just the thing. I'm not sure *what* I'd be agreeing to."

"Whatever you want it to be," he said, somewhat exasperatedly.

"How much of my rent will go away?"

"That depends on what you let me do to you," he said after a short pause. His voice was gruff and lower than usual, and it sent tingles through my body.

"What do you want to do to me?" I was afraid to hear the answer, but I had to know.

“Everything.”

My heart started beating double-time, and I swallowed thickly. Excitement and nerves twisted in my stomach. I felt like I was going to burst.

“We don’t have to decide now,” he said quickly. “Let’s just see what happens. We can hash out the details after.”

“How do I know you’re not going to screw me over?” I asked. This wasn’t something we could draw up a contract for, and I wasn’t about to give him any part of my body without knowing exactly what I’d get in return.

“I fully intend on screwing you, Miss Swan,” he said playfully. “But don’t worry, I promise to be fair.”

For the first time, I seriously considered Edward’s offer. I was no virgin, and it was just sex. It’s not like doing the dirty deed with him had *never* crossed my mind. He was an attractive guy. Just when I thought my mind was made up, doubt and insecurity set in. The little voice in my head told me this situation was wrong.

“Are you still there?” he asked uncertainly.

“Yes.”

“Apartment 6B, seven o’clock. Bring one month’s rent or an overnight bag. Your choice. We can talk more then. Oh, and Miss Swan?”

I waited.

“Wear a skirt.”

I didn’t know what to do. I weighed my options while I showered and shaved my legs. This would be so much easier if I knew what to expect! I wanted to know just one thing so I could mentally prepare. My mind wasn’t made up, even as I pulled on a skirt. It wasn’t tight, but it was short, and I hoped—if I decided to do this—it was what Edward had in mind.

It was 7:05 when I was finally ready. I tossed both my checkbook and a toothbrush in my purse, not having come to a decision, and made my way to his apartment.

My knock was quiet, and part of me hoped it would go unheard. Edward must have been expecting me to follow through because he opened the door immediately. He stood before me in a pair of well-worn jeans and a dark blue T-shirt. His hair was wet, his face was freshly shaven, and his feet were bare. He smelled clean and fresh, and I felt myself leaning closer to get a better whiff.

His eyes scanned the exposed skin of my legs, and my face turned red under his scrutiny. It made me uncomfortable, but I couldn’t deny a part of me liked the appreciative way he looked at me. His smug expression fell as he focused on my empty hands. Opening the door all the way, he moved back and motioned for me to enter. I stepped cautiously inside his home.

“Miss Swan,” he greeted.

I took a deep breath before speaking. “I need something concrete.”

“Concrete?”

“Yes. If I’m going to do this, I want to be guaranteed something going into it. Tell me at least one thing you want me to do and what I’ll get in return. That way you can’t say that I didn’t hold up to your expectations.” I waited while Edward regarded me. His face contorted as he chewed on the inside of his cheek.

“You understand why I’m hesitant to make a verbal agreement, don’t you?” he asked. “I trust you. I need you to trust me.”

“Please?”

“I don’t want this to feel like a business deal,” he explained.

“That’s exactly what this is,” I countered.

“It’s not going to be any fun if you’re just looking for a way to get it over with as quickly as possible.”

This time it was my turn to be exasperated. “Just name something.”

“I want your lips wrapped around my dick,” he demanded while raising his pointer finger in front of my face. “One month.”

A blow job. I could handle that. It wasn’t anything too crazy, and in all honesty, it was something I expected to do anyway. And if that was all I had to do to make a month’s worth of rent disappear . . .

I exhaled a shaky breath and nodded my head.

Edward’s hand came to rest on my hip, and he moved closer. He dipped his head, but as his lips ghosted across mine, I had second thoughts. I turned and stepped away from him.

His kitchen was directly off the entry way, just like mine, and I wandered into it. He didn’t make a sound as he followed me. I braced my hands on the countertop and ducked my head.

There was no way I could do this. I didn’t have enough confidence to pull it off. It was too hard to put myself out there in front of a stranger. All my flaws would be on display. Edward was a ridiculously attractive, sexy, smooth talking man who wasn’t blinded by love. What if he didn’t like my small boobs or the shape of my butt? What would I do if he thought I was terrible in bed? I didn’t think I’d be able to handle the mortification.

I had to remind myself that I was doing this to get ahead, not to impress him.

“Would you like a drink?”

My eyes snapped open. I watched Edward pour a bit of whiskey into a lowball. He slid the glass in front of me. “Are you trying to get me drunk?”

“I think we both need to relax.”

I didn’t think *he* needed to relax. He seemed to be handling the situation just fine. But maybe he had a point. Lifting the glass to my lips, I took a tentative sip. It burned all the way down. “Ugh,” I said, setting the glass back on the counter. “That’s disgusting.”

“I have wine.”

“No, thank you.”

Edward picked up the glass and poured the amber liquid into his mouth. Even his post-shot grimace oozed with sex appeal. He set the tumbler into the sink before moving to stand behind me.

“I want this to be fun for you.” His gravelly voice sent chills down my spine. “Just know that whatever we do, you will not be left unsatisfied.” This time he placed both hands on my hips. “And we can do *whatever* you want.” His lips were warm against my neck, and I had to bite my lip to keep quiet. He slid his hands to the front of my body and pulled roughly. I fell back against him. His erection pressed against my lower back. “Do you feel this?” he asked as he rubbed against me. “I have been hard all day long. You can’t imagine the things I want to do to you.”

My breath caught as his hands touched my bare thighs. He slid them underneath my skirt and hooked his fingers in the sides of my panties. Slowly, he dragged them down my legs until they dropped to the floor. His body left mine as he bent down. There was a tug against my ankles, and I stepped out of the small piece of fabric so he could take it.

Edward stood and turned me around. He wrapped his arms around me and squeezed my behind firmly as he held me against him again. His lips were soft against my neck. I tilted my head back to encourage him to continue. I was still nervous, but my desire for him was winning out.

He slid one hand to the front of my body and cupped me between my legs. “Give yourself to me,” he whispered. “I want to be in charge.”

His words both excited and frightened me. I didn’t want to call the shots, but I didn’t know him. Even though that fact alone held a lot of appeal, I wasn’t ready to give him free reign over my body.

“You won’t regret it,” he promised. “You can always tell me to stop.” He continued placing delicate kisses along my neck and jaw as his hand flexed against me. “Just let me have the control.”

I nodded my silent consent, unable to voice my desires. Edward took my hands and walked backwards, leading me into the living room. He stopped in front of the couch before releasing me.

“Get on your knees.”

I sank to the floor as he unbuckled his belt and popped open the buttons of his fly. He lowered his pants and boxers past his hips and sat down on the couch. I tried not to stare, I really did, but I couldn’t tear my eyes from him. He was so . . . *thick*. He could do damage with that thing. Suddenly my forfeit of control didn’t seem like such a great idea.

“Come here.”

I crawled to him, positioning myself between his knees. He grabbed the hem of my shirt and pulled it over my head, leaving me in only my bra and skirt. I reached out and wrapped my hand around his cock. His girth made me want to laugh. Or cry.

What did I get myself into?

“Huh-uh,” he said as he brushed my hand away. Snatching both my wrists, he dragged me as close as possible. He lifted his hips and slid my hands under his legs before sitting back down. “You won’t be needing those.”

It was obvious he wanted me to jump right to sucking him off. I bent forward and licked up his length. When I swirled my tongue around his head, he rewarded me with a moan. He didn't let me tease him for long, though. His fingers twisted into my hair, and with both hands, he pushed me down onto his dick.

Edward started out at a slow pace, pulling my head up every time he made contact with the back of my throat. After a few minutes he began pushing a little farther. Each downward stroke became deeper than the one before as my throat adjusted to the invasion. With Edward guiding my head, I put all my concentration into staying relaxed and breathing steady.

"You're doing so good," he praised, stopping half-way in my mouth. "I'm going to hold you down. I want to get deeper."

When I went down again, I took more of him than I had before. True to his words, he didn't let me up, instead pushing my head down steadily. My throat burned as he forced himself into it. I tried to stay calm, but without being able to breath, panic quickly set in. My stomach convulsed violently, and he let go of my head.

I coughed and sputtered as I knelt before him, and he waited patiently while I caught my breath. I looked up worriedly, afraid that my reaction was a deal breaker. The expression on his face surprised me. He didn't look upset at all. If anything, it was a look of sheer bliss.

He pulled me toward him and held me by my hair. With his other hand, he grabbed his cock and tapped it against my lips.

"Kiss it."

I obeyed his command, kissing and licking the best I could, but he kept moving just out of my reach. He swept his cock across my cheek, leaving a trail of pre-cum. He cursed and smacked himself against my face a few times before guiding himself back into my mouth.

"One more time," he said. "All the way. I want to feel your nose pressed against me."

I moaned around his dick. His words affected me in ways I would have never expected. I was surprised at how my body was reacting to this situation. Everything about it turned me on—my hands pinned beneath his thighs, the way he controlled my head, his domineering words. Even my missing underwear added to the experience as the evidence of my arousal made its way down my legs.

Taking a deep breath, I relaxed my throat and took in as much of him as I could. My body stretched to accommodate him as he pushed me the rest of the way down. Warm skin met my face as he held me down, flexing his hips to get deeper.

"Ffffuck!" he cursed loudly. "I want to come like this." He held my head steady as he made short, jerky thrusts. "Swallow every drop."

He came into my mouth, hot and thick. I swallowed as much as I could, but the way he was moving made it impossible to comply with his demand. I coughed as it hit the back of my throat, causing some to spill from the corner of my lips.

We were both breathing heavily once he finished. Edward shifted, freeing my hands. I tried to wipe my face, but he grabbed my wrist before I could. He squeezed my chin between his thumb and fingers and tilted my head back.

"You missed some," Edward said darkly. I was about to apologize, but before I could, he licked

the trail from my chin and kissed me. I could taste it on his tongue. It was a turn on knowing he didn't have an aversion to his own semen. "You give great head," he murmured against my lips.

"Um, thank you?"

Edward chuckled as he pulled me up to straddle his lap. I could feel how wet I was as our bodies came together. It made me self-conscious.

"Wow," was all he said about it. He combed his fingers through my hair in an attempt to fix the mess he'd made of it. He smiled and tucked the strands behind my ears. "Do you want to keep going?" he asked softly.

This was it. I fulfilled my half of the bargain. I could walk away right now and never look back or keep going and make the most of this opportunity.

If I was being perfectly honest with myself, I didn't *want* to stop.

"Do you want to keep going?" I asked.

"Hell yes." He said it so excitedly I couldn't help but smile in return. "There are so many things I want to do. I'm not even close to being done with you."

Edward led me to his bedroom. It definitely belonged to a single guy. The queen-size bed was made. Kind of. The black comforter had been straightened. There were only two pillows and no sign of any shams. I hoped the sheets were clean.

"Is this okay?" he questioned. I nodded, and he folded the blankets down. "Lie on the bed."

I slid to the middle of his bed and lay on my back. Edward removed his shirt. His open jeans dropped to the floor in the process. He kicked them off, then leaned down to pull his belt from the loops. Sauntering to the bed, he crawled on top of me, placing his legs on either side of my hips.

He began by teasing my nipples through the thin fabric of my bra. They hardened under his touch. He placed his palms over my breasts, squeezing gently. I arched my back, making it easy for him to remove my bra. He continued his assault against my bare skin, pinching and rolling and tugging, and I squirmed beneath him as the sensations bordered on too much.

Still, I wanted more.

Edward stopped abruptly and I sighed, both in relief and longing. He folded his belt in half before trailing it across my stomach and chest, leaving a path of goose bumps. I hissed when he dragged it across my over stimulated nipples.

"Hold out your hands."

I did as he said but quickly jerked them away when he began looping the belt around my wrists.

"What are you doing?"

"Tying you up," he answered.

"No." There was no way—no fucking way—I was letting Edward tie me up. I didn't even *know* him! I couldn't just let a stranger render me helpless and let him have his way with me . . . could I?

No, I couldn't.

But, god, I wanted to.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he stated.

"I know."

"Tell me to stop and I will," he said. "But I bet you won't." Leaning forward, he placed a kiss behind my ear. "Trust me."

I melted into the bed as Edward gently kissed up and down my neck. He sat up, and I silently offered him my hands. He grinned as he wrapped the belt around my wrists. I swallowed nervously when he lifted my arms over my head.

Instead of securing me to the headboard like I expected, he simply hooked the ends of the belt around one of the rungs and placed them into my palms. He closed my fingers around the leather and squeezed, wordlessly instructing me to hold on. Most of my apprehension vanished once I realized he wasn't *actually* tying me up and that I could easily free myself if I wanted.

Which, according to him, I wouldn't.

"One last thing," he said as he stood up. "This skirt is sexy, but it needs to go." He took a fistful of the fabric and roughly yanked it down my legs. The sudden exposure caused me to blush. Edward *tsked* when I pressed my knees together. "Open them." I parted my thighs as he crawled between my legs, but it wasn't enough. Placing a hand on each knee, he spread my legs as wide as they would go. I wasn't sure which was more of an invasion, my body being on full display or the shock of cold air hitting my wet skin.

"Beautiful," he groaned. "Look how ready you are for me." I shivered as his hands slid down the inside of my thighs, stopping just short of where I wanted his touch the most. "I'm going to fuck that tight little pussy of yours, but first I'm going to see how wet I can get you."

I drew a ragged breath as he slid two fingers into me. I arched my back, trying to get more friction. He knew what I wanted; it was evident in his smirk. "What's wrong, baby? Do you want me to touch you here?" he asked as his thumb stroked across my clit. I moaned and shifted my hips. He laughed devilishly. "Hold on, I have an idea."

Keeping his fingers in place, Edward reached across the bed and opened the nightstand. He pulled out a small, rectangular object and held it up, looking at me questioningly. It took me a moment to realize it was a digital camera.

"No way," I said, shaking my head.

"Are you sure?" he asked as he flicked his thumb across my clit. I rolled my hips, whimpering at his touch. He set the camera down and continued rubbing circles against me.

"What're you gonna do with them?" I struggled to form a complete question. "The pictures, I mean."

"Nothing," he answered with a shake of his head. "They'll just be for me." He did something with his fingers that made my body arch off the bed. In that moment, I felt like there was nothing I would deny him.

"Not my face."

Edward smiled and picked up the camera. It chimed as he pressed the power button. I closed my eyes and tipped my head back, breathing deeply. His fingers left my body and he pushed my legs apart again. I heard the first click of the shutter, followed by another. He teased me, stroking inside and out as he continued taking photographs. My heart rate rocketed every time I heard that little noise. It was risky and taboo, and I loved every moment of it.

“I can tell you’re enjoying this,” he said confidently.

“Mm-hmm,” I whimpered in return. There was no sense in denying it.

“You know, that’s the third time you’ve told me ‘no’ and then changed your mind. And just look at you, all sopping wet and writhing around on my bed. You should really say yes from now on.”

“Okay.” My acquiescence came easily.

“Besides, if you didn’t let me do this, you’d never know how much you like being a star.” Edward snapped another picture for emphasis before focusing his attention on the camera. “Mmm, I love the photos of you getting finger fucked. It’s hot seeing them inside you, but why stop at two?”

Without warning, he roughly pushed three of his fingers into me and began working me over. I flinched each time he bumped the overly sensitive skin above. It was never by accident. I was certain of it. He seemed to know exactly what to do to make my body sing for him.

“That’s it,” Edward crooned. “Get my fingers nice and wet.” He paused his movements. The camera clicked. There was even more pressure as he filled me up again. Tensing, I gripped the belt above my head and groaned. “Relax,” he whispered. “I’m much bigger than this.”

Edward took pictures while allowing me to adjust. When I told him I was okay, he began slowly twisting and pumping, working his fingers in and out of me. He switched between slow and fast, hard and soft, constantly bringing me closer to the brink and then backing off. I whimpered and moaned and begged, but he wouldn’t allow me a release.

When he pulled away abruptly, I wanted to cry. My body throbbed where his hand had been. I felt empty. It was the sweetest of torture.

“I can’t wait any longer,” he said gruffly. He quickly stripped off his boxers and climbed between my legs. Reaching between us, he rubbed his cock against me before shoving it inside. I felt myself stretching as he entered, filling my body in a way he couldn’t have prepared me for. I squeezed my legs around him as he started thrusting.

“Breathe,” he whispered. I let out a breath I didn’t realize I was holding. He pried the belt out of my grip, freeing me from my faux bindings. “Hold on to me.”

I wrapped my arms around Edward’s shoulders. Something about his quiet request made him seem vulnerable. It occurred to me that, even though I had relinquished my control, I didn’t have to remain completely idle while he fucked me. He would probably enjoy my voluntary participation.

Trailing my hand down his spine, I dug my nails into his backside. His thrusting faltered and he groaned quietly. I kissed a path up his neck, licking the salt off his skin, before catching his earlobe between my teeth. His warm breath fanned across my shoulder with each shaky exhale.

Edward placed his hand behind my knee and bent my leg toward my shoulder. He straightened his arms, causing him to slide deeper. We both groaned with the new angle as he plunged into me with a renewed fervor. Maintaining his rhythm, he looked around frantically, his gaze finally

falling on the camera sitting on the foot of the bed. He cursed, and turned back to watch our bodies move together.

“I’m going to come inside of you,” he said in a strained voice. With a few more deep thrusts, his body shuddered, and he rocked against me as his climax overtook him. When he was finished, he collapsed on top of me. The weight of his body pressed me into the bed. In all my life I had never felt so helpless and turned on and sexually frustrated all at the same time.

“Edward,” I begged. “Please.”

He pulled out of me and sat back on his knees. “Get on all fours,” he ordered. I did as he told me, groaning in complaint. His hand came down on my ass quickly and unexpectedly, leaving a harsh sting in its wake. “Stay.” I felt his weight lift from the bed and listened to his footsteps as he left the room.

I waited as patiently as I could for him to return. When he came back, I glanced over my shoulder to look at him. “No peeking.” His voice was playful. I looked down at the pillows in front of me and felt him drop something onto the bed.

“Now, this I need a picture of,” he said as he crawled behind me. “You with your ass in the air, exposed, ready and waiting for me to do whatever I want.” I heard the telltale click and wiggled my hips, wanting nothing more than for him to touch me. I felt something wet run down the inside of my leg as I moved. “Fuck, you look so sexy with my cum leaking out of you.” He placed his palm against my thigh and rubbed the still-warm fluid into my skin before sliding his hand higher. His fingers entered me again, spreading me open easily with the added lubrication. I moaned and pressed my hips back against him.

“Soon,” he promised in a low murmur. “There’s just one more thing I want to do.”

I whimpered in frustration as he removed his fingers. He dragged them higher, grazing the sensitive skin between my cheeks. I inhaled sharply as he applied more pressure and began caressing the area.

“What are you doing?” I choked out.

“You know what I’m doing,” Edward teased, applying more pressure. “Are you going to tell me no again?”

“No.”

He paused.

“No, I mean . . . I’m not telling you no,” I amended.

My body gave way as he pushed his finger into the tight opening. It felt foreign and awkward, but I couldn’t deny that a small part of me liked it. I sighed when he began to move in a slow rhythm, and he groaned as I rocked back to meet him.

“You’re such a good girl.” Edward’s praise made me want to do anything he asked. I wanted to be good for him.

I was disappointed at first when his finger slid from my body. There was a quiet snap, and when he teased me again, it was cold and slick. I realized he must have left the room earlier to get lube. Slowly, he penetrated me, this time with two fingers. I tensed at the invasion.

“Relax, baby,” he cooed. “You’re doing so good.” With his other hand he began rubbing my clit,

flicking and pinching the hypersensitive skin. I squirmed, unintentionally pushing him deeper. He picked up the pace, working me vigorously from both ends. After a few minutes, I got lost in the sensations, and my muscles began to contract. Just as I was about to reach my climax, Edward pulled his hands away.

“Fuck!” I yelled. “Please!”

“I love it when you beg,” he said. The sound of the lube bottle opening again caught my attention, and my body hummed in anticipation. “I’m going to make you come so hard, but first I want you to take my cock.”

What? *There?*

“It’s never going to fit,” I scoffed in a slight panic.

“I’ll make it fit.”

“Edward,” I whimpered, fear and excitement mingling to create a delicious tightening in my abdomen.

“I hope you say my name like that when I’m fucking you up the ass.” His voice was raspy. I whimpered again as anxiety set in. My breathing picked up, and I kept silently reminding myself to relax.

Edward pressed the tip of his dick against me. He entered slowly, and I whined in a combination of pleasure and pain. He grabbed my hips firmly as he continued easing himself in. I dropped my head into the pillow and fisted the sheets in my hands while trying to stay relaxed.

“Halfway,” he breathed. “Are you okay?”

“Yes,” I answered shakily.

Edward leaned forward, pushing until his hips were flush with my behind. We moaned, panting with each exhale. Gathering my hair into a ponytail, he yanked my head back sharply, forcing me to arch my back. He pulled almost all the way out and stopped. I moaned when I heard the click of the camera once more. He inched back inside me slowly, taking pictures as he went. By the time he was all the way in again, I was a quivering mess.

“So good,” he groaned. “So tight.” He pumped his hips cautiously, and I pushed back against him with each thrust. “Do you want to come?”

“Yes!”

“Beg.” I pursed my lips. After everything I let him do to me he was going to make me beg? Edward tightened his hold on my hair. “Beg,” he repeated.

I pushed my embarrassment aside. “Please, Edward,” I cried. “Please!”

“Please what?”

“Please make me come.”

“Good girl.” Wrapping his arm around my chest, he pulled me up onto my knees. His other hand dropped to the apex of my thighs. He continued to pump into me as he stroked my clit. It didn’t take long to succumb to his efforts. Edward held me to his chest, and I cried out his name as I came.

I had barely finished riding out my orgasm when Edward forced me down, flattening my chest against the bed. He drove his body into mine, his climax hitting him within seconds. He collapsed on top of me, pushing me onto the mattress.

As the high of my orgasm wore off, I became all too aware of my surroundings. I was naked, covered in sweat and bodily fluids, beneath a strange man. He was still inside me—inside a very private part of me. I had let him ravage my body; the photographic evidence of our debauchery sat on the bed beside us.

“Are you all right?” He placed a soft kiss on my shoulder.

“I’m not sure,” I answered. “I should go.”

“I want you to stay.”

“Edward—”

“Stay,” he said firmly. “At least until I know you’re going to be okay. I’ll behave,” he tacked on.

“You don’t know the meaning of the word.”

“You like me that way,” he teased. “Come on, at least shower with me. You can’t leave looking like you’ve been thoroughly fucked . . . even if you have.” I laughed, feeling a lot lighter, and allowed him to lead me to the bathroom.

I spent the night wrapped in Edward’s arms. It didn’t take much to convince me to stay. All he had to do was pout and I gave in. I didn’t really want to go back downstairs to my apartment anyway. I was worried that, once I was alone, I would start feeling like a cheap whore.

Besides, I couldn’t leave yet. We still had one last thing to discuss.

Edward drifted to sleep easily. For me, it was harder. My mind kept racing, replaying the things we had done and trying to decide if it was a wise decision. In the end, I decided it wasn’t all that much different from a one night stand. I had fun, just as Edward had promised. When I finally fell asleep, it was with a smile on my face and an easy acceptance of the events that had transpired.

I woke up the next morning feeling slightly awkward, but Edward’s laid-back attitude put me at ease. “Well, I guess we have one last decision to make before I leave,” I said as we lay in bed.

“I’ve already made a decision.”

“And?”

Edward shrugged as he traced a pattern on my bare stomach. “Consider your account paid in full.”

“Really?” It’s not that I didn’t feel I *deserved* it for what I’d done, but I was honestly surprised that he was willing to write off everything I owed.

“You were perfect last night,” he admitted. “I couldn’t have asked for a better experience.”

“Oh,” I said, a little surprised. “Thank you.”

“Thank *you*.”

I got dressed shortly after and Edward walked me to the door. I didn't want to leave, but I really didn't think it was appropriate to stay under the circumstances. We said a quick goodbye, and I stepped into the hallway.

“Bella, one more thing,” Edward called after me. I turned and waited. His lips turned up into a wicked grin. “See you next month.”

And that was how he left me. Standing outside his closed door, wet and pantyless, without a clue as to how I was going to make it through the next four weeks.

Chapter 2

The next four weeks passed faster than I had expected. It felt like I barely had time to reflect on what had transpired between Edward and me. Thanks to him—and a lot of hard work at the diner over the past month—I managed to catch up on most of my bills. Against my better judgment, I bought a new cell phone. There was almost enough money in my account to write a check for this month's rent. If I took advantage of my seven day grace period and didn't spend any money between now and then, I would be able to pay Edward. I had yet to come to terms with our agreement, and I was still unsure of what the future of that agreement held.

Things have a way of catching up with us, though. I came home after a late night out with friends to find a note taped to my door. A note with two little words written in elegant script.

Call me.

I didn't get much sleep after that. I couldn't turn off my mind. Was what we did right? Was it wrong? Did it matter as long as I wanted it? *Did* I want it? I would be mortified if anyone found out—was that a bad sign?

Unable to lay there and do nothing any longer, I grabbed my phone from the nightstand. I didn't want to wait until morning to contact him, and if I was being honest with myself, I was too chicken for a phone conversation anyway. I knew his number by heart, even though I had only dialed it once, and I typed a quick message.

I got your note. What's up?

It was almost 4:00 AM, so I was surprised when he replied almost immediately.

Bella?

Who else would it be?

Right after I hit send, my stomach sank. There was a good possibility that mine wasn't the only note he left.

Nobody. We getting together this month?

I took a deep breath, trying to clear my head before I answered. I must have hesitated too long because my phone started ringing.

"Hello?" I answered hesitantly.

"*What are you doing awake?*" Edward sounded tired, but I could tell he was smiling.

"I could ask the same of you."

"*Hard to sleep when a beautiful woman is sending me text messages.*"

His compliment made me blush. "Come on. You don't expect me to believe you were sleeping, do you? You replied way too fast."

Edward sighed before falling silent. I was about to ask if he was still there when he spoke. "*I've been busy working. Haven't been sleeping well lately.*" The fatigue was evident in his voice. "So," he began after a short pause, "*do I get to see you this month?*"

If I had any doubts about hooking up with Edward again, they disappeared once he asked to see me. Maybe it was the hopeful tone in his voice, or maybe it was the feeling of being wanted. Whatever it was, I found myself answering without hesitation. “Definitely. I’d love to.”

“Good. How about tonight?”

“Tonight is fine. I don’t have to work for the next two days.”

“Perfect. Then there’s no reason why you can’t stay the night.”

“I guess not.” Spending the night at Edward’s felt strange, especially because we only lived four floors apart, but I wasn’t about to argue. He was already being generous enough.

“See you . . . eightish?”

“That sounds good.”

“I can’t wait. Sweet dreams, beautiful girl.”

“Yeah, sweet dreams.”

Edward wasted no time pulling me out of the hallway and into his arms. “You smell nice,” he murmured against my neck. His hands traveled down my back and squeezed my behind. “You feel nice, too.” I giggled and swatted at him. “Can I get you anything?”

“No, thank you.”

His eyes scanned my body hungrily, but he frowned when they reached my feet. “Nice slippers,” he said sarcastically.

I shrugged. Sure they had ears and whiskers, but they were comfortable. “I stand all day. Sometimes it’s nice to not wear shoes.”

“Take them off.”

I slid my feet out of them and kicked them to the side. Edward pulled off my shirt and tossed it on the floor. My bra and jeans were quickly added to the pile.

“Much better.” Edward turned me around and pulled me to him so my back was pressed against his chest. “You have no idea how much I need you tonight.” He dipped his hand low and teased me by sliding his fingers under the waistband of my panties. “Are you okay with the way things worked last time?”

“Yes,” I answered shyly.

“You’ll let me be in control again?” His hands came up to cup my breasts, and he squeezed gently.

I thought about the first time he asked to be in charge. It had made me nervous and apprehensive, but once I let go, it proved to be amazing. The anticipation of what he had planned for tonight was very, very exciting. “Uh-huh.”

“Good girl.” Edward dropped his head and placed a kiss on my bare shoulder. “I bought you something.”

“What?” I asked, a little surprised. “You shouldn’t be buying me stuff.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m not . . .”

What, a whore? I internally cringed at the label.

“Come on, you don’t even know what it is yet. I bet you’ll like it,” he cooed. I didn’t want to argue or question my morals, so instead I said nothing. “Why don’t you go wait on my bed. I’ll be there in a couple of minutes.” He patted my ass and gave me a little push toward his bedroom.

The room looked pretty much the same as last time. I don’t know why I expected it to be different. I crawled onto the bed and pulled the covers over me. It felt strangely intimate but a lot less weird than lying there exposed.

Edward entered the room a few minutes later and smiled when he saw me curled up in his bed.

“Comfy?” he asked. I nodded and hummed contently. My eyes raked over his body, and I noticed he was holding something behind his back. “Close your eyes.” I hesitated only briefly before doing as I was told. The bed dipped as he sat next to me. I jumped when I felt something silky touch my face. He was blindfolding me. “Okay?” he asked once it was in place.

“Yes.”

“Sit up.” I did as he asked. I felt him arranging the pillows into a pile before slipping onto the bed behind me. He wrapped his arms around my chest, and I leaned back against him. His hands skimmed down my sides. He hooked his fingers inside my panties. When I lifted my hips, he pushed them down my legs and off completely.

It felt strange to be completely naked while he was still fully clothed. I didn’t protest when he pushed the covers off of my body. He grabbed my knees firmly and pushed my legs apart, exposing me further.

“Ladies first tonight.”

He slid his hands up my torso and played with my breasts, tweaking and pulling my nipples. I think he liked making me squirm because I could feel him getting harder every time I did. It was surprising how easily his touch made me come undone. I shifted my legs together, trying to get some friction.

“Legs open,” Edward demanded. I hissed through my teeth when he pinched me roughly, and my knees quickly fell to the side. “Much better.”

He slipped one hand between my legs and caressed me lightly. He seemed to know exactly where I wanted his touch, and much to my dismay, he was very good at avoiding the spot. I shifted my hips, but he kept his hand away from anywhere that would offer me relief. I whined and he chuckled softly in my ear.

“My, my, aren’t we greedy tonight?”

I felt my body flush. I wanted it and he knew it.

“Are you going to be a good girl and do as I say?”

“Yes,” I whispered.

“You sure about that?”

“Uh-huh.”

Edward removed his hand from between my legs and I whimpered. He grabbed both my nipples and twisted. Hard. Harder. Harder yet. “Ah!” I cried. He didn’t let go. “Ow!”

“Legs.” His voice was low and drawn out. I dropped my legs open, and he released his grip immediately. I gasped at the relief. “Keep them open,” he whispered against my ear. “If you can’t behave, I *will* tie you up.”

Duly noted, Mr. Cullen.

His hands slid down my abdomen then disappeared from my body completely. The muscles in his chest flexed as he shifted behind me. I had no idea what he was doing. The anticipation was killing me! He was starting to breath heavier. I placed my hands on his bent knees and squeezed. He shifted his hips against my backside, the rough denim of his jeans adding to the sensations.

I was so wound up that I jumped when a quiet buzzing filled the room.

A vibrator! I thought in disbelief. Edward placed it between my legs, eliciting a moan from me.

“See? Told you you’d like it.” He was pleased with himself. I could tell. Actually, I was quite pleased with him, too. Especially when he held it firmly against my clit. It didn’t take me long to learn that he enjoyed teasing me. He kept bringing me right to the brink, then he’d pull the toy away. Over and over again.

“Please, Edward,” I begged once it got to be too much.

“Please what?” He had made ask for my release last time, too. I groaned frustratedly. “Soon, I promise. I’m just having so much fun.” He flexed his hips against me, proving just how much he was enjoying it.

“More,” I gasped. “Inside.” I was so close. My entire body was shaking and felt completely out of control. Edward hooked his legs over mine and spread them apart again, this time using his body to keep me in place.

“As much as I’d love to fuck you with this, my dick is going to be the first thing in you tonight.” Edward pressed the vibrator exactly where I wanted it and scraped his teeth across my neck. “So you’d better get nice and wet for me.”

His words were my undoing. I completely fell apart in his arms as my orgasm washed over me. He held me tightly with his free arm and legs, not letting up until I forced his hand away. Turning off the vibrator, he dropped it on the bed next to us and wrapped his other arm around me as well.

“Good?” he asked, sounding almost uncertain.

My brain still wasn’t working, so I answered as best I could. “Yeah.”

Edward slipped out from behind me, and I collapsed on his bed. I heard the rustling of fabric as he presumably removed his clothes. He crawled onto the bed and hovered over me before taking off my blindfold. The room was dimly lit, so it was easy for my eyes to adjust. I watched as Edward

straddled my waist. He really was beautiful naked. My memory hadn't done him justice. He leaned forward until his cock almost touched my lips.

"Taste," he ordered. I licked the drop of pre-cum off him before sucking the tip into my mouth. "Fuck." He sat back, trapping my arms at my sides, and rested his cock on my chest. His hands came to my breasts and pushed them together.

"What are you doing?" I asked stupidly. It was obvious.

Edward smirked down at me. "I'm going to fuck your tits, and then I'm going to come all over your pretty face."

Heat began to spread throughout my body. I couldn't believe he was using me like this. More surprisingly, I couldn't believe I was enjoying it. For the first time I felt genuinely helpless. My arms were pinned and the weight of his body pressed down on me. He kneaded my breasts, squeezing them as he thrust quickly.

"Open up," he demanded. "And don't swallow until I tell you. I want to see my cum in your mouth."

I obeyed and dropped my jaw. Edward moaned, his fingers digging into my flesh as he came. I had to hand it to him—the man had great aim. The first shots went into my mouth. He also hit my cheek, chin, and left a trail down my chest. When he was finished, he looked at me with lust filled eyes. I waited patiently while he stared, his eyes lingering on my mouth.

"You look so sexy like that," he mumbled. "Swallow." I did as I was told, quickly swallowing everything. Slowly, he dragged two fingers up my body, gathering the trail of semen on my chest and neck, and placed them against my lips. "You missed some, baby," he said before pushing his fingers into my mouth. I sucked them until he was satisfied they were clean, then he repeated the action with the rest of the cum that had gotten on me. "When you're ready to let me take pictures of your face, we're doing that again."

"Okay." My agreement came easy, because honestly, there was nothing I wouldn't do for him at this point.

Edward sat up on his knees. He leaned forward, bracing his arms on the headboard. "Get me hard so I can fuck you properly." He brushed the tip of his dick across my lips, and I took him into my mouth. I tried not to giggle, I really did, but I just couldn't help it. "What's so funny?" He sounded offended, but when I looked up at him, he was smiling.

"Nothing."

"You can't just laugh when my dick's in your mouth and not tell me why," he said. "Wait, do I want to know why?"

"It's not bad," I answered quickly.

His smile quickly faded. "Tell me," he said quietly.

"It's just . . . I don't know," I rambled, embarrassed. "Soft penises are funny."

Edward snorted as relief washed over his face. "Really, Bella? Soft *penises*?" He grabbed the back of my head and shoved himself back in my mouth. He was starting to lengthen but was still quite pliable. I giggled again. "You won't be laughing when you're choking on my *penis*."

Between Edward's serious tone and use of the word "penis," I really started laughing. He was

hard enough to touch the back of my throat now, and I coughed when he made contact.

“If you can’t stop laughing, then next time I’ll buy you a gag.”

My eyes went wide as I stared up at him. “You wouldn’t,” I mumbled around his growing cock.

“What was that?” Edward asked as he pulled out.

“You wou—” He thrust back into my mouth, cutting me off.

“Oh, but I would,” he said teasingly. “There are all sorts of dirty things I want to do to you.” He grinned at me, not bothering to hide his amusement. I couldn’t reply as he pushed his now fully erect cock down my throat. Edward backed off when I began to gag. “I’d love to watch you choke on my cock all night long, but I’ve been looking forward to fucking you all day.” He rolled to the side of me and lay on his back. “Get on.”

Edward’s command took me by surprise. From our prior experiences, I hadn’t expected him to put me in a position of control. I swung my leg over his hip. He dug his fingers into my hips as I straddled him. I had just lined up our bodies when he pulled me down onto him. I bit my lip to keep from groaning as my body stretched to accommodate him.

“You all right?” Edward only gave me a moment to answer, and when I didn’t, he picked me up and slammed me down once again. This time I couldn’t hold in my cry. It hurt but felt good at the same time. “I love that I can be rough with you,” he said. He shifted his grip on me and squeezed, causing my flesh to sting. His fingers were going to leave bruises. He rocked his hips into mine, pushing himself deeper until he was buried fully inside me. “You like it too, don’t you?”

“Yes,” I breathed.

“Good.” He gripped me harder and began to guide me up and down at a steady pace. “Because you’re going to feel me tomorrow.”

“Last time I felt you all weekend,” I admitted between pants.

“Let’s make it all week.” Edward grabbed a fistful of my hair and yanked me down. He kissed my lips quickly before working his way down my neck. “I want to mark you,” he said. When I didn’t object, he placed his teeth against my neck and bit down—not hard enough to break skin but definitely hard enough leave a mark. There was a fleeting thought in my head that maybe this wasn’t a wise idea, but as he sucked my skin between his lips, I couldn’t find it in me to care.

Edward grabbed my ass with one hand and stilled me. At first I thought it was because he was too close to coming, but that changed when I felt cool plastic brush between my cheeks. I pulled my neck away from his mouth and looked down at him. His eyes were half-closed and he was breathing heavily. He swallowed thickly, then pushed the tip of the vibrator into me.

“Edward?”

“Let me.” His voice was quiet and strained. “Please.” He inserted the toy a bit farther. It was relatively thin, but with his cock already inside me, it felt huge. Being filled so completely was something I hadn’t experienced before.

“Lube?” I started to panic slightly.

Edward froze. “Does it hurt?”

“No,” I answered quickly. “But I don’t want it to.”

“Let’s try without,” he said. “I’m not going to fuck you with it. I just want to feel it in your ass.” I nodded, and he continued filling me. “Tell me if it gets to be too much, okay?”

“Okay,” I agreed.

Edward pushed on my shoulder. “Sit up.” I returned to my knees and he sat up with me, one arm reaching around me to hold the vibrator firmly in place and the other propping him up. “Ride me.”

I moved cautiously at first, not used to being on top or having both holes occupied. After a few minutes the foreign feeling gave way to pleasure. I picked up the pace, wrapping my arms around Edward’s neck for support. He moaned quietly and dropped his head to my shoulder.

“Fuck, this makes you tight,” he whispered. “You feel so good.” I was just about to tell him how good he felt, when he hit the power button.

Every thought in my head disappeared as my entire body seemed to vibrate. It rendered me completely speechless. I collapsed onto his chest, unable to support myself any longer. Edward pulled us down on the bed and immediately brought his free hand between us, bringing me to climax within seconds. It only took a few a few forceful thrusts before he was coming as well.

When we finished, we lay there, breathing heavily and covered in sweat. Edward held me loosely in his arms, switching between running his fingers through my hair and tracing patterns over my back.

“Wow,” I said finally. Edward replied with a grunt. I climbed off of him, wobbling as I got to my feet.

“You were wonderful tonight,” he murmured.

The heat rose to my cheeks. I was unsure why his praise embarrassed me. “I didn’t really do anything.”

Edward shrugged as he sat up. “It’s more of what you let me do to you.”

Like last time, the post-orgasmic atmosphere felt awkward. I wasn’t sure if it was our arrangement or the things I let him do to me that made me uncomfortable. I wanted to run back to my apartment where there was no one to judge me and no reminders of how I so willingly gave up my body to this man.

“You all right?” he asked with a frown. My discomfort must have been written on my face.

“Yes,” I answered, feigning confidence. I wasn’t going to let it bother me. No matter how poor my decisions were, I refused to regret them.

“There are towels on the bathroom counter if you want to clean up before bed.”

“Oh.” Of course he would still insist that I stay. “That’s really not necessary. I’m just downstairs.”

“You should stay.” His voice was authoritative and didn’t leave much room for argument. I really wasn’t in the mood.

“Look, Edward,” I said sternly. “I’m a big girl, okay? I understand the nature of our . . . *arrangement*. We’re adults. It’s just sex.” I glanced around the room for my clothes before remembering they were in the entryway. I didn’t want to look for my underwear; he could add them to his collection. “I don’t need to spend the night or cuddle with you to be okay with that.” I turned toward the door, but his next words stopped me in my tracks.

“Maybe I do.”

I looked at him, trying to figure out if he was just trying to manipulate me to get his way, but I could see nothing other than sincerity in his eyes.

“It would make me feel better if you spent the night. Please,” he added quietly.

Apparently my inability to deny him extended beyond sex, because I found myself walking back to the bed.

“Okay,” I agreed. “I’ll stay.”

Chapter 3

“What’s with the shit eating grin, Swan? If I knew rolling silverware was so much fun, I’d be doing that instead of busting my ass for tips.”

The sound of Tanya’s voice caused me to jump. I tried to stuff my phone in the pocket of my apron, but she snatched it from my hand and slid into the booth across from me.

“Ooh, who’s Edward?” she asked as she read the text displayed on the screen. “Looks like someone has a big date this weekend!”

“Gimme that.” I pried her fingers off the phone and locked it before putting it in my pocket. Thankfully the text wasn’t dirty. “It’s not a date.”

“Mm-hmm. ‘I can’t stop thinking about you. Saturday can’t come fast enough.’ Sounds like a date to me.”

“It’s not like that,” I insisted. “We’re . . .” I wasn’t sure what to call Edward. Friends didn’t seem like the right word. We knew each other a little too well to be acquaintances. Fuck buddies wasn’t quite accurate either. “It’s complicated.”

“All right, Swan. If you say so. Where’d you meet this guy anyway?”

“He lives in my building,” I answered vaguely.

“Oh?” Tanya’s eyes lit up in excitement. “New neighbor?”

“Not really.” I shrugged. “He’s lived there awhile, but we met a few months ago and hung out a couple of times.” My cheeks heated as I recalled what happened the two times we “hung out.”

“Have you fucked him?”

“Tanya!”

“What? It’s a valid question. You both live in the same place. You’re adults. You’re single.” She frowned. “He is single, right?”

“Yeah. I mean, I’m pretty sure he is.” I’d never broached the subject with Edward, but I was fairly confident he wasn’t in a relationship. Whether he had an arrangement like ours with anyone else . . . well, to be honest, I’d been too afraid to ask. Things were going well now, and I didn’t want to ruin it by getting too personal. “But like I said, it’s not like that.”

“Do you want it to be?”

Her line of questioning made me uncomfortable. I didn’t want to take a deeper look at my relationship with Edward. I liked him; I truly did. He was attractive and nice, and he was great in bed. If we had met under different circumstances—normal circumstances—he would be someone I’d want to date. But this was anything but normal. We had established our relationship to be mutually beneficial. I had my own reasons and justifications for it, as I’m sure he did as well. There was no sense in messing with a good thing.

At least that’s what I’d been telling myself.

Over the past few weeks, there had been a slight shift in the dynamic of our relationship. It was

subtle, but it was there. Edward had sent a text, asking if I was available to meet this coming Saturday. At the time it was still a month away, but he claimed if he didn't have something fun on his calendar to look forward to, he would lose his mind. The messages became more frequent after I agreed. They were generic—good morning, I can't wait to see you, how was work?—but he sent something every day. Knowing he was thinking of me always put a smile on my face.

So maybe I was falling for Edward Cullen. I just wasn't ready to admit it yet.

“I don't know, T. It's too soon to tell. Besides, I'm not looking for anyone right now. I'm happy.”

“Your attitude has been more tolerable lately,” she teased. “But that's probably because you're never here anymore. What's up with that? If you found the secret money tree, you'd better tell me where it is.”

It was true that I'd cut back on my hours a bit. I knew it was irresponsible, but I had worked hard over the past few years. Now that I wasn't struggling to make ends meet, being on my feet for 12 hours a day didn't seem as appealing.

“I've been tending to some personal matters,” I said carefully, the tone of my voice making it clear it wasn't up for discussion. Tanya and I were friendly, but I never saw her outside of work. She was a smart girl, and I was afraid if I gave her too much information, she would figure out what was going on. I didn't want word about our arrangement getting out. Not just for me, but for Edward too. He might have been the one to proposition me, but I'd accepted. I was just as much a part of this as he was, and I felt the need to protect him.

“Okay, fine, but I'm here if you ever need someone to talk to.”

“Thanks.” I didn't know what else to say. Fortunately the kitchen bell rang, notifying Tanya that her order was up.

“Break's over,” she sighed. “Quit texting lover boy and fold those napkins.”

I laughed and shook my head as she made her way back to the kitchen. Business at the diner had been slow lately, and I usually ended up with mundane jobs like rolling silverware and filling ketchup bottles. It's not that Tanya and Jane didn't want to sit down and do something mindless for an hour, but doing so came at the expense of tips, and since I was the least concerned about money, I was always the first to volunteer.

Jane arrived through the diner's backdoor at the same time our boss, Alistair, exited his office.

“There you are, Jane. I was hoping to reach you before you left home.”

“What's up, Al?” she asked cheerfully.

“I'm sorry, honey, but we're slow tonight. I have to send you home.”

Jane's face fell. She dropped her backpack onto the floor as tears filled her eyes. I knew that feeling; I'd been there before.

“Are you sure? Isn't there anything I can do?”

“I wish there were,” he answered sadly. Alistair hated cutting down our hours just as much as we did, and it seemed he was doing it more and more lately. “It's been slow all week. I can't afford to have three of you on at once.”

“I'll go home,” I volunteered. Jane was a single mom. She needed the money more than I did,

probably even more than Tanya.

“Really?” she asked excitedly.

“Bella, are you sure? You’ve barely gotten any hours in this week. You’re not scheduled again till Monday.”

“I’m sure, Al. Don’t worry about me.”

Alistair was hesitant but reluctantly agreed to send me home. Jane hugged me tightly, thanking me over and over again. Ten minutes later I was on my way. The sun was shining, and it was a beautiful day. I smiled, knowing I would see Edward in 48 hours.

As if he could read my mind, he chose that exact moment to send a text.

How’s work?

Slow day. I just left.

I hit send. My phone rang a few seconds later.

“Hello?”

“*Hey, baby.*” Edward sounded excited. “*It’s nice to hear your voice. I should call you more often.*”

His words made my stomach flutter. I was glad he couldn’t see my stupid smile and the way I awkwardly half-skipped down the street.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“I was about to leave to meet with a client.”

“Oh.”

“I’m trying to decide if it would be worth it to show up late.”

“Why is that?”

“Because if I stick around, I’ll get to see you.”

I giggled. It probably sounded stupid and girly, but I didn’t care.

“You’re wearing that little black skirt, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” I answered, suddenly feeling shy.

“I’d love to see you in that. How long until you get here?”

“Two minutes?”

There was a short pause before Edward mumbled, “*It’s worth it.*”

I was surprised that he would be late just for the chance to see me, short skirt or not. “Is that all you want to do? Just look?”

“*Fuck.*” The sheer lust in his voice excited me in only the way he could. I sped up, knowing I

would see him that much sooner. *“No, that’s not all I want.”*

“We could . . .”

“I don’t have much time,” he warned.

“That’s fine.”

“I still get you on Saturday.”

“Okay.”

“Where are you?”

“Just entering the building.”

“Meet me in the stairwell,” he said before disconnecting the call.

I was breathless by the time I met Edward between the fifth and sixth floors. He looked sexy wearing suit pants and a white button-up shirt, the sleeves rolled past his elbows. He wasted no time with a greeting. Instead, he raised my shirt and bra over my breasts and squeezed them roughly as he attacked my neck with his mouth. He pushed me backwards until I hit the wall, then lifted my skirt with his free hand until it sat high on my waist. His hand came between my legs, and his fingers worked their way inside my panties.

“Always so ready for me.” His breath was hot against my neck, but his words made me shiver. He didn’t bother to warm me up before shoving his fingers inside me. None of his actions were gentle, and I felt my body stretching as he relentlessly pumped and rotated his hand.

“Edward,” I whined.

“You want me, baby?”

“Yes.”

Edward undid his pants and let them drop to his ankles. He hooked my knee over his elbow and lifted my leg as high as it would go. I wrapped my arms around the back of his neck, steadying myself. Standing on one leg made me feel awkward and unbalanced, but I trusted him and knew he wouldn’t let me fall. When he rammed into me, I inhaled sharply, surprised by the sudden fullness. I didn’t think I’d ever get used to his size.

“If you want to get off you’d better get your hand down there,” he growled. I took his suggestion and quickly slid my hand between us.

I was close to coming, and I think Edward was too, when a door opened somewhere below and footsteps echoed through the stairwell. My heart rate spiked and my body stiffened. Edward only froze for a split second before falling back into his rhythm.

“What’s wrong, baby?” he asked patronizingly. “Afraid of getting caught?”

A whimper escaped my lips. I wasn’t sure if it was because I was turned on or terrified that someone might find us.

“Anyone could come up here and see us,” he whispered. “Just imagine what you look like right now—half naked, getting fucked against the wall. I bet you’d like that, wouldn’t you? For everyone to know.” Edward groaned and picked up the pace. “They’ll know you’re mine.” He

shuddered as I dug my nails into the back of his neck. “They’ll know you’re my slut.”

My jaw dropped, and my eyes widened as they met his lust-filled gaze. He smiled apologetically before pulling his bottom lip between his teeth and dropping his forehead to mine.

It was insulting and I shouldn’t have liked it, yet even though my mind was screaming at me to do something, my body responded positively. There was a tightening in my abdomen as the familiar burn started to peak, and then I was crying out, not caring who heard as my orgasm hit.

“Bella,” Edward moaned, and he slowed as he took his final thrusts. When he was finished, he carefully dropped my leg. He repositioned my underwear and rubbed his hand against them. The cotton felt cool against my skin as it absorbed our body fluids. “Fuck, I love filling you with my cum.”

Edward wiped himself off on the inside of my skirt and straightened my clothes before fixing his own. He laid his hands on my hips and leaned in slowly. When I turned my head away, he placed a kiss at the corner of my lips. “Are you okay?” he asked. I didn’t know if I was, but I nodded anyway. He regarded me uncertainly for a moment, but didn’t press the issue. “Thank you, Bella.”

“You’re welcome,” I whispered.

“See you Saturday?”

I nodded again.

“I have to go.” Edward brushed my cheek with his thumb before thanking me once more. He took the stairs quickly, disappearing around the corner. The same guilty, uncomfortable feeling that normally followed our time together descended upon me. The only difference was that this time he left me to face it alone.

I didn’t sleep well that night. My mind worked overtime trying to process the feelings I had toward Edward. I could handle the deal we had made. It was cut and dry—he gets my body and I keep my money. But what happened today was outside the scope of that agreement. Now we were bordering on fuck buddies. There wasn’t anything wrong with that, but I felt it gave him the upper hand. He was getting something for nothing. What if he came to expect it as part of the bargain? Or worse, what if he decided to start collecting rent again now that I was willing to give it up for nothing in return?

More than anything, I was upset by what he called me. It would be one thing if I knew he didn’t feel that way. Edward was a dirty talker, and I shouldn’t have been surprised, but now I was paranoid that he thought less of me. Even worse than that, though, was the way my body betrayed my mind and triggered my orgasm. I dwelled on it to the point that I became nauseated, and more than once I thought I might have to take a trip to the bathroom.

Eventually I fell into a restless sleep. When I woke up, I had a much better understanding of why I had felt physically ill the night before. I barely made it to the bathroom before I was vomiting out everything in my stomach.

I spent the majority of the day either in bed or on the floor beside the toilet. I went from hot and sweaty to cold and shivering every few minutes. My stomach twisted, my head pounded, and my whole body ached. In my entire life, I had never felt this miserable.

After a seemingly endless stretch spent dry heaving, I dragged myself back to the bedroom. My cell phone chirped as I climbed into bed, and I discovered a slew of missed messages from Edward.

8:45 AM *Good morning.*

12:02 PM *I hope you're having a good day.*

1:34 PM *Do you have time to meet this afternoon? I'd like to talk.*

1:46 PM *Just talk, promise. ;)*

3:27 PM ***Missed call**

8:12 PM *Is everything ok?*

10:14 PM *Please tell me if I did something to upset you.*

11:58 AM *Are we still meeting tonight?*

Tonight? I looked at the time and was surprised to see it was already Saturday. I had missed an entire day.

1:03 PM *I'm starting to worry.*

2:41 PM *Reply so I know you're ok please.*

4:16 PM ***Missed call**

4:19 PM *I don't know whether to be hurt or worried Bella. Please call me. I hope everything is ok.*

I felt groggy and delirious. My eyes hurt as I squinted at the screen. All I wanted to do was go back to sleep. Even my fingers protested as I typed a very short reply.

I'm sick.

He answered before I could even put the phone down.

Sorry to hear that. I hope you feel better soon.

About thirty seconds later, my phone alerted me to another new text. I groaned when I read it.

This is ridiculous. If you don't want to do this anymore just say so.

I couldn't deal with him right now. I wasn't in the mood for him to suddenly start acting like a jilted lover. My eyes drifted closed, and I was in that blissful state between sleep and full consciousness when my phone rang. Edward's number flashed on the screen.

"What?" I asked hoarsely. My voice was weak and my throat was raw.

"Bella?" Edward sounded relieved.

"What do you want?"

"*You are sick.*"

“That’s what I said.” The effort to put any sort of emotion into my voice was fruitless.

“I’m sorry. I thought . . .” He sighed. *“May I come over?”*

I couldn’t imagine why he would possibly want to be around me while I was sick. We didn’t have that type of relationship. Sex was the only reason we had ever gotten together. “What’s the point?”

“Bella, I—”

“I’m in no shape to be your entertainment for the night. I’ll talk to you later.”

I pressed the power button and threw the phone onto the floor. I hadn’t meant to be rude, but the only thing I could think about was going back to sleep.

Something cold pressed against my forehead, and I became vaguely aware that I wasn’t alone. There was a noise that I couldn’t identify. The bed shifted beneath me. A cool hand wrapped around the back of my neck, lifting my head. Something slipped between my lips.

“Drink,” a velvety voice said.

I took a few sips. It was water. It felt good on my throat. The hand disappeared and my head sank back into the pillow. I opened my eyes, but something was covering them.

“Edward?” I croaked.

“I’m right here, baby.”

I brought my hand to my face and pulled off the damp washcloth. The room was dim, but I could make out Edward sitting on the edge of the bed, looking down at me with a concerned expression. I didn’t know what time it was or how long he’d been here or even how he had gotten in.

“What are you doing here?” I asked in confusion.

“I was worried about you. Open,” he said, holding two pills to my lips. I opened my mouth and he set them on my tongue before offering me the water again.

“What were those?” I asked after swallowing them.

“Roofies.”

Blood rushed to my head, and my eyes went wide. “What?”

Edward chuckled. “I’m just kidding. It’s Aspirin. It should help with your fever.”

“That wasn’t funny,” I growled. I put my hand on my head, pressing against the spot where it pounded.

“I’m sorry. It was a bad joke.” A moment of silence passed before he spoke again. “I made you soup.”

“You did?”

Edward smiled and gave a small nod. “Yes. Let me know when you feel like eating.”

“Okay.”

Edward took the washcloth from my hand and folded it into a narrow rectangle. He brushed the hair off my face before placing the cloth back on my forehead. I didn’t understand why he was doing this. It wasn’t like he was getting anything out of it. Sex wasn’t an option, and I wouldn’t be much company while I slept.

“Why are you taking care of me?”

“Because that’s what friends do.” His smile suddenly faded. “We are friends, right?”

Friends.

The word sounded so foreign coming from Edward’s lips, but I liked it. A warmth spread through me that had nothing to do with my fever.

“Yeah, we’re friends.”

Edward smiled before lying down next to me. He picked up the remote and looked at me questioningly. When I nodded, he turned on the small TV that sat on my dresser.

“You might get sick,” I warned him.

He shrugged. “I don’t care.”

“You do realize I’m not up for doing anything, right?”

“I’ll take a rain check.” He looked at me and winked before turning his attention back to the TV.

I watched Edward as he flipped through the channels—one arm behind his head, legs crossed at the ankles, feet bare. He looked good, and as I drifted to sleep, I couldn’t help but think he needed to be in my bed more often.

On Monday, I didn’t go to work. Although I was feeling much better, I didn’t want to spread my germs everywhere. Besides, I could barely be out of bed for longer than ten minutes without becoming fatigued. Alistair said he was sorry I wasn’t feeling well and gave me his well wishes to get better soon.

The soup Edward made was delicious. My stomach couldn’t handle solid foods, so I was thankful he made enough for a few meals. By evening, there was only a little bit left. I put what remained in a bowl before thoroughly washing his plastic container.

I wanted to go to bed so I would be well rested for my morning shift at the diner, but after spending almost four days in bed, I wasn’t very tired. I decided a quick trip to Edward’s apartment would tucker me out, so I grabbed his container, slipped on my shoes, and headed out the door.

When I arrived at the landing between the fifth and sixth floors, my mind replayed Thursday’s events. I tried not to think of the conflicting emotions that I’d had. I would deal with them once I was feeling better.

As I reached the sixth floor, I heard Edward's low murmuring. I smiled, glad he was home and that I'd get to see him. My excitement came to an abrupt end when his voice was followed by a feminine laugh. I turned the corner, coming face to face with Edward and a very tall, very beautiful woman with silver blonde hair.

I froze. Edward's eyes widened as he looked at me with an expression that could only be described as panic.

"Hello," the woman said pleasantly. She smiled, showing off unnaturally white teeth. Her voice seemed to pull Edward from his trance.

"Miss Swan," he said formally. "What a surprise to see you. Is there a problem with your apartment?"

His words slammed into me with the force of a freight train. I stood there, holding his Tupperware to my chest like an idiot, shocked and unable to come up with a proper response.

So this was how I rated. He could fuck me, he could call me his friend, but the minute he had a hot date, I was nothing but a tenant.

"No," I answered dumbly.

"Excellent." Edward wrapped his fingers around the woman's arm and gently tugged her toward the elevators. "Have a nice evening," he called over his shoulder.

I remained in place, stunned, as I watched them walk down the hall and disappear around the corner. Keeping the container tightly in my arms, I turned and fled back down the stairs. When I reached my apartment, I grabbed my checkbook from the desk drawer and quickly scribbled a check to cover this month's rent. I tossed it inside the plastic container and brought it back upstairs, dropping it in front of Edward's door.

As far as I was concerned, this arrangement was over.

The shrill ring of my cell phone woke me up in the middle of the night.

"*What the hell is this?*" Edward asked angrily before I could say anything.

"What the hell is what?"

"*Don't play dumb with me,*" he snarled. "*You know exactly what I'm talking about.*"

"Oh," I said melodically. "You must be referring to the check I left you. It's called rent, Edward. In case it wasn't clear, it means your rain check has officially been canceled."

"*I don't want your money.*"

"I'm well aware of what you want," I snapped.

"*Bella—*"

"Oh, we're back to Bella now? What happened to Miss Swan?"

"*Look, just let me explain.*"

“That won’t be necessary. I’m pretty sure I figured it out on my own.”

“It’s not what you think.”

“I’ll tell you what I think. I think you’re a sick, twisted pervert, and I’m not going to be the pawn in your little sex game anymore.”

There was a short pause before Edward spoke again. *“Don’t act like you didn’t like it,”* he said, his usual confidence faltering.

“You took advantage of the position you were in. You knew I was desperate, and you manipulated me into doing what you wanted.”

“Is that how you really feel?” he asked flatly.

I answered automatically. “Yes.”

“I’m sorry. It was never my intention to hurt you.”

“Well, you did,” I said before hanging up on him.

I half expected him to call back or show up at my door, but he didn’t. I was too keyed up to get back to sleep, so I got out of bed and started pouring over my finances. Writing that check practically drained my account. I would be able to pay my phone bill and buy groceries, but there was no way I’d be able to cover next month’s rent. I would have to pick up more hours. No more trading shifts and taking days off.

The diner was closed when I arrived, but Alistair was already there, like I knew he would be.

“Hey, Al,” I said, poking my head into his office. “Do you have a second?”

“You’re here early,” he said in surprise. “Just the girl I wanted to talk to. Come here. Have a seat.”

I entered his office and sat down in the chair across from him.

“Bella,” he began, and I could tell from the tone of his voice that something was off. “You know you, Tanya, and Jane are like family to me, right?”

“Sure I do.”

“This is hard for me, but there’s no other way. Business has been slow, and times are tight. I have to make decisions based on what’s best for everyone. Jane has three children, and Tanya has been asking for more hours for the past two months.”

I couldn’t believe my ears. He couldn’t be saying what I thought he was. He wouldn’t . . .

“What are you saying, Al?”

“I’m sorry, Bella.” He reached out and placed a comforting hand on mine. “I have to let you go.”

Chapter 4

I paced my small apartment, weighing my options for what felt like the billionth time. It had been three days since I lost my job, and I had yet to start looking for another one. Over the past two days, I searched for a new apartment; I couldn't stay here. This place was filled with nothing but disgusting memories. I needed a fresh start.

There was an apartment building across town for a little less than what I was paying now. The living space was a bit smaller, but it was a lot newer as well. Most importantly, it wasn't owned by Cullen Properties. I double checked before even setting foot inside. They had an apartment available for rent immediately and another opening next month, but I wasn't ready to commit yet. A few miles still wasn't far enough away from Edward, and if I were going to be stuck working some shitty waitressing job again, I sure as hell wasn't doing it here.

It was time for a change.

The biggest problem was, in order to get a new apartment, I would have to make a down payment. Unfortunately I had just given the last of my money to Edward.

I stayed up half the night, mustering the courage for what I needed to do. At the crack of dawn, I found myself outside Edward's apartment. I banged my fist against the door. It felt good to release my pent up aggression on something that was his.

It took a couple minutes and another series of knocks before Edward answered. The worried expression he wore hardened into an impassive mask the moment he saw me. He had a serious case of bedhead, and his shirt and shorts were wrinkled. A layer of stubble covered his face. It was a far cry from his usual perfectly put together appearance, but somehow he still managed to look good. Sexy even. The mental image of him, naked and dominating, filled my head. But when I thought of him acting out his dirty, depraved fantasies with the blond woman from Monday night, my stomach churned. I shook off the thought.

"I want my money back," I said without giving him a chance to speak.

Edward cleared the sleep from his throat. "What makes you think I have the power to do that?"

"Look, just give it back, okay? I need the money to put down on another apartment. I'm moving out at the end of the month. Consider this my notice."

He chewed his lower lip and glared at me icily. "Well, you're still living here, so you still have to pay."

"I did pay," I argued. "I paid the first and last month's rent when I signed the lease. Any legitimately run company would be able to look it up in my file."

"I'm well aware of our rental policy." Edward was livid as he crossed his arms over his chest. His eyes blazed. "We also require a thirty day cancellation notice. It's already ten days into the month, so technically, your last month is *next month*."

All I could see was red. I couldn't believe the nerve this man had after everything he put me through. "You are going to give me back my money," I demanded, "or I'm going to report you."

"Really? To whom?" Edward smiled, but it wasn't the lust-filled smile I was accustomed to. It made him look sinister. Evil. "And what exactly are you going to tell them? What proof do you have?"

My confidence began to falter, but I hid it as best I could. To an extent, he had a point. It would be his word against mine. I wasn't even sure if what I did could be considered prostitution. If I turned him in for . . . I don't even know what. Sexual harassment? Coercion? Rape? Deep down inside I knew it wasn't fair. But even if I tried, who's to say it wouldn't backfire on me? I sure as hell wasn't responsible with my money the past few months, and I was sure I'd be looked at like a gold-digging whore.

"Please. I need the money." My voice wavered as I spoke.

For a moment, Edward's face softened. He almost looked relieved, and I wondered if what I assumed was anger earlier was actually fear.

"I'll give it back, but it's going to cost you," he whispered.

My eyes widened as I realized what he was implying. "You've got to be fucking kidding me!" I hissed. "What do you want me to do, suck your cock again? Let you fuck me? Photograph me? Stick a vibrator up my ass? Is that what you want?"

Edward's eyes shifted down the hallway. No one was out at this early hour, but my voice was rapidly increasing in volume as I reached near hysterics, and I'm sure we were in danger of waking at least one of his adjoining neighbors. Slowly, he returned his gaze to me and shook his head.

"Price has gone up." He said it as if he weren't quite certain himself. It reminded me of the phone conversation we had before our first night together, when everything was new and we were entering uncharted territory.

"What are you talking about?"

I waited expectantly when he didn't continue. He looked at me as though he were calculating. Testing. Trying to figure out a riddle or some kind of complicated equation. I was about to repeat myself when he spoke.

"I'm going to be gone on business for a few days."

"What, have a goldfish you need fed or something?" I tried to joke, but it fell flat.

"I want you to come with me."

I stared at him blankly and shook my head. He regarded me with a nervous expression.

"You want your money back? This is the only way. You'll stay with me. Our current arrangement will apply. I don't care what it takes. I don't care what you have to sacrifice to make it work. If you behave yourself, I'll give you the cash when we get back in town."

"If I . . ." I didn't know what to say. I wanted to tell him no, that he could take his deal and shove it up his ass, but my mouth wouldn't form the words.

"I don't need an answer right now," he said. "If you want to do it, be here tomorrow morning at seven."

I lifted my chin indignantly but gave him no indication one way or the other.

Edward began to close the door, but then he stopped and opened it again. "One more thing," he added. "If you agree, this time you don't get to say no."

He didn't meet my eyes as he slammed the door in my face.

Once again, I found myself pacing my apartment. So this was how it would all go down—spend a few more nights with Edward to finally be free of him forever. I kept reminding myself that the sooner I had my money back, the sooner I could get the fuck out of this hellhole.

If I were being perfectly honest, I knew our time together wouldn't be *that* bad. Whether I wanted to admit it, I enjoyed having sex with Edward. And nothing had changed, really. I was stupid if I believed for a moment we had something exclusive. In fact, I shouldn't have been surprised to see him with someone else, and it definitely shouldn't have hurt so much.

But he called me a slut, and then he blew me off in front of his gorgeous, blonde date. I didn't understand why. It wasn't like I was a threat. He didn't have to answer to me. I wondered how Edward would have reacted had the roles been reversed. If we had been together and she showed up in the hallway, would it still have been me he snubbed? I wasn't sure I wanted to know the answer.

I didn't want to be a part of any relationship—be it based on friendship or sex—if the other person didn't respect me. I deserved better.

My decision was made, even if I had yet to admit it to myself. My pacing eventually led me to my bedroom, where I stood in front of my open closet door. I felt numb as my hands reached for clothes to pack. I was going to choose a dingy, white cotton bra and my largest, most period-stained underwear but decided against it at the last moment. I might feel like a moralless whore, but I did have some standards. After all, I would still be getting undressed in front of a man. I had to keep at least a little bit of dignity.

In the end, I decided to treat this situation as though I were going somewhere fun with friends. I packed sexy lingerie, all of my makeup and hair supplies, and even a nice cocktail dress. I was under no illusion that Edward was going to wine and dine me before defiling my body, but he did say he was going for business, and I wasn't about to be left behind for an evening because I didn't have the proper attire.

I tossed and turned all night and was more than happy when it was finally time to leave. I was tired of thinking about what I had gotten myself into; I just wanted it to be over.

It was 6:55 when I knocked on Edward's door for the second time this weekend. This time, he answered much quicker.

"Bella," he said softly. Leaning in, he kissed my cheek. I could smell his aftershave, and my eyes closed automatically as he dragged his lips down to my neck. "I'm glad you're joining me."

I responded by dropping my suitcase at his feet. It thumped loudly as it hit the floor. He stared at it for a moment before bending at the waist to pick it up.

"Come inside. I'm almost ready."

I followed Edward into his apartment, closing the door behind me. He had already disappeared around the corner leading to the bedroom. I stood in the entryway, trying to decide if I should make myself at home in his living room or continue standing where I was, irritated by the whole situation.

Edward made up my mind for me.

“You coming?” echoed his voice from the hallway.

I sighed and trudged down the hall to meet him. I stopped in the doorway of his room and peeked inside. It looked the same as I remembered it, except for the piles of clothing and toiletries meticulously laid out on the bed. Surprisingly, being in his room didn't make me feel embarrassed or ashamed like I thought it would. It didn't make me all hot and bothered either.

I felt numb.

“What do you think?” Edward stepped out from his closet, holding up two dress shirts. One was white, probably the same one he wore the day we had sex in the stairwell. The other was a very light mint green. It looked nice with his eyes, but I wasn't about to tell him that.

“They're both nice.”

“Do you prefer one over the other?”

I shrugged. My indifference was irritating him, or at least I hoped so. “You can always bring them both.”

Edward laid the white shirt on the bed and returned the green shirt to the closet, much to my disappointment. I kept my face neutral as he carefully folded the shirt and packed everything into a duffle bag. He sighed as he zipped it closed then he turned to face me. “Come here.”

I moved to stand next to him at the foot of the bed.

“I'm going to fuck you before we leave,” he said. My stomach fluttered with anticipation and then dropped, leaving me feeling anxious, like it was the first time all over again. “Face the bed.”

Once again, I did as I was told. He wasted no time pulling my shirt and bra over my head; then he unfastened my jeans and pushed them down past my knees. Gripping a fistful of my hair, he forced me facedown onto the bed. The fabric of his clothes made a ruffling sound as he took them off, and his cock brushed the back of my thigh when he stepped behind me. He kept me pinned to the bed by my hair with one hand while the other hand slipped between my legs. His fingers slid easily through the wetness there. “You're always so ready for me to fuck you,” he groaned.

It angered me that I couldn't control my reaction to him, but I kept my mouth shut. I tried to keep calm while I waited. He ran the head of his cock over me, lubricating himself, but when he started to push inside, I panicked.

“Wait!” I choked out. Edward froze. I waited for him to say something, but he didn't. I took a deep breath. “Maybe you should wear a condom or something.”

“A condom or something,” he repeated. I nodded without thinking. His grip on my hair was tight, and I winced as the strands pulled at my scalp. “You want me to wear a condom *now*.”

“Yes,” I answered, even though I really didn't think he was asking for clarification.

“Is there something you want to tell me? Something I need to be concerned about?”

His question was insulting. Did he really think I was trying to tell him that he needed protection from *me*? It was him I was worried about, now that I knew there was a high probability I wasn't the only one he was sleeping with.

“No! I—”

“Good.”

I gasped as Edward pushed inside of me, the angle and lack of foreplay making the sudden invasion uncomfortable. I squeezed my eyes closed. My breaths came out in heavy pants with each of his thrusts.

“How am I supposed to feel how dripping wet I make you if I wear a condom?”

Assuming the question was rhetorical, I kept my mouth shut. The weight of his body pushed me into the bed as he covered me. He wrapped his fingers around my wrists and stretched my arms over my head.

“Relax.” His warm breath fanned across my neck, causing me to shiver. “Let me know when you’re close.”

Now that he wasn’t holding me by the hair, I acknowledged his request with a nod and did my best to relax. The gentle kisses he placed on my neck and shoulders were a stark contrast to the strength of his hips as he drove into me. I wanted to push him away. At the same time, I wanted to give in to the pleasure I knew he was capable of giving me.

“Tell me to fuck you harder,” he said.

“Harder,” I whispered.

“Say it like you mean it.”

“Harder,” I said again. Edward’s thrusts became slow and shallow, and I squirmed beneath him, needing more.

“Louder,” he growled.

“Please fuck me harder!”

This time he obliged, and I wanted to cry from the pleasure. It didn’t matter how angry or jealous I had been over the past few days—in this moment, he made me feel too good to care.

“I’m close,” I told him. Almost immediately, he pulled out and stood back, leaving me empty and cold and confused . . . and then really angry. “What the fuck?” I yelled over my shoulder. I tried to roll over, but Edward shoved his hand against my back and held me down. His other hand moved over his cock in fast, hard strokes, and he quickly came on my ass.

I didn’t move when his hand left my back. Actually, I still wanted to cry, but in a completely different way than before. The window of opportunity for my orgasm had passed, and it didn’t seem like Edward was going to give me a hand any time soon.

“A little help?” Somehow I managed to keep the petulance out of my voice. Apparently the part about it being good for me no longer applied. I expected Edward to bring me a wash cloth or towel or something; instead, he grabbed my shoulders and pulled me onto my feet. I refused to complain as his cum ran down the backs of my thighs.

At first, I didn’t realize what Edward was doing as he bent down and grabbed my panties, which were still securely around my ankles. It wasn’t until they were up to my knees that I understood what was happening, and even then, I was too shocked to say or do anything.

When they were in place, Edward pulled up my jeans as well. After fastening them, he turned me to face him, squeezed my ass, and pressed his hips against mine. Between the drying cum and thin layer of sweat on his chest, I shivered involuntarily.

“A little something so you’ll remember who owns you this weekend,” Edward said as he patted my backside. “I’m going to have so much fun with you.”

I tried not to look disappointed, but I wasn’t very successful.

“Don’t pout,” he said before kissing my lips. “If you’re a good girl, you’ll get yours tonight.” Edward released me from his hold and picked up both of our bags. I tried not to watch the way his biceps flexed as he carried them. He wasn’t looking at me when he nodded toward the door, so I didn’t think he noticed. “Ready?”

As if I had a choice. I followed him in silence, trying to ignore the cum drying on my skin.

We didn’t take the stairs, for which I was thankful. The elevator ride was quick but uncomfortable with the awkward silence. I supposed I should get used to being in an enclosed space with him seeing that we were about to be in a vehicle together for God only knew how long. When we reached Edward’s car—a shiny, black coupe—he stowed our bags in the trunk before opening the passenger door for me. I didn’t bother thanking him as I got in. He waited outside the car for what felt like an eternity. I wasn’t sure if he wanted to say something or if he was waiting for me to break the ice. Finally he gave up, closed the door, and made his way to the driver’s side.

Edward started the car without a word and shifted into reverse. The car had a manual transmission, and my eyes were drawn to his hand as his fingers tightened around the gear shift. My stomach fluttered with thoughts of what that hand had done in the past, and I looked away.

He attempted to strike up a few conversations throughout the drive, as though we were friends and he hadn’t just fucked me in his apartment. He asked if I was feeling any better, if I had trouble getting time off work, if there was anything I wanted to do while he had free time. He even commented about the weather. I would shrug or nod, shake my head, anything to avoid talking. I was here to fuck him, not engage him in conversation. That was the arrangement. He hadn’t specified anything more. Eventually he gave up trying to communicate with me and turned on the radio.

“Bella, wake up, baby,” I heard Edward say as I returned to consciousness. He was brushing the hair from my face, the backs of his fingers trailing down my neck with each circuit. It felt nice, but I flinched and sat up straight, not wanting to take comfort from him. His actions were too intimate, and it made me uneasy.

Opening my eyes, I took in our surroundings. We were in a parking lot of an apartment building. It was big, much larger than the one we lived in. “Where are we?”

“We’re staying here for the night,” he said.

“At an apartment?” I asked. “I thought we’d be in a hotel or something.”

“You do realize what my family does for a living, right?” I could tell Edward wasn’t being condescending, but my sleep-muddled brain felt stupid anyway. “Come on. Let’s go inside.”

Edward retrieved our bags from the trunk, and I followed him into the complex. Key in hand, he

led me to a door on the top floor. I was surprised to find the apartment fully furnished, and it was a big apartment, too. The countertops were made of marble, and there was hardwood floor in the kitchen. The carpet was plushy. Even the fixtures looked expensive.

“Who lives here?” I asked.

“No one.”

“Do you have some sort of alternate lifestyle or something I don’t know about?” I didn’t mean to pry, and part of me didn’t want to hear the answer.

“No,” Edward said, shaking his head. “My father likes to keep an apartment reserved at each building in case a situation like this pops up.”

“A situation like what?” I asked uncertainly. “You brought me along, so you’re obviously not collecting past due rent.” The subtle accusation came out sharper than I intended. My throat became dry, and I struggled to swallow as Edward looked at me. His expression was unreadable. I couldn’t tell if my comment angered him, and the last thing I wanted to do was piss him off. I had to remember I was at his mercy. If I didn’t “behave,” he wasn’t going to return my money.

“I’m looking at a property a few miles from here,” he explained. “I have a meeting with the owner in a little bit. He’s going to show me around, and then we’re going to discuss some options over dinner. I’ll bring you back something to eat.”

“Oh.” I tried not to sound too dejected when I realized the invite wasn’t extended to me.

Edward must have misunderstood the reason behind my disappointment. “Or I can leave you money. I’m sure there are plenty of places that deliver, and we’re in walking distance of pretty much everything.” He made his way into the living room and opened the curtain. The setting sun shone through the sliding glass door, bathing the room in a warm, yellow glow. He leaned against the doorframe and sighed as he looked down on the city below.

“I can see you living somewhere like this,” Edward finally said. “Busy city, nice building.” He looked at me over his shoulder and smiled. “You’d probably like it a lot.”

“Yeah, well, I could never afford it.” A waitress’s salary was not going to allow me to live in a place of this caliber, nor was any other job I’d be qualified to do.

“We could work out a deal.” Edward rolled his eyes when I gave him a steely glare. “Purely monetary, of course.”

It was tempting, but I felt like I already sold my soul to the devil, and I wasn’t about to start another transaction. Besides, I wanted to get away from Edward, not give him another thing to hold over my head. “Thanks, but it’s a little too ritzy for my taste.”

He shrugged and returned his gaze to the street below.

I watched him for a few minutes, wondering what he was thinking. I wished we could go back to the way we were before I knew he was seeing someone else. Was that only last weekend? It felt like an eternity ago. I didn’t like how things were uncomfortable between us now, and what made me the most angry was that it was mostly my fault. I overreacted when I should have known better.

“Do you mind if I shower?” I asked hopefully. I needed some time alone, and it would be nice to get cleaned up.

Edward seemed surprised when he looked at me. “You can do whatever you want, Bella. You don’t have to ask my permission.”

Without another word, I grabbed my suitcase and retreated to the bathroom.

I didn’t mean to doze off while I waited for Edward to return from his meeting, but I couldn’t help it. The king-sized bed was the most comfortable bed I had ever been in, and once I lay down, I couldn’t get back up. What finally woke me up was the book being plucked from my hand where it rested on my chest. I opened my eyes to see Edward smirking down at me.

“Sleepy?” he asked.

I shook my head.

“Good, because I have plans for you.” He held up a long piece of black silk. “Remember this?” It was the blindfold he used on me the last time we were together. I nodded, and he covered my eyes. “Put your hands over your head,” he demanded. I complied, raising my arms above my head. Edward shifted so he was straddling me and quickly undressed me from the waist up. I heard a sound behind my head that I couldn’t distinguish, followed by a distinctive click as something encircled first one wrist and then the other.

Edward had handcuffed me to the bed.

I gave my restraints a little tug, then I pulled harder. They didn’t budge, and my hands weren’t about to slip out any time soon. My heart rate picked up as panic settled in. I couldn’t see, and now I didn’t have use of my hands. Edward had never legitimately restrained me before, although he had made threats. Being trapped was very unsettling.

“Edward?” I whimpered. He was still sitting on top of me, and I felt his body vibrate with his chuckle. His weight lifted from my body, and he slowly removed the rest of my clothing.

“Open your mouth nice and wide for me.”

Without knowing what else to do, I complied. I didn’t know what to expect—maybe for him to stuff my panties or his cock into my mouth. I frowned when he inserted something firm. It was smooth and tasted like rubber. It wasn’t until he started buckling something behind my neck that I realized he was gagging me.

His words from last night came rushing back.

This time you don’t get to say no.

I didn’t know what Edward had in store for me tonight, and the unknown was terrifying. For some reason, I had always trusted him in the past, but this was different. He had acted cold and strange all day, and I was pretty sure he was angry with me. Why would he go to this extent unless he wanted to hurt me?

I jerked my head away, but it was too late; the gag was already securely in place. When I tried to ask him what he was doing, the words came out a garbled mess. Fear set in as the sound of my own voice amplified my helplessness. I could only think of one thing: I needed to get away.

I yanked on the handcuffs as hard as I could, but all it managed to do was hurt my wrists. Edward

was saying something, but I wasn't listening. My legs were free, and I kicked in the direction of his voice. His grip was firm as he grabbed my legs and pinned them to the bed. No matter how hard I thrashed, I was no match for his strength. In no time at all, he was on top of me and tearing the blindfold from my face. The room was bright, and I forced my eyes to stay open, blinking through tears I hadn't realized were there.

"Shh, Bella, shh," Edward repeated in a soft, soothing voice. "You have to calm down." My eyes met his, and I was surprised to see my own panic reflected there. "It's me, baby. It's just me."

It was hard to catch my breath through my nose, and I let out a pathetic sounding whine. I didn't mean for it to sound that way. It was just how it came out.

"Why are you so frightened?" Edward asked softly. Obviously I was unable to answer, and now that I was settling down, I was actually kind of glad I couldn't. It seemed silly to admit I thought he was going to hurt me. He sighed in what I could only assume was relief and leaned in to kiss my cheek, right above where the leather strap pressed into my skin. "You'll always be safe with me."

Edward sat back, and I nodded to let him know I understood. He watched me carefully for a few moments. Then he smiled and replaced the blindfold. I took a deep breath as the world around me once again disappeared. His fingers trailed down my body, leaving a path of goose bumps in their wake. I squirmed as he caressed my stomach, giggling when he reached my feet.

"That's better," Edward said from somewhere near the bottom of the bed. He replaced his fingers with his mouth and slowly made his way back up my body, using his lips and tongue and teeth to retrace his path. I was trembling with anticipation by the time he reached my thighs. Placing his hands on my knees, he gently pushed my legs apart, leaving me feeling exposed and vulnerable.

I tried to keep my breathing under control, but it was hard. He was making me wait; for what, I didn't know. My muscles ached from being clenched so tightly. I forced out a groan, pleased that the gag couldn't stifle my frustration. Edward laughed under his breath then flicked his tongue against my clit.

My response was immediate. I arched my back and twisted my hips in a vain attempt for him to continue. His forearms pressed against my thighs, rendering me immobile as he spread me wider.

"Please," I tried to beg, but of course, it came out unintelligible.

"That is so unbelievably sexy," Edward said. "Do you want me to make you come?" I nodded affirmatively. "I can't hear you," he cooed.

"Yes!" It was garbled, but from my experience with Edward, I knew it was better to give him what he wanted the first time he demanded it. "Yes!"

Taking me by the hips, Edward dragged me down the bed, stretching out my arms and flattening my back against the mattress. I tried to relax, which proved to be almost impossible once his mouth was on me again. I squirmed and grunted and tried to breathe steadily through my nose. He attacked my body relentlessly. And he was good at it. Each stroke of his tongue brought me closer to the orgasm he denied me of earlier.

Everything was building, and I couldn't have held it off if I tried. My body jerked as wave after wave of pleasure hit me. I rode it out for as long as I could, and then I sagged against the bed as I went completely slack.

I didn't think I could have moved if I tried.

Edward crawled up my body with an uncharacteristic urgency and settled on top of me. I was sore from the harsh way he fucked me that morning, and I bit into the rubber ball, wincing as he entered me with a sharp thrust of his hips. He stilled immediately.

“Are you okay?”

I nodded.

“Do you need me to stop?”

I shook my head.

“Good girl,” he said. “I’ll be gentle.” True to his word, Edward was gentle. He moved slowly, pulling out almost completely before pushing back in with long, fluid strokes. “You look so good,” he began, “all tied up and gagged and at my mercy. I could do anything to you right now.” His rhythm faltered, and a shudder ran through his body. “Oh, god, I’m going to come.”

His pace quickened as he emptied himself inside of me, and then he collapsed onto his side. The only sound in the room was his labored breathing, and I waited patiently, listening as it returned to normal. I tugged against the handcuffs. They were still secure. I don’t know what else I expected, but I was starting to get antsy.

Edward unfastened the gag before pulling off the blindfold. I blinked as my eyes adjusted to the light and stretched my sore jaw.

“Do you know what the best thing about having you here is?” he asked.

“The sex?”

Edward pursed his lips, unsuccessfully trying to mask his smile. “Do you know what the *second* best thing about having you here is?”

“What?” I whispered.

“There’s nowhere for you to run off to.” He reached out and playfully tugged on one of my nipples. “Otherwise I’d have to leave you handcuffed to the bed until I was ready to let you go.” Retrieving a key from the nightstand, he swiftly unlocked the cuffs. He kissed both of my wrists before standing from the bed. His eyes darkened, and he smiled down at me devilishly. “Maybe I’ll do that next month.”

As he walked away, my feelings warred with each other. Next month? There wasn’t going to be a next month. This was it. After we got back in town, I was going to take my money and get as far away from him as possible. Surely, he knew that—I had told him as much.

I refused to believe he would rescind our agreement, but now more than ever, I worried he wouldn’t let me get away so easily. However, a small part of me didn’t want to get away, and knowing that was the worst of all.

Chapter 5

Unlike the previous evenings I spent with Edward, when I woke up in the morning, I wasn't wrapped in his arms. He was on his side at the very edge of the bed, facing away from me. A lump formed in my throat, but I swallowed it away. For as unnecessary as I had believed his insistence on cuddling to be, there was something very unsettling about the fact that he didn't want to anymore.

I sat up slowly, watching and listening for any sign that he was awake, but he didn't stir, and his breathing was even and slow. I crawled off the bed and made my way to the kitchen. I wasn't sure what I expected to find, as the apartment had been locked up like Fort Knox when we arrived yesterday, but the kitchen was completely empty. I needed coffee in a bad way. Figuring a little fresh air wouldn't hurt, I got dressed and crept from the apartment.

Edward had been right yesterday; located in the middle of the city, we were within walking distance of everything. From drug stores to coffee shops, pet stores to clothing boutiques, bars and restaurants, music stores, hobby shops—anything I could possibly want or need was located in the blocks surrounding the apartment complex. It was a far cry from what I was used to. My apartment wasn't too far from the city, but without a vehicle my options were limited.

Rounding a corner, I ran into a line of people outside a breakfast cafe. Delicious scents wafted out of the open door. The line seemed to be moving quickly, and figuring there was probably a good reason for the mass amount of patrons, I decided to give the place a try.

I was about to decide between a breakfast sandwich and oatmeal when my phone rang. It was Edward. I reluctantly answered the call.

“Hello?”

“*Bella, where are you?*” The words were rushed, his voice filled with alarm.

“Down the street. Why?”

“*Oh . . . I . . .*” Edward cleared his throat. “*You had me concerned, that's all.*”

“Sorry,” I said. “I went to get coffee.” There was an awkward pause where neither of us spoke. “Do you want some?” I hadn't meant to offer, but I couldn't take the silence any longer.

“*Sure.*” He sounded surprised. “*Black is fine.*”

“Next,” the cashier called.

“That's me. I have to go.” I hung up without waiting for a reply.

Because I hadn't yet decided what I wanted to eat, I ordered both food items and two coffees, sighing as yet another chunk of money was deducted from my dwindling bank account. I thought about his phone call as I waited for my order. I couldn't understand the underlying urgency in his voice. Where did he think I had gone? I was completely at his mercy. I didn't even have the means to go home if I wanted to.

When I arrived at the apartment, Edward was waiting by the door. His eyes lit up when he saw the bag in my hand, making me thankful that I ordered enough for both of us. He chose the sandwich, leaving me the oatmeal.

We ate together at the kitchen table. Something felt off, but I couldn't quite place what it was. Edward wasn't his usual playful self. He seemed reserved and deep in thought, and aside from thanking me for breakfast, he hadn't said a thing.

"How was the property?" I asked, breaking the silence.

Edward chewed slowly, seemingly in no hurry to answer. He swallowed and took a sip of coffee. I tried to ignore the way his tongue swept over his lips when he was finished. "Good. The place needs a lot of work, but I think it will be a good investment."

"You're going to buy it?"

"I'd like to." He shrugged. "I have to discuss it with my father first. He makes all the big financial decisions."

"Probably a good idea. Otherwise you might sleep away all the profits." I hadn't meant to make the accusation, but as fast as the words popped into my mind, they had moved past my lips.

Edward's eyes shot to mine. His jaw tensed, and his nostrils flared. "I'm not sleeping away any profits." The coldness of his tone sent a shiver down my spine.

I had seen Edward domineering and playful. I'd seen him unforgiving and relentless. But I had never seen him legitimately angry. I diverted my eyes from his face, unable to take the intensity of his stare, and ate the rest of my breakfast in silence. I finished before Edward. When he was done, he pushed his plate away and sat back in his chair.

"I'm meeting an old friend for dinner tonight."

By the way he worded the statement, it didn't sound like he was extending an invitation to me. It also didn't sound like his "old friend" was one of his high school football buddies, or whatever it was Edward passed the time doing in his years before being an overbearing jackass . . . if those years ever existed.

"Oh," I said, chancing another look at him. His expression was stony and unreadable.

"You don't mind being on your own again, do you?" He briefly met my gaze before dropping his eyes to his coffee cup.

"Nope," I said in a failed attempt to keep the sharpness from my voice. I didn't mind being on my own. At least, I didn't think that was what bothered me. What bothered me was the thought of him double dipping his dick and not giving me the courtesy of a heads up. Anger built inside me, no doubt flushing my cheeks a bright shade of pink. "What's her name?"

Edward looked at me again. He frowned, appearing genuinely confused. "Pardon?"

"Your old friend," I clarified. "What's her name?"

For a moment, I actually felt silly for saying anything. What he did shouldn't have been any of my concern. I definitely didn't have the right to question him about it; certainly he owed me no explanation.

"Are you jealous?" Edward's tone was playful, yet his expression remained neutral.

"Hardly." Even as I said it, I knew it was a lie. I was jealous. He invited me to travel with him. The least he could do was give me some of his precious time outside of the bedroom.

If Edward picked up on my terrible acting skills, it didn't show. "Besides," I added, "why would I be jealous? It's not like we're dating or anything."

"That's right." There was a flash of emotion on his face, but he recovered too quickly for me to get a grasp on what it was. "I keep forgetting this is strictly business for you."

"Yes, I'm basically your whore."

"You're not a whore," he said. I didn't appreciate his patronizing tone. I looked at him with disbelief, and he threw his hands up in the air. "There isn't any money being exchanged."

"Not technically, but there is a value on—" I gestured to the space between us "—what we're doing. And after this trip you *are* giving me money."

"Fine. You're not a whore. I'm helping out a friend whom I just happen to like fucking." Edward sat up a little straighter and cocked his brow. "Is that better?"

"Would you still be helping me if we didn't fuck?" My question was met with silence. Other than the straight line his lips formed, Edward remained perfectly still. "I didn't think so." I stood, assuming the conversation was over, but Edward didn't let it drop.

"Would you still fuck me if you weren't getting something out of it?" There was an edge to his voice. His eyes blazed as he stood and stepped toward me. "I am a sick, twisted pervert, after all."

Edward used my own words indifferently, as if he were stating something obvious, like the weather or that it was Sunday. For the most part his face stayed neutral, but the edges of his lips turned down into a pout.

And then it hit me.

"Did I hurt your feelings?" I asked, my voice rising in pitch and volume. Edward's silence was all the confirmation I needed. I couldn't believe his audacity. "Oh, my god. You're the one who called me a slut!"

"I don't think you're a slut."

"Oh, really?" I didn't bother hiding my sarcasm. "That's kind of hard to believe, seeing as you treat me like one every time we're together."

"Bella," Edward said in exasperation. "Remember when we started this? I said I wanted to make it good for you. I don't know you. I'm just trying to figure out what you like, what gets you off. I thought you might like . . ." He sighed and tugged his hand through his hair. "I'm sorry. I'm trying to read your reactions as I go, but it's not always easy."

I stood before him, absolutely speechless. His simple honesty was unexpected, and I'd never imagined him to have taken my feelings, my desires into consideration.

"Besides," he continued, "I didn't call you a slut. I called you *my* slut."

"Because that makes a difference," I scoffed.

"It does." With one long stride, Edward stood directly in front of me. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but I'm pretty sure you like the way I treat you when we're together." His arms wrapped around me, pulling me flush against him. His lips dropped to my ear, and his warm breath fanned across my neck. "Admit it," he whispered. "You liked it, just a little bit, when I called you my slut."

A shudder ran throughout my body. It was true; a part of me had liked it. But liking it and not wanting it to be true were two completely different things. I closed my eyes, exhaling harshly as Edward skimmed his nose down my neck. “Maybe just a little,” I whimpered.

“That’s what I thought.” Without releasing his hold on me, Edward leaned back and ducked his head to look me in the eyes. “Will you accompany me to dinner tonight, Bella?”

“So . . .” I bit my lip, hesitating, not wanting to say anything to ruin his sudden turn of mood. “Does that mean you’re *not* going out with another girl?”

Edward’s lips curved into a smile. “Do you think I would invite you to dinner if I already had a date?”

“I don’t know. Maybe you have a threesome fantasy you want to act out.”

Edward laughed through his nose and shook his head. I got the distinct feeling he was shaking his head at me, not necessarily disagreeing with my statement.

“I’m meeting a buddy from college. And I would have invited you had I known you’d be interested.”

“Well, maybe next time you should just ask instead of assuming and making an ass out of yourself.”

“Me, an ass?” Edward gave a mock look of surprise. “Since we’re being honest,” he said, squeezing my backside. I shifted closer to him to escape the sting of his fingertips. “I don’t typically get off on being called an ass. I prefer things like *please* and *harder* and *more*.”

Edward held me tightly with one hand and unbuttoned my jeans with the other, unzipping them before sliding his fingers between my legs. He caressed me softly and slowly, and as much as I wanted to stifle the moan that was threatening to slip past my lips, it took too much effort to hold it in.

“That’s more like it,” he said. His warm lips found my neck, making me weak in the knees. I had to hold on to his shoulders to steady myself. “So, Miss Swan, is that a yes?”

“A yes?”

“To dinner.”

I nodded.

“Good.” Edward pulled his hand from my pants. Keeping his eyes on mine, he slipped his fingers into his mouth, slowly licking them clean. “There’s some work I have to get done before this evening. I trust you can entertain yourself for a while.” He chuckled at the disappointed look on my face. I should have known he was just teasing me.

The dress was simple—sleeveless, black, with a sweetheart neckline and a skirt that flared slightly. It had been a few years since I last wore it, and it seemed a lot shorter than I remembered, but at least it still fit.

I put a thin coat of gloss on my lips and stepped back from the full length mirror, feeling altogether

out of place with my hair pulled into a sleek ponytail, smokey black eyes, and a dusting of pink on my cheeks.

Edward and I had never done anything outside the bedroom before, and although this was far from a date, there was something exciting about going out with him, about spending time with him out of this environment. I tried to ignore the fact that I technically invited myself along. The last thing my self-esteem needed was a pity invite.

A soft knock on the bedroom door pulled me from my musings. Edward opened the door a crack and peered into the room. When he saw me, his jaw slackened. His eyes roamed my body, lingering on my legs before settling on my face. He smiled softly.

“Is it too much?” I asked. Edward stepped inside the room, clad in dark jeans and a black T-shirt. I took another look in the mirror, feeling silly for dressing up, for inviting myself, for assuming he was taking me somewhere remotely nice. “It’s too much. I’ll change.” Sighing, I reached behind my back, searching for the zipper.

“Don’t change. You look nice.”

“I look ridiculous.”

“Don’t, please.” Edward reached behind me and stilled my hand. “I’ll change.”

Edward removed the white dress shirt from his bag. He sniffed it and gave it a couple good shakes before holding it in the air. He must have deemed it acceptable, because he laid it on the bed, along with a pair of slate gray slacks and black dress socks, before stripping down. I let my eyes wander over the plains of his chest, the faint outline of his abs, the slight V that descended into his boxers. He was oblivious to me staring, and I did it shamelessly. It took everything I had to look away before he caught me.

“If I knew I was going to wear shirt this again I’d have hung it up.”

“I told you to bring both,” I said, imagining how the mint shirt would bring out the green in his eyes.

Edward frowned at me as he stepped into his pants. “I didn’t realize you meant it. I thought you were just being difficult.”

I shrugged. At the time I was, but I didn’t feel like admitting it now, especially after he was changing to make me feel more comfortable. “Are we going to look out of place?” I asked.

“We’ll blend.” Edward approached me slowly, rolling up first one sleeve and then the other. He stopped just inches from me and took my hands in his. His skin was cool to the touch, his thumbs soft as he rubbed them across my bare wrists. Edward looked at my hands and then at my neck. “No jewelry?” he asked.

“I forgot,” I whispered.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen you wear jewelry.”

Inadequacy settled in, burning my cheeks and twisting in my chest. Was I not on par with his tastes? Was that the reason he didn’t invite me in the first place? “I can’t even afford my rent,” I managed to say. My voice was so weak I wondered if he could hear me at all. “Overpriced baubles really aren’t a priority.”

“Hmm.” Dropping my wrists, Edward stepped to the side and placed a hand on the small of my

back, guiding me to the door. "Then it's a good thing you don't need them."

The drive to the restaurant was short. I wouldn't have minded walking under normal circumstances, but with the heels I was wearing, I was thankful not to be navigating the streets. The waiting area at the restaurant was packed, yet when Edward gave his name to the hostess, we were quickly whisked away to our table. I briefly wondered if he was more important that he'd originally let on, but it was probably more likely that he'd slept with the hostess. "Did you pay her off or something?" I whispered behind him. He turned around and gave me a look that made me question my sanity.

"Reservations."

"Right," I mouthed.

Edward smiled and reached back to grab my hand. "You're adorable."

A man stood as we approached his table, arms outstretched, a giant smile extending across his face. "Edward!" he laughed in greeting. They entered a brief one-arm embrace, slapping each other on shoulder much harder than necessary. The man turned to me. His eyes flicked down, roaming my body appreciatively, so quickly I would have missed it had I not already been looking. "And who is your beautiful date?"

"Marc, this is my friend Bella. Bella, this is Marcus."

"Well, it's *very* nice to meet you, Bella."

Marcus clasped my hand, bringing it to his lips and kissing the back of it before I even knew what was happening. My mind was numb, focused on one thing.

Friend.

Friend.

We weren't anything more, technically, but there was something unsettling about the way Edward specified that I was his friend, like he wanted to make sure Marcus knew he was in no way attached to me. I could think of no other reason he would bother with the label. After all, he didn't introduce Marcus as his friend. It made my stomach lurch.

Edward pulled out a chair for me, and I sank onto it. He sat to my right. Marcus sat directly across from me.

"What's new, Marc?" Edward asked once we were settled. "It's been a long time."

"Too long," Marcus agreed. "Same old, same old. Trying to stay out of trouble and failing." He looked at me, winking before returning his attention to Edward. "How've you been?"

"Good. Busy, but good."

"Busy playing or busy working?" Again his eyes wandered to me.

"The latter, unfortunately. I started working for my father a few months ago."

Marcus froze, his water glass halfway to his mouth. "No shit? How's that been?"

"Stressful."

A waiter appeared to take our drink orders. Edward seemed relieved by the interruption. He slid a

drink menu in front of me. "Order whatever you'd like."

I ordered water. Edward ordered a bottle of red wine.

"You're not going to be able to drive if you drink all that," I said once the waiter left.

"I'm not going to drink it. You are."

I shook my head infinitesimally.

Edward leaned closer, placing his lips by my ear so Marcus couldn't hear. "You are going to drink it because I told you to. That's part of the deal."

"Why are you always trying to get me drunk?"

I could tell by the gleam in his eyes that he had a smart ass retort. He looked across the table before sitting up a little straighter, putting more space between us. "You'll thank me later."

The waiter returned with the wine and poured a sample. Edward gestured toward me. Reluctantly I took a taste. It was all right, so I nodded my approval. The waiter filled my glass before taking our food orders and leaving the bottle at the table.

Marcus cleared his throat. "How do you two know each other?"

"Bella and I live in the same building," Edward said. It was the same non-lie I'd told before, but it seemed so natural coming from his lips, like there was nothing more to our history. For a moment, I imagined what it would be like if that were all there was to our story, how different I would feel sitting next to Edward, knowing he really was my friend. "She didn't have anything going on this week, and I don't like traveling alone, so . . ." He wrapped his arm around my shoulder and gave me an affectionate squeeze. "Here we are."

"I see." Marcus nodded his approval.

"What about you guys?" I asked in an attempt to divert the conversation from Edward and me. "Edward said you went to college together."

"Yep, we were roommates. Man, you should have seen this guy back in the day."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Edward tense. Although Marcus's comment piqued my curiosity, I didn't like seeing Edward uncomfortable. "How long ago was that, exactly?" I asked.

A thoughtful look crossed Marcus's face. "Geez, how long has it been?"

"Eight years," Edward said.

I turned to look directly at Edward. "So old," I stage whispered, even though he was probably only a few years older than me. He pursed his lips, trying to hide his smirk.

"How's the wine?" he asked.

"Excellent." I picked up the glass and took a sip to pacify him.

Conversation flowed easily between Edward and Marcus after that. I listened as they talked about past events and people they both knew and what they'd done in the year since they last saw each other. I continued to drink the wine. Edward never allowed my glass to be empty, refilling it without asking, without even a lull in the conversation, as if he were doing it subconsciously. I

had no idea how much I'd drunk, but my body was warm, and my nose was numb. I also couldn't stop the stupid smile from forming on my face whenever Edward looked at me or secretly touched me under the cover of the tablecloth.

After we finished eating, Edward excused himself. My eyes followed him, appreciating the sway of his shoulders as he walked, the way his long legs maneuvered through the tables. And his ass. He had a nice ass.

"You two aren't really friends, are you?" Marcus asked once Edward disappeared from our view. Something in the tone of his voice unsettled me, and I forced myself to look at him. He was staring at me, at my chest to be exact. I diverted my gaze to the empty plate in front of me, wishing Edward would return.

"Why would you say that?" Nerves and alcohol made my voice slurred and unsteady.

Marcus placed his hands on the table and leaned forward. "Edward doesn't have female friends."

I wanted to argue, but the words got stuck in my throat. We weren't friends; we fucked. Being friends was just a cover.

Or was fucking a cover for our friendship?

I wasn't sure of anything anymore.

Edward had taken care of me when I was sick. That's what a friend would do. Then I remembered the mystery blonde and how I felt when he chose to blow me off in her presence. A friend wouldn't do that.

"Look, I don't mean to be presumptuous. Whatever you have going on with Edward is your business," Marcus said. "But it sounds like you two aren't in an exclusive relationship." He gestured to the empty space where Edward sat. "And you two act a little closer than *just friends*."

"And?"

"I know Edward. He's a fun guy." Marcus looked at me expectantly. I held his gaze. He studied me for a few moments before continuing. "The two of us make a great team. If you want to come back to my place, we will be more than happy to show you just how great it can be."

I was on my feet before he could finish his proposition. The wine had made me tipsy, and I grabbed the back of my chair to keep from stumbling.

"Bella—"

Without acknowledging him, I followed the path Edward had taken only a few minutes before. It led to the restrooms, and I ducked inside. Tears stung my eyes. It took everything I had to choke back a sob. So this was why Edward invited me. This was why he wanted me to drink. He did have a threesome fantasy after all, only not with another woman like I had expected. He probably had this planned from the beginning and left me alone with Marcus to sort out the sordid details.

My arrangement with Edward might have been questionable, but I still had standards. I could not sleep with his friend and feel good about myself afterward. I had to get out of this restaurant. I had to get away from Edward before he talked me into doing something I really would regret, because I feared that I would give in if he asked, if he demanded.

Taking a deep breath, I threw open the door and marched into the hallway. Strong hands wrapped around my arms, stopping me in my path.

“Take your hands off me!”

“Bella, stop.”

“I am not fucking your friend!”

Edward pressed me against the wall, pinning me with his hands and his body. “You agreed to be mine, remember? *Mine.*”

“I can’t—I won’t—” I tried to kick myself free, but he was standing too close for my blows to be effective.

“Bella!” My name sounded harsh through his clenched teeth. “Do you honestly think I would *share* you?” He spat the word as if it were the most disgusting idea in the world. I looked up at him, fully expecting to see his face filled with the rage that radiated throughout his entire body. Instead, his eyes were open wide, concerned and pleading. Troubled. I stopped struggling. “Let’s just go back to the table so we can pay and get the hell out of here.” He stepped back, releasing me from his hold, and took my hand in his. My arm extended as he began to walk, but my feet stayed firmly planted in place. He turned and looked at me, his face etched with worry. “Bella?”

“I can’t go back there.” I had to look toward the ceiling to keep the tears from falling. The internal struggle with my promiscuity was one thing, but it was a completely different story to find out how transparent I was. I couldn’t face Marcus again and act like everything was okay. Keeping myself pulled together in front of Edward was enough of a struggle in itself. I hated asking him for anything. I didn’t want him to have another reason to hold power over me, but I couldn’t return to that table.

Edward’s expression softened as he watched me. Reaching into his pocket, he removed his keys and placed them into my hand. “Wait in the car. I’ll be right there.”

It took Edward less than ten minutes to meet me. He looked exhausted, but he managed to give me a smile as he got inside.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Why?”

“For ruining your night. I didn’t lead him on, I swear—”

“Stop,” he demanded. “And before you continue beating yourself up over it, it’s nothing you did. It’s just . . . Marcus.”

A thousand questions tumbled inside my head. I wanted to know how many girls like me he had, and who the blonde was, and why his friend thought it was socially acceptable to solicit sex from me. But one immediate question trumped them all.

“Have you shared a girl with him before?”

Edward hesitated. He sighed, keeping his gaze trained out the windshield before answering.

“Would it surprise you if I had?”

I had no doubts that Edward had been with other women, lots of them probably, so I didn’t know why his reply hurt so much. “I guess not.”

“It was a long time ago, Bella.”

I didn't know what to say, so I changed the subject. "I'll pay you back for dinner."

"Don't be ridiculous. I asked you to come with me."

"I don't want to be indebted to you any more than I already am."

"Indebted to me," he repeated. "I wish you wouldn't look at it that way."

The rest of the short drive was silent. The energy in the car was almost tangible. I was both nervous and excited, not knowing what Edward planned on doing to me tonight. I would take anything to distract me from what happened at the restaurant.

Edward parked near the rear entrance of the apartment complex. He killed the engine but made no move to get out. His brow furrowed as he concentrated out the windshield, worrying his bottom lip with his teeth. I could tell he wanted to say something, but whatever it was, I wasn't interested in hearing it. Unlatching the seatbelt, I bolted from the car.

Edward followed me but didn't speak. I stopped when I reached the door and waited for him to open it. He gestured for me to enter first, and when I did, he closed and locked the door behind us. I stood in the entryway, facing away from him.

"Are you okay?" Edward asked. When I didn't answer, he wrapped his arms around me and pulled me back against him. "What do you want to do tonight, baby?" He brushed the hair away from my neck and rested his chin on my shoulder. "We can watch TV." His day-old stubble prickled my exposed skin as he spoke, heating it with the gentle friction. "We can go for a walk, go to a movie, get dessert. Anything you want."

I swallowed back the emotion that was threatening to overwhelm me. I didn't want this nice, caring version of Edward now. I wanted the one that would command my body and make me forget about everything beyond the two of us.

"I want you to fuck me."

Edward stiffened. After a few excruciatingly long moments, he dropped his arms and turned me to face him. "You still want me?" His voice was a combination of surprise and uncertainty. He searched my eyes; whatever he saw there must have pleased him because he smiled and lifted a hand to my cheek. "Wait for me on the bed," he said as he trailed his fingers along my cheek and down my neck. "Leave the dress on."

I lay on the bed like I was told, patiently waiting for Edward to join me. I already felt better, knowing he still wanted me, that, for now, I was still enough for him.

"No peeking," he said as he entered the room. I closed my eyes and listened to him approach the bed. Fabric rustled, followed by the the jingling of a belt and a zipper being opened. I heard his clothes fall to the floor. The bed dipped as he crawled onto it. He lay down next to me and pushed my far knee up and away from him, causing my dress to ride dangerously high. He slid his hand up my thigh. His breath caught when his fingers met my bare flesh. "I don't remember telling you to take your panties off."

"I wasn't wearing any."

"All night?" he asked. I confirmed with a nod. In a deep, seductive voice, he asked, "What kind of respectable girl goes into public like that?"

I bit my lip as he dipped his fingers into the wetness between my legs. I wanted to get angry at his comment—I should be angry—but whenever he talked down to me, my body reacted positively.

“I’m surprised your dress is dry for how wet your pussy always is,” he whispered. I whimpered as he stretched me open with his fingers. “See?” His teeth grazed my ear. “I knew you liked being my slut.”

I dug my nails into his back, taking out my pent up anger and frustration and desire on his skin. He arched away from me with a hiss.

“Why didn’t you tell me you wanted it rough?” A seam ripped as he yanked down the neck of my dress. The cool air sent a wave of goose bumps across my exposed skin. He stretched across my body, and I opened my eyes in time to see him grabbing a large dildo from the nightstand. It was a bright, translucent blue, molded with veins and a head, giving it a real, yet slightly comical, look.

“I can tell by that little smile on your face that you want it.” Edward lowered the toy and dropped it onto my abdomen. It landed with a heavy thud. I pushed my hips up, silently begging for it. For him. “Impatient, are we?” he asked. “Are you ready?”

“Yes. Please,” I whimpered, hoping if I plead that he would spend less time teasing me.

“I should have known a filthy little cunt like you would beg for a cock.” Edward wrapped his fist around the base of the dildo and smacked it against my clit, causing me to jump. “That’s right, baby. Get it nice and wet,” he said as he rubbed it against me. “Tell me, how much of it do you think you can take?”

Assuming it was a rhetorical question, I didn’t answer.

“All of it?” he asked.

There was no way he could fit the whole thing in; it was much too long. But I didn’t doubt he’d have fun trying. I gasped as he pushed the head inside me. It wasn’t much larger than Edward himself, but the cold plastic was hard and unyielding, causing me to squirm in an attempt to find a more comfortable angle.

He began slowly, pushing the toy in at a leisurely pace before pulling it out and repeating the process. Each time, he pushed it in farther, but he was being gentle. Too gentle.

“More,” I whimpered.

“More?” he asked condescendingly. “I don’t have anything bigger, but I can get creative if need be.”

I writhed beneath him. “Faster.”

“Faster? I can do faster.” Edward picked up the pace, angling the toy so it hit a spot inside me that made my toes curl. “Tell me if I’m too rough.” His voice washed over me like a soft caress, completely contradicting his actions. It made me feel safe—almost cared for. His next words brought me back into the moment. “Not that I could be too rough with a greedy whore like you.”

I clung to Edward’s shoulder and the back of his neck as he worked me over. His lips were warm and wet as he kissed every inch of exposed skin I allowed him to reach. Surprisingly, he didn’t tease me. It was the first time I told him what I wanted, and he wasted no time giving it to me.

“Come hard for me,” he said against my skin. “I want to hear you scream my name.”

“Edward,” I gasped.

“Does this feel good, baby?”

“Yes!” I was so close. I didn’t want him to do anything that would ruin the moment. “Don’t stop.”

“Never.”

I clutched him tighter as the waves of pleasure rolled over my body. Edward slowed as I came down from the high, and I sagged back onto the bed, my arms falling to my sides. He continued to kiss, nip, and suck at the sensitive skin on my chest and neck as we caught our breaths. Between the wine and post-coital bliss, I was more than ready to curl up next to him and let sleep find me. I closed my eyes and sighed.

“I’m not done with you yet.” Edward picked up the dildo and pressed it against my lips. “Open up.”

I did as I was told, and Edward pushed the toy into my mouth.

“Do you like the way you taste?”

Edward must not have been interested in my answer, because he shoved the dildo against the back of my throat, holding it there until lack of oxygen had me struggling to escape. He removed it only far enough so I could catch my breath.

“You said you wanted me to fuck you. You didn’t say where,” Edward said as he began to fuck me with the toy again. “But I know how much you like a big cock in your mouth.” My stomach convulsed as he hit the back of my throat. Edward smiled wickedly. “You can do much better than that,” he said. “Let’s try again.”

Edward pushed the toy in once more, but it was too rigid, and I gagged again as he held it there, coughing when he finally allowed me to breath.

“Good girl.”

Even through my watery eyes, I could still see the pure look of lust on his face. Edward began to fuck me again, shallower this time. It was a brief, but much welcome, break.

“I want to fuck your mouth with my cock like this someday,” he said. “I want to see your eyes water and your face turn red as you fight to take me in.” Again, he pushed the dildo in far enough to cut off my airway. Leaning closer, he whispered, “You have an amazing gag reflex, but it would be so fucking sexy to watch you choke on me over and over again. To watch you struggle for air.”

My body already wanted oxygen, and instincts had me writhing beneath him. I gasped for air when Edward yanked the dildo from my lips. Before I could catch my breath, he flipped me onto my stomach and removed my dress in one quick, smooth motion. I waited, having no idea what he was going to do next. He had yet to get off, so I knew he was far from done with me.

After a few moments, he pushed the dildo into me again; it was cold and slick with lube. Edward’s skin was hot and damp with sweat when he lowered his body onto mine. He pressed himself against my backside, moaning as he entered me. I dug my fingers into the pillow above my head, unprepared for the sudden invasion.

Edward began to move, burying his full length inside me. All I could do was lie there, overwhelmed by the feeling of being completely filled.

“You’d better enjoy this,” he said in a strained voice, “because it’s as close to having two cocks

inside you as you'll ever get.”

“Edward,” I breathed, not even sure if he could hear me.

“No one else will ever touch you like this. No one else will ever be inside you.” He punctuated his point with a sharp thrust of his hips, causing me to suck in a deep breath through my teeth. “You belong to me. I will never let you go.”

One of his hands twisted in my hair. The other held me by my hip, his fingers squeezing into my flesh. With every one of his ragged breaths, his chest pressed against my back. The thin sheen of sweat between us felt cold compared to his warm skin. I relaxed every inch of my body, surrendering to him completely.

“Tell me I’m the only one,” he demanded.

“Only you, Edward.” My words were choppy, in time with his thrusts.

“Tell me you’re mine.”

“I’m yours. I’m all yours.”

Edward snaked his arm underneath me and pushed the dildo farther in as he continued to enter me from behind. He tightened his grip on my hair, cursing when his hips were flush against my ass. I felt his cock pulsing as he found his release inside of me. The weight of his body pushed me into the bed as he slowly collapsed.

Edward’s lips pressed into my shoulder as he spoke. “Tell me you liked it.” It wasn’t a demand; it was a plea. “Tell me I’m—that I’m not—”

I felt his jaw flex as he swallowed. He took a deep breath and swallowed again, all the while trembling slightly. I knew that my level of enjoyment was not the real answer he sought tonight.

“I don’t really think you’re a sick, twisted pervert,” I whispered.

His heavy sigh fanned across my shoulder. “I don’t think you’re—” He paused, tightening his hold on me. “Any of the names I called you.”

It felt like a weight had been lifted that had nothing to do with Edward pushing himself from the bed. I watched his bare ass as he disappeared into the bathroom down the hallway before heading to the attached bathroom to clean up.

After showering and changing into my pajamas, I entered the room to find Edward already in bed, sleeping soundly. Wanting to be alone, I decided to stay up a little longer. I grabbed a book and went into the living room. I tried to read, but my eyes skimmed over the words on the page without retaining them. My mind kept wandering back to everything that happened this evening.

Edward had seemed so angry about the incident at the restaurant, but his ire didn’t appear to be directed at me. At least not at the time. He definitely took it out on me in bed. I’d never seem him so—for lack of a better word—insecure. I didn’t think he meant any of the things he said to me while in the heat of the moment; he was simply being his usual controlling self. I didn’t want to think about it too hard. Not tonight.

There was an afghan draped across the back of the couch. I lay down and pulled it across my body. It had a slight dusty smell, probably from lack of use. I tried not to think of Edward as I fell asleep, but my last coherent thought was how nice he looked when he smiled.

I woke up sprawled across the bed. It only took me a moment to realize I wasn't in the spot where I went to sleep. From the amount of light filtering in through the window, it was early in the morning. Edward must have carried me in here sometime during the night. I couldn't believe I didn't wake up. Must have been the wine.

I rolled over, coming face to face with Edward. His breaths were slow and even, and he had the most peaceful expression on his face. Reaching out a tentative finger, I traced the pout of his lips, careful not to use too much pressure. His nose twitched, but other than that he didn't stir. I closed my eyes and drifted back to sleep.

The next thing I knew, the room was filled with sunlight. Edward was packing his duffel bag. I sat up, hugging the blanket close to shield me from the chill in the room.

"Leaving without me?" I asked.

Edward looked up from his task and smiled. "Never." He picked up my dress from the floor and inspected the small tear on the neckline before laying it out on the bed. "Take your time," he said. "I wanted to get packed so I could get some work done before we leave."

I took my time in the shower, enjoying the water pressure and wondering where we were headed next. After I was dressed and finished packing, I brought our bags to the door.

"Ready?" he asked. I nodded. Edward packed up his laptop and the piles of paperwork scattered across the kitchen table. He seemed nervous as he grabbed our bags and locked up the apartment, which only served to put me on edge.

We drove until early in the evening. It was apparent that Edward was distracted. When we finally pulled off the highway and into a residential neighborhood, I breathed a sigh of relief. I couldn't wait to get out and stretch my legs.

"Bella?" The anxiety in his voice captured my attention. His jaw was set, and he gripped the steering wheel so tightly that his knuckles were white. "I trust you. You know that, right?"

We pulled into the driveway of a large house. Edward parked off to the side of the driveway, away from the garage—a sure sign that we weren't leaving anytime soon.

"Where are we?" I asked.

"We're staying here."

I rolled my eyes. I had gathered that already. "And where exactly is here?"

"Don't freak out."

"Edward," I warned.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "My parents' house."

Chapter 6

“I can’t believe you brought me to your parents’ house,” I hissed through clenched teeth. “In case the situation with your friend didn’t clue you in, the nature of our relationship is a bit obvious.”

“I’m sorry.” Edward grabbed my elbow and tugged me toward the door. “I tried to get out of it. It’s not exactly like I want to be here myself.”

“You could have left me behind. Jesus, Edward! I’d sleep in your fucking car if it were an option.” I wanted to ask him why he didn’t give me a heads up, but it didn’t matter now. We were standing at the front door, and it didn’t seem like anything was about to change that. “I can’t believe this is happening.”

Edward rang the doorbell without another word.

I didn’t know how to act, what to say. I had no idea what he expected of me. Interacting with parental figures was not my forte. The last time I spoke to mine was when I turned 18 and yelled goodbye as I walked out the door. As if Edward could sense my inner turmoil, he wrapped his arm around my shoulder and hugged me to his side. My immediate instinct was to push him away, but as the handle turned and the door began to open, his firm body acted like a security blanket. I couldn’t get close enough.

The woman standing in the doorway smiled, her caramel-colored hair bouncing as she sprang onto the porch and enveloped Edward in her arms. He released me from his hold in order to return her embrace.

“Edward, I’m so glad you made it.” She stepped back and cradled his face in her hands. “I’ve missed you so much.”

“I’ve missed you too.”

“You didn’t tell me you were bringing company.” She averted her gaze to me. Curiosity and barely contained excitement were written across her face.

“Esme, I want you to meet Bella.” Edward gestured to me. I didn’t know whether to be relieved or disheartened by his omission of a title. “Bella, this is my step-mother, Esme. I hope we won’t be too much of an inconvenience,” he told her. “We’ll be out of here before you know it.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Bella is more than welcome. Come inside.” Esme gestured for us to enter. Edward placed his palm on my lower back and guided me into the house. “Why don’t you put your stuff upstairs and show Bella to the guest room. And tell your father dinner’s almost ready.”

“Guest room?” I asked once Esme was out of earshot.

“She’s old fashioned.”

“You’re an adult,” I laughed.

Edward shrugged. I swore his cheeks tinted pink. “We can both sleep in the guest room. It’s not like she’s going to say anything about it.”

“Oh, no,” I said in my best serious voice. “I would never disrespect your mother’s wishes in her own home.”

Edward started up the stairs, scowling at me over his shoulder. I suppressed my smile. Once upstairs, an open door captured my attention.

“Whose bedroom is this?”

“Mine,” he answered.

I stopped in the doorway and peered inside. The walls were painted a deep blue. Centered on a side wall was a twin-sized bed. The striped comforter looked soft and well worn, the complete opposite of the matching pillow sham, which had obviously seen less use. This room was probably scattered with remnants of Edward’s adolescent life. I wouldn’t be surprised if there was a poster of a naked girl behind the door.

“Come on. The guest room’s down the hall.”

“No way,” I said. “You go sleep in the stuffy guest room. I’m staying right here.”

Edward pursed his lips. Apparently he wasn’t fond of other people making decisions on his behalf. “The guest room is much nicer.”

“I don’t care.” I crossed my arms over my chest and leaned against the door frame. “I want to stay in here.”

He regarded me for a moment, a frown marring his face. His stare was penetrating, calculating. It took everything I had not to break eye contact and recant my demand.

“If you think you’re going to find anything interesting in here, you’re wrong.”

I didn’t give him the satisfaction of a response.

“Fine.” Edward dropped my bag onto the floor. The hardwood groaned in protest. “Have it your way,” he said before walking away. I tossed my purse on the bed and followed him.

The guest room *was* stuffy. It had all the perfection of a model home. There was nothing on the dresser or nightstand. Even the bedspread and five feet of decorative pillows looked like something that shouldn’t be touched. I couldn’t envision Edward sleeping here, surrounded by pristine white lace.

I waited in the doorway as Edward placed his duffel bag onto the bed. He fished the car keys from his pocket and dropped them on the night stand before turning to face me. “We’ll go home tomorrow, okay?”

“Okay,” I agreed.

“Come on.” Edward placed his arm around my shoulders and guided me to the next room down the hall. He stopped outside the closed door and gave it a light knock. The way his lip twitched on one side when he smiled at me gave away his nervousness.

“Yes?” a voice called from within the room.

Edward opened the door to reveal an office. A man sat behind the desk, facing us. He smiled when his eyes landed on Edward. They had the same smile. The same straight, white teeth. I knew without a doubt this had to be Edward’s father. If Edward aged as gracefully as him, he would be a lucky man.

I pushed the thought from my mind. My relationship with Edward was temporary. I didn’t need to

be concerned with the quality of his genetics.

“Hi, Dad,” Edward said, confirming my suspicions.

“Edward! I wondered when you were going to show up. You never called.”

“Sorry.” Edward looked at me, appearing to struggle for what to say next. “I had a busy weekend.”

Edward’s father glanced at me over the top of his black-rimmed glasses. “So I see. Who’s your friend?”

“This is Bella. Bella, this is my dad, Carlisle.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Bella.”

I felt like his father could see right through our facade. I put on my best smile. “It’s nice to meet you too, Mr. Cullen. You have a beautiful home. Thank you for having me.” It sounded forced, even to my ears.

Carlisle nodded. The fact that my formality went uncorrected didn’t surpass my notice.

“Esme said dinner’s ready.”

“Great. Tell her I’ll be right down.”

Edward led me to the dining room, where Esme was putting the finishing touches on two additional place settings. She beamed as she motioned for us to sit. “So how have you been?”

“Good.”

Esme looked him up and down. Her smile faded, and her eyes flicked to mine. “Are you sure? Sweetheart, you look tired. Have you been getting enough sleep?”

“Yes.”

“Have you been eating? You’re getting too skinny.”

“Yes, Mother.” Edward looked up at her. She returned his smile, concern still evident in her eyes.

I wanted to laugh at her maternal display. Edward wasn’t the type of man who needed mothering. I wondered how she would react if she knew all the depraved things he’d done to me.

With that thought, Edward’s previous words sunk in. He brought me here, to his family’s home, with his step-mom and his dad, who was also his boss. I had the power to ruin him, yet he trusted me.

It occurred to me just how out of place I was. I wasn’t Edward’s girlfriend. We technically weren’t even friends. We barely knew each other. I was the outsider here. Perhaps there was something going on with him I couldn’t see. Maybe his and Esme’s conversation would be different were I not here.

I looked at him more closely. Did he look tired? Had he lost weight? I thought back to the last month and the month before, but my frame of reference was too small to answer those questions definitely.

“How long are you two staying?” Esme asked.

“Just for the night,” Edward answered.

“Oh.” Esme’s face fell. She recovered quickly, but a sadness remained behind her eyes. “But it’s such a long drive, and you haven’t visited since Christmas.”

Edward sighed. “I know.”

Carlisle entered the dining room, and somehow I knew the conversation was over. He sat at the table, directly across from me. “It smells delicious.”

The three of them began to pass serving dishes around the table. I was thankful they weren’t one of those families who prayed before meals or, worse yet, expected everyone to say something aloud. I’m not sure how far out of my comfort zone I was willing to take this charade. I didn’t even know what role I was playing. I assumed if he wanted me to play his girlfriend, he would have introduced me as such. Then again, when had Edward ever done anything that made sense to me?

Esme was the first to break the silence. “So how did you two meet?”

And so it began.

Great.

“We’re neighbors, so to speak,” Edward said without missing a beat. “We met a few months ago.” He looked at me out of the corner of his eye and wiggled his brows. “Turns out we like a lot of the same things.”

I wanted to punch him in the face.

“That’s fantastic! And what is it that you do, Bella?”

“I—” I hesitated, not knowing how to answer. Edward still didn’t know I was currently unemployed, so I couldn’t tell the truth. Since I was lying anyway, I entertained the idea of fabricating a more glamorous career, but I had no reason to impress these people. I had no reason to *want* to impress them.

Panic started to set in. To my surprise, Edward came to my rescue.

“Bella works in the food service industry.” He looked at me uncertainly, as though seeking approval. “Isn’t that right?”

I nodded, thankful for the intervention.

“Oh,” Esme said. “That sounds nice.”

Edward flashed me a brilliant smile and nudged my foot with his.

“Edward, I got the pictures of that property you were scoping out,” Carlisle interrupted. “I’m not going to lie; it needs an extensive amount of work.”

Esme sighed and gave me an apologetic smile. Edward reluctantly turned his attention to his father.

“I know, but I have a full inspection report. I’ve already spoken to a general contractor about the repairs. I think it would be a good investment.”

“No.”

“No? How can you say no?” Edward stammered. “You haven’t even seen it in person yet.”

“They want too much for it.”

“I got him to knock fifty grand off the asking price, which was already a fair deal.”

“It’s still too much.”

“But it’s in a great area. Over time—”

“It’s not feasible.” Carlisle placed a second helping of pot roast onto his plate. Whether he didn’t notice or didn’t care how deflated his son had become, I couldn’t tell. “Someday, when you’ve been doing this as long I as I have, you’ll have a better sense for these things. Right now you’re still too green.”

Edward stared at his plate. “I did a lot of research.”

“I’m sure you did. But that doesn’t mean your research is sound. Pass the peas, dear.” He pointed to the bowl in front of Esme with his fork. “This isn’t up for discussion. Not unless you can get them to drop it at least another fifty.”

Edward slumped back in his chair. He didn’t argue further.

Esme kept the conversation relatively pleasant after that. I was more than happy when dinner was over. To my dismay, Edward retreated to Carlisle’s office to further discuss business. I offered to help Esme wash the dishes, but she insisted I go relax after a long day of traveling.

Unsure what to do with myself, I returned to Edward’s bedroom to snoop.

It didn’t turn out as fruitful as I’d hoped. Edward wasn’t lying when he said I wouldn’t find anything interesting. There were no trophies, diplomas, or other school day accolades shoved in drawers. No love letters or secret diaries stowed under the bed or wedged beneath the mattress. There wasn’t a box of sentimental memories stashed on top of his closet. Either he did a thorough cleaning job before moving out or he never had those things to begin with. This room could have belonged to any nameless, faceless teenage boy.

I plopped on the bed, wishing there was a TV and trying to remember if I saw one in the guest room. I wondered if it was too late to change my mind about sleeping here.

Pulling a book from my bag, I read until my lids were heavy. My thoughts kept wandering to Edward. If he was still talking to his father, I almost felt sorry for him. I didn’t know anything about property management, but it seemed like Edward had put in a lot of effort this weekend. His father didn’t even listen to him. It must have been frustrating to be so easily dismissed, especially after how hard he worked. In fact, when I thought back to our interactions, Edward always seemed to be working. Every text and phone call was squeezed in when he had a free moment. His kitchen table was scattered with paperwork. Even this past weekend he spent more time scouring through documents than he did with me.

Unable to sit by myself any longer, I snuck down the hall toward the guest room. The door was wide open, the room dark and empty inside. A light filtered from beneath the door to Carlisle’s office. I could hear the low murmuring of voices. Curiosity got the best of me, and I crept closer.

Edward and his father were still talking business. At first it didn’t pique my interest, but as I turned to go back to my room, the name of my apartment complex followed by the phrase “delinquent

account” captured my attention.

“She’s over five months past due,” Carlisle said. “That is not acceptable.”

I was three months behind when Edward and I made our first arrangement. That was two months ago.

“What was I supposed to do? I can’t kick her out!”

My heart leaped into my throat, the whooshing of blood in my ears threatening to drown out their voices. Clenching my shaking hands into fists, I swallowed down my panic.

“Evictions are part of your job description. If you can’t handle that task, I will gladly find someone who can.”

The room went silent. I held my breath, afraid my ragged breathing could be heard through the door. Hell, my racing heart could probably be heard through the door. I exhaled slowly, trying to be as quiet as possible. How could I face Edward’s father after this? I wondered how much Edward would end up telling him.

He would see me as a deadbeat whore. Someone who would never be worthy of his son.

Carlisle was less stern when he spoke again. “This is not a charity. It’s a business. Part of running a business is making money. If we don’t make money, there’s no point to any of this. As admirable as it is that you want to help Mrs. Cope—”

“She’s eighty-seven!”

Relief swelled in my chest. They weren’t talking about me! Blood rushed through my veins. I had to brace myself against the doorway to stay vertical.

“As admirable as it is,” Carlisle continued, punctuating each word, “we can’t afford to give out freebies in today’s economy. You *will* resolve this before the end of the week.”

“Yes, sir.” Defeat radiated from Edward’s voice.

I backed away from the office, not wanting to hear any more. When I was safely inside Edward’s room, I closed the door, twisting the lock before collapsing onto the bed.

Carlisle was a businessman through and through. I could definitely see where Edward got his no nonsense attitude. What surprised me was that Edward had a soft spot. Me I could understand; I had something he wanted. But Shelley Cope? She was a little, gray-haired widow who lived on the first floor. Unless she kept him well stocked with baked goods, Edward was acting out of the goodness of his own heart.

I’d talked to Mrs. Cope on quite a few occasions. She always cornered me in the hall or coerced me to stay in her apartment for tea and cookies after I helped her carry in groceries. I always obliged her because her loneliness was apparent. She had a son who lived a few states away. The last I’d heard, she was looking for an assisted living home near him, but every place she called was either full or too expensive.

If Edward couldn’t get away with comping the rent of an elderly woman who was down on her luck, how did he get away with comping mine?

I got back into bed, but every time I was close to falling asleep, some strange house noise would put me on full alert. I wished I hadn’t insisted on staying in Edward’s room alone.

I pushed the thought aside. Wanting Edward was not something I should entertain. I needed to focus on finding a job and an apartment I could afford. Being with Edward would only hold me back.

There was a creak in the hallway, too loud to be the house settling. I sat up, holding my breath as a shadow moved beneath the door. I imagined Edward standing on the other side. Would he knock? Try the handle? What would he say? Would he demand I join him for the evening, knowing his parents were under the same roof?

The silence outside the door stretched on. After a few more moments, the shadow disappeared and soft footsteps padded down the hallway. I collapsed onto the bed and let out a deep breath. He didn't do anything. Surprisingly I was . . . disappointed.

My phone buzzed with a new text message, and I flew off the bed to get to it.

Still awake?

I hesitated, unsure if I should respond. I didn't want to appear needy, but I didn't want to ignore him either. I decided a bit of fun at his expense couldn't hurt anything.

Yes. Just rummaging through your stuff.

His reply came almost immediately.

Are you?

I found your porn stash.

I snickered under my breath as I hit send. It wasn't very often that I was in a position to taunt him. It felt good to have the upper hand for once.

No you didn't.

Ah ha! So you admit there is one.

I crawled back onto his bed as I waited for a response. I pulled the blankets up to my chin, leaving only my face and the hand holding the phone exposed. For whatever reason, I thought the blankets would smell like Edward. Instead they smelled freshly laundered, like fabric softener. My mind pictured a younger version of him in this bed, sleeping under the same striped comforter.

The screen of my cell phone illuminating refocused my attention.

Of course there is. But do you honestly think I didn't bring it with me when I moved out?

So that explains why I didn't find any.

Stay out of my stuff.

I smiled. I was definitely getting under his skin.

What are you hiding?

The question could have been playful, but it could have been serious, too. Let him interpret that as he willed.

Five minutes went by without a response. I wondered if I offended him or if my comment struck a

nerve. I was about to give up waiting and go to sleep when I received another message.

Look in the nightstand, under the liner.

I was on my feet, my phone forgotten. I turned on the lamp and opened the nightstand drawer. One corner of the liner was pulled up. I gripped it between my fingertips, careful not to tear it as I slowly peeled it back. I held my breath, anticipating what treasure I would find, what secret of Edward's past lie beneath.

It was empty.

Finding my phone where it'd tumbled to the floor, I sent him another message.

There wasn't anything there.

I didn't know him well enough to predict how he would react. Edward didn't seem like the type of man to sit and stew in silence. I half expected him to barge through the door at any moment, furious and frantic as he searched for the missing item.

His response infuriated me.

I know. ;)

He winked at me! How dare he wink at me? I was supposed to be toying with him, not the other way around. Edward had the uncanny ability to maintain the upper hand.

I kept my reply short.

Good night, Edward.

Good night, beautiful.

By the time I got out of bed the next morning, Edward was already awake. I checked the guest room for him first, but it was empty. The blankets were straightened haphazardly, clothing piled in the center of the bed. Tiptoeing into the room, I plucked a T-shirt from the top of the pile and held it to my nose. It smelled like Edward. Whether it was his soap, deodorant, or just *him*, I didn't know, but I would recognize his scent anywhere. I laid the shirt on the top of the pile but couldn't bring myself to release the fabric. Instead I balled it up and took it with me. I tried not to feel guilty about taking something that belonged to him.

After all, he had taken enough from me.

When I returned to the bedroom, the first thing I noticed was a book sitting on the bed. I glanced around the room and into the hall, but no one was around. Dropping the shirt onto the bed, I picked up the book. Upon further inspection, I realized it was a photo album.

A smile spread across my face when I opened it and saw a school picture of Edward. He was young, maybe six or seven, and wore a bright pink shirt. There was a gap in his smile where his front teeth were missing. His hair was short and spiky on the top of his head. In the back, long tendrils curled around his shoulders.

I flipped through the pages, watching Edward grow up before my eyes. He grew taller, his hair

became darker, shorter, and his adult teeth came in, looking far too big for his small face. The first family photo I came across was just as cliché as the rest—Edward and his parents, wearing matching red sweaters in front of a canvas Christmas tree backdrop. Carlisle looked much the same as he did now, even though the photo was probably close to 20 years old. The woman in the picture, however, wasn't Esme. She had the same eyes and nose as Edward. I could only assume she was his birth mother.

The few photos remaining after that covered a longer period of time. Teenage Edward looked much the same as he did now, only scrawnier and with more of a baby face. Most of the photos seemed candid, and if Edward noticed the camera, he wore a scowl. It wasn't until I came to the last page of the album that I saw him smiling again. It was a brilliant, teeth-baring grin that reached his eyes. The girl whom his arm was wrapped around looked equally as happy. She wore a baby blue dress, a perfect match to Edward's bow tie and cummerbund. Her dark hair was piled in curls on the top of her head; his was slicked back, the most tamed I'd ever seen it. They made a beautiful couple. I could imagine them being crowned Prom King and Queen.

I studied the photo longer than the others. Something about it felt off, but I couldn't place what. As beautiful as she was, I had no reason to be jealous of Edward's teenage love interest, but there was something about the girl that twisted the pit of my stomach.

And then it hit me.

Her hair was darker, her eyebrows were heavier, and her teeth were a natural shade of white, but it was definitely her. I'd remember those eyes anywhere.

The blonde.

I slammed the album closed. Being jealous of her was irrational; I knew that. Edward wasn't mine. He never had been mine. It was ridiculous to feel so betrayed.

But I was jealous, and I did feel betrayed. And the curiosity was killing me.

I grabbed the album and headed downstairs. It felt strange to wander around the house by myself. Fortunately it didn't take long to find Edward. He sat at the kitchen counter, staring absently at his coffee mug. When I entered the room he turned to me and smiled.

"Good morning." His smile faltered when he saw the expression on my face.

It took everything I had to keep my voice steady. "Who is she?"

"Who is who?" he asked. By the expression on his face, I could tell he was genuinely confused. Placing the photo album on the counter, I flipped to the last page. Edward frowned when he looked at the photo. "Rosalie?" He ran his hand through his hair, stopping to scratch the back of his head. "She's my sister."

Of all the answers I was expecting, that was not one of them. Edward fidgeted with the collar of his shirt. His nervousness made me skeptical. "Your sister," I repeated.

"Yes."

I looked at the picture again, at their matching colors and close proximity. I thought back to the night outside his apartment. The vibe I received from them didn't seem like that of siblings. "You went to prom with your sister?"

Edward swallowed and nodded.

It was odd, but I guessed stranger things had happened. My laugh was sharp, a bitter combination of relief and anger. “And here I thought you were sleeping with her.”

“I didn’t,” Edward said a little too quickly. “I mean, not that night.”

My mind struggled to process his reply. I waited for him to elaborate, but he wouldn’t even look at me. “That’s not a normal response to have in regard to your sister, Edward.”

“Step-sister.” Edward sighed and sat back in his chair. He covered his face with his hands and rubbed his fingers over his eyes.

“So you’re not actually related.” I glanced down at the photo. Now that I looked closer, I could see her resemblance to Esme. “But you have slept together.”

“It was a long time ago.”

“I’ve heard that before.” It was the same excuse he’d used for his threesome with Marcus, and it didn’t do anything to make me feel better. If anything, it was irritating that he kept using it as an excuse for his past behavior.

“Rosalie is family first and foremost. We dated when we were younger, and we’ve . . . been together a few times since then.” Edward threw his hands into the air. “I don’t even know why I’m telling this to you. There’s nothing romantic between us anymore.”

If Edward had taught me anything in the short time I’d known him, it was that romance and sex had nothing to do with each other. “And last Monday?”

“She was in town. I took her out for a late birthday dinner.”

“So if there’s nothing going on between you, why did you act the way you did? Like I was some lowly renter who wasn’t worth your time?” I wasn’t sure I wanted to hear the answer. I didn’t think my heart, or ego, could take it if he really did feel that way. “You know what? Forget I asked. It’s none of my business.”

“Rosalie works for my dad too,” he said, ignoring my request. “When I saw you, I panicked. I was afraid you’d say something that could get me in trouble.”

“Really? What exactly did you think I would say?” I put on my best sarcastic voice. “It’s so nice to meet you, Rosalie. Did you know I’ve been sleeping with your brother in exchange for my apartment?”

Edward’s eyes widen as he shushed me. He gave me a look of warning and lowered his voice to a whisper. “It was stupid. I wasn’t thinking.”

“Why didn’t you tell me the truth? It would have saved me a lot of heartache.”

Edward’s jaw dropped open, but he reeled in his surprise almost instantly, his expression hardening to a mask of indifference. “I tried to talk to you about it. You made it very clear you weren’t interested in hearing me out.”

His words were a reality check, a virtual slap in the face. He was right. My mind flashed back to last week when he’d called and tried to explain. I’d told him he was a pervert and accused him of taking advantage of me. By his behavior toward me in the subsequent days, it was painfully obvious I’d hurt him too.

This big misunderstanding was all my fault. I had no one to blame for my inner turmoil but

myself. I should have heard him out, let him explain instead of blowing things out of proportion.

“Come here.” Edward slid off the stool and stepped toward me. Wrapping his arms around my shoulders, he pulled me tight to his chest, sighing against the top of my head. Being close to him like this felt strange. It was much more intimate than I was used to, yet somehow Edward managed to hold me with the same intensity he used to fuck me. I tucked my head under his chin, taking the comfort he somehow knew I needed.

“Edward, I found that box of your mother’s with all her—oh!” Esme’s surprise appearance in the kitchen ruined whatever moment we were having. I pushed against Edward, but he was slow to respond. His hands slid down my body before letting go completely. I stepped away, blushing furiously at being caught. Esme averted her eyes.

“I’m sorry to interrupt.” She held up a small box. “I’ll go put this in your room.”

Turning, Esme fled the kitchen without another word. Edward smiled at me once we were alone.

“That was strange. I feel like a teenager again.”

“Yeah.” I cleared my throat and wrapped my arms around my waist. “You don’t think she knows . . .” I shook my head. It was ridiculous to think Esme had any insight into our relationship because she caught us in an embrace. “I don’t want her to think poorly of me.” Surprisingly, I found I meant it. For whatever reason, I cared what this woman, whom I’d probably never see again, thought of me.

“She doesn’t,” Edward assured me. “Actually, she asked me if we’d stay another night.”

“Oh?” I didn’t know to else to respond. He wasn’t technically asking my opinion, and I wasn’t sure how much of what I wanted actually mattered to him.

Edward searched my eyes. Looking for what, I wasn’t sure. Acceptance? Disapproval? I kept my face blank.

“I’m sorry,” he said finally, his brow furrowed. “I never asked you about your work schedule. It was inconsiderate of me.”

Oh, yeah. *That*. I didn’t know how to tell him losing my job was the main motivation for traveling with him. It was none of his business anyway.

“It’s fine,” I said, not wanting him to inquire further. “Do *you* want to stay another night?”

Edward hesitated. I smiled, knowing I’d discovered the real issue at hand.

“It’s not that I don’t want to,” he said. “It’s just . . .”

“You don’t want another late night meeting with Daddy?”

“I’m not staying for him.” Edward winced the minute the harsh words were out of his mouth.

“Don’t get me wrong. I have nothing against my dad. I just have no desire for bonding time. I’m only considering it because Esme asked.”

“You two seem close,” I offered.

“She’s been a mother to me since I was twelve. She didn’t want me to move so far away, but Dad needed someone to manage the northern properties.”

“No offense.” I took a deep breath and hoped Edward wouldn’t be offended by my next comment. “Your dad kind of seems like a jackass.”

Edward threw his head back and laughed. “He’s not a bad person, he just runs a tight ship.”

“I heard you guys yesterday.”

His smile faded.

“In his office—about Mrs. Cope.” I swallowed as Edward pressed his palm over his forehead and massaged his temples with his thumb and forefinger. He didn’t speak. “How did you do it, Edward? How did you comp my rent when he wouldn’t even allow you to help a little old lady?”

“I didn’t.”

“But you had to, or he would have been lecturing you about me. How did you get away with it?”

“No, Bella.” Edward dropped his hand, cleared his throat. He looked at me with determination in his eyes. “I paid your account myself.”

His words didn’t sink in at first. When they did, I stepped backward, completely failing to hide my surprise. Edward had never forgiven my debt. This whole time he had paid for my apartment out of his own pocket. I was torn. I didn’t know whether to be thankful that he took it upon himself to help me, or insulted that he actually was, in effect, paying me for sex.

I reined in my shock, standing straight and composing myself the best I could. “It must be nice to have enough expendable income to pay for someone else’s apartment,” I said. My voice shook almost as much as my hands. “But I suppose you live rent free, so I shouldn’t be all that impressed.”

“You think I live rent free?” Edward asked in disbelief. “Come on, Bella. You heard my dad. He’s a businessman. He doesn’t cut me slack because I’m an employee. Or his son.”

“Then it’s a good thing you won’t have to concern yourself with me anymore.” I tried to ignore the way my chest ached at the thought. Except for the bobbing of his Adam’s apple, Edward remained stoic. “I don’t care if we stay another night,” I continued, “but the sooner we get back and you return my money, the sooner I find a new apartment.”

“Fine.”

“Fine.”

I turned to leave, but he grasped my arm, stopping me in my tracks.

“Bella,” he said. I refused to turn around. “Thank you for agreeing to stay. It means a lot to me.”

“You’re welcome.”

As much as I longed to lock myself away in Edward’s room for the next 24 hours, I didn’t want to seem rude, especially since Esme had been so welcoming. After lunch, she gave me a tour of the house. Most of the renovations and add-ons she had headed up herself. From the newly remodeled kitchen to the screened in porch, there was no project she hadn’t been directly involved in from

start to finish. Esme's knowledge of architecture amazed me. I, on the other hand, could barely wield a paintbrush.

Edward followed us from room to room like a lost puppy. He pouted, probably from being ignored. It was painfully obvious who Esme was interested in spending time with when she'd asked us to stay. More than once I caught Edward staring at me while Esme chattered on about one project or another. He never seemed to notice when he was caught, but the few times he did, he would smirk and hold my gaze until I looked away.

Dinner passed much the same as it had the night before, minus the awkward introductions and discussions about work. When it was over and the dishes were cleared, Edward stood, stretching his arms over his head.

"We have a long day of driving tomorrow," he said. "I'm heading to bed."

I didn't know if that was my cue as well, but I wasn't about to hang out with his parents for the remainder of the evening. "Me too," I said.

"I'll walk you upstairs."

He followed me to the bedroom. I stopped inside the doorway and turned to face him. Not being sure of his intentions, I decided to play it conservative.

"Well, good night."

Edward frowned. He placed his hands on his hips and shook his head in disapproval. It looked like he wanted to make good on our deal after all.

"What?" I played dumb.

"I know you're struggling to make ends meet, but stealing, Bella? I expected so much more from you."

"What!" I could hardly believe what he was saying. He thought I'd stolen something? I'd barely been out of his sight all day.

Edward strode past me. My confusion turned to mortification as he snatched his T-shirt from the bed and held it up. He cocked his head, waiting for an explanation.

"I . . . it's not . . . I was," I sputtered.

His lips quirked into a smug smile. He dropped the shirt onto the bed before picking up a box. It was the one Esme had carried into the kitchen earlier. I hadn't even noticed it sitting there.

"Actually, I only wanted this," he said, obviously pleased with himself. "Esme must not have known we switched rooms."

Edward came to stand beside me again, the box tucked securely under his arm. I couldn't look at him. I was too embarrassed. He swept his thumb over my cheek before leaning down and kissing my flushed skin.

"Good night, beautiful," he whispered.

I could only nod, too unsure of my voice.

Once he was gone, I slammed the door and fell face first onto the bed. Why did he have to catch

me with his shirt? And a dirty one too, nonetheless. The offending material lay crumpled next to me, and I pushed it to the floor so I wouldn't have to look at it.

Across the room, my phone chimed. I ignored it, instead taking a moment to clear my mind.

Now that I knew there was nothing going on with the blonde—past relationship aside, however strange it might be—I felt a lot better about everything between us. I had yet to rule out if Edward currently had other women in his life, but if he did, I highly doubted they shared a situation like ours. Besides, I was the one here, at his parents' house, even if it was under the pretense of friendship.

For the life of me, I couldn't figure him out. We'd never so much as talked before the day he showed up at my door, yet he was willing to spend his money to help me. It couldn't have been about the sex. Hiring a hooker would have been cheaper, not to mention less risky career wise. Surely he had women who would be more than happy to give him a booty call. Heck, less than two weeks ago, I was that girl. We had sex against a wall in a stairwell for Christ's sake.

So if it wasn't the sex, what was it?

Sighing, I flipped onto my back and covered my face with a pillow. I didn't know what to do. It seemed the more I tried to distance myself, physically and emotionally, the more I wanted him.

Eventually the unread text became too much to ignore. I retrieved my phone to read it, but not before forcing myself to get ready for bed.

I hope you plan on wearing it. There's nothing sexier than seeing a woman in your clothes.

I eyed the shirt on the floor. Without much of an advanced notice for this trip, I hadn't planned very well, packing only nighties to wear to bed. The soft shirt seemed much more practical, especially since I was sleeping alone. At least that's what I told myself as I stripped down to my underwear and put it on.

As hard as I tried, sleep didn't come. The creaks and clunks and taps seemed loud in the otherwise silent house. Edward hadn't come back to the room, nor had he sent me any more texts. It was disappointing, to say the least.

Without giving myself a chance to overthink my decision, I sprang from the bed. It wasn't until I was standing outside the guest room that I started having second thoughts. The door was open a crack, allowing just enough light into the room to illuminate Edward's sleeping form. He was lying on his stomach, one arm flung over the side of the bed nearest me.

I hesitated in the doorway. Edward had given no indication he desired my company, and I wasn't sure how he'd react to my presence. I didn't want him to think I'd become clingy. Taking a deep breath, I tiptoed into the room, closing the door behind me. I tried to be quiet, but he stirred and lifted his head from the pillow.

"Bella?" he asked, his voice thick and groggy from sleep.

"Sorry," I whispered. "I didn't mean to wake you."

"Come here."

Edward shifted onto his back and stretched one arm toward me. When I was next to him, he wrapped his fingers around my wrist and pulled me onto the bed. I slid under the covers, enjoying the warmth of his body as he folded his arms around me. He rubbed one hand up and down my back before stopping and plucking at the shirt I wore.

“Is this mine?” he asked.

“Maybe.”

Edward groaned and buried his face in my neck. “What are you doing to me?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I tried to play coy, but the way he kissed my neck made every coherent thought disappear.

“And here I’ve been trying to behave.”

In one smooth motion, Edward rolled on top of me, the weight of his body pressing me into the mattress. He bowed his head and ghosted his lips across mine. They were soft and warm, and I parted my own in response. A low moan vibrated in the back of his throat as I allowed him to kiss me, really kiss me, for the first time. There was no sense of urgency as he captured my lower lip between his teeth. Nothing forceful as his tongue swept into my mouth. His taste, his scent infiltrated my senses until nothing outside of him existed.

Edward thrust against me, the evidence of his arousal rubbing against my thigh. His hands found their way under my shirt, and I arched my back as he massaged my breasts. Breaking his lips away, he sat up and pulled the shirt over my head. Once it was off, his hands and lips returned to my body—pinching, caressing, sucking, licking.

My body responded to him as it always did. I didn’t think either of us were surprised by how easily his fingers slipped beneath my panties and inside of me. I rocked my hips against his hand, wanting more—more friction, more pressure, more of his skin against mine.

“Edward, can we—” I stopped myself from asking if we could make love. It sounded too serious, too sentimental. Edward was already tugging at the side of my panties. I lifted my hips so he could slide them down my legs. “Can we just have sex like normal people?”

At first I was afraid he didn’t hear me. My voice had been quiet, weak with uncertainty. He shed his clothes before hovering over me, inches from my face. Through the darkness I could just make out his eyes; they looked black in the scant lighting.

“Anything you want,” he whispered.

I wrapped my arms around his shoulders and drew him closer. It didn’t take much force to coax him between my legs. He slid his length along my entrance. Not in the mood to be teased, I whimpered and dug my fingers into his shoulder blades.

Edward brought his lips to mine once again. He cradled my head in one hand while the other roamed my body. Nudging his hips forward, he sank into me with one long stoke. He panted softly, his breaths matching the pace of his thrusts.

My heart beat wildly in my chest as I became flooded with emotion. I wanted to laugh. I wanted to cry. The pressure escalated. My stomach tightened in anticipation as a delicious burn spread through me. I was so close. I cried out in frustration, the sound swallowed by our kiss.

Edward slid his hand to where we were joined. His fingers circled my overly sensitive flesh; it was exactly what I needed. I clung to him, jerking as the first wave hit me. The intensity didn’t diminish as my body gripped him over and over again. I sobbed into his shoulder, overwhelmed by the sensation.

Edward came right after me, his telltale fluctuation in pace and rhythm giving it away. Still inside

me, he dropped his forehead to mine.

“Don’t leave,” he said once he caught his breath.

I frowned, puzzled at where he thought I could possibly go. “What?” I asked.

Edward took a shaky breath and tightened his hold on me. “Don’t move away,” he pleaded in a whisper. “Don’t leave me.”

Chapter 7

When I woke up in the morning, I could sense the other side of the bed was empty. I reached out anyway, hoping I was mistaken. My hand grazed cool sheets, and it made me wonder how long Edward had been out of bed.

The early morning sun filtered through the sides of the curtains, casting the room in a soft gray light. I slipped out of bed and made sure the hallway was empty before retreating to my room.

This morning felt different than the other mornings following my nights with Edward. It wasn't that I didn't enjoy what we normally did in bed. Quite the opposite, actually. But what we did last night was so much more intimate. For the first time, it didn't feel like I was selling my body to work off a debt. I didn't have to question my morals or be ashamed for enjoying whatever deviated thing we'd done the night before.

After putting on my clothes, I headed downstairs to find Edward. Once again I found him sitting at the kitchen counter. This time Esme stood on the other side. She smiled at me when I entered the room.

"Bella!" Turning around, she grabbed a plate and fork, and placed the extra setting next to Edward. "Come eat. I hope you like eggs."

Edward didn't look at me as I climbed onto the stool next to him. Esme spooned a pile of scrambled eggs onto my plate before pouring me a cup of coffee.

"Thank you. It looks delicious."

"We should leave when you're finished," Edward said. "It's a long drive."

I finished chewing the forkful of eggs I'd shoveled into my mouth before replying. "Okay."

"I should pack." Edward slid from the stool and walked out of the room. His hasty exit left behind a sinking feeling in my stomach. Especially when I thought of his duffel bag, which had been zipped shut and sitting by the bedroom door.

Any previous awkward moments that Edward and I shared paled in comparison to the drive home. I tried to make small talk, but getting more than a three word answer from him was like squeezing blood from a turnip. At first I thought an altercation with his father had put him in a sour mood. Carlisle wasn't there when we left, so it was hard to tell for sure. I couldn't think of another reason for his sudden change in demeanor.

"Esme's really nice."

Edward hummed in agreement.

"Any plans to visit again soon?"

"I don't know." He shrugged his shoulder. "Maybe."

"Do you have more properties to look at?"

"No."

When Edward turned up the radio, I took the hint. For whatever reason, he didn't want to talk. It

was the complete opposite of our first car ride together, when I refused to speak to him. Being ignored was a shitty feeling, something I hadn't fully understood at the time.

Everything had seemed fine between us yesterday. I replayed the events of the day in my head, trying to figure out if I said or did anything to anger him, but I kept coming up blank. The only thing remotely out of the ordinary was the sex.

Had I overstepped some boundary by my request? He couldn't possibly be upset about that. It was far from normal for us, but it wasn't like he hadn't enjoyed himself. The comment he made afterward was unusual. At the time I didn't know how to react—why would he care if I left, anyway?—so I said nothing. Edward didn't bring it up again, and everything seemed fine when we went to bed.

The closer we got to home, the more anxious I became. Sure, I planned on moving away. Far away. And yeah, Edward was a big part of that decision, but after this weekend, I wasn't sure if I wanted to erase him from my life completely. The thought that I might have done something wrong ate away at me.

“Do you want to stop for dinner?” I asked when we were almost there.

Edward seemed to consider, and it lifted my hopes. After a few seconds he shook his head. “I probably shouldn't. I've got an early morning tomorrow.”

“Okay.”

When we arrived, Edward carried my bag to the second floor. He remained in the doorway as I entered my apartment. His eyes still refused to meet mine.

“You can come in.”

Edward closed the door behind him and set our bags on the floor. Shoving his hands in his pockets, he trudged toward me. I didn't understand what was wrong; I just wanted things to be normal. The problem was I didn't know what normal was for us. Our relationship—if that's what it could be called—was based on sex. It was all I knew when it came to him.

Grabbing him by the shirt, I rose up on my toes. Our lips met only briefly before he pulled away.

“What, don't you want me?” I teased.

Until I said the words, it hadn't crossed my mind that maybe he didn't. Maybe he'd had his fill of me. Before panic could set in, Edward had me backed against the wall. His hands settled lightly on my waist, and he lowered his forehead to mine.

“I always want you.” His voice was rough and strained, as though it pained him to say the words. He pressed his lips to mine and kissed me with a sense of urgency I couldn't ignore. I pulled him closer, but when I reached for the hem of his shirt, Edward broke off the kiss and backed away.

“Bella—” He closed his eyes and tugged his hand through his hair. “We need to talk.”

The words alone caused my stomach to plummet. He might as well have punched me in the gut for the way I felt inside. It was ridiculous to get upset over an impending breakup speech when we barely had a friendship, when in my head I'd already called off any future arrangements.

All this time I'd been eager to get away from him, but now that it was out of my control, now that *he* was about to walk away from *me*, I realized it wasn't what I wanted at all.

“About what?” I tried to play it cool, but my shaky voice betrayed me.

Edward took a deep breath and dropped his hands to his sides. “I don’t have the money.”

That wasn’t too surprising. It was late, and as far as I knew, he hadn’t gone to a bank.

“It’s not a big deal,” I assured him. “You can pay me tomorrow.” One more day. I was guaranteed to see him one more day. Maybe things would go back to normal after a night apart.

“No, Bella.” Edward shook his head and wrapped his arms around his waist. His shoulders slumped. “I don’t have the money. I can’t pay you.”

At first I thought he was joking, or at the very least that he would offer me another deal. But his face was pale, and he had yet to look at me. His fingers scratched absently at his chin, leaving white marks on his skin.

My heart sank.

I stared at him, not knowing what to say. Once the initial shock of his words wore off, I was hit with a barrage of emotions. I was upset with him for lying to me, and upset at myself for being stupid enough to fall for his games. And for him. He betrayed me, my trust. Suddenly my situation seemed even more hopeless. I needed that money. It was my way of getting out, of starting over.

The silence must have dragged on for too long, because Edward started filling it with excuses.

“It’s just . . . I paid three months of back-rent to bring your account up to date, then two more months after that. And that’s on top of my own. I cleaned out my savings for you.”

His words snapped me out of my stupor.

“Are you trying to make me feel bad?”

“No, I’m not. I—fuck!” He scrubbed his hands over his face, rubbing his eyes as he released a frustrated sigh.

“This was your idea! You chose to help me, not the other way around.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I want to pay you. I do—and I will—but I just don’t have the money right now.”

“I *need* that money, Edward!”

“Look, I was thinking it over on the drive today, and it’s not that big of a deal. You don’t have to leave. The thing with Rosalie was a misunderstanding. We worked it out. It’s all okay now. Just stay here and—”

“I lost my job last week.”

Edward looked at me for the first time since starting this conversation. His brow furrowed and he shook his head. “What?”

“I got laid off. That’s why I came to you.”

I thought he’d be irritated at me for not telling him, but he seemed more concerned for me than anything else, which only made me feel worse about the entire situation.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because it was none of your business.”

“If I’d known, I could have helped.”

“What, exactly, would you have done? Offered me another deal you couldn’t follow through with?” I said the words knowing they would hurt him. And they did. Edward closed his eyes and hung his head. “Why?” My throat burned, tightening as I fought back tears and making it hard to speak. “Why did you offer to pay me back if you couldn’t?”

“I didn’t know what to do!” Edward’s raised voice caused me to flinch. He began to pace in front of me, barely taking a breath as he started to ramble. “You showed up, and you threatened to leave. I didn’t know what to do, but I couldn’t let you go. I wasn’t thinking. I was desperate. I didn’t even think you’d agree. You were so angry with me.”

I thought back to Friday morning. I had been angry. I was mad at Edward for fucking me and leaving me in the stairwell after he called me a slut. I was furious that he treated me like I meant nothing to him in front of the blond woman. Most of all, I was irritated at myself for agreeing to his arrangements in the first place and for being jealous when I saw him with someone else.

“Yeah, I was.” I barked out a laugh that sounded dangerously close to a sob and shook my head. I was so stupid. “After everything that happened between us . . .”

Our history flashed before my eyes. I thought of how he’d been demanding in bed yet caring afterward. The phone calls, the texts. The soup when I was sick. The way he defended me in the restaurant. How he held me when we made love last night. It was all a lie. Just like his promise to me. Our whole relationship was a sham.

“I was stupid to think that I was . . . that there was something more.”

“Baby—”

“Don’t you dare ‘baby’ me!” I snapped. “You don’t get to talk to me like we have some sort of relationship! Like you give a shit about anything besides your dick!”

“Bella—”

“I was counting on you, and you fucked me!” If I were in a better mood, I’d have laughed at my choice of words. As it were, I couldn’t bring myself to find humor in them, only bitter irony. I was on the verge of tears, and I didn’t want Edward to see me weak. “Get out.”

His jaw dropped open. “You can’t be serious.”

“Get out,” I spat again, putting as much venom in my voice as I could conjure.

He stepped back but hesitated. I steeled my resolve, glaring at him through angry tears.

“Don’t do this,” he whispered.

“You’ve already done it.” The fight and energy drained from me as I watched the broken expression cross his face. I wanted to be alone so I could shut out the world and break down. “Just go. Please.”

Edward didn’t argue. With a resigned nod, he turned, picked up his overnight bag, and walked out the door.

The next morning, I dragged myself out of bed and into the bathroom. The bright light hurt my eyes, which were swollen and sore from crying. My sinuses were plugged as well. I didn't bother looking in the mirror; I knew I would look just as terrible as I felt. There were probably red splotches covering my face, and my eyes were most likely bloodshot.

Last night I'd let myself wallow in self-pity, but it ended now. It was time to get my life back under control.

Employment opportunities in a town this size were limited. Without a car, my options were few and far between. My lack of higher education didn't help matters much, either, but that didn't mean I was completely without skills.

After I showered and did my hair and makeup, I felt much better. Outwardly, anyway. Inside, it felt like someone had stuck a knife in my chest. I did my best to push the feeling away and ignored the voice in the back of my head telling me to call Edward. I refused to even look at my phone. If there was a message from him, I didn't want to hear it, and if he hadn't called, it would only hurt.

I dressed in a pair of tight jeans and a top that flattered my chest. If anyone saw me now, they'd have no idea of the inner turmoil I was experiencing. It was a good thing. If there was ever a time I needed my personality to exude an easy, fun confidence, it was now.

My heart pumped in both dread and longing as I left my apartment, but I made it outside without any sign of Edward. I tried not to think about what he was doing as I made the short walk to The Spotlight Bar on Main Street. I took a deep breath, relaxed my shoulders, and put on a convincing smile before entering.

The low lighting and rock music gave the bar a laid back atmosphere. A few patrons sat at the U-shaped counter, drinking tap beer and laughing with the bartender, who acknowledged me with a nod. Two men were highly engaged in a game of darts. Other than that, it was quiet, which was probably common for eleven thirty on a Thursday.

I made my way to the opposite end of the bar and took a seat. The men on the other side glanced my way. One I recognized as a regular from the diner. He winked at me, and I returned it with a small wave.

The bartender excused himself from their conversation and strolled toward me. He wore an easy smile that immediately made me feel welcome. There wasn't anything specific about him that I found attractive, but something about his personality was definitely appealing. With his sandy blond hair, dark brown eyes, and tanned skin, he looked nothing like Edward, yet it didn't stop me from being reminded of him anyway.

"What can I get for you today?" he asked.

"Actually, I was wondering if I could speak with a manager."

He held up his arms, bar towel in one hand, pilsner glass in the other, and cocked his head to the side. "Will assistant manager do?"

"Perhaps," I said, giving him a coy smile. "Are you currently hiring?"

Stuffing the rag into the glass, he snapped his fingers and darted toward the register. When he

came back, he set a job application and a pen on the bar in front of me. “A pretty lady like you? Always.”

For the first time since Tuesday, a genuine smile formed on my lips. I knew it was a line. He was probably the type of guy who moved mountains with his charm. Unlike Edward, who was demanding and forceful and didn’t take no for an answer. I brushed away the thought of him and picked up the pen.

“I’m Garret,” he said, and held out his hand for me to shake.

“Bella.”

“Beautiful name for a beautiful girl.”

I had to fight to keep the smile on my face. Was there nothing that wouldn’t remind me of Edward?

“I’ll leave you to it,” he said. “Let me know when you’re done.”

I started with the tedious task of filling out the application. At times like this, I wished I had a computer. Having a resume prepared would be so much easier than writing down my employment history. Not that it was very long, but copying down dates, names, addresses, and phone numbers was time consuming, nonetheless.

Garrett read over the application once I finished. “You know Alistair?” he asked with a grin.

“Yeah, I worked at the diner for a long time.”

“So I see. Al’s a friend of my dad’s. Nice man.” His eyes widened as he continued reading. “You’ve bartended before?”

I nodded. I’d bartended pretty much from the day I moved out of my parents’ house until I started working for Al.

And I hated it.

It wasn’t the actual job I disliked—it was the clientele. They were either drunk and obnoxious or drunk and trying to get into my pants. I had no problem flirting with men, but when they acted entitled for the simple fact that I was a woman who was there to serve them, it pissed me off. More than once I was thankful for the bar top being between me and someone who’d had a bit too much to drink, and I’d often have one of my male coworkers escort me home.

But the tips couldn’t be beat, and right now, I needed the money.

I hoped Spotlight was different. It was newer and in a better neighborhood than the other bars where I’d worked. Although it wasn’t a super classy establishment, it wasn’t a complete dive, either. Garrett seemed like a nice guy, too.

“Looks good,” he said once he finished reading. “Tell you what. When boss man comes in tonight, I’ll have him look it over and give you a call.”

“That would be great. Thank you so much!”

“Hope to see you soon, Bella.”

I didn’t want to get my hopes up, but it felt like a weight had been lifted from my shoulders.

Getting a job was the number one item on my to-do list. The second was making a decision about where I was going to live.

Because my initial deposit covered my final payment, I wouldn't have to pay anything next month, but I didn't think six weeks was long enough to save enough for a deposit on a new apartment. As much as I hated the idea of not paying rent on purpose, it might be my best bet. Worst case scenario, I had three additional months before I got evicted, and that was if Edward went through the hassle of making me leave. His father might step in if he didn't do it, but I had a feeling, considering our circumstances, Edward wouldn't press the issue unless he absolutely had to.

I still didn't know what to do about Edward. When it came to him, I had too many conflicting emotions and no idea how to even begin processing them. I was still hurt, but not to the extent I was yesterday. I felt used, yet wanted. Dirty . . . but that was nothing new. He lied, took advantage of my trust. It didn't stop me from missing him. Because, great sex aside, I liked him. A lot.

When I got back to my apartment, I checked my phone. Edward hadn't called or texted. I told myself it was early in the afternoon, and he was probably busy working. As the day wore on, I got the distinct feeling he didn't *want* to talk to me.

Maybe he'd finally had enough. At some point, the hassle of maintaining a relationship had to outweigh the benefits. It wouldn't make sense for him to repair whatever went wrong between us if he wasn't getting anything in return. Namely sex.

Not wanting to dwell any longer, I set to work cleaning and organizing my apartment. It was too soon to start packing, especially not knowing where or when I would move, but I managed to fill a large garbage bag with crap I didn't want to take with me.

I was running low on things to wear, so I sorted my dirty clothing into three laundry piles. Everything had been going well until I opened my overnight bag.

My torn dress was folded neatly on the top. It wouldn't take much to fix—I could probably do it myself. But like a scar left behind from an accident, the stitching would only serve to remind me of how I felt that night. Before I could stop myself, I was pulling at the dress with all my strength, sending the tear ripping down the front. Once I deemed the fabric irreparable, I balled it up and shoved it into the bottom of the trash bag.

There wasn't a washer and dryer in my apartment, but there was a laundry room on my floor. I hauled the first load down the hallway and checked to make sure the machines were empty before starting. Finding someone else's underwear in my laundry basket was not something I wanted to happen twice.

As I loaded the darks into the machine, Edward's T-shirt caught my eye. I must have missed it while I was sorting. Holding it to my face, I took a deep breath, inhaling the faint scent that remained in the material. As much as I wanted to preserve the only piece of him I had, I knew it would need to be laundered sooner or later. Begrudgingly, I tossed it into the washer and watched as it disappeared into the suds.

It was past nine when my phone rang. I didn't think I was ready to talk to Edward, so the disappointment I felt when an unfamiliar number appeared on the screen was unexpected. It had to be someone from the bar. Clearing my throat, I took a deep, calming breath and tried to settle my nerves.

“Hello?”

“Hello. I’m looking for Isabella Swan.”

“This is.”

“Hey, this is Sam down at Spotlight. Garrett gave me your application. It looks good. I’d like to have you come in for a formal interview. Maybe put you behind the bar and see what you can do. How does that sound?”

I breathed a sigh of relief. “That sounds perfect!”

“Are you available tomorrow afternoon? Let’s say around three?”

“Three works.”

“Great. I look forward to meeting you, Isabella.”

For the first time all week, it looked like things were finally starting to go my way. I wanted to be excited about tomorrow, but being in limbo with Edward overshadowed the enthusiasm I should have felt.

Staring at my phone, I contemplated whether to call him. I didn’t want to be the one to give in first, and although I knew I should swallow my pride and apologize for how I reacted yesterday, I was afraid of rejection. Because as much as it sucked to not know our future, it was better than knowing it was over.

My thumb hovered over the call button, but before I could make up my mind, an incoming message lit the screen. The three words on the display caused my chest to tighten.

I miss you.

I read it, and then read it again. Then I double checked to make sure it was from Edward. Once his text sank in, I typed the only response I could think of.

I miss you too.

I’d barely hit send when the phone started ringing.

“Hello?” The burn in my chest crept into my throat, constricting it and making my voice sound all wrong.

“Are you okay?”

More than anything I wanted to tell him yes, but I knew if I tried to speak, I would only start crying.

“Bella?”

“No.”

“What’s wrong?” The worry in his voice was my undoing. As hard as I fought to keep my emotions in check, tears slid down my cheeks in an act of betrayal. Clamping my hand over my mouth, I choked back a sob. *“Come on, baby. Talk to me.”*

How could I possibly tell him what was wrong when I couldn’t even sort out my own emotions? Edward kept talking, but his voice was drowned out by my gasping breaths. It wasn’t until I heard the knock on my door, echoed a split second later through the phone, that I realized he’d come to

me.

“Open the door.”

“Why?” I asked through sobs.

“I want to make sure you’re okay.”

“I’m fine,” I lied.

“Bella,” he said in a stern voice, *“if you don’t let me in, I’m going back upstairs and getting the key.”*

Edward had never struck me as a guy who made idle threats. I shuffled to the door, still pressing the phone against my ear. “You don’t have to do this.”

“Open the door.”

I unlocked the deadbolt and removed the chain. Edward had the door open before I could even reach for the handle. He plucked the phone from my hand and set it on the counter. Then he wrapped his arms around my shoulders and pulled me in to a tight hug.

“It’s okay,” Edward whispered. “Everything will be okay.” His confidence brought on a fresh round of tears. I buried my face in his shirt, not caring that I turned into a sobbing mess against his chest. “How do I fix this?”

“I don’t know,” I answered honestly.

“If you wanted to report me, I’d understand. I won’t deny anything. My dad would most likely want to settle out of court.”

Pushing my palms against his chest, I stepped back to examine his face. The dark circles under his eyes made him appear tired and stressed, defeated. There was no challenge there, nothing that led me to believe he was calling my bluff.

“Do you really think I would do that to you?”

Edward shrugged. “You need the money.”

At this point, I doubted money would make much of a difference. Whether I stayed or left, whether or not I had a job, it wouldn’t change the way I felt about myself. It wouldn’t make our relationship any clearer.

“Not at the expense of your job. Or your relationship with your dad.”

“None of that fucking matters to me! If the money is important to you, if getting some sort of justice makes you feel better about all of this—” Edward paused, gesturing to the space between us. “How can I make things right? I’ll do anything.”

I didn’t think there was anything he *could* do. He didn’t have the money, and we couldn’t change the past.

“You can’t.”

Edward tilted his head toward the ceiling. He took a slow, deep breath and blew it out through pursed lips. When he looked at me again, his face was set in determination.

“Have sex with me.”

“What?” I failed to hide my confusion. Sex was what had gotten us into this mess in the first place. “You can’t be serious.”

“I am. Have sex with me. Not as part of a deal. Because you want to. No obligations, no expectations. Let’s start over and put this whole mess behind us.”

“Why?” My voice cracked, and the tears that had stopped once again pooled in my eyes. “What’s done is done. Why bother?”

“You don’t get it, do you?” Edward shook his head. There wasn’t a trace of humor in his laugh. “You mean more to me than some arrangement, Bella. This isn’t about sex for me anymore. I consider you a friend. I know you don’t feel the same way. Whatever. I can live with that. But I can’t let you leave like this. So unless you have a better idea . . .”

“I want us to be friends,” I whispered, and it astonished me just how true the words were.

Edward studied me for a moment. Slowly, his brow unfurrowed, and the corners of his lips lifted into a faint smile. Taking my hand, he began to lead me toward the bedroom.

“Wait, now? Here?”

“Yeah.” He stopped and turned to me. The disappointment in his voice was as clear as day. “We can wait. Go somewhere else.”

I shook my head. There was no point in putting it off. He was here now. I wanted the distraction, the pleasure I knew he could give me. I wanted to feel desired.

I wanted him.

As we continued to my room, unease set in. I wondered how this would differ from our previous encounters. The only other time we had sex without an exchange of monetary value was in the stairwell, and even though we had later talked about what he said, the experience still left a bad taste in my mouth. Did he still expect to be in control? And how would he react if I said no?

Who was I kidding? Edward had never done anything I didn’t thoroughly enjoy.

Before I could overthink things, Edward picked me up and tossed me unceremoniously onto the bed. It took me by surprise, and I giggled as he pounced on top of me.

“Now that’s the sound I like to hear.” Dropping his voice, he added, “Almost as much as the sounds you make when you come.”

I hoped the heat that filled my face couldn’t be seen in the dim room. “And you think you have something to do with that?”

“I know I do.” Edward positioned one leg between mine and pressed himself against me. Even through our clothing I could feel him growing hard, not that his pajama pants offered much of a barrier. I tried to ignore the way he moved against me and concentrated on what I wanted to say. He always had a way with words, and for once, I wanted to come out on top.

“You think pretty highly of yourself, don’t you?”

“Shouldn’t I?” Reaching down, he popped open the button of my jeans and worked the zipper down so slowly that I was convinced he was trying to torture me. “Admit it. I’m the best you’ve

ever had.”

He was, and he knew it, but I wasn't about to inflate his ego more than it already was. “Well . . .” I shrugged. “You're not bad.”

“Not bad?” Edward fixed me with a challenging gaze. I thought he'd defend himself. Instead, he turned the tables on me. “If I'm *not bad*, that must make you *very easy*.”

I opened my mouth, feigning shock.

“See? Begging for my cock already.”

I scoffed and tried to slap his shoulder, but he grabbed my hand and pinned it above my head.

“You think you're not easy?” Edward asked. A knowing smile lit his face. “I bet just the thought of my cock makes you wet.” He trailed his hand over my breast and down my stomach, pausing at the top of my open pants. “Should we test my theory?”

I squirmed beneath him, knowing he was right and wishing he would stop teasing me. He worked his fingers beneath the material and chuckled. “That's what I thought.”

My first instinct was to be embarrassed by my involuntary reaction to him, but I pushed the feeling aside. He liked how responsive I was to him; he'd told me so before.

“Now that we've established how easy you are, I'm going to have to ruin you for anyone else.” The harshness of his words was a contrast to the gentleness of his fingers. I sighed as he filled me and lifted my hips to meet him.

“Is that what you fantasize about when you think of my cock?” he continued. “Or would you rather have me fuck your pretty mouth?” Edward shifted his weight and brought the fingers of his free hand to my lips. “Open up.”

I obeyed, and he hooked two fingers in my mouth.

“You probably want it here, don't you?” Edward slid his other hand lower. “In your tight little ass?” He added pressure. Not enough to enter me; just enough to keep me waiting with anticipation.

I didn't think he expected an answer, but he squeezed my jaw with his hand and gave my head a gentle shake. “Well?”

His fingers depressing my tongue made a better gag than the real one he'd used on me. He wouldn't be able to comprehend anything I said, but I understood that wasn't the point. “Anything,” I begged.

“What was that?”

Edward removed his fingers from mouth. I repeated my answer, but this time it was cut short by his lips pressing against mine.

We undressed each other as we kissed. Edward managed to keep things moving slowly despite the frantic way I clawed at his clothing. When he settled on top of me, I was more than ready for him.

“Is this what you want, baby?” A thrust of his hips punctuated the words. “You want my cock?”

“Yes.” I pulled on his shoulders, needing him closer. He complied, and I gasped at the overwhelming sensation that always accompanied him filling me this way.

It felt good to be with him again. I pushed all thoughts from my mind and focused on the way he felt inside of me. On his smooth skin, cooling with sweat. On his panting breaths, which matched the steady drive of his hips. I groaned as his grip on my shoulder tightened to the point of pain, but all I could think was that I wanted him closer.

“If you leave, you’ll never have this again,” he whispered. “You’ll never get to feel me this way.”

I held on to him with all my strength, not wanting to think about this being the last time. Everything was building, and as much as I didn’t want it to end, I knew it would be over soon.

“More,” I whimpered.

Edward didn’t hesitate, giving me exactly what I wanted. I fell apart in his arms, clinging to him until I rode out the last waves of pleasure. When my arms loosened their hold on him, he pushed away from me and sat back on his knees. I watched his long fingers wrap around his cock. He stroked himself until he came, sending long streams across my belly and chest.

Once he was done, he retrieved his shirt from the floor and used it to clean me off. He disappeared from the room without another word. At first I thought he left, but the sound of the bathroom door closing told another story.

I pulled the covers over me and curled into a ball. Between the events of the past few days and what happened tonight, I felt exposed and raw. I didn’t know how to feel about anything anymore.

Edward returned to the room. I didn’t acknowledge his presence, not knowing if I wanted him to leave or stay. The bed dipped beneath his weight, and I held my breath. After a few long moments, he pulled back the covers and slipped in beside me. His arm wrapped around my waist, pulling my body against his. I released my breath as his lips pressed into the back of my neck.

“What happens now?” I asked.

“That depends,” he said. “Are you really going to leave?”

I shrugged. I didn’t know what the correct decision was. “There’s nothing here for me.”

“I’m here,” Edward whispered, barely audible. I rolled over to look him in the face. His hold on me slackened, but he kept his arm slung over my hip.

“I don’t even know you.”

“So get to know me.”

I closed my eyes and hid my face in the crook of his neck. Having a relationship with Edward had never crossed my mind in more than fleeting thoughts. And while it sounded appealing, I had no idea how it would work. This entire situation, everything about our relationship, was fucked up.

“What’s the point? You couldn’t possibly want more with someone like me.”

“Someone like you?” Edward slid his hand up my back. When he tried to tilt my head to look at him, I burrowed my face in the pillows. “Why wouldn’t I want someone like you?”

“Let’s see,” I began, keeping my face shielded from his view. “I don’t have a job. I’ll probably

never amount to anything. And after everything I've done . . .”

“What have you done?” he prompted when I didn't continue.

I didn't want to verbalize my biggest insecurity, but his fingers playing with my hair soothed me, and the fact that he was still here, in my bed, spoke volumes in itself. I took a deep breath and steeled myself for his reaction.

“I'm not exactly a respectable girl, am I?”

“Is that what you're worried about? That I don't respect you?” When I didn't answer, Edward forced space between us. He wouldn't speak until I looked him in the eyes. “Bella, I respect you *because* of everything we've done. You didn't have to do this. You trusted me enough to give me your body. You allowed me to live out my fantasies, and you got lost in them right along with me.” He brushed the hair away from my face and placed his hand on my cheek. “We're two adults, taking pleasure in each other's bodies, in private. The arrangements we made were secondary to that. You have nothing to be ashamed of.”

“So that's all you want from me, then? My body?”

Edward shook his head and hugged me close again. “I enjoy the time I spend with you. Whatever you're willing to give, I'll take it.”

I clung to him, telling him without words that he already had my heart.

I could only hope he wouldn't break it.

Chapter 8

Sleeping with Edward was easy. He didn't hog the bed. He didn't snore or steal the covers. However, he did have an uncanny way of sneaking off in the morning without waking me, which left me wondering if it was something he did often.

Although I felt better about us, our relationship was still unclear. We were stuck in limbo, more than friends but without a defined commitment. But being on speaking terms and knowing Edward was interested in more was a welcome relief to how I'd been feeling over the past few months.

Eventually my thoughts turned from Edward to my impending interview. It'd been a few years since I'd been behind a bar, and I hoped I wasn't rusty. I knew once I got back into the swing of things I'd be fine. My biggest concern was actually landing the job. I needed it more than I wanted to admit.

"Bella!" Garrett called as I set foot in Spotlight later that afternoon. He sat at the bar, a wide smile on his face as he swiveled the stool to face me. Excitement danced behind his eyes as I approached, and I fought the urge to fidget beneath his stare.

"Aren't you on the wrong side?"

Garrett shrugged. "I heard some new chick is replacing me."

A tall man stepped around the corner of the bar. He offered his hand, and when he spoke, I recognized his voice as Sam's.

"You must be Isabella." His handshake was firm. It fit in well with the broad span of his shoulders and looming presence. There was a seriousness in his smile, something that radiated authority. "Let's go in my office. Garrett, watch the bar, please."

I was nervous as I followed Sam into the back room, but after getting past all the formalities of a typical job interview, things became a lot less stressful. Sam's hard exterior seemed to dissipate, or perhaps I adjusted to it. By the time he stuck me behind the bar for a trial run, I felt at ease.

Happy hour was beginning. Garrett stayed by my side the entire time, taking the orders and processing payments while letting me focus on making the drinks. It didn't take long to get the hang of it. For the most part, everyone ordered standard drinks; tap beer was the most common. Only once did someone order something that made me shoot Garrett a questioning glance. He mimicked my expression before asking the patron what was in the drink.

"Great job, Bella. Welcome to the team," Sam told me once the happy hour rush ended.

"See? I told you she'd be awesome." Garrett clapped me on the shoulder, and a wide smile stretched across his face. Sam rolled his eyes.

"Thanks. I'm really excited to work here."

"I'm going to have you train with Garrett for a few weeks. Why don't you come in tomorrow at eleven."

"Sounds great!"

"Let's get out of here," Garrett said once Sam took over the bar. "I'll walk you to your car."

“Oh, I didn’t drive.”

Garrett frowned. “Do you need a ride home?”

“No, it’s okay. I like to walk.”

“All right.” Garrett ran his hand through his shoulder length hair. He hesitated for a moment, but then he smiled, his usual confidence returning. “Mind if I walk you?”

It was early in the evening and still light outside. I didn’t think it was necessary for him to accompany me. At the same time, he was being nice, and I did enjoy his company.

“Sure. Let me grab my purse from the back.”

The six block walk passed quickly, and before I knew it, we were standing in front of my apartment complex. “This is me.” I gestured to the front door of the building.

“Wow, that is close. It must be nice to not have to drive.”

“It is some days. It sucks when it’s raining. Or when it’s two in the morning.”

“Or raining at two in the morning?”

“Yes.” I giggled. “That’s not fun either.”

“I’m sure Sam or one of the other guys wouldn’t mind giving you a ride home. If you switch to the late shift, I mean.” Garrett shrugged and gestured to himself. “And I can always give you one if you want.”

“Thanks.” I smiled and tried to act grateful, even though being dependent on a ride was exactly what I didn’t want to happen. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Maybe I should start walking to work.” Garrett frowned, seemingly deep in thought, and tapped his chin. “Nah. I’m way too lazy for that.”

I was mid-laugh when a figure paused in my peripheral vision. I turned to see Edward. His presence took me off-guard, rendering me speechless. He glanced between Garrett and me with a curious expression on his face. Before I could gather my thoughts enough to say hello, he composed his features and nodded.

“Have a good evening, Bella.” His voice was quiet. There was no bitterness or sarcasm behind the words, only sincerity. As I watched him disappear into the apartment complex, I realized how the situation must have appeared to him.

It was eerily similar to the night I saw him with Rosalie, and I knew firsthand how it felt to be shunned.

“I’m sorry, Garrett. I have to go.”

“Oh, okay.” If he wanted an explanation for my abrupt departure, he refrained from asking. “See you tomorrow.”

I gave Garrett a small wave before entering the building and running up the stairs. I hoped to catch Edward at some point, but he was nowhere in sight. My heart pounded as I approached his door. It only took him a few seconds to answer after I knocked.

“Hey,” I said, still winded from climbing six stories. “Can I come in?”

Edward opened the door wider and stepped into the kitchen as I entered.

“Hot date?” he asked as he buttered a piece of bread. The sharpness of his actions and the straight line of his lips told me his composure from earlier had begun to slip.

“It wasn’t a date.”

“Really?” He gestured toward me with the butter knife. “Dressed like that?”

His tone cut through the confidence I’d built throughout the day. Sure, I was dressed a little provocatively, but he said it like it was a bad thing. It made me worry about Garrett’s motive for walking me home. I wanted to believe he did it because he was a nice guy, not because he thought I was easy.

“I got a job at The Spotlight Bar.”

Edward’s lips parted slightly, his eyebrows lifting in surprise. The knife clattered as he dropped it on the counter. “You did? That’s great.”

I couldn’t tell if he was still upset about seeing me with Garrett or if he was displeased with my new employer, but he didn’t seem half as excited as I would have expected. I folded my arms across my chest, unamused by his sullen reaction.

“I’m sorry.” He sighed. “I had a really shitty day. I shouldn’t have taken it out on you.”

“Want to talk about it?”

“Not really.”

I gave him a look that said I wasn’t messing around and stared him down. Bad days were understandable, but if he was going to be a jerk about it, he could at least tell me what happened.

Edward sighed again and dropped his eyes to the floor. “I had to evict Shelley Cope.”

I didn’t know what to say. It wasn’t something anyone would want to do, and I knew from eavesdropping on him and his father that he’d put it off for as long as he could. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. It’s my job. Besides, my dad is right. This is a business. If he’s not going to let me live rent free, he’s not going to let someone else freeload. She agreed to pay, just like everyone else here, and she didn’t.”

Edward shrugged in a nonchalant way that said he didn’t care, but I knew he did. His dad might have been right, but I hated seeing Edward hiding his compassion in order to deal with what he’d done.

“Why not work somewhere else?” I asked. “Your dad obviously doesn’t give a shit about what you have to say. And if you’re not going to benefit from being family, why not get a job you actually like, with a boss who respects your opinions?”

Edward stepped back, crossed his arms over his chest, and shook his head. “You don’t get it.”

“So explain it to me, because I would never stand for a boss, or a parent, treating me like he did you the other night.”

“It’s complicated.”

“I’m not stupid,” I retorted.

“What would you have me do instead?” he snapped. “Wait tables? That’s worked really well for you so far.”

I stood there, my mouth gaping. Edward’s angry expression morphed into one of horror.

“Bella—” he started.

“Save it.” I turned to leave, but he grasped my arm, holding me in place.

“Don’t go, please. I’m being an ass. I’m sorry.”

When I stopped struggling, he released me.

“I’m not working for my dad for the benefits,” he continued, more reserved. “I’m working for him because my life took a shit and I needed the job.”

Edward returned his attention to the half-made sandwich on the counter. I watched as he carefully assembled the meat and cheese, each movement slow and deliberate. He took a deep breath and exhaled loudly before he spoke again.

“I worked in commercial real estate, but I couldn’t cut it once the economy tanked. I wasn’t very responsible. Worked up more debt than I could ever hope to pay off on my own. My dad bailed me out on the condition that I work for him. So when you say you’re probably not going to amount to anything . . .” Edward raised his arms and gestured to himself. “I would have filed bankruptcy if it weren’t for him. He paid my bills. He floated me enough money to pay my house until I could sell it. Even my fucking car’s in his name. He asked for one thing in return. So you tell me: why don’t I go and work somewhere else?”

To say I was shocked by his admission would have been an understatement. I didn’t know what to say. I would have never assumed that Edward wasn’t in control of every aspect of his life.

“I’m sorry,” I said for the second time tonight.

“Don’t be. I have no one to blame but myself.”

Edward crossed the small kitchen and stood before me. My heart hammered in my chest as our eyes met. He lifted his arm, pausing for only a second with his hand inches from my face. I took a deep breath, and a shiver ran down my spine when his cool fingers wrapped around the back of my neck.

When he kissed me, it was slow and gentle—something I was unaccustomed to when it came to him. I half expected him to turn up the heat a notch, but instead he pulled away.

“I’m glad you found a job,” he whispered against my cheek.

“Thanks.”

He glanced over his shoulder and then shot me a sheepish smile. “Will you stay? I’ll make you a sandwich.”

After dinner, Edward and I settled on his couch and watched TV. As much as I enjoyed our more carnal encounters, I liked being in his quiet company. At some point I must have dozed off, because I woke up to his fingers combing through my hair and his soft voice whispering in my ear.

“Bella.”

“Hmm?”

“It’s late, baby. I need to get to bed.” Edward shifted, dislodging my head from his lap. He chuckled at my groan of displeasure and pulled me from the couch. “Come on.”

My sleep muddled mind thought he was kicking me out, so I was confused when he led me past the front door and into his bedroom.

“Is this okay?” Edward folded down the covers and began to slip out of his clothes. I followed suit and climbed into his bed. I’d forgotten how nice it felt to lie on. My head hit the pillow, and the last thing I remembered was his arm wrapping around me.

The next morning, I woke up alone once again. I found Edward sitting at his kitchen table, which was buried beneath paperwork. He was concentrating on the document in his hands and chewing on his pen so hard that I was sure it would crack between his teeth.

“Makeshift office?” I was worried that maybe he didn’t want any interruptions, but he looked at me and smiled, putting me at ease.

“You could say that.” Edward set down the papers and stood. “Are you hungry? I can make you breakfast.” He glanced at his watch before adding, “Or lunch.”

The faint scent of bacon told me he’d already eaten. He looked busy. I didn’t want to inconvenience him more than I probably already had.

“I should go. I have to be at work soon, anyway.”

He looked unconvinced, but he didn’t push me. “If you’re sure.”

We stood by the door, a different type of awkwardness settling over us. This situation was different than any other experience I’d had with him. Last night he’d given me part of himself, something more intimate than sex. I wasn’t sure how to react. By the looks of it, neither did he.

“Thanks for letting me sleep in.”

“It seemed like you needed it.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t want to . . .” I gestured to the space between us, hoping he’d understand what I was trying to convey.

Edward’s eyes widened. He ran one hand through his hair and rocked back on his heels. “I, uh . . .” He cleared his throat. “I didn’t know that was still an option.”

“Oh.”

Silence fell over us. I hadn’t even realized I was looking at the floor until Edward took my chin between his fingers and tilted up my head.

“Is it?” he asked.

I felt the color flooding my face. How could I admit that I wanted him? That I enjoyed everything he did to me? That I wanted him to take whatever he desired as long as he would hold me when we were done?

“Yeah. I mean, I wouldn’t mind. If you wanted to, that is. Do you?”

“How could I say no?” Edward leaned in and kissed me on the cheek. “Come over when you get off work tonight.”

Garrett greeted me with his signature smile when I arrived at Spotlight. He didn’t mention my speedy departure the night before, and for that I was grateful.

Being Saturday afternoon, it was much busier than the previous day. Sam was working behind the bar, and two waitresses were taking drink orders. A few times I felt overwhelmed, but Garrett was always by my side to make sure I had a handle on things.

And talk me down when I fucked up.

“It’s no big deal,” he said when I’d messed up a particularly large order. “Everyone makes mistakes.”

“Yeah, but that was just stupid. It’s supposed to be vodka, not rum. I know that!”

“Bella, really. Don’t worry about it.” Garrett rubbed his hand across the exposed skin on my lower back. It sent a shiver up my spine, and I froze at the unexpected contact. He didn’t seem to notice. “You’re doing great. You’d be surprised at how many drinks I fucked up. And that was only yesterday.”

The tension slowly dissipated, and I berated myself a little less. Something about Garrett’s laid back attitude made it hard to be upset about anything. I took a deep breath and nodded.

“Why don’t you go in back and take ten. There’s a pizza in the oven you can check on. I’ll take care of things out here.”

I took Garrett up on his offer and headed into the tiny kitchen. I had no idea how long it would take me to get used to this place. If it was this crazy now, I couldn’t imagine working nights. If I decided to stay in town, and I probably would, the tips from a busier shift would definitely be beneficial. Especially now that I fully intended on paying my rent.

When seven thirty rolled around, I was more than happy to get out of the bar. Garrett offered to walk me home, but his shift wouldn’t end for another half hour, and I didn’t want to wait around. Besides, I didn’t want anyone getting the wrong idea.

Edward didn’t answer his door. His phone went straight to voicemail. Confused and a little discouraged, I went downstairs to my apartment. I kept the place tidy, so the note on the counter captured my eye the minute I stepped inside.

Bella,

A last minute meeting came up. I’ll probably be out late. If you don’t want to wait around, I’ll

understand.

I've abused the authority to enter your apartment twice now. It's only fair that you can do the same to me.

Edward

A key lay on the counter next to the note. I picked it up and rubbed the cool metal between my fingertips. As much as I wanted to use it, I didn't trust myself not to rummage through his stuff. A childhood bedroom was one thing, but his current residence was a completely different story. Edward opened up to me last night. I hoped he would continue to tell me more about himself on his own.

It was well past midnight when I awoke to a warm body curling around mine.

"There you are," Edward whispered. He slid his hand down my side, hooking his fingers into my underwear and pulling them down in the process. "You were supposed to come over."

"You were supposed to be home."

Either Edward ignored my words or he couldn't decipher them through my pillow. He kissed a trail down my side and flipped me onto my back when he reached my hip. Using his tongue and fingers, he wasted no time bringing me to the brink of release.

"Don't stop," I whined when he pulled away.

"Stop?" He crawled up my body and settled between my legs. "I'm not going to stop until I feel you coming on my cock."

My body quaked with each inch that entered me. I was close, and I wanted nothing more than to come undone in his arms. I clung to him, rocking my hips in a desperate search for friction. Edward pulled out and entered me again.

"Is this what you want?"

"Yes!"

Over and over, he gave me what I needed, until my toes curled and my fingers dug into his back. My breaths were short and fast. I squeezed my eyes closed as my body finally gave in. With his arms wrapped tightly around me, Edward came as well. When he finished, he collapsed on top of me in a sweaty heap.

"I love having sex with you."

"Me too," I agreed.

Edward kissed my shoulder before rolling onto his back. "Mind if I crash here tonight?"

He could crash here every night as far as I was concerned. I loved the things he did to me, but mostly I liked having him here. Something about his presence made me feel at ease, like nothing else in my life mattered as long as he was by my side.

Edward must have taken my silence as rejection, but he didn't give up. "Please?" he drawled. "I'll take you out to dinner tomorrow."

“You just want an excuse to get in my pants again.”

“Is that a yes?”

I couldn't help but laugh at the hopeful tone of his voice. “Yes.”

At six o'clock, I found myself standing outside Edward's door. I contemplated using the key he'd left me the day before, but I felt strange letting myself in, especially knowing he was home and most likely more than capable of answering the door. I knocked and waited in anticipation. We'd only said goodbye a couple of hours ago, but with nothing to do, it felt like an eternity.

Edward opened the door. His eyes raked over my body, and he smiled. “You look lovely.”

I rolled my eyes as I pushed past him. I wasn't wearing anything special—just jeans and a T-shirt. “You know you don't have to sweet talk me to get some, right? We've already established that I put out.”

Edward didn't reply, but he stared at me with narrowed eyes.

“What?” I asked.

Edward's scowl vanished, and he shook his head. “Nothing.” Reaching toward me, he trailed his fingers across my neck. “No necklace?”

This time it was my turn to frown. Hadn't he understood that I couldn't afford fancy jewelry? “I told you, accessories have never been a priority for me.”

“Wait here,” he said, then he disappeared down the hallway. I shifted uncomfortably, wondering what he was doing. When he returned, a silver chain dangled from his closed fist. “So . . . it's probably outdated and not your style, and if you don't like it, you don't have to wear it. I won't feel bad. I just thought . . .” Edward sighed and held up the necklace. “I just thought it would look really nice on you.”

A single pearl dangled from the chain, encircled in tiny diamonds. It was beautiful. Timeless. To say I was surprised was an understatement. I could only imagine what my face must have looked like. Edward looked like he was about to run away.

“Edward,” I began in an attempt to lighten the mood, “are you seriously giving me a pearl necklace?”

His brow furrowed with confusion, but I saw the exact moment when it dawned on him. He laughed and shook his head. “Yeah. I guess I am.”

I held my hair out of the way as he fastened it around my neck. It was heavier than I expected, and the pearl felt cool to the touch. “Where did you get this thing, anyway?” I asked.

“It was my mom's.”

If I was shocked before, it was nothing compared to now. I released the necklace, letting it settle into place on my chest. “Are you sure you want me wearing it? I don't want to ruin in.”

“You won't. My mom wore it all the time. It was her favorite. She wouldn't have wanted it to sit

in a box for the rest of eternity.”

I wasn't completely comfortable wearing something with so much sentimental value attached to it, but I had a feeling Edward would be more hurt if I didn't. I was fairly confident it would survive one night unscathed.

“If you're sure.”

“I'm sure.” Edward pulled me close and kissed my lips. “Where do you want to eat?”

“Anywhere *not* in this town.”

“Agreed. Let's get out of here.”

Edward drove us to a burger joint a few towns away. It wasn't anything like the restaurant we went to with Marcus. Maybe that was why he chose this particular place. We ordered at the counter and settled into a corner booth.

“So I was thinking,” I said once the food arrived. It was always easier to have a potentially awkward conversation with eating as a distraction. “You were right. We had a misunderstanding, and we worked it out. So there's really no reason for me to move.”

Edward paused mid bite. He set his burger on the plate and finished chewing. “You're staying?”

“Yeah. It turns out that I actually really like my new job. I know it's only been a few days, but the people are really nice, and it's within walking distance.”

“There are bars and restaurants everywhere.”

Once again, Edward's reaction wasn't what I expected. It was almost as if he was looking forward to me moving away.

“Why? Did you already lease my apartment to someone else?” I was only half joking.

Edward didn't waste any time dismissing my fears. “No, nothing like that.”

“Good, then.” I stole a fry from his plate and popped it into my mouth. “I've got to do what's best, you know? It wouldn't make sense for me to move so I can get a new job when I like the one I have. Besides, this is probably as good as I'll have it anywhere else.”

“Is that your main motivation for staying?” he asked.

“I guess.” Actually, Edward was my main motivation for staying, but I wasn't ready to admit that to him yet. I was still having trouble admitting it to myself.

“I'm trying to do that. Make the best decisions for me, I mean.”

“You should.” I had a feeling Edward was referring to something with his father or his job. Or both. “Take opportunities when they present themselves, because you never know if you'll get another chance.”

“And what opportunities have you missed?”

Edward wore an easy smile, but I diverted my eyes. I didn't care to discuss my past, but Edward had opened up to me. It was only fair I do the same.

“What opportunities?” I asked flatly. “I left home when I was eighteen and dropped out of school.

I got my G.E.D. eventually, but I've been busting my ass ever since."

"Why did you leave?" There was no judgment behind his words, something I was used to when talking about my past, only curiosity.

"My parents were assholes."

"Were they pissed?"

"They didn't care."

Edward gave me a skeptical look. "I'm sure that's not true."

The fact that we hadn't spoken in almost seven years was proof enough of their feelings toward me, but I wasn't ready for this conversation to take a more serious turn. "Enough about my parents. Tell me about yours."

"What about them?"

"I don't know. Has your dad always been such a jerk?" I winked to let him know I was *mostly* kidding.

Edward smiled and shook his head. "He was different before my mom died. Or maybe I was too young to notice. I don't know. I didn't make it easy for him when I was growing up."

"How so?"

"I got into trouble. Typical boy stuff, I guess. College was bad, though. I was irresponsible. Partied a lot. Failed a few courses. It wasn't my money, so I didn't care. He always threatened . . ." Edward trailed off. His smile faded as he became lost in memories.

"Threatened what?" I prompted when he didn't continue.

"He told me if I didn't get my grades up, he would pull me out of school and make me work for him."

Edward smiled again, but it was different than before. Strained. I felt his torment as if it were my own. I didn't like seeing him so defeated.

"He can't possibly expect you to work for him forever. You're a grown man who can make his own decisions."

"I've had another job offer," he said quietly.

"So take it."

"It's not that easy."

"Nothing good ever comes easy, Edward! Sometimes you can't avoid hurting the ones you love."

Edward looked like he was about to argue. I held up my hand to stop him.

"If you want the job, if it's what's best for *you*, take it. And don't let anyone hold you back. You can't live your life for other people; you'll end up miserable."

I realized too late that I'd probably overstepped my bounds. This was our first date. We were just getting past the rocky start to our relationship. I didn't want to add to it by giving unsolicited life

advice.

I steered the conversation toward a safer topic. Edward seemed relieved by the change of subject. He was an easy person to talk to, and I was reminded of the way we were before uncertainty and hurt feelings interfered with our relationship.

Edward took the long way home. I got the distinct feeling he didn't want our night to end, so when he didn't follow me into my apartment, I assumed it was part of his game.

"Would you like to come in?" I asked in an overtly sexual voice. Leaning against the doorframe, I pressed out my chest, exaggerating my come on.

He hesitated, and then slowly shook his head. "Not tonight."

"Oh." I stood a little straighter and swallowed back the lump forming in my throat. My mind raced as it replayed our evening together, searching for something I'd said or done to make him pull away.

Edward picked up on my internal struggle. "We've done everything backwards," he explained. "Let me be a gentleman for one night."

"Okay." It was a nice gesture but completely unnecessary. One evening of abstinence wouldn't change the past. If it was important to him, I didn't want to argue, but I couldn't shake the feeling that there was something more to his behavior. "Don't forget your necklace." I reached for the clasp to remove it. Edward took me by the wrists, stopping me.

"Keep it. It looks good on you."

"But it's your mom's!"

"It *was* my mom's," he said. "It hasn't been hers for a long time."

I couldn't imagine why he'd want to give me something so valuable. He must have only meant for me to keep it for now. Either way, I didn't want to be responsible for something so important. Maybe I could conveniently forget it at his apartment next time I was there.

Edward slid his hands up my arms until my face was cradled in his palms. "Good night, Bella." Dipping his head, he pressed his lips against mine. Despite his soft words and calm demeanor, there was a certain urgency behind the kiss, an emotion I couldn't quite put my finger on.

As I watched his retreating form disappear into the stairwell, a sense of unease settled in my stomach. Because while he might have been saying good night, it felt like goodbye.

Plagued by the feeling that something was wrong, I didn't sleep well that night. I woke up later than I planned, and I had to rush through my morning routine if I wanted to make it to Spotlight by eleven. The pearl necklace dangling on the vanity caught my eye. It would look good with the low cut shirt I was wearing, but I was too paranoid that I'd ruin it. I gave it one last fleeting glance before grabbing my purse and racing to the bar.

"Sorry I'm late!"

"No worries." Garrett's smile faltered as he looked up from the drink he was mixing. "Everything okay?"

"Yes." I straightened my shirt and smoothed down my hair. Apparently I didn't look as put together as I thought.

He gave me a doubtful look.

“I’m fine,” I insisted.

I busied myself by wiping down the bar and making small talk with a couple of older gentlemen sitting on the end. I got the distinct impression they were regulars and probably more than happy to see a female here during the day.

The amount of people who trickled in over the lunch hour surprised me. Some of them ordered a frozen pizza or mozzarella sticks, but most just drank a beer or two and went on their way.

“You’re doing great,” Garrett said.

“Thanks.” I breathed on my nails and shined them on my shirt. “I’ll be switching to evenings and weekends in no time.”

“You want to leave me so soon?” Garrett clasped his hands over his heart and gave me an exaggerated pout. “I’m hurt.”

“Oh, stop it!” I punched him on the shoulder, and he laughed. “Why do you work during the day, anyway? The tips can’t be any good.”

“I can’t do nights. Besides, Sam’s a friend of mine. This job is a good way to help him out and make a bit of extra cash.”

“What do you do at night? If you don’t mind me asking,” I added. The last thing I wanted to do was pry into his business.

“I could tell you, but . . .”

“But?”

Garrett lowered his voice as he spoke. “You’ve got to keep it on the down-low. It’s not something I want getting out.”

Just like that, I wanted to know more. “I won’t say anything. I swear.”

“Promise?”

“Promise,” I agreed.

“I’m serious. No one can’t know this.”

“Okay!”

Garrett leaned in close to whisper in my ear. Knowing he was about to share something private with me was exciting. Was he a CIA agent? An undercover detective? A male prostitute? I fought to keep my expression in check.

“I’m Batman.”

“Oh, my god.” I pushed him away. My face reddened as he laughed, a loud heartfelt roar that left him watery eyed and clutching at his stomach.

“Your face! You should have seen your face!”

I tossed a handful of sliced lemons at him. He managed to sidestep in time, dodging them all. “I hate you!”

“No, you don’t. You love me!”

Grabbing a towel, I headed into the lounge area. “Don’t think I’m picking those up, either!”

I set to work wiping off tables, careful to avoid looking at the eyes that were sure to be on me. Being the center of attention had never been something I enjoyed.

“Bella!” Garrett called from the other side of the bar.

“I’m not talking to you.”

A few moments later, his arm draped over the backs of my shoulders. “You can pretend to be mad at me later. Some guy is asking for you.”

I turned around in time to catch Edward seated at the bar, staring in my direction. Seeing him was a surprise, and he looked away before I could manage a smile.

I shrugged off Garrett’s arm and left the towel on the table as I made my way back to the bar. “Hey.”

“Hey.” His eyes scanned over me before fixing on something over my shoulder. The tight set of his jaw made him seem annoyed. I wondered how much he’d seen of my interaction with Garrett and how it must have appeared to him.

“Do you always drink on Monday afternoons, or are you checking up on me?” My attempt to break the ice backfired. Edward’s eyes blazed as they shot to mine. If we didn’t have the bar between us, I might have been tempted to take a step back. “Can . . . can I get you anything?”

Edward exhaled. His expression softened as he leaned back in the chair. “Old Fashioned.”

I began making his drink. I hoped his sour mood didn’t have anything to do with us. It wouldn’t be the first time he had a bad day at work. Maybe that was why he came here.

“Rough day?” I slid the drink in front of him and leaned against the bar.

“It hasn’t exactly turned out how I expected.”

“How’s the Old Fashioned?” I asked once he took a sip.

“Perfect,” he mumbled.

“Bella?”

“What?” I turned to Garrett, the irritation clear on my face. He nodded toward three men taking a seat at the bar before darting into the kitchen. The stench of burning pizza hit my nose immediately after. Sighing, I smiled at Edward in apology. “I’ll be right back.”

I took the men’s orders and mixed their drinks. Of course they didn’t want something simple, like beer, and they all paid separately. When I finished, Edward had already left. A twenty dollar bill sat tucked under his glass.

Looking at the clock, I groaned. This shift couldn’t be over soon enough.

I pressed the end call button and tossed my phone onto the bed. It was the third time I'd called Edward in the past two hours with no answer. Leaving a message was pointless. He would see that I called. Besides, I didn't want to cross into needy girl territory.

I was in the middle of eating dinner when he sent me a text.

I'll be out of town for a few days. Talk to you when I get back.

I frowned as I read it. What was wrong with talking to me while he was gone? I wouldn't let myself entertain ideas of him doing something, or someone, he didn't want me to know about. There was nothing I could do about it now. Even if I didn't like it, I held no official title. He didn't owe me anything, phone call included. Though I'd like to have thought I meant *something* to him after everything we'd done and talked about.

I went about my night and the days that followed. Garrett could tell I was down, but he never asked specific questions. Each night I'd send Edward a text asking how he was or what his day was like. His replies were always short and sometimes came hours later. I never tried to call him. It was clear he didn't want to speak with me.

After a couple of days, I stopped texting him. I hoped he would take the initiative to contact me, but he never did. Something was definitely wrong, though I didn't know if it was me, us, or some other factor.

By the time the weekend rolled around, I was really starting to panic. I found myself standing outside his apartment without consciously making the decision to go there. I knocked on his door and listened for any indication that someone was inside. There was nothing but silence.

Guilt consumed me as I pulled his key from my pocket. I wasn't going to snoop; I just wanted to make sure everything was okay. I told myself that if he didn't want me using it, he should have asked me to return it. Taking a deep breath, I inserted the key into the lock and pushed open the door.

At first glance, everything seemed to be in order. He wasn't lying dead on the floor. There were no signs that any women had been staying there. Perhaps I was overreacting. If he was conducting out of town business, maybe he really was too busy to chat. But something in the apartment felt off, and I couldn't shake the nagging feeling that I was missing something.

The place seemed too clean. There were no dishes on the counter or in the sink. No pillows or blankets strewn on the couch. Even the table he worked at was organized with meticulous stacks of paper. It looked fake—more like a model home than a lived-in apartment. I wandered down the hallway and peeked into the bathroom. The counter was bare. I tried to remember if there was ever anything sitting out—cologne, toothpaste, deodorant—but every time I'd used the bathroom, my mind had been elsewhere.

I opened the cabinet above the sink. New bars of soap were stacked beside unopened toothbrushes, just waiting to be used.

Suddenly, Edward's earlier words struck me.

"My father likes to keep an apartment reserved at each building in case a situation like this pops up."

I bolted from the bathroom and into the bedroom, wasting no time throwing open the closet door.

Empty hangers swayed from the rod. I pulled out a drawer.

Nothing.

Stumbling backward, I bumped into the bed and collapsed on the floor. I didn't know what he was doing or why he wouldn't talk to me, but one thing was painfully clear.

Edward was gone.

Chapter 9

The week following my discovery of Edward's absence was awful. I'd never felt so miserable in my entire life. Not when I'd cut ties with my parents. Not when I was facing eviction. Not even when I thought Edward had used me as his whore.

He invaded my every thought. Ghostly images of him flashed in my mind as though he were still here. I knew it wasn't real, but I couldn't stop imagining his presence.

I could see him in the stairwell, dressed in a white shirt with rolled up sleeves. I remembered how the rough wall scraped my back with each thrust. At the time I was afraid of getting caught. Now I would gladly let someone watch if it meant I could have him back.

Every time I lay in bed, I pictured him there, bare feet and remote in hand. I heard his voice pleading with me not to leave, telling me he wanted whatever I was willing to give him. Moments like those were the ones that hurt the most to relive, because it had always felt like there was more between us, and now there was nothing.

Not even the parking lot was safe. Sometimes I swore I saw his black coupe, but upon further inspection, it was never there.

I started entering the side door to avoid the lot. When thoughts of him holding me in my bed became too much to bear, I slept on the couch.

I stopped taking the stairs.

More than once I contemplated calling him, but he was just as capable of picking up the phone. Besides, his leaving was rejection enough. I knew how to take a hint.

Each morning I dragged myself out of bed. I went through all the motions. I showered, dressed, and did my hair and makeup. At work I wore a smile and flirted with customers, but inside I was numb. I tried not to think about Edward, because whenever I did, it felt like a huge hole had been punched through my chest, as though he somehow tore out my heart and took it with him.

I would rather feel nothing than the pain of losing him.

"Want to catch a movie tonight?" Garrett's voice pulled me out of my trance. He pointed to the glass in my hands. "I think it's dry enough."

I set it down and picked up another. "I don't know . . ."

"Why not? It'll be fun. Popcorn's on me."

I didn't feel like going out, but I couldn't sit home and mope forever. I was better than that. I deserved better than that. And Garrett had been a good friend to me. He knew something was wrong, but he never pressed for information. This was probably his way of cheering me up.

"As long as it's not some stupid romance flick."

"Deal," he said.

After work, Garrett drove me to my apartment so I could change.

"Sorry about the mess," I said when we stepped inside.

“You think this is bad? You should come to my place.”

“Ew, I’d rather not.”

“Hey!”

I changed quickly, putting on loose fitting jeans and a shirt that was less revealing. I felt guilty, even though I knew I had no reason to be. Edward left me. He was probably off having fun somewhere. There was no reason I couldn’t go out with a friend. I plucked the pearl necklace from the vanity where it’d been hanging for the past two weeks and contemplated putting it on. I knew I would think of him each time it shifted against my skin, and I didn’t want the constant reminder putting a damper on my evening.

I opened a drawer and dropped the necklace inside, where it would be out of sight and hopefully out of mind.

It was time to move on.

“Ready?” Garrett asked.

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” I said under my breath.

Against my wishes, he insisted on buying my ticket and concessions. When I balked about it, he assured me I could pay next time. I deemed that an acceptable plan. Here we were, already discussing our second movie, while Edward and I hadn’t even been to one. It really put things into perspective.

But thoughts of what Edward and I hadn’t done only brought on the pain of what could have been. I wrapped my arms across my chest, wishing it could be enough to mend the gaping hole in my heart.

“Everything okay?”

I composed myself and took the popcorn and soda Garrett offered me. “Yeah, sorry.”

“Don’t apologize.” Garrett wrapped one arm around me and gave me a sideways hug. He didn’t release me as we walked to the appropriate auditorium. Once seated, he let his arm hang loosely over my shoulder. It felt nice, and I found myself leaning into him as the movie progressed.

The past two weeks had been filled with self-doubt. I constantly questioned what was wrong with me or if I’d done something to drive Edward away. I wasn’t sure what this evening meant to Garrett, but it was nice to feel wanted, whether it was as friends or something more. So when the movie ended and he slipped his hand into mine, I didn’t pull away. Not when we returned to the car or during the drive home. Not even as he walked me to the front door of my apartment building.

“I’m glad we went out tonight. I had a nice time.”

“Me too,” I agreed.

“Next weekend?”

“I’d like that.”

Garrett smiled as he cupped my cheek in his hand. His eyes flickered to my lips, and I knew this was the moment we’d been leading up to all evening. Probably a lot longer if I were being

completely honest with myself.

I took an unsteady breath as his lips brushed against mine in the lightest of kisses. My eyes drifted closed, and I grasped the front of his shirt in my fist. I could do this. I wanted to do this. Garrett responded, deepening the kiss. His lips were warm and felt like silk compared to the scruff of his beard. He slid one hand through my hair and dropped the other to my lower back, holding me against him as his tongue slipped between my parted lips.

Things would be so easy with Garrett. We got along well. He was attractive and charming, and he always managed to make me laugh no matter how terrible of a mood I was in. In another life, we could be perfect together.

But he didn't smell right. And he didn't taste right. And it wasn't his arms that I wanted wrapped around me.

I shoved Garrett with more force than necessary. He stumbled back, shock written on his face as he pressed his fingertips to his mouth.

"I'm sorry. I can't." My voice shook as I struggled to keep the tears at bay.

"What is it? Did I do something wrong?"

"I have . . . there's someone . . ." I knew I should have stopped talking. I should have thanked him, said good night, and excused myself. As I squeezed my eyes closed, all I could see was Edward. His cocky smile when he originally propositioned me. His lust-filled face each and every time we had sex. His pleading eyes when he asked me not to leave him. "I'm sort of seeing somebody."

Garrett's expression morphed into one of horror. "Why didn't you say anything?" His voice was laced with pain and anger, and I was immediately overcome with guilt. "Why didn't you stop me earlier?"

"I'm sorry."

Scrubbing his hands over his face, Garrett cursed under his breath. "I should probably go."

I didn't argue. As he walked to his car, all the pent up emotions—the heartache and longing and insecurity—poured down my cheeks in the form of tears. Unable to bear watching him drive away, I turned and retreated into the building.

Never in my life had I felt so terrible about myself. Edward was gone; he didn't want me anymore. To make matters worse, I ruined any chance I had with Garrett. He was my friend, and I'd hurt him over something that wasn't even an issue—something that had never been an issue. It was pathetic.

I was pathetic.

I tossed and turned all night. Every time I closed my eyes, images of Edward flooded my mind, a constant reminder of my failure. I wanted to turn it all off, to enter an unconscious world where I'd be numb from the pain.

At the same time, I didn't want to fall asleep, because I knew there would be a brief moment upon waking when I wouldn't be thinking about him. When everything would be okay. And inevitably, that split second of happiness would be shattered when reality came crashing back. I lived through it every morning, and so far it hadn't gotten easier.

I didn't want to think about Edward, but each time I managed to block him from my thoughts, all I could think about was Garrett and the stunned look on his face when I'd pushed him away. In all the time I'd known him, I couldn't recall seeing him without at least a hint of a smile on his face. Until tonight. It killed me to know that I was the reason for his anguish.

If I thought it would help, I'd call in sick tomorrow, but I needed the money, and more than anything else, it was a cowardly thing to do. Running away wouldn't solve anything. It wouldn't change what I did tonight, and it wouldn't bring Edward back.

I made my bed. It was time to lie in it.

Alone.

My stomach flipped as I set foot in Spotlight the next morning. I hoped things wouldn't be awkward between Garrett and me after what happened last night. He nodded at me before returning his attention to the barware he was putting away. I stashed my purse in the back room and joined him.

"Hi, Garrett."

"Morning," he replied.

I grabbed as many glasses as I could hold without dropping any and headed to the opposite end of the bar. Garrett's muted footsteps echoed behind me. Once I put them away, I took a deep breath and turned to face him.

"Can we talk?" he asked quietly.

"Sure."

"I feel bad for rushing out on you last night. When you said there was someone else . . . I freaked out. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. You didn't do anything wrong."

"Yes, I did. I should have asked. I don't know how I misread the signs." Garrett smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. "Maybe it was wishful thinking."

"Garrett," I sighed. A stabbing pain struck what was left of my heart. I didn't know how to fix this, but I couldn't let him beat himself up over something that wasn't his fault. "My life is kind of complicated at the moment. I like you a lot. I really do. I'm just not ready to pursue anything right now."

"You don't have to explain." He hesitated. "Are we cool?"

"Yeah. We're cool."

Though I was happy Garrett didn't want this coming between us, things were different. The small touches that always seemed casual disappeared. His smile was still warm, but it was directed at me less. At the end of the night, he didn't offer to walk me home.

I was so lost in thought that I walked through the apartment parking lot without thinking. Out of

the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of the phantom black car. I told myself not to look, that I would only be disappointed when it wasn't his. My eyes betrayed me, and I turned my head.

I froze.

For a moment, the world ceased to exist. Time stopped as I stared at the car that was unmistakably Edward's. Then my heart started beating again, pounding so hard I could feel it in my throat and hear the whooshing of blood in my ears. My hands shook. I took a staggering breath.

Without giving it a second thought, I ran into the building, taking the steps two at a time to the sixth floor. Edward's door was slightly ajar. I burst inside without considering if I should.

The blonde—Rosalie—was sitting at the table, thumbing through a box of paperwork.

“Edward, where are the rental agreements for—” Her eyes widened when she saw me. She sat up a little straighter. “Oh! Hi.”

I was about to apologize and flee with whatever dignity I had left, but seeing her here angered me. This was Edward's apartment, where he'd been with *me*. I couldn't make him stay with me, but I wasn't about to feel inferior to her.

“Where is he? Where's Edward?”

“He's bringing some boxes out to the car.” Rosalie stood and slipped a folder into the filing box. “That man, I tell you. I'm glad he found a job that's better for him, but he could have given us more than a few days' notice.” She laughed. “Oh, well. At least he'll be closer to home. This place is way too far away.”

Rosalie kept talking, but my mind was stuck processing her words. Edward had accepted the job. He was really moving on from here. From me. He wouldn't be back. I held no ties to him, not even as a tenant. Maybe living nearer to Rosalie was a factor. Maybe they weren't as final as he'd made it seem. I should have known better than to think I could ever be enough for him.

Knowing they'd had a romantic relationship made me sick to my stomach. He'd seen her naked. She knew what it felt like to have him inside of her. I tried not to picture him doing to her what he'd done to me, but images of them together flitted through my mind. Did he say the same things to her in the heat of the moment? Did he hold her like she meant the world to him when they were done?

Suddenly, I no longer wanted to see him. I didn't want to look into his eyes and know he didn't want me. And I definitely didn't want to hear him say it.

“You know what? I'm sure you guys are busy. I'll talk to him later.” I backed toward the door, eager to make my escape before Edward returned.

A frown marred the blonde's beautiful face. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah. I don't want to interrupt.” I caught her eyes narrowing as I made it to the safety of the hallway. I all but ran down the stairs, praying Edward and I wouldn't cross paths and breathing a sigh of relief when I reached the second floor.

Surprisingly, I didn't cry as I entered my apartment. I didn't feel angry or sad. Edward was here, and I had absolutely no desire to see him.

I felt nothing.

Numb.

When there was a knock on my door an hour later, I knew it would be him. I could sense his presence with every fiber of my being. I dragged myself from the couch to answer it.

Edward's eyes lingered on mine only a second. He lowered his head as he leaned against the door frame. "Hey, Bella."

"Hey." I didn't bother keeping the bite from my voice. I couldn't believe he had the audacity to disappear for two weeks and then greet me with *hey*.

"How are you?"

I bristled. He acted as though nothing were wrong. Like I hadn't just survived through the worst time of my life. "I'm fine."

"So I, uh . . ." Edward ran his hand over the back of his head. "I took your advice and accepted that job I mentioned."

"I gathered."

"Oh." He shifted on his feet and cleared his throat, still not bothering to look at me. "I just wanted to say goodbye."

"You're moving." It wasn't a question. I knew before his step-sister confirmed it. I'd seen the empty apartment.

"I already have, actually. I drove back with Rosalie to get some documents. We're leaving first thing in the morning."

Never in a million years would I have guessed that hearing him use the word *we* to refer to someone else could hurt so much. In that moment, it didn't matter if they had a history. It didn't matter whether they hooked up in the future. She would always be a part of his life. That was more than I could say for myself.

"I'm happy for you," I lied, making me feel that much worse about myself. Deep down I knew it was selfish of me to want him to stay. But I was hurt. And as much as I didn't want to care about him, I did. "What about your dad?"

Edward blew out a long breath. "He wasn't as angry as I expected, just disappointed. But he's trying to be supportive. I think we'll be okay."

"That's great." It sounded forced, even to my own ears.

Edward looked at me then, his face solemn. "Will you be okay?"

Anger rushed through me. Why wouldn't I be okay? I didn't need him to take care of me. Besides, it was a little late to be asking now.

"Of course," I spat. "Why wouldn't I?"

"I didn't mean . . . yeah, I know you will." Edward gave me a sad smile. "I'll miss you, Bella."

My chest tightened. I nodded, not trusting my voice.

"But we had fun, right?"

I needed this conversation to end. I didn't think I could hold it together much longer, and I would not break down in front of him. He came to say goodbye, and he did. There was no reason to draw out this conversation longer than necessary.

"Right. Look, Edward, it's late. I have to go. I'm opening the bar tomorrow."

"Oh." He seemed surprised. "Okay."

"Good luck with everything, really."

"Thanks. I'll—"

I didn't let him finish. The loud thud of the door closing effectively cut him off.

The next day was unusually busy at Spotlight. I found myself judging all the people there. Didn't they have anything better to do on a Sunday afternoon than drink beer and eat cheap bar food?

My foul mood was showing. More than once Garrett shot me a disapproving look. I didn't care.

Edward's car was gone this morning, and I knew that was it. It was officially over. The end. All I wanted was a day to mope. To get it out of my system so I could move on with my life.

Unfortunately I didn't have a day off until the end of the week. I'd have to make do with what little time I had to myself.

"Do you want to leave?" he asked.

"No," I insisted. My tips might have been suffering today, but I still needed a paycheck. "I'm fine."

Once it slowed down, I retreated to the back of the bar and busied myself with cleaning and organizing. I was so focused on the task at hand that I didn't even notice Garrett standing beside me until he spoke.

"Bella—"

"I know!" I snapped. "I cannot deal with these people today. You've spent months working days by yourself. Let me stand back here and wash dishes for a while. Please."

"All right. Fine." He began to walk away but stopped. "Hey, isn't that the guy who asked for you a few weeks ago?"

I spun around, nearly dropping the glass I was holding. Edward stood at the corner of the bar nearest me. He shoved his hands into his pockets and turned his head away, but it was obvious he was waiting for me. Setting down the glass, I made my way over to him.

"Can we talk?" he asked.

"I thought you were gone."

"I came back."

I gestured for him to follow me around to the back of the bar where no one was sitting. Once there, I put my hands on my hips and waited.

“Look, Bella,” he began, “I know we were never serious. Christ, we’ve only known each other three months.” He wiped his hand across his mouth and huffed before resting his elbows on the bar. “But I can’t imagine not having you in my life.”

Adrenaline surged through me. I wanted him to say he missed me and was going to stay, but I also hoped he wouldn’t. I refused to be responsible for holding him back, no matter how badly I wanted to be with him. Was this going to be an extension of our conversation from last night? Was he going to tell me how much I meant to him, only to shred my heart into a million pieces when he left once more? I braced myself for whatever he was about to say.

“Come with me.”

“What?” I stuttered, half in shock and half in disbelief. There was no way I heard him correctly.

“Come with me,” he repeated. “You can stay with me until you find a job, or just . . . fuck. Come live with me. It’s in the city. You’d love it.”

I didn’t know what to say, how to respond. He was right; we barely knew each other. I’d been living for myself for years. How could I turn my entire life upside down for him?

Yet how could I not?

My heart still stung from his abrupt departure. He might have been here now, but that didn’t change anything. He still hadn’t bothered to inform me of his decision to leave. He hadn’t even said goodbye until after the fact.

“You left.”

His eyes closed. “I know.”

“You said you’d be out of town for a few days. You didn’t want to talk to me. You barely even returned my texts.”

“I didn’t know what to say.”

“How about the truth?” I asked. “Instead you left without saying anything. I didn’t understand what was happening between us, but I was worried about you. You know how I found out? Your fucking empty apartment!”

Edward dropped his head into his hands.

“And now you come back and want me to uproot my entire life for you?”

“See? This is why I didn’t ask in the first place.” He pushed away from the bar and paced in front of me. “I took the job because you told me not to live my life for anyone else. How was I supposed to ask you to give up everything for me? I couldn’t.”

“So your solution was to not say anything?”

“I should have. I’m sorry.” Stopping in his tracks, he threw his arms in the air and let out a sharp laugh. “Doesn’t really matter now, does it? End result is the same.”

“What makes you think I wouldn’t have said yes?”

“When you were going to move, I asked you not to. You didn’t stay for me. You stayed for your job. There’s no way you would have said yes.”

I thought back to our conversation over dinner, and it all began to make sense. The way he'd seemed disappointed when I told him I wanted to stay. How he'd asked if my job was the main reason for my decision. Even when he'd wanted to argue about taking a new job himself. Had I been up front with him, we might not have been in this situation now. The fight drained out of me as I looked at his pained face.

"I stayed for you, Edward. You said it yourself. There are bars and restaurants everywhere."

Edward looked at me then. I saw the exact moment my words dawned on him. Shock crossed his face. "You would have said yes?"

"Of course I would have."

He rubbed his eyes before dropping his hands to his sides. "Looks like I blew it."

"Are you retracting your offer?"

"No." A smile played at the corners of his lips, and he let out a shaky breath. "Come with me," he said again.

I wanted to, but I wasn't ready to go now. I had to pack, and I couldn't bail on Sam without warning, not after how good he'd been to me.

Edward's hopeful expression fell.

"Please," he whispered.

"I need more time."

"Come next week. Come next month. I don't care how long it takes, just be with me."

"Be with you how?" I had to make sure we were on the same page. That he wanted me as more than a convenient lay.

"Be mine. Be my girl. Be anything you want. I don't ever want to live without you again."

My heart melted at his words. I nodded. "Okay."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

Edward leaned across the bar. Wrapping one hand around the back of my neck, he closed the distance between us. His lips felt right, like they belonged against mine, and I took his face in my hands as I kissed him in return. He pulled away too soon and rested his forehead against mine.

"God, I missed you."

"I missed you too."

"I'm so sorry, baby. I never meant to hurt you." His thumbs swept over my cheeks, wiping away tears I didn't even know had fallen. "I've got to go. Promise me you'll come."

"I promise."

He kissed me one last time before reluctantly letting me go. "I'll call you tonight."

I was sad as I watched Edward walk out of Spotlight, but for the first time in a while, I felt hope. Although we still had things to talk about, I was certain everything would be okay.

We would be okay.

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

My last night at Spotlight was bittersweet.

I'd given Sam my two week notice the day Edward stopped at the bar, but I offered to stay longer if he needed me. We agreed on three weeks, and he switched me to the night shift while Garret trained someone new.

"I'm going to miss you," Garrett said during our shift change. "Stop by if you're ever in the neighborhood."

I agreed to visit the bar if I ever came back, but inside I knew it was goodbye. There was nothing tying me here. If things didn't work out with Edward and me, there would be no reason to come back. There was nothing here for me. This chapter of my life was over.

At Edward's insistence, I'd sold what little furniture I had. Moving it would have been more of a pain than it was worth, and it was nice to have a little extra cash in my pocket. He claimed to have made a clerical error on my account, stating he forgot to record my 30 day notice. Cullen Properties refunded my last month's rent, and Rosalie turned a blind eye to my squatting in Edward's old apartment for the past few weeks.

As it turned out, she wasn't so bad after all.

Aside from a few items like a change of clothes and bathroom necessities, all of my belongings were packed. The apartment was spotless. It was just a matter of waiting for Edward to come get me.

When there was a knock on my door, I practically jumped out of my skin. I rushed to answer it, excited to see his face after three long weeks. Edward had me in his arms before I could even say hello. He swept me off my feet and spun me around.

"Put me down!" I said with a laugh.

"Never." He placed me on my feet and squeezed me tighter. I couldn't breathe, and I had to tap him on the back before he released me. Framing my face with his hands, he pressed his lips to mine. "God, I missed you."

"How was the drive?" I asked.

"It couldn't go fast enough. How was work?"

"Kind of sad."

Edward pouted and kissed me again. "You have no idea how much this means to me."

I had a fair idea, but I didn't want to ruin the moment by getting too mushy. I inclined my head toward the bedroom. "Why don't you show me."

His serious expression morphed to one of surprise, and then a devilish smirk crossed his face. "Gladly."

My excitement spiked as he all but dragged me to the bedroom. He took his time, touching and kissing every inch of my body. He was tender and attentive, making me feel worshiped, but also like a porcelain doll.

When he flipped me onto my stomach, I thought for sure I'd get a glimpse of the old Edward. I waited for him to pull my hair or dig his fingers into my hips, but he didn't. He remained a total gentleman.

Later that night, Edward and I lay together on the bed, my head on his chest and his arm wrapped around me. His fingers traced a circle on my shoulder, over and over again, leaving a trail of goose bumps in their wake. The sensation was making my eyelids heavy. Listening to the steady beat of his heart wasn't helping, and I drifted somewhere between asleep and fully awake.

Edward's voice, barely louder than a whisper, pulled me out of my haze.

"I never thought I'd have you again, here in this room." He exhaled long and slow. "I never thought I'd have you again, at all, after I left."

"Edward . . ." I wanted him to stop. We'd been avoiding this topic for weeks. I didn't want to have this conversation yet. Not now, when we were finally together again. When I was warm and in a state of bliss and exhausted from everything that had led up to this day. But I knew what it was like to keep something inside, to force myself to sleep when my mind wouldn't stop dwelling on the past. I didn't want that for him.

"I thought I made the right choice," he continued. "I thought if I asked you to come with me, it would be selfish, and I've been nothing but selfish since we met. I took advantage of you. I won't do it again. I'm sorry."

I processed his words. He did use the situation to his advantage. It caused us both a lot of heartache, but if it meant being where we are now or not having him in my life at all, I would do it all again.

"I don't regret anything," I assured him.

"I'm glad." Edward squeezed me tighter then continued to caress my skin. "I still feel bad. You weren't doing those things because you wanted to."

While it was true that I wouldn't have tried most of the things we did without persuasion, I did enjoy it, and I wanted to do it again. I missed the way we used to be.

It struck me then, the way he'd treated me the last few times we'd been together. He'd been gentle. He barely spoke. He didn't incorporate anything kinky. He'd even shot me down.

I sat up and stared down at him. His eyes were sad as they met mine. His lips turned down at the corners.

"Do you think . . . is this why . . ." I struggled to gather my thoughts. Just thinking about those things got me flustered. "Things have been different," I finally spit out.

Edward nodded.

"Why?" I blurted.

At first he seemed surprised by my outburst. "I know we're not into the same things. I won't force you to do anything. I just want you to be happy."

My jaw dropped open. “Where on Earth did you get the idea that I don’t want those things?”

“You told me.” Edward frowned. “At my parents’ house.”

Now it was my turn to be confused. “What are you talking about?”

“When you came to my room. You asked if we could have sex . . . like normal people,” he mumbled.

“Oh, Edward.” I leaned down and kissed him, trying to erase the pain I heard in his voice. “It wasn’t that I didn’t like it. I just wanted to feel like I was enough for once. I wanted you to want *me*.”

“Of course you’re enough.” Edward wrapped both arms around me and held me tighter. “I always want you.”

I laughed in nervousness and relief. “I thought maybe you didn’t want me like that anymore. I’ve told you so many times that I like what you do to me. How could one comment make you doubt everything we’ve done?”

“I could ask you the same. I did everything I could think of to show you how much you mean to me. I even told you I wanted more. I’m still not sure you believe me. I suppose that’s my own fault. I’m sorry I ever gave you a reason to doubt me.”

I silenced him with another kiss. “I don’t want to think about all that right now.” I resituated myself next to him and placed my hand on his bare chest. His chest was perfect—toned, and not too much hair. Even when he was sweaty and pressed against me, we couldn’t be close enough. I took a deep breath. “I like the things you do to me. I don’t want you to stop.”

I felt him shift beneath me and knew he’d lifted his head to look at me. I couldn’t bring myself to look at him. This conversation had already caused my face to turn bright red. I wondered if he could feel my blush on his skin.

“Do you mean that?” he asked.

“Yes. I’ve missed it.”

“So . . .” He gulped, hesitating. “Everything? Or . . .”

“I don’t want anything to change,” I told him. “I like you in control. I like everything you say and do, even when I think I won’t.”

Edward exhaled shakily. “You would tell me if I did something you didn’t like, right?”

“Yes, but that probably won’t happen. I like being your slut,” I added in a whisper.

“You *really* shouldn’t have said that.” Without warning, Edward tossed me onto my back and covered me with his body. “You think you’re my slut now? You haven’t seen anything yet.”

A shiver ran up my spine as his hand slipped between my legs.

“Just wait until we get home. I’m going to torture you in every way imaginable. I promise you’ll love every minute of it.”

His head disappeared beneath the blankets, and his mouth made a promise of its own.

I didn't want to get out of bed the next morning. I would have been content lying in his arms all day, but Edward wanted to get an early start on the day. We had a long drive ahead of us, but we stopped at the diner for breakfast so I could say goodbye to Al, Jane, and Tanya. Edward kissed me when we left, thanking me again for agreeing to move with him and promising he would find a way to make up for everything I had sacrificed to be with him.

"I get to have you," I told him. "That's enough for me."

It was late morning when I tossed the book I was reading into the back seat and stretched my arms. Edward looked at me from the driver's seat.

"Do you want to stop?" he asked. "Get out and stretch? Use the bathroom?"

"No, I'll wait until we stop for lunch. The sooner we get there, the better. Unless you want to."

"I'm fine." His eyes shifted to mine. "There's something else I'd like to do though."

"What's that?" I asked, realizing how clueless I was when he smirked at me.

"Touch yourself."

I pushed away my embarrassment and placed my hand where I knew he wanted it. Edward tsked.

"Inside."

I obeyed, unbuttoning my pants and slipping my hand inside the fabric.

"Good girl."

I kept my gaze focused out the windshield, but it didn't take long before I stopped seeing everything outside. I closed my eyes and pretended it was Edward touching me. I imagined his hands and his lips, his hard length and the way his body always had a way of forcing mine to accommodate him.

"Are you wet yet?" Edward asked. He didn't give me time to answer. He pulled my hand away, replacing it with his own. His fingers dug into my skin, teasing and torturing me at the same time. I moaned and gripped the door handle as he pumped them inside of me. "You can do better," he said as he removed his hand.

I continued to pleasure myself. Edward seemed to be watching me more than he was looking at the road. When I got close, and my legs began to twitch, he reached over and unlatched my seatbelt.

"Get over here and suck me off."

Doing as he commanded, I got on my knees and leaned over the center console. He was one step ahead of me, having already opened his fly. I took him into my mouth, and he twisted my hair around his hand and used it to guide my head. His moans of pleasure encouraged me. I didn't mind when he pushed my head down or pulled my hair so hard my eyes watered. I liked it when he used my body for his pleasure. It made me ache for my own release.

"Looks like we have an audience," his rough voice said. I panicked and tried to sit up, but he forced me to stay down, to keep my mouth sliding up and down his cock. "Should we give them a

show?"

Edward released my hair and slid his hand down my back, pushing my pants over my behind and leaving me exposed. He gripped my panties and yanked them toward my head. I squirmed as the material chafed my skin, and he rubbed my pussy and ass through the fabric.

"There's no hiding how much you enjoy this."

Shoving my panties out of the way, he played with my clit. At that moment, I didn't care who was watching. I couldn't hold still any longer. I arched my back and pushed against his hand, needing more. I was on the edge, and Edward seemed to know. He stopped what he was doing and dipped a finger inside me. It was all it took for me to come undone.

"Get ready, baby. Here it comes."

I braced myself as he filled my mouth, and I was careful not to spill any on his clothing. When he pulled his hand away, I was overcome with embarrassment. Knowing I couldn't sit with my head on his lap for the remaining drive, I sat up and took a sheepish look out the window.

There was no other car.

"You okay?" Edward asked.

I nodded and wiped my mouth on my sleeve. I couldn't bring myself to ask if we really had an audience. The concept of being watched was a turn on, and I'd rather not know for sure.

I was surprised when Edward turned into the driveway of a small house. He smiled when he saw the shock on my face.

"Welcome home," he said.

I stared at the front door. It had been years since I'd lived in a house. "You said you had an apartment."

"I never specified," he said. "You assumed. I didn't correct you."

"How can you afford this?"

"It's not as much as you think. I'm making more now, and the relocation allowance helped. It's a rent-to-own too. If you like it . . ." Edward shrugged.

I looked at the house again. "You live here?"

"Yes."

"I'm going to live here?"

"I certainly hope so."

I laughed. "I want to go inside!"

Edward helped haul my bags inside before giving me the grand tour. I loved the house. While it was small, it was still larger than either of our apartments had been. It was older, and a few things

needed to be fixed, but Edward assured me he was quite handy when it came to that stuff. It served as a reminder of how little I knew about him.

“How are we going to make this work?” I asked as we stood in the living room. There was a mismatched couch set and one lone end table. A small television hung on the wall, the only one I recalled seeing in the house.

“What do you mean?” His expression, which had been so happy only seconds ago, became worried.

“I know your body, but I know nothing about you.”

“Every relationship has to start somewhere. What I do know is that I want to discover everything about you. I can’t think of a better way to do that than being as close to you as possible.” Edward pulled me into a hug and kissed the top of my head. “Do you want to be here?”

“Of course I do,” I answered without hesitation.

“Good.” He grinned. “Because I want to wake up next to you every morning and see your face before I fall asleep each night, and everything in between.”

I couldn’t help but smile in return. “Good.”

“Let’s clean up,” he said. “It’s not too late, and I have a promise to keep.”

The sun had long since set by the time I unpacked and got ready for bed. My heart pounded as I waited for Edward to join me. When the shower turned off, I pulled the blankets tight around my shoulders. It was hard to fight off the chill in this big bed all alone, especially wearing only thongs, at Edward’s request. I hoped it wouldn’t take long for him to warm me up.

I smiled when his silhouette appeared in the bedroom door though I doubted he could see it in the dark.

“Are you still awake?”

“Yes.” I flipped down the covers on the opposite side of the bed. Edward slid in next to me. His body was damp, and I shivered as he pressed against my side.

“Cold?” he asked, pulling the covers to my waist before I had a chance to answer.

“What are you doing?” I shrieked and reached for the blanket. Edward pinned my arms to my sides and drew my nipple into his mouth. The warmth of his tongue was an odd contrast to the cool tingle from what I presumed was his toothpaste. I wound my fingers through his hair and sighed.

“Do you want me to stop?”

“No.”

His hands and mouth traveled my body. Each moment that passed relaxed me, warmed me. I kicked the blanket away from us and stretched my arms over my head.

Edward kissed his way up my body and ran his hands over my hair. At first he was gentle, so I

was unprepared for the sudden sharp tug at my scalp. He shifted off of me, and I discovered rather quickly that he didn't intend to let go as he slid from the bed, forcing me to crawl after him to quell the pain. When I reached the edge, Edward released his grip on my hair. Taking me by the shoulders, he flipped me onto my back and dragged me so my head hung off the edge of the bed.

He didn't need to tell me what to do as he stepped closer. I opened my mouth and darted my tongue across the tip of his cock.

“Do you want this, baby?”

Edward slid inside, pausing when he tapped the back of my throat. I concentrated on my breathing so I wouldn't gag, but breathing became difficult when he placed his hand on my neck. Even though he didn't squeeze hard enough to cut off my air, it didn't take long for my head to feel fuzzy. I squirmed. He let go and pumped in and out of my mouth in long, slow motions.

“Touch yourself, just like earlier.”

I did as he demanded, careful not to bring myself too close to finishing. It'd been a long time since we were together like this, and I wanted the pleasure to last as long as possible.

Edward brought both hands to my neck and held me as he continued. The angle made it easy for him to slide deeper. I relaxed my throat, trying to take more of him in.

“Take off your panties.”

The position I was in made it difficult to comply. I did my best to strip them off while timing my breaths with his thrusts. Edward didn't falter. I could only assume he enjoyed watching me struggle.

He ripped the tiny scrap of material from my hands before I could toss them on the floor. This time, when he pushed into my throat, he didn't pull out. I gagged once before I could force my throat to relax. Edward pushed deeper.

“I can see my cock,” he said in a strained voice. Two fingers traced the sides of my throat.

I couldn't breathe. Though I knew Edward would never cause me harm, it didn't make lack of oxygen any less unsettling. My back arched off the bed, and I tried to squirm out of his grip.

When he pulled away, I gasped for air. I'd barely taken my second breath when something was being shoved into my mouth. It didn't take long to figure out what it was. The lace was surprisingly rough against my tongue.

“Don't move.”

Edward stepped away and rummaged through the nightstand. When he returned, he took a fistful of my hair and lifted my head. A familiar silver camera dangled over my face.

“I have a collection that's in serious need of new material. What do you say?”

I'd forgotten about the pictures he'd taken the first time we were together. Somehow, I wasn't as apprehensive this time around. I nodded to let him know I was on board.

Edward watched me on the small screen. “You look so good with your panties stuffed in your mouth. The only downside is it isn't me.” His eyes narrowed. “Hmm . . .”

He hooked a finger into my mouth and pushed the material into my cheek. With his other hand, he

guided the head of his cock between my lips. Once again I found myself concentrating on breathing.

“That’s much better.”

The camera beeped, but the shutter never sounded. Edward stroked his thumb across my cheek. The gesture was tender, a complete contradiction to his words.

“I know you like this. I can see how wet you are from here.” He tapped his fingers against my cheek, hitting the tip of his cock where it pushed against my skin. He stroked me a few more times and patted my cheek again, increasing the pressure. “Why aren’t you touching yourself?”

I took the hint and brought my hand between my legs. Edward’s hand came down on my cheek, harder this time. Deliberate. My moan was muffled by my panties and his cock. In the position I was in, I couldn’t see what was coming next. The anticipation was killing me. Edward caressed my cheek again, and then he slapped me. The sound was much more shocking than the sting that followed. Part of me was surprised, but I also knew Edward was anything but predictable when it came to the bedroom.

He smacked me again before removing everything from my mouth. I swallowed a few times, trying to get the moisture back to my tongue. When I looked up, I noticed the camera still pointing at me. My face reddened when I realized he’d recorded the entire thing.

“You okay?” Edward asked.

“Yes.”

He turned off the camera and placed it on the nightstand before cupping my face and bending down to kiss me. “Get on your knees,” he whispered.

I did as Edward asked, and he climbed on the bed behind me. His palms skimmed across my back, relaxing me, so I was unprepared for his initial thrust. He drove into me so hard that I fell face-first onto the bed. I braced my hands beneath me, but before I could push myself up, his hand was on my cheek, pressing my face into the pillow. He hooked a finger into my mouth as held me down.

The force of his thrusts was just what I needed. My body thrashed beneath him as the orgasm rocked my body. Edward grabbed my hips to support me as he rode out his own.

We collapsed in a sweaty heap on the bed, our labored breaths in perfect harmony. Edward kissed my shoulder before guiding me onto my back.

“I missed that,” I panted.

“So did I.” A lazy smile stretched across his face. “You liked it?”

“Yes.” I took a deep breath. “Is that wrong?”

Edward frowned at me playfully. “I thought we were past that.”

“I know. We are. It’s just hard to admit sometimes.”

“You only have to admit it to me.” Edward nudged my nose with his. “I adore you, Bella.”

His lips were on mine before I had a chance to respond. As he held me tighter, I realized there was nothing I wouldn’t try if he asked me to. And there was nothing he wouldn’t do for me. We made

each other happy, both in and out of the bedroom.

I loved Edward, and for the first time in my life, everything was perfect.

The End

Chapter End Notes

Wow... I can't believe this story is over. In January it will be 4 years since it first posted, and that's a long ass time.

First off, I'd like to say thanks to Sandy at SFFR. Without you twisting my arm to write something smutty, this never would have happened, and it definitely wouldn't have been continued.

To Monika and PTB, thank you so much for giving me the opportunity to write an EPOV of this for the 2012 Back to School Fundraiser. Sometimes I feel like writing fanfic is just this silly little thing I do. It was a nice feeling to write dirty smut, knowing it would benefit innocent school children.

Libbeh, KB, Joo, and Hobo (this time in reverse alphabetical order): Thank you for your constant support and feedback. Not just for this story, but for all the things. I can't imagine my life had you all not weaseled your way into it.

To all the readers, you guys are awesome. When I started Adore, my goal was to write the dirtiest one-shot I possibly could, and you welcomed me with open arms. Even when I expanded it and threw in one of those pesky plots. The feedback I got was overwhelmingly positive, and for that I feel very fortunate. Thank you so much for sticking with me on this journey.

I've got some new things up my sleeve, so don't go too far! I'll be posting them on FFn for sure, and probably AO3. If you are reading on FictionPad, please make sure you follow me on one of the others sites, or subscribe to my blog: gardenofsin.net. I'm also on Twitter [@o_oza](https://twitter.com/o_oza) and [@jillwritesbooks](https://twitter.com/jillwritesbooks).

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!