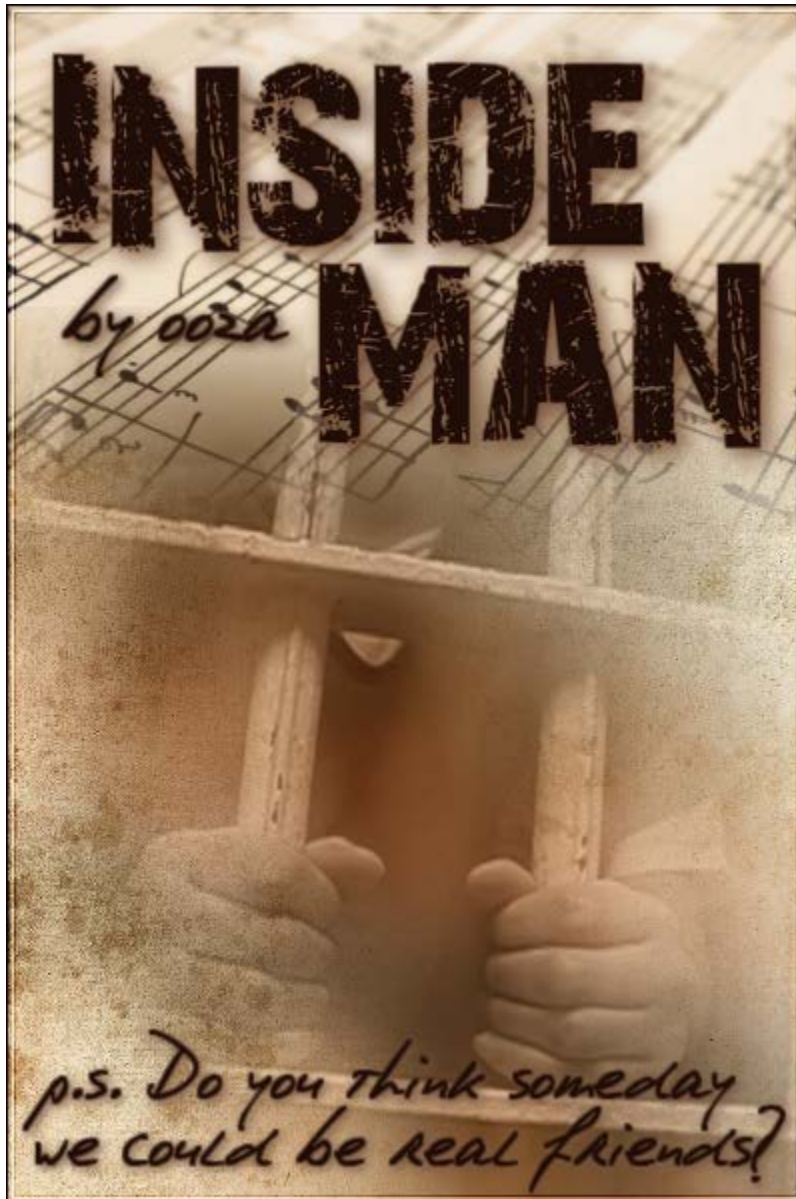


# Inside Man



*a Twilight fan fiction by oozza*

With his parole fast approaching, inmate Edward Masen is looking for a friend. College student Bella Swan stumbles across his profile on a prison pen-pal website. Their friendship is formed over written words, but will it last once he rejoins her world? Edward/Bella, AH, Rated MA/NC-17 for adult situations.

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<http://www.gardenofsin.net>  
<http://www.fanfiction.net/u/2111776/ooza>

# The Profile

**Edward Masen #15604091**  
**Waterview State Correctional Facility**

## **About Me**

Race: Caucasian  
Religion: N/A  
Date of Birth: 6/20/1974  
Eyes: Green  
Hair: Brown  
Height: 6'2"  
Seeking Donations: No  
Sex: Male  
HomeTown: Chicago, IL  
Astrological Sign: Gemini  
Correspond Overseas: Yes  
Seeking Legal Help: No  
Seeking Prayer Partners: No  
Marital Status: Single  
Profile Type: Personal  
Sexual Orientation: Straight  
Seeking Education: No

## **Incarceration**

Earliest Release Date: 2009  
Latest Release Date: 2013  
On Death Row: No  
Incarcerated Since: 1998  
Serving Life Sentence: No  
Incarcerated For: Assault, Robbery, Possession

Hello,

I am creating this profile in hopes of finding someone who will write to me. I'm up for parole later this year, and my counselor suggested this program as a way to lift my spirits and practice communicating with people on the outside.

I have a Bachelor's degree in music and have spent a lot of time composing over the past 11 years. Creating music is what I've missed the most while here.

I've made a lot of stupid choices in my life that I can't take back, but I'm trying to be a good man now. I'm usually a happy person, but sometimes the loneliness of incarceration is overwhelming. I need a friend.

Thank you for reading my profile. I look forward to hearing from someone soon.

Respectfully,  
Edward Masen



Edward Masen #15604091

Waterview State Correctional Facility

June 1, 2009

Dear Mr. Masen,

I hope this letter finds you in good spirits and good health.

My name is Isabella. I've just finished my junior year at the University of Washington and am taking a few summer courses to lighten next year's load. My professor suggested I participate in the write a prisoner program. Don't worry—I promise not to psychoanalyze you or anything like that. I am doing this for the sole purpose of connecting with someone I otherwise wouldn't have exposure to and by doing so hopefully making our community a better place.

A little bit about me: I'm 21 years old. I've lived in Washington for the past three years but grew up in the southwest. The change in climate was quite a culture shock! I'll be graduating (hopefully) next spring with a Bachelor's degree in Psychology and have absolutely no idea what I'm going to do with it. Music sounds much more interesting, and I'd love to hear more about it. In fact, I'll be here to listen to anything you're comfortable talking about. (over)



I'm not sure what else to say, but I'd love to learn more about you. Please send any correspondence to the address listed below.

Best wishes,  
Isabella

c/o Student Services  
Department of Psychology  
University of Washington



June 10, 2009

Isabella,

Thank you for writing. I can't begin to explain what it felt like to hear my name called today. Yours was the first letter I've received since posting the ad. Actually it's the first personal letter I've received at all. It usually takes a little more time for us to receive correspondence here, and I know this, but waiting was nerve-wracking all the same. So thank you again. You've made today one of the good days.

Please call me Edward. Mr. Masen was my father. Believe me when I say that I want to be nothing like him. People here address me by my last name a lot. I think it will be nice to hear my first name again, or read it anyway.

Wow, I apologize for my handwriting. It's been a while.

Music has been my saving grace. It's what I turn to when I want to get away from it all, which is pretty often. I used to go through a lot of paper, not so much anymore. My compositions have gotten simpler over time. I used to write full orchestra pieces, but now I stick to piano only. It's hard to create something without being able to hear the instruments. Ever. Most of it is probably crap.

Was there something specific you wanted to know about music?

I grew up in Chicago. I wasn't in Washington very long before landing myself here. Sometimes I wish I had stayed back home because I wouldn't be in here right now, but I'm sure I was heading for some place like this regardless. Sometimes I'm glad I ended up here. When it's cloudy all the time, I don't feel like I'm missing out. At least that's what I've been telling myself. I've never been to the southwest. Will you tell me about it?

This is strange. I feel like . . . I'm not really sure. I hope this letter doesn't bore you to death.



I'll be turning 35 in ten days, but I'm sure you've already done the math. I don't feel any older than when I got here. It makes me sad to think about all the time I've lost. I was actually really surprised to read about you. I didn't think I'd receive something from a young woman. Or is this one of those things where you're really a 50 year old guy? If you are, I don't want to know. Just let me remain blissfully ignorant.

Seriously though, you seem like an intelligent girl. I'm sure you'll have no problem graduating, especially if you're driven enough to spend your summer in a classroom. You said your professor suggested the program to you, does that mean you'll only be participating for the summer?

Thank you again for writing to me. I wish I could think of more to say. Hopefully it will get easier over time. I look forward to hearing from you again.

Your inside man,  
Edward

p.s. What do you do for fun?

Edward Masen #15604091

Waterview State Correctional Facility

June 17, 2009

Dear Edward,

Happy Birthday! I don't think you'll receive this until after your special day, but know that I'll be thinking about you.

Don't worry. Your letter wasn't boring at all, your handwriting is just fine, and I assure you that I am a female. I hope our age difference isn't an issue. If it's any consolation, I'm okay with it.

It's really cool that you write music! I'm sure your recent compositions aren't crap. Is that what you did for work before? Do you play any instruments?

The southwest is beautiful. The sun is always out and the sky is blue. It hardly ever rains, unlike here. There are so many colors. A lot of people think that it's all dirt and brown, but that's just not true. My favorite time of year is in the spring when everything blossoms and it's hot, but not too hot. It's over 100° there now. It's not that bad, though. I'd take it over snow any day.

I thought about going to school in the south, but

(over)



I wanted to experience something new. As much as I love it, I'm not sure if I'll go back when I'm done. I want to see more of the world. I only came here because my dad lives in Seattle, and I could stay with him instead of living on campus.

What brought you to Washington? Will you go back to Chicago when you get out?

And to answer your question, no, I don't plan on only writing you for the summer. As long as we both want to do this, I see no reason why we can't continue.

I know what you mean about this feeling strange. Remember we both chose to do this. It's just you and me, and I'm not going to judge you. Don't worry about the right thing to say, just write.

What do I do for fun? I like to hang out with friends—go to movies and the beach. I read a lot, too. I'm perfectly content with sitting at home by myself for the weekend. Back home I hiked a lot, but I don't do it much here. Just the thought of cold, wet socks makes me cringe. I've just realized I'm not interesting at all. Now I'm probably boring you to death!

There are a couple things I am curious about. Forgive me if I ask anything that makes you uncomfortable. Feel free to tell me to butt out or just ignore me. I promise I won't push you to tell me anything. I decided to stick them all at the end of the letter, so you can just stop reading if you want to. Otherwise, here goes nothing.

You wrote that Mr. Masen was your father. Does that mean

he has passed away?

Am I really the first person who's written to you? It seems like such a long time to go without friends or family contacting you. Is your family still in Chicago? Do they ever visit or call?

Take care,  
Isabella





June 29, 2009

Isabella,

Thank you for the birthday wishes. I received your letter on the 25th, and I've been struggling with how to respond. I think I'll tackle the hard part first to get it out of the way.

Yes, you are the first person to write. I wasn't lying when I said I needed a friend. I ran with a bad crowd in Chicago. They weren't "friends," and even if they had contacted me, I wouldn't have responded. I've moved on and don't need people like that in my life. I hung with better people here, but when you end up in the slammer, people you've only known for a few months don't stick around.

As for family, I'm an only child. My mother passed away. My father is dead to me. So no. No letters. No visitors. We can't receive phone calls. We can make them, but we have to either call collect or buy a phone card through the commissary. Even if I had someone to call, I have better things to spend my money on like paper and tooth paste that doesn't suck and strawberry Pop-Tarts.

I guess that wasn't so hard after all. You can ask anything, just take it easy on me, okay? I may not answer right away, but I will never ignore you, Isabella. You don't deserve that.

My counselor says these are the types of things I have to get used to talking about. I can't hide my past, and I have a lot of anxiety about how people will react when I get out. You say you won't judge me, but you have already. You've given me your first name and the address of the university. You say you're from the "southwest." I don't blame you. You are protecting yourself, as you should. People will always guard themselves from me. It's something I have to accept.

I don't know where I'll go when I get out, but I don't have the means to get very far. I came to Seattle to check out the music scene. I never want to go back to Chicago. The southwest does sound nice. Maybe someday...



I play the piano. It's by far my favorite. I had one that I put in storage before I moved, but I'm sure it's long gone by now. I can play the string instruments (violin, viola, cello, bass) but nothing very complex. I'm probably pretty rusty by now. I've tried playing almost everything at some point. I have a better understanding of instruments and their roles than I am at actually playing, but that's what is important.

You're not boring at all. I enjoy reading also, but the selection here isn't too great. I've never been hiking. I do a lot of jogging here and outdoor maintenance for the prison, so I know about cold, wet socks all too well. I've even splurged on a second pair of shoes. I miss going to the movies. There's a TV room here, but we only have the basic channels. I don't watch much.

I'm glad you will continue writing. It's very kind of you to do this. Thank you again.

Your inside man,  
Edward

p.s. What is your favorite food?

Edward Masen #15604091

Waterview State Correctional Facility

July 11, 2009

Dear Edward,

I'm sorry it took me so long to respond. I was out of town for the holiday, and my classes were crazy this week. This is the first moment of free time I've had.

Please understand that I am protecting myself. I would take precautions with any stranger, and I think it's only logical that one would feel the need to protect their privacy while writing to someone in your situation. You seem like a nice man, but I don't know you. I hope you don't take offense.

I'm sorry to hear about your family situation. By your short answers, I assume you don't want to talk about them in more detail. I won't ask, but I'm willing to listen. It may be easier for you to write to someone you don't actually know than to talk about it. It may even make you feel better. I'm happy you've realized your friends weren't good for you, and I'm sorry none of the good ones stuck by you. Everyone should have a friend. I hope by writing to you I can fill some of the that void.

If you don't have anyone, what will you do when you get out?

(over)



I know you said you don't know where you'll go. What do you mean by that exactly?

My favorite food is anything with noodles. Spaghetti, stroganoff, mac 'n cheese, etc. Although I do have an affinity for anything with chocolate frosting. I might have eaten an entire tub a time or two. I'm not a fan of Pop-Tarts, but if I were going to eat some, I would definitely opt for the chocolate variety.

This is probably a dumb question, but where do you get money to buy things? Is that why you do outdoor maintenance? What other things do you spend money on? Also, can you jog and go into the TV room whenever you want? I guess I just pictured you sitting in a cell all day. How big is your cell? Do you share with anyone? Do you wear one of those black and white striped jumpsuits?

I apologize if I'm being too forward again. There are just so many questions running through my head.

Until next time,

Bella (that's what my friends call me)



July 22, 2009

Dear Bella,

Please don't think that I was trying to make you feel guilty or extract personal information from you. I completely understand and am in no way offended. I would take 1,000 anonymous letters over none at all. Like I said, it's something I have to learn to accept. Your letters are a gift to me. I am grateful that you make time to write at all.

Don't be sorry for me. The past is just that. What's done is done. To be honest, I've had extensive counseling and talked my past to death already. I'm not sure what the chances of me starting a family are, but if I ever have children, they won't grow up like I did. A child should feel safe at home. They shouldn't be afraid to say or do the wrong thing. A parent is supposed to protect their child, not harm them or allow them to be harmed. I had a lot of anger when my mom passed away. I was mad that she escaped and I didn't. You're a smart girl. I think you can put the pieces together.

Will you tell me about your family? It's got to be a happier story than mine. I assume your parents are divorced and your mother still lives in the southwest. Do you have siblings? For some reason I can picture you looking after a younger sister or brother. Do you have any pets? What about a special someone? Children? I know you're young, but these days you never know.

Please don't feel obligated to answer my questions if they make you uncomfortable. I just want to know you better.

I've been doing outdoor work for quite a while now. I've done almost everything since I've been here. Factory, kitchen, laundry, janitorial. I get paid if you can call it that. I earn enough to make life tolerable. At first I tried to save so I could have something when I got out, but it always seemed so far away, and sometimes having something simple like a Pop-Tart before bed was enough to motivate me to keep going. Most things I spend money on are



hygiene items like deodorant, tooth paste, shampoo, soap, and shaving supplies. I like to have a little supply of snacks, too. The food is fine, but sometimes we eat dinner early or it's something I don't like. It's nice to have a backup. Stamped envelopes of course, but that's a fairly new development. I've purchased things like watches a few times, but they always seem to get broken or stolen. I used to smoke, but the habit was too expensive so I quit. Now I'm hungry and craving frosting.

The jumpsuits are orange, not striped. That was a joke. The prison issues us work type pants and T-shirts. My cell is 6 x 8 feet. It has a sink, toilet, and a makeshift desk. There's a window. It's barred but isn't large enough for me to squeeze through anyway. I've sized it up a time or two. I don't have a cellmate at the moment, but I have before. I prefer being alone. I can be out of my cell for most of the day.

I don't have anywhere to go once I get out. I'll probably apply to a halfway house or end up in a shelter until I can find a job, which should be a struggle in itself. There are programs designed to help. I'll find out more when/ if I get approved for parole. I sent my application to the parole board last month. It can take up to six months for them to make a decision. If they deny me, I'll have to wait another year to apply. Wish me luck.

Please write soon.

Your friend on the inside,  
Edward

p.s. What do you look like?

Edward Masen #15604091

Waterview State Correctional Facility

August 4, 2009

Dear Edward,

You are very clever. Yes, my parents are divorced, and my mom still lives in Arizona. We've always been close, and it was hard for me to move here. She's been asking me to come home for the past three years. I think it finally sank in that I'm staying, because she helped me get an apartment! I moved in over the weekend. It's old and small, but it's close to campus and free, so I really can't complain. I don't have any pets, but maybe I'll get a cat or a fish or some Sea-Monkeys.

My dad and I weren't very close while I was growing up. He was basically a stranger. Asking to move in made for a very awkward conversation. We ended up getting along great, though. We have so many things in common it's almost creepy. He had no problem with me staying there for another year, but I think he's happy to reclaim his living room (man cave) and bathroom (man throne). I think it'll be nice to be on my own, too. This is the first place that I can call my own.

(over)





I'm an only child as well. And NO, I don't have children! I've been seeing someone on and off since last fall, but it's nothing serious. I'm not interesting in a relationship with anyone right now.

What do I look like? Let's see. I'm medium height with brown hair and brown eyes. Pretty average. I used to be tan, but after living here for three years, I'm white and pasty. I tried a spray tan once. Apparently orange isn't my color. What about you? I only know what was listed in your profile. I keep picturing big muscles and tattoos. Are you bald? Do you have a goatee? I'm still trying to get the vision of stripes out of my head.

I refuse to censor my feelings. What you said about your past is heartbreaking, and I do feel for you. I honestly believe that having a family is within your reach if it's something you truly want. It sounds like you've done a lot to get your life on track. You'll find someone who will look beyond your mistakes. Everyone deserves to have somebody special.

I'm glad you aren't locked in your cell all day. A small window must be better than none, right? I highly suggest you don't attempt to squeeze through the bars. If you got stuck, you'd be the laughing stock of the entire facility and probably make it on one of those dumbest criminal shows. I have to imagine that would be embarrassing.

It's a good thing you have a means to buy Pop-Tarts. I don't think the square edges would be very comfortable to smuggle in if you know what I mean. (Was that in poor taste? I don't know the etiquette for prison jokes.) I looked into sending you frosting, but according to the WSCF website, I can only send you letters. When you get out, your first tub of frosting is on me. What flavor do you want?

Do you ever think about what your life will be like when you're released? You said you don't know where you'll go or what you'll do for work, but what about the simple stuff? What's the first thing you'll eat? What's something you look forward to doing?

Good luck,  
Bella





August 13, 2009

Dear Bella,

Sea-Monkeys sound like a self-sufficient pet. Maybe I should look into getting some. They're probably much more comfortable to smuggle in than Pop-Tarts, but I'm not sure they'd enjoy the journey if you know what I mean. Thank you for making me laugh. Your sense of prison humor is endearing, but only because it's you. You may want to refrain when talking to someone other than me. I'd hate for you to offend a big, muscular, bald, tattooed ex-felon.

You've completely missed the mark on my appearance. I am hurt! I don't have big muscles. I'm toned I guess. Like I said, I do a lot of jogging. I have a tattoo of a treble clef. I got it when I was 21, right before I graduated. No goatee. That seems like a lot of upkeep, and I really wouldn't feel like me. I try to shave a couple times a week. It's all or nothing. I have a full head of hair. I'm not into the skinhead look. Or did you ask if I'm bald because you think I'm old? If so, I'm not sure how much more of you my ego can take.

You gave a very average sounding description of yourself. I have a feeling you're either being modest or don't have a very clear self-image. If your appearance is in any way reflected in your personality, then you are the most beautiful person I've ever known.

We can't receive anything from the outside. You shouldn't be thinking of sending me things anyway. Put the money toward school or furnishing your apartment. But let's say for a minute that you were going to send me frosting. Would you think less of me if I requested Funfetti?

I try not to think about what life will be like once I'm out. I focus on one day at a time, and thinking about all the things I can't do usually doesn't make it any easier. Besides, when I start counting all the struggles I'll face, I get stressed and anxious. I don't want to get my hopes up either. I could very well be in here



another four years. But for you, my dear, I'll take a moment to think about it.

I really look forward to being able to drop my guard. It will also be nice to have control of my own schedule again. If you're looking for a more lighthearted answer, then I'm excited to be able to go out with friends. Maybe to a concert or something. This is assuming I have friends and a way to make money so I can afford to go out. Then, when I do have friends and money, I'll need a cell phone because I don't think my old pager is going to cut it. See? Anxiety is setting in already. Do you think the dumb criminals who are featured on those shows get paid?

When I do get out, I'm sure as hell not going to eat a Pop-Tart or anything else that comes in a package, I can tell you that much. I could really go for a greasy fast food burger. An ice cold beer would be awesome, but that will probably have to wait until my parole is over. And before you start to worry, alcohol was never my vice.

It sounds like you had a nice childhood. I'm glad you got the chance to connect with your dad, even if it wasn't until you were an adult. It's very nice of your mom to help you out with an apartment. Are we talking studio or one bedroom? Do you have any furniture? Have you finished unpacking yet?

Please don't take this the wrong way, but you sound like someone young who hasn't had life chew you up and spit you out. It's a good thing. You're still able to dream big. Don't get me wrong. I still have hopes and dreams, but I can't seem to find the optimism that everything will work out. Life is what you make of it, and I am going to spend the rest of mine working my ass off because my time here will follow me forever. Maybe you can dream big enough for the both of us.

Thank you for brightening my day. I will be forever grateful.

Your inside man, Edward

p.s. When is your birthday? You don't have to tell me exactly. Maybe just the month or the season it's in.



Edward Masen #15604091

Waterview State Correctional Facility

August 22, 2009

Dear Edward,

I'm afraid I can't write to you anymore. I was wrong when I said I wouldn't judge you. I've thought long and hard about this decision, and it's not right for me to be associating with someone who'd choose Funfetti over chocolate. Or dark chocolate. Or milk chocolate. Or chocolate fudge.

I have to describe myself vaguely. When you're really a 50-year-old man pretending to be a young girl, it's best to be nondescript. But thank you for the compliment. You don't sound so bad yourself. What's the catch? Missing eye? One arm? Wooden leg?

My apartment has one bedroom. So far I have a bed and a TV that I kind of borrowed from my dad. I say borrowed because I took them from my room (aka the guest room), and I'm pretty sure he expects them back. I bought a cheap couch off the internet that turned out to be really comfortable. Instead of a kitchen table, I decided to get TV trays. They'll be easier to transport when I move. So far that's about it.

(over)



I'm going to look for a desk this weekend because my computer is on the floor and it's really not comfortable to use. If by unpack you mean empty boxes and scatter their contents across the floor, then yes, I have unpacked. It's a good thing I don't own much.

A pager? Seriously? I never understood the point of those. Did you carry quarters for pay phones, too? What if you couldn't find a phone but someone paged you with 911? That seems stressful. The lack of pager will probably offset the anxiety you feel about getting a cell phone.

A concert sounds nice. What kind of music do you like? I don't think you'll have any trouble making friends. You seem like a good guy. Besides, it's not like you have to wear a shirt that reads "Fresh out of prison!" Yes, you have to live with it, but that doesn't mean it has to define you, either. Not everyone is going to write you off because of your past. Have some faith in yourself. I'm not optimistic because I'm young and naïve. I'm optimistic because it makes me feel better. Maybe if you weren't so down on yourself, the future wouldn't seem so daunting. I'm not in your position, but don't you think if you thought about what your life could be like that it would lift your spirits and help you feel more prepared? Not all spirals have to be downward.

I know there's a job out there waiting for you. It might take a little effort to find, but it's there. Last summer I

worked at a sporting goods store. One of the guys I worked with had spent a few months in rehab right before he started. There are people out there willing to give you a chance!

It sounds like you've done a lot of different jobs. Is there a specific type of work you want to do? If you want, I can make you a list of places in the area to save you time.

You must not feel very safe if you have your guard up all the time. I'm glad you don't have an issue with drinking. I'd hate to think you'd do something that has led to problems in the past. Are there any temptations you're concerned about encountering on the outside? Things that would send you back? If drinking wasn't your vice, then what was?

I took the finals for my summer courses last week. I'm looking forward to having the next month off! I can't believe this will be my final year of college. I should probably look for some kind of job myself now that I have to buy my own food and stuff. Since I can only really work weekends during the winter, I should do the responsible thing and work full time now. But I don't know . . . I'll be working for the rest of my life. This is probably my last chance to relax and do nothing.

I'm glad I can brighten your day. I'm always happy to get your letters too. To answer your question, my birthday is

(over)



next month.

Wishing you the best,  
Bella

p.s. Will your ban on packaged food include frosting? If it does let me know right away so I can cancel the pallet of Funfetti I ordered for you.



September 1, 2009

Dear Bella,

Jesus Christ, girl. You damn near gave me a heart attack when you opened your last letter with "I can't write to you anymore." Be glad I was sitting or I'd probably be writing from a hospital bed. If someone had heard my uncontrollable sobs, I'd be their bitch right now. In all seriousness though, don't ever do that to me again. Ever. I can't handle jokes like that, not here. Not when you're all I have.

What's the catch? I'm in prison.

Your apartment sounds nice. I hope it doesn't take me long to find a place I can call my own. Unpacking shouldn't be a challenge seeing as I don't own anything. Yet. I'm going to buy a piano. I don't know how long it will take to save the money, and it will probably be cheap and old and sound like crap, but it beats not having one at all. See? I am trying to think about the future. Realistically anyway.

I'll do anything for work if it means I'm out of here. I'm not in a position to be picky. People will write me off—the good people. Thank you for the information about your coworker, but a few months in rehab is not the same as serving 11 years of hard time. You don't have to help me. You should spend the time doing something for yourself.

Once I get out I'm never coming back. I made bad decisions and did dumb shit. I was angry and young and stupid. I thought I was invincible. This has been a very eye opening experience for me. I'm not a bad person, Bella. I won't ever do anything to end up here again.

I don't feel threatened, but I don't necessarily feel safe if that makes sense. I keep to myself as much as possible. There are groups I've associated with as well. I don't trust anyone. I'm always cautious. Anything can happen. For the most part I've been



Lucky.

I should support you being responsible and getting a job, but the selfish part of me knows it'll mean you'll write less frequently. If you decide to wait, make sure to do something fun for me this summer. I take it your mom is paying for your apartment since you didn't mention needing a job to pay rent. That's very nice of her. I'd like to think my mother would do the same for me if she were alive today.

I love all music, especially when it's live. There's something exhilarating about watching the instruments come to life. Shows in small venues were always my favorite, even if I had never heard of the band before.

Don't cancel the order of Funfetti. It will be my one exception to the packaged food ban.

I honestly can't begin to tell you what your letters mean to me. You're probably sick of me thanking you, but I need you to know. Sometimes I feel as though I've known you my entire life. The past three months have been different somehow. I don't know. It's like you're always with me. A little voice in my head telling me that things will be okay. I think I'm finally starting to believe it.

Please don't make me wait too long.

Your inside man,  
Edward

p.s. Why did you pick me?



Edward Masen #15604091

Waterview State Correctional Facility

September 5, 2009

Dear Edward,

I'm so very sorry about what I said in my last letter. It was stupid of me. I should have stopped to think about how you would perceive it. Please believe that I never intended to hurt you. Forgive me?

Your profile was the first one I looked at. I started with the newest, which was yours, and worked back about a month. There are an overwhelming number of people like you. This will probably sound silly, but there was something about you that drew me in. With every other profile I read, I thought, "This guy seems nice, but it's not him." What you wrote was unassuming and honest. It sounded like you could really benefit from a friend. Like I could actually make a difference in your life. Not to mention you were educated and wrote in complete sentences, which was refreshing as well. (Does that make me judgmental? I was just thinking of my sanity.) Finally I realized it was pointless to keep looking because you were the one I wanted to write. So far I think it's worked out well. You're easy to communicate with, and I

(over)



look forward to getting your letters. I always check to see if you've sent anything before I leave campus and usually don't get farther than my car before reading them. You're constantly on my mind, and I find myself wanting to know you better.

I'm glad you're thinking about your future. An old, cheap piano is a great place to start. I'm not going to say it won't be a lot of work to get to the point where you have one, but I think it will be easier than you think, especially if you accept help when people offer it. Don't turn people away because you assume to know how their time is best spent. If you do it enough times, people will stop trying.

I truly hope you meant what you said about never going back. As much as I enjoy writing you, I don't want to send these letters to a correctional institution indefinitely. I've never thought of you as a bad person, and I'm sure that won't change if you decide to give me more details about your past. I understand if you're uncomfortable talking about it, but don't dance around your past because you think I won't be able to handle it. I do want to know. I hope someday you'll tell me.

I wish you didn't feel the need to protect yourself all the time. Someday you won't have to. Until then, stay safe for me.

My mom invited me to go to Florida with her for two weeks. It's been over a year since I've seen her, and I've never been to the Sunshine State, so I'm really excited. She's a

lot of fun, but I'll probably need a vacation after my vacation.  
At least I'll come back tan. So much for working before  
classes start. And don't worry about me having a job. I will  
always make time for you.

I'll be thinking of you,  
Bella





September 20, 2009

Dearest Bella,

Of course I'll forgive you. How could I not? I know you weren't trying to hurt me. You're not that type of person. We are still getting to know each other, and I appreciate that you're comfortable enough to joke with me. It takes a lot of weight off my situation.

I received your post card. Are the beaches in Florida really that beautiful? The only time I've seen the ocean is here. It's nice that you get to spend time with your mother. I'm happy for you. I hope you're having fun and wearing sunscreen. You said you didn't like being orange, but somehow I don't think red is a better alternative. Just remember you don't need to be tan to be beautiful to me. Will you tell me about the trip? Where did you go? What did you do?

At the risk of sounding like a crazed convict who's lost his mind, I swear I can sense your absence. I feel different somehow. I wonder if I would have felt this way had you not told me you were leaving.

Your last letter left me speechless. I've always known you were writing because you wanted to, but to know that you wanted to write me, to know you think of me and look forward to hearing from me . . . like I said, speechless. And let me assure you, you have made a difference in my life. You make me feel like I matter, like I'm a human again. To know there's at least one person out there who cares if I succeed makes such a big difference. I'm glad you followed your instincts.

In the past few weeks, I've allowed myself to focus more on getting out. I think it might be a good idea to get a bike. It will be a while before I can afford a vehicle, and I really don't want to rely on public transportation if I don't have to. I've been on someone else's schedule long enough. This is really random, but I want to cook something. My mother was a great cook. She was always



creating something new in the kitchen. Is that something you like to do? Any super-secret recipes you'd like to share? My lips are sealed.

I hope I didn't offend you when I said not to help me. It's not that I don't want your help. I just don't want to impose. I'm used to keeping people at arm's length. Please understand that. This is all new to me. As for your concern about my safety, thank you. It's easier to get through the day knowing someone cares. I'm not sheltering you from my past. I want to tell you, but I'm not ready. Please be patient with me.

Let me end this letter by wishing you a very happy birthday. I'm enclosing four pages of sheet music. It's something I wrote for you. It represents what you mean to me. I apologize if it's late, but when I asked when your birthday was, I didn't expect it to be so soon. I figured since you were out of town anyway I'd take my time and make it perfect. I wish I could give you more, but this is the only thing I have. Maybe someday you'll let me play it for you.

Good luck this semester. Don't forget about me.

Your inside man,  
Edward

p.s. How far did you make it before you read this?

Edward Masen #15604091

Waterview State Correctional Facility

October 3, 2009

Dear Edward,

Wow! I can't believe you wrote a song for me. Now I am speechless. No one has ever given me anything so personal before. It's obvious you put a lot of effort into it, and I'm sure it sounds beautiful. Thank you so much!

I actually made it all the way to my apartment before reading your letter. It was really thick, and as much as I wanted to know what was in it, I was afraid I'd end up sitting in my car reading for an hour. The drive home was torturous. I guess I'm just a glutton for punishment. I'm glad I waited, though, because I'm pretty sure anyone who saw me would have thought I lost my mind. Thank you again. Definitely the most amazing birthday gift I've ever received.

Florida was awesome. It was hot, too. I like the heat, but I'm not used to the humidity. I got burned pretty badly at the end. Please don't be mad! I spent the last couple of days inside the hotel, then I was all peely, and now I'm my usual shade of pastiness. Oh well.

We did a lot. My mom took me to  
(over)



Disney, Sea World, Universal, you name it. If it was a tourist attraction, we were there. We spent a few days at the Keys too, so at least I got to relax before coming home. It's a good thing too because my professors wasted no time diving into their curriculums. I keep telling myself it will all be worth it when I'm only taking two classes this spring.

The beaches there were beautiful. The postcard didn't do them justice. You'll have to add a tropical destination to your list of things to do. Bring sunscreen—SPF 50!

A bike is a great idea. I'm sure you'll have no trouble finding a used one for a good price. Actually, I do have a super-secret recipe for Funfetti frosting, but it will cost you severely. No, that's a lie. If it comes out of a box, I can make it. Otherwise my creations are sketchy. I'm pretty sure cooking is passed on through genetics. I blame my parents for my lack of culinary skills. If I'm right (and I usually am) you'll probably be awesome at it. When you're a big time chef, don't forget about us little people. Actually, I do have a recipe for a strawberry pie that my grandma used to make, but I've never been able to do it justice. Maybe you'll have better luck. I'll send it once you're out of the clink. But share it and you're going down!

I'll be patient. Is there anything I can do to help you be ready or do you just need time? I promise things won't change after I know, if that's what you're worried about.



I'll still write to you. I'll still be your friend. I don't have ulterior motives, and I'm not here to hurt you. Also, if you decide you do want my help with something, just ask. The worst that will happen is I say no, and as long as it's reasonable, I don't see why I would turn you down. I'm here for you.

Hurry up and write to me so I have some interesting reading material.

Your psych major friend who totally thinks you're a  
crazed convict who's lost his mind,  
Bella





October 14, 2009

Dear Bella,

I'm thrilled that you liked the sheet music. I was worried you'd think it was silly. You're right, I did put a lot of effort into it. I poured my heart and soul into every note. What better way to spend my time? I'm just happy to be able to do something for someone else. It's a refreshing change.

You had me going with the Funfetti recipe. Such a tease. Cocky little thing, too, aren't you? Well, if you're so convinced that I'd be great in the kitchen, I'd love to give your strawberry pie recipe a go. But that means you'll have to be there to judge it or else how will I know if it's a success? I'm sure you're not as bad at cooking as you think you are. I'd smile and pretend to like anything you made.

I'll add Florida to my list of places to go, but I have a feeling it's a long way off. It sounds like you had fun. I'm sorry you got a sunburn. Why do you think I'd be mad? I know what it's like to be stuck inside feeling miserable when you'd rather be doing anything else.

I've been debating whether to tell you this. I don't want to burden you with my problems, but I'm trying to be better at communicating, so here goes. The past few weeks have been rough. I've been really down. I'm worried about my parole application. Losing sleep over it actually. The parole board is supposed to notify me in writing once a decision has been made. I should receive it sometime in the next six weeks. I feel like I'm going to have an anxiety attack during every mail call. If they deny me, I'm not sure that I'm ready to find out. I honestly don't know how I'll handle it. There are so many things I've dreamed of doing next year. I can't bear the thought of being stuck here any longer, not when I'm this close. And to top it all off, someone stole my good pair of shoes, and by good, I mean the pair with the least amount of holes. I have just enough money to replace them, but if I do get out, I'm going to need it for other things, like existing. I'll just



have to avoid puddles until I know for sure what my future holds.

Time, Bella, please. Time is all I need. You may be confident that knowing my past won't change anything, but I'm not. I'm terrified to tell you. I can only deal with so much stress at once. Let me hold on to this feeling of security a little while longer. It's the only thing that's going good for me lately.

Thank you for offering to help. I'm going to wait until I think of something I really need. No sense in wasting my request on something lame like smuggling in frosting.

Good luck this semester. The hard work will pay off, and I'm sure you'll do great. On the bright side, with only two classes this spring, you'll have plenty of free time to write if I'm still here.

Your friend on the inside who really, really  
wants to be on the outside,  
Edward

p.s. Do you think someday we could be real friends?

Edward Masen #15604091

Waterview State Correctional Facility

October 18, 2009

Dear Edward,

You are not burdening me. Don't ever feel bad about telling me what you're going through. I'm here to listen to the good and the bad. That's the exact reason I decided to write in the first place. I don't expect or want you to put on a happy face and pretend that everything is okay. If you're upset or scared or hurting, I want to know about it just as much as when you're happy and smiling. You never have to hide from me. Unless for some reason I made you something to eat and it was horrible. Then I would totally expect you to smile and pretend to like it. Just remember it was your own damn idea!

I'm sorry that you've been so stressed lately. It's understandable you'd feel that way considering the situation you're in. Being paroled is a big deal. I know it's easier said than done, but try not to dwell on it. Find something else to do to occupy your mind. Write to me more often if you have to. There's no sense in worrying about something you have no  
(over)





control over. Realistically, the worst that will happen is you have to stay. I know you don't want to be there, but it's not like they'll be sending you to the gallows. If I'm not mistaken, although life in prison isn't ideal, you're not living a miserable existence, right? You have food and a roof over your head. You have your dreams. You have me! You will get out—remember that. You won't be inside forever.

You can request help from me more than once, you know. Although I think smuggling in frosting would fall under the unreasonable category. If you were to seriously ask me, I'd have to say no. I'd probably also point and laugh, so if you cherish your ego, you might want to hold off on that one.

I really do want to help you, and that also means helping when you don't ask. I can't sit and write you with a clear conscience knowing your feet are cold and soggy for the next six weeks. You work outside and you run, and if you do get out, you should at the very least have shoes without holes. I called the prison, and they told me if I enclosed a cashier's check, they would see that it's deposited into your account. I have no idea what a new pair of shoes costs you, but I hope I sent enough to cover them.

I am your friend, Edward. By real friends do you mean friends who hang out and do stuff together? I think we have a long way to go before that can happen. Trust is

a two way street, and right now we both have to work on trusting each other. I think we're on the right path. I don't see any reason why our friendship can't be "real" someday. Until then, I hope what we do have can be enough.

I hope you feel at least a little bit better after reading this letter. Chin up! I'm here for you.

Your friend,  
Bella

p.s. Don't you dare tell me that I shouldn't have sent you money.





November 2, 2009

Dear Bella,

Your letter did make me feel better, but it hurt a bit, too. That's what they say about the truth, right? Let's just say I had a few days to absorb everything you wrote.

You shouldn't have sent the money. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said anything about the shoes. I shouldn't have ever mentioned my financial situation at all. At first I was really upset. Now I'm not sure how I feel. I'm grateful, I guess. Thank you. It was a very thoughtful thing to do. You still shouldn't have done it. I will pay you back when I get out.

Things here aren't getting any better. Last week was bad. Real bad. I was in the wrong place when a fight broke out. I have a black eye and my lip got busted open. I swear I was just trying to protect myself. I was the first one on the ground when the guards broke it up, but do you think it mattered? They put me in solitary for 72 hours. I'm not trying to be a whiny bitch, but how is that fair? I didn't instigate anything. I've never acted on anything other than self-defense here. It's not like I put myself into bad situations. It's fucking prison. I can't always avoid the bad shit. Sometimes it just happens, and those of us who are in the wrong place at the wrong time are powerless to do anything about it.

Two of the guys here were denied parole last month. Both of their reasons were listed as "behavioral issues." I know I have as many, if not more, infractions on my record than one of them. I don't know how recent the information is that the parole board reviews, but if they see this I'm done. I should have never gotten my hopes up. I shouldn't have let myself dream about what it could have been like. I'm going to be stuck here for another year at least, and at that point they'll probably just make me finish the rest of my sentence.

I don't belong here. I was guilty and I deserved to be punished, but not like this. I've seen drug dealers and rapists released in less time than me. I've learned my lesson. I've



changed. I'm not a risk to the public. I've spent a third of my life here. How is that justice? I wasn't perfect when I got here, and I'm not going to be perfect when I get out. I can't live up to their standards when everything is against me no matter how hard I try.

I feel like I'm burdening you even though you say I'm not. I don't want to put this on your shoulders, but if I don't get it all out somehow, I'm going to go crazy. Do you know what it's like to want something that's just out of your reach? There are so many things I want, and what I want the most I can't have. It makes me want to scream and bang my head against the wall.

I hope things get better soon, because I'm not sure how much more of this I can take.

Edward

p.s. Will you visit me? I can't do this alone anymore. I need someone.

# The Chief

Bella sat on the couch in her father's living room, chewing on her fingernails as she anxiously watched the clock. It was almost 11:00 P.M. He would be home any minute, and she still didn't know exactly what she wanted to say. A sleek, unmarked Washington State Patrol Volvo pulled up to the house, its headlights illuminating the room briefly as it turned in to the driveway. Bella took a deep breath, trying desperately to calm her nerves.

"It's me. Don't shoot!" she called playfully as the front door opened.

"I know it's you," Charlie Swan replied. "I saw your car out front."

Bella stood and joined him in the kitchen. "Undercover today?" she asked as she watched him kick off his dress shoes and loosen his tie. It was a much different look than the French blue and navy uniform he sometimes wore.

"I was in court this afternoon." He turned to her and frowned. "It's a little late to be visiting your dear old dad. Don't you have class in the morning?"

"Yeah," she said nervously. "There's something I wanted to talk to you about."

"Must be important. You can always call the bureau, you know. They'll track me down."

"I know, but I kind of wanted to talk to you in person."

"Come on." Charlie placed his hand on his daughter's shoulder and guided her back into the living room. "Have a seat. Tell me what's going on."

Bella took a deep breath as she sat on the couch. She hoped he would take what she was about to say well. "Remember when I told you about that write a prisoner program my professor mentioned this summer?"

"The program I told you not to participate in? Yes."

"Yeah, that one." Bella hesitated. "I kind of did it anyway."

"Of course you did," he muttered. "Well, what's the problem? You're not in some kind of trouble, are you?"

"No, it's nothing like that."

Charlie crossed his arms over his chest and gave her a look that clearly said *spit it out*.

"He asked me to visit him, and I don't know if I should."

Charlie's eyes widened, and he struggled to keep his calm composure. "Do you want to visit him?"

"I think so."

"Where is he?" he asked between his teeth.

"Waterview."

"Waterview! Bella," said Charlie in exasperation, "not only did you go against my advice, but you wrote to someone local? God, please don't tell me you gave him any personal information. Does he know where you live?"

"No."

"The boy's in a state prison, Bella."

"I know."

"What did he do?"

"Assault," she answered simply. "I don't know the specifics."

"How long as he been there?"

"Ten years."

"Ten years!" he yelled. "How old is he?"

"Thirty-five."

"Jesus. Why on Earth would you want to visit him? What are you thinking?"

"I'm worried about him. He's having a really hard time, and I don't know what to do!" The conversation was taking an emotional toll on her, and she fought to keep her voice steady.

Charlie shook his head as he began to pace. He had always thought of his daughter as an intelligent young woman, and he couldn't believe she would get sucked into something like this. "These men—some of these men are nothing but cons. Manipulative scum. He could have five, ten, twenty young, naïve girls out there just like you."

"He's not like that."

"Has he asked you for money?"



“No.” This time her voice wavered. She had sent Edward money, but that wasn’t what her father had asked. She had a feeling that if he knew, he wouldn’t approve. “This is the first time he’s asked for anything. He’s not using me.” Bella barely got the last sentence out before the tears began to fall.

“You don’t know that. You think you know him, but you don’t. Did he threaten anything if you don’t visit?” he asked. “Harm to himself? To others? To you?”

Bella shook her head. “No, he’s just lonely,” she sobbed.

As much as Charlie hated seeing Bella upset, it was more important to him that she was safe. “I’m sorry, Bella, but sometimes the truth is hard to hear.”

Bella nodded as tears silently streamed down her face. She knew Charlie could very well be right—he would know better than anyone—but she didn’t want to believe him. She didn’t want to accept that Edward would take advantage of her kindness.

After a few minutes, Charlie broke the silence with a sigh. “What’s his name?”

Bella pressed her lips together. She knew that Charlie, as Assistant Chief of the Investigative Services Bureau, could easily look up Edward’s detailed criminal record. She knew it was ridiculous to want to protect him at this point—Charlie already knew he was in prison. Still, Bella felt a certain loyalty to Edward. She knew he wouldn’t want a stranger looking at his file and prejudging him.

“Bella?” Charlie warned.

“Edward Masen.”

“When is he getting out?”

“Next month, maybe. The parole board is still reviewing his case.” Bella didn’t add that Edward didn’t think he’d be released, unsure if the information would make things better or worse.

“Hmm.” Charlie nodded and gazed pensively at the wall. Not having been an active parent during Bella’s childhood, and with Bella no longer living under his roof, he had no power to stop her from visiting the prison. He was also worried that any attempt to put his foot down would send her running in the opposite direction. He didn’t know Edward’s intentions, nor did he know what idealistic fantasies Bella was entertaining. The only thing that mattered to him was her safety. “Is it safe to assume my opinion is somewhat important to you, seeing as you’re here in the middle of the night?”

Bella ducked her head and nodded.

“I can’t stop you, Bella. I can only advise you against it.”

“Okay.”

“But if you do go—and I have a feeling you will—be safe. Is this address still on your license?”

Bella looked up at her father through her tears, wondering where his line of questioning was going. "Yes."

"Good. Use my address for any paper work you fill out. Be careful what you say while you're there. Don't give him any personal information. Don't send him money. Don't do him any favors. Don't do this because you feel obligated; only do it if *you* want to. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"If he gives you any trouble or if you ever feel threatened, I want you to tell me immediately."

"I will," she promised.

"Okay then." He pulled Bella off the couch and gave her a giant bear hug. "I love you, kid."

"I love you, too, Charlie."

Edward Masen #15604091

Waterview State Correctional Facility

November 11, 2009

Edward,

I've scheduled a visitation with you on December 3rd. There weren't any time slots available until mid-January, probably because of the holidays, but my dad pulled some strings and got me in earlier.

If I do this for you, then there are things I need answers to. I want to know the details of your charges, and I want to know if there's anyone else who writes you. I hope you'll tell me the truth. I'm willing to trust you. Please don't take advantage of that.

I understand your reluctance to accept money from me, but you said you were really upset. Why?

It's unfortunate that you were in the wrong place at the wrong time. I hope it doesn't reflect negatively on you. Don't waste time and energy comparing yourself to the others who got denied. Your cases are different and they are reviewed separately. You might not even have the same people looking at yours.

Your dreams aren't going anywhere.

(over)





If you have to wait until next year to be released, it doesn't make you any less likely to achieve them. I'm still here. I'll still write to you.

Have a happy Thanksgiving. I'll see you on the 3rd.

Bella

# The Visit

Bella bounced her leg nervously as she watched the clock. Each tick of the second hand brought her that much closer to meeting Edward for the first time.

*Tick. Tick. Tick.*

She shifted in the uncomfortable plastic chair and stretched her neck from side to side. Although she hadn't been at the prison very long, the process to get in made it feel like an eternity. She double-checked her pocket to make sure she still had her driver's license and car key—the only two items she was allowed to carry inside. She would have liked to bring a book or her phone to pass the time, but as it was, she couldn't even wear her lightweight hooded sweatshirt. Letting out a sigh, she looked at the clock again.

*Tick. Tick. Tick.*

When she had arrived, Bella filled out a form stating her name, where she lived, whom she was visiting, and her relationship to the prisoner. She used her father's address, as he had insisted, and quickly scrawled the word *friend* in the relationship box before signing her name on the bottom of the page. After a guard had checked to make sure she was whom she claimed to be, she was sent through security.

The security check at Waterview was much the same as what she had experienced at the airport on her recent trip to Florida. The biggest difference was the lack of personal belongings. She had placed her shoes, license, car key, and visitor form into a plastic bin to be X-rayed before walking through a metal detector. A sign on the wall warned that a visitor only had two tries to pass; after that, they would not be allowed in. Bella had made it through without a problem.

Once Bella had cleared the security checkpoint, she was able to enter the prison grounds. A guard led the small group of visitors she was a part of through multiple gates and to a complex where the prisoners would be escorted, and that was where she currently waited.

*Tick. Tick. Tick.*

Her eyes drifted to the rules sign posted on the wall. Bella had read it enough times to know it by heart, but with nothing else to do, she found herself reading it once again.

WEAPONS OF ANY KIND ARE NOT PERMITTED.

PLEASE BE CONSIDERATE OF OTHER VISITORS. AVOID LOUD, EXCESSIVELY EMOTIONAL, OR DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIOR.

SPEAKING TO OTHER OFFENDERS/VISITORS IS NOT PERMITTED.

A BRIEF HUG AND KISS ARE PERMITTED AT THE BEGINNING AND CONCLUSION OF VISITS.

HAND HOLDING IS PERMITTED ONLY IF HANDS REMAIN IN PLAIN VIEW.

OFFENDERS MAY HAVE CONTACT WITH HIS/HER CHILDREN.

IF YOUR VISIT BECOMES EMOTIONAL, STAFF WILL CHECK IN WITH YOU AND ASSIST AS NEEDED.

"Next," a guard called.

Bella practically jumped out of her chair. She quickly made her way to the counter and handed him the form she had filled out.

"Go through the door to your left. Make sure it closes completely behind you. When the buzzer sounds, go through the second door. Once inside, go directly to Table Seventeen. Any questions?"

"No."

"Have a nice visit. Next!"

Bella followed his instructions and quickly found the table with a large "17" stamped on the top. She sat and took a deep breath as she glanced around the room, taking in her surroundings. The room was large with round and square tables in various sizes spread evenly across the floor. She tried not to stare, but it was difficult to avoid looking at the others who occupied it.



There was a man at the table next to her holding a young child on his lap. The little girl giggled as he showered her face with kisses. At the table across from her, an older woman wept as she held hands with a man who might have been her grandson. At the far end of the room, one prisoner was surrounded by eight visitors. They seemed cheerful, everyone smiling as one of them spoke animatedly, using grand hand gestures.

A door opened on the opposite side of the room, and a man stepped inside. He was tall and slender and appeared to be in his thirties. Bella knew the moment she saw him that it was Edward. She watched him as he scanned the room. He looked guarded, uncertain, but the moment his eyes landed on her, relief spread over his face. He made his way toward her hesitantly, as if he was afraid he might scare her away.

Bella held her breath as he closed the distance between them, and she took the opportunity to study his appearance. He looked . . . *normal*. Other than the slightly institutional feel to his clothing, nothing about him screamed “prisoner.” There were no handcuffs secured around his wrists. He didn’t look rough or haggard. He was clean. His hair, although slightly messy, didn’t look shabby or unkempt. What surprised Bella the most, however, was how attractive she found him. His facial features were angular and defined—high cheekbones, strong jaw, straight nose—and a small smile played at the corner of his full lips. Even with their age difference, if she saw this man on the street, she would definitely look twice.

As he got closer, Bella noticed his piercing green eyes, the dark circles underneath making them all the more intense. She wondered if his anxiety over his parole decision was still keeping him up at night. By the looks of it, it was.

When Edward reached her, he glanced down at the table number, making sure he had assumed correctly. “Bella?” he asked quietly.

“Yeah. Hey,” she said as she stood up.

“Hey.” An awkward pause filled the space between them before Edward continued. “You really came.”

“I did.”

“Thank you.”

Edward took in Bella’s appearance, memorizing everything about her. Average was the last word he would use to describe her. She was young and had an innocent quality about her, but she was beautiful. He wanted to run his hands over the curve of her waist and touch her skin to see if it was as soft as it looked. His gaze lingered on Bella’s body a little too long, and she crossed her arms over her torso, suddenly feeling uncomfortable. He noticed and quickly diverted his eyes.

“Do you want to sit?” Edward gestured to the chair she had been sitting on.

Bella sat, and Edward positioned his chair on the same side of the table, angling it so they were sitting knee-to-knee. He held out his hand, silently asking for hers. When she timidly placed her palm in his, he closed both his hands around hers and held on gently.

“Bella, I—” He squeezed his eyes closed and swallowed thickly in an attempt to keep his emotions at bay.

“It’s okay,” she comforted.

Edward looked at her face again, searching for any signs of discomfort, anything hinting that she didn’t want to be near him, but the only thing he found there was the compassion she had always shown through her words. He leaned closer, much to Bella’s surprise, and before she had time to react, rested his forehead on her shoulder.

Bella held her breath, and for a moment, they were both perfectly still. Edward moved first, caressing her hand and wrist with his thumbs. Her eyes darted around the room until they fell on the guard. She knew what they were doing wasn’t allowed, and she didn’t want Edward to get in trouble. The guard watched them in slight disinterest. When he looked away, she relaxed slightly.

Each breath Edward drew was heavy, and she could feel him shaking slightly. “Are you okay?” she asked. He nodded against her shoulder. His hair was soft and tickled her cheek. Without thinking, she leaned her head against his. In return, he tightened his hold on her hand.

The twenty minute visit passed quickly, and before they knew it, the guard was telling them their time was up. Edward pulled away reluctantly and smiled sadly. “Thank you,” he said again as they stood up.

“You’re welcome.”

Before Bella knew what was happening, Edward wrapped his arms around her and pulled her in for a hug. She froze in place, not knowing how to react. Once the initial shock wore off, she gingerly placed her arms around his waist, returning the hug in part. Something about being in his arms made her feel safe. With all the precautions she had taken to protect herself, she didn’t quite know how to feel about that.

Edward released his hold, and then his strong hands were framing her face. She inhaled sharply as his lips met her cheek. “Thank you,” he repeated in a whisper.

This time it was Bella who couldn’t speak. She nodded and kept her lips closed tightly as Edward was escorted back through the door he came from. Somehow she managed to keep the tears from falling until she was safely inside her car.

December 4, 2009

Dear Bella,

Thank you so much for visiting me. I can't even begin to tell you how much better I feel. It made a big difference to actually see your face and know you're there. I'm sorry if my affection was unwanted. I know it's a horrible excuse, but I really couldn't help myself. I had to touch you, to feel that you were real. It's been so long. Forgive me.

A large part of me didn't think you would come. It seemed too good to be true—you seem too good to be true. I know you are still waiting for answers from me, and you don't owe me anything. If you hadn't shown up, I wouldn't have held it against you.

You are the only one I write to or have any type of outside contact with. Please believe me. I have no reason to lie to you. I wish there were some way to prove it. Your trust is important to me, and I will do everything in my power to earn it. I just wish I knew where to start.

I was charged with both first degree assault and robbery as well as possession of a controlled substance. If it were up to me, I would leave it at that, but I know you are going to want more details, so here goes. If for some reason this changes the way you feel about our friendship, please give me a chance to talk to you about it before you completely write me off.

When I moved to Washington, I wanted a fresh start, but what I was really doing was running from my problems. I didn't realize it at the time, but the problem wasn't where I lived, the problem was me. It didn't take long to run out of the two things I needed—money and drugs. You asked me once what my vice was, and I never answered you. I was addicted to prescription painkillers. Hydrocodone, oxycodone, codeine, it didn't matter. I would take whatever I could get my hands on.

I managed to find someone who was selling. Because he didn't



know me, he refused to give me anything without the money upfront. Looking back, it was completely understandable, but at the time it pissed me off. You have to understand I was desperate. I was a junkie going through terrible withdrawals. Things got physical, and I wasn't one to lose a fight. I stole the drugs, and because I was greedy, I took his wallet as well. The police were able to arrest me for assault and robbery. Of course, when they searched me they found the bottle of Vicodin and a gun. Even though I hadn't used it to threaten him, they still bumped both charges to first degree. I wasn't able to prove that he was dealing. It was my word against his. Fortunately they didn't charge me with intent to sell, not that it would have made much of a difference at that point. Also, it didn't help that the guy's father was a lawyer, which was probably the only reason he had enough balls to press charges. Want to know the ironic thing? My father is a lawyer as well, yet I ended up with a public defender.

I spent years pondering the "what if's." What if I'd fled the scene instead of sticking around to get high? What if I hadn't stolen something that clearly proved my guilt? What if I hadn't been carrying the gun? If I'd done things differently, then I might not have gotten caught. Maybe I wouldn't be here or I'd have been out by now. One of the hardest things for me has been admitting to myself that I was wrong. It didn't matter that I executed the crime poorly. I shouldn't have done it at all.

I've done a lot of growing up while here. I'm not a dumb kid anymore. I'm clean, and I've changed. That version of me is gone, I promise you.

Are you still with me?

Since I'm on a roll, I'll tell you why I was upset about the money as well. My freedom and choices have been taken away, and I'm used to that. When you sent the money, the prison deposited it into my account. I didn't have a choice to accept or decline it. You had taken my choice away, and that's what upset me the most. If you



would have offered, I would have told you no. I understand why you did it, and I do appreciate that you cared enough to help, so thank you again. I'm sorry I didn't accept it more graciously. By the way, the new shoes are comfortable.

I know I have absolutely no right to ask this, and I admit that I'm actually quite terrified to hear the answer, but who is your father and how was he able to pull strings here?

Did you have a nice Thanksgiving? What are your plans for Christmas? I didn't get the chance to ask you yesterday. There were a lot of things I wanted to say. Maybe next time!

Your friend (hopefully),  
Edward

p.s. May I call you sometime?

# The Bestie

“What are you writing?”

“A letter.”

Jake hovered over Bella’s shoulder, so she angled the paper out of his view.

“Seriously? You’re actually writing? Why aren’t you using your computer?”

“It’s personal. Now be quiet.” Bella tuned him out and focused on what to say to Edward. In light of their recent meeting and his follow-up letter, she found herself without words for the first time since they had started writing each other. She didn’t know how to respond; she didn’t even know where to begin.

After their visit, Bella started to have conflicting emotions regarding their relationship. Part of her wanted nothing more than to take down the walls and let Edward into her life completely. To be a friend. A shoulder for him to lean on both figuratively and literally. Someone he could spend time with during the undoubtedly long and lonely journey to get his life back on track. During the very limited amount of time they spent together, it was apparent that he was starved for any type of social contact. Their meeting had greatly affected her, and it would be a lie if she said otherwise.

Yet there was also a part of Bella that wanted to keep Edward at arm’s length. She wanted to believe what he told her in his letters—that he was a changed man and wanted to make the most of his life—but she didn’t really know who he was at all. For all she knew, those could just be words, and if they weren’t, sometimes even the best of intentions fail. Although she didn’t believe he would hurt her physically, she understood there was a good chance of one or both of them getting hurt emotionally, and the possibility of that terrified her.



If she was certain of one thing, it was that she felt a strong, inexplicable pull toward Edward. Try as she might, she couldn't ignore it any longer.

"Looks like you're thinking real hard," Jake said, pulling her out of her inner musings.

"I am."

"Is it for school?"

"No," she snapped. "Hush."

Jake, sensing her frustration, tried to stay quiet, but he wasn't one to sit in silence for long. "Who are you writing, anyway?"

"A friend," she answered vaguely.

"A guy friend?"

"He happens to be a guy, yes."

"Oh." Even though he could tell she was uncomfortable discussing the recipient of the letter, Jake couldn't help his curiosity. "Who is he?"

"Someone I met online."

It wasn't necessarily that Bella didn't want to talk about Edward. She wasn't ashamed or embarrassed by her new friend. She just wasn't ready to share him with the world yet. She felt very protective of him, and she didn't want Jake to pass judgment without having met him first.

"Online?" Jake was skeptical. "If you met him online, shouldn't you be emailing him or something?"

"This is just—" She gestured to the page in front of her. "This is our thing."

"Oh." Jake could sense there was more to the story but decided to let it go. "I'm bored. Want a sandwich or something?"

"No, thanks. But feel free to make yourself at home," she said sarcastically.

"Don't mind if I do. Hey, are you still visiting your mom over Christmas. Because if you need someone to watch your place . . ."

"If by 'watch your place' you mean sleep here and eat my food, then no. I've got it covered."

"Oh, come on," Jake whined. "Don't act like me eating your food is some financial burden. I know your mom sends you grocery money."

"Exactly. She sends money so *I* can buy food for *myself*."

"Yeah, but she would want you to feed me."

Bella dropped her pen and snorted. "My mom doesn't even know you!"

"You mean you haven't told her about me?" Jake asked, pressing his palm to his chest in mock offense.

“What would I say, exactly?” Bella asked as she reached over to punch his shoulder. “Hey, Mom. My friend Becky is totally awesome, but her creepy little brother is *so annoying*. He’s constantly crashing at my place and eating all my food. Oh, and he drinks my beer when he thinks I’m not looking.”

“Pfft. I’m awesome, too. You know deep down inside you want me.”

“Gross.”

“Whatever.”

“Shut up. I trying to concentrate.”

“I thought I smelled something burning.”

Bella ignored the insult. Jake sauntered into the kitchen and began making a sandwich. She watched him layer a half-pound of lunch meat between multiple slices of cheese and top it off with a heaping dollop of mayonnaise. How he could eat like that all the time and still remain skinny without any sort of exercise was a mystery to her.

She couldn’t help but notice how similar Jake’s and Edward’s builds were. Both men were tall and slim. Jake, who was approaching his twentieth birthday, was just starting to fill out, his lanky teen body becoming leaner and more masculine. She knew this because whenever he was at her apartment, like now, he walked around without his shirt on. He only did it to irritate her, so she tried her hardest not to encourage him by complaining.

Bella briefly wondered what Edward would look like standing in her kitchen shirtless but quickly shook away the thought. The friendship they had formed was already walking a thin line, and she needed to rein in her emotions. Now was not the time for a relationship with anyone, let alone a man who needed to reestablish his entire life. He needed a friend, and that’s exactly what she intended to be.

“Hey, Jake, how tall are you?”

“I don’t know. Six-three, six-four. Why?”

“Just curious.”

He glared at her with narrowed eyes before squishing his sandwich down to a manageable thickness. “Don’t think I don’t notice how you can’t keep your eyes off of me,” he said in a sultry tone.

“That’s because your scrawny ass is always walking around half-naked,” Bella retorted. “You’re like the sun. Looking at you hurts my eyes, but I can’t look away.”

“Whatever. I know you know you want me,” he said before shoving the sandwich into his mouth.

“Ew.”

“So,” Jake said as he chewed. “About Christmas?”

“If being at home during the holidays is so shitty that you’d rather sit here alone, then by all means, the place is yours.”

“Yes!”

“But no drinking my beer until you’re old enough to replace it, and no parties with your dumb little friends, got it?”

“Yes, ma’am!”

“I mean it.”

“So do I.”

“And you owe me a favor.”

Jake frowned suspiciously. “What kind of favor?”

“You’ll find out when the time comes. Until then, be afraid. Be very afraid.”

He was about to demand specifics when Bella’s cell phone rang. “It’s Paul,” he said as he picked it up from the counter. “Want me to answer it?”

“No!” Bella panicked, and Jake looked at her in surprise. “I do *not* want to talk to him right now.”

Jake hit a button, silencing the call. “Trouble in paradise?”

Bella shook her head. “The guy won’t take no for an answer. We went on a few dates, and suddenly he thinks he has some claim on me. He’s possessive and controlling. I can’t stand him.”

“You want me to tell him to back the fuck off?”

“No, I’ll deal with him when I have less on my mind. Thanks, though.”

“Sure thing.” The call dropped to voicemail. Jake watched the screen go dark. “Whatever happened to that one guy you were seeing? Mark? Mitch?”

“Mike? He was fun, but he’s too clingy. I’ve told him multiple times that I’m not interested in a relationship, but he doesn’t seem to get it. I just want to go out and have fun. No strings attached, you know? I thought that was every mans’ dream.”

Jake shrugged noncommittally. “Some, I suppose.” He finished his sandwich before once again joining Bella on the couch. “So are they really that bad, or are you freeing up your schedule for the guy you’re writing?”

Bella froze, her pen leaving an inkblot on the paper. “It’s not like that,” she said defensively.

“Sorry, I just thought—”

“We’re friends,” she insisted.



“Okay.” The two of them fell quiet. When Jake couldn’t take the silence any longer, he spoke again. “You can trust me, Bella. If something’s bothering you, I’m here to listen. You know that, right?”

“I know,” Bella whispered. In the three years that she had known Jake, they had always gotten along well. Though they constantly bickered and sometimes treated each other more like siblings than friends, they had always had each other’s backs. Even now, over a year after Becky had moved out of state, their bond was as strong as ever. If there was anyone she would confide in about Edward, it would be Jake. “I do trust you. I’m just not ready to talk about it yet.”

The words were barely out of her mouth before the familiarity of them set in. Edward had once written basically the same thing. Bella realized, albeit on a much smaller scale, how he must have felt when he had asked for more time. At the time she had taken it personally, but his request had never been about her. It had been about *him*.

Bella had felt bad when she demanded more information. Now she felt even worse. She didn’t know how to make up for her pushiness, but she knew where to start.

“Jake, I think I’m ready to cash in on that favor.”

Edward Masen #15604091

Waterview State Correctional Facility

December 11, 2009

Dear Edward,

I feel the need to apologize. First, I'm sorry that my decision to send you money took your choice away. It was never my intention to force it upon you. If it's any consolation, doing so made me feel good about myself. You can pay me back if you'd like, but I hope you'll let me continue to help you instead.

Second, I feel awful about demanding you tell me about your past when you were clearly not ready. When I hadn't heard from you after my last letter, I thought that maybe I pushed too hard and you decided this wasn't worth the effort. I think I understand why you wanted to wait, but at least now it's out in the open. You don't have to worry about it anymore. You've told me, and I'm still with you.

You are earning my trust, Edward. You've been earning it for the past six months. We both have our guards up for good reasons, and I realize that you've dropped yours unwillingly. You could have ignored me or told me no, but for whatever reason, it was more important for you to step outside

(over)



of your comfort zone. There hasn't been a time when you've demanded anything from me. A birthdate, a visit, a phone number—you've always requested information from me politely and without pressure. I understand you're not in a position to be demanding, but neither am I.

Thank you for giving me the details of the crimes you were charged with. Of course I have more questions now, but I will wait for the answers until you're ready to tell me.

I have a feeling there's more to your past than what you described. Was it your first brush with the law? Did your father refuse to help you or was your falling out before that? And why on Earth were you carrying a gun in the first place? Prescription drugs are serious. You were basically forced into sobriety. It's been a long time, but do you think you'll struggle with temptation when you get out? What about cigarettes? I know recovering alcoholics and smokers say the craving never goes away. I hope it won't be difficult for you to stay clean.

Thanksgiving was good. I spent it with my dad, so it was kind of like any other day. We ordered pizza. I'm visiting my mom in Phoenix over Christmas and crossing my fingers that she has a more palatable spread. This is probably a dumb question, but do you get to celebrate holidays? Does the day feel different from the rest somehow?



My dad heads the State Patrol's Investigative Services Bureau. The division deals with narcotics, missing persons, forensics, criminal records, organized crime, etc. Don't go having another almost-heart-attack. My dad is a good man who went out of his way to help me visit you sooner. Just remember that.

I've been stressing out over finals. They're next week. Hopefully it will be smooth sailing for the rest of the year, assuming I don't fail miserably and get banned from campus. Since you probably won't get this letter for another week, I guess I won't have to tell you not to call me during class. I have a cell phone, so when you have the opportunity to make a call, I'll be available. If you want to talk, you can reach me at 206-555-2368. As for another visit, I probably won't be able to get in for at least another month, and I'm crossing my fingers that you'll be out by then.

In case I don't get the chance to tell you in person, have a merry Christmas.

Truly,  
Bella



# The Call

With a shaky hand, Edward raised the phone to his ear. The idea of talking to Bella made him extremely nervous. Gone was the safety net their letters provided, and unlike when she visited, this time he would need to hold an actual conversation.

*Ring.*

Edward wondered how she would receive his call. In her last letter, Bella hadn't seemed opposed to his request to contact her, but written words could be deceiving. He hoped her easy acceptance wasn't a product of his own wishful thinking.

*Ring.*

The phone cord was twisted firmly around his fist, and his foot tapped a steady rhythm on the floor. When the third ring was cut short, his breath caught in his throat.

Bella answered and listened as a recorded message played.

*"You have a call from Waterview State Correctional Facility. You will not be charged for this call. This call is from a correctional institution and is subject to monitoring and recording. If you do not wish to accept this call, please hang up now. To accept this call, press 5. To deny this call and block all future calls from this facility, press 7."*

She pressed 5, and the call was connected.

"Hello?"

"Bella?"

"Edward, hey."

"Is this a bad time?"

"No, of course not."

Edward let out a deep breath. He could feel every muscle in his body relaxing as he sagged against the wall. "Did you—"

"I was—"

They laughed uncomfortably.

"You first," said Edward.

"I was just starting to wonder if I was ever going to hear from you."

"You were? It is okay that I called, right?"

"Of course it is."

"I would've called sooner, but it took me a little while to get a phone card."

"Really? I guess I just assumed you'd call collect."

He hesitated. "I didn't know if I should."

"It would have been okay. What were you going to say before?" Bella asked, changing the subject.

"Oh, um . . . did you have a nice Christmas?"

"I did," she answered happily. "It's nice to be home with my mom. I wish it were warmer, but at least it's sunny."

"You're still in Phoenix?"

"Yeah, but only until tomorrow. My friend back home is having a New Year's Eve party that I don't want to miss. How was your Christmas?"

"It was . . . I don't know. It was just Christmas, I guess. I'm glad you're having a nice vacation, though."

They were quiet for a few moments before Bella spoke. "So . . . no news is good news, right?"

"I hope so." Edward smiled to himself. Bella had always been supportive in her letters, but now, hearing her voice, he couldn't help but think she was on his side. "When I hear something, you'll be the first to know."

"Good. Hey! I have a present for you."

Edward's heart sank. Aside from money and letters, there was nothing he could receive. He hoped she wasn't going to send the former again. Last time it had made him feel worthless, a disheartening reminder that he didn't have anything of value to send her in return.

"Bella—"

"Hold on a sec. I just . . . have to get it . . . all set up."

His curiosity peaked as she shuffle around on the other end of the phone. He couldn't imagine what she was doing.



“Ready?” Bella asked excitedly.

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” he answered apprehensively.

A few silent seconds passed. Edward opened his mouth to ask if she was still there but stopped when he heard a hauntingly familiar sound. Notes, played in a minor chord, filled his ears, and although he had never before heard the song, he knew it by heart.

The melody began slowly and held an air of sadness. As the tempo increased and the notes climbed the scale, it transformed into something light and sweet, taking on a hopeful quality. In his mind, he could see the pages of music he had written, pages that represented Bella’s impact on his life.

For the first time in over ten years, Edward listened to one of his compositions. It was amazing, hearing his music come to life, but knowing this piece in particular had been played by someone else left him feeling raw and vulnerable. Never before had he poured so much emotion into anything he had written. It was personal, the only tangible thing he and Bella shared, and he had always imagined being the one playing the first time they heard it.

However, after having gone so long without even touching a set of keys, Edward wasn’t sure he could do the song justice. Whoever played it had done a remarkable job, and for that, at least, he was thankful.

The song slowed and faded in unfinished discord. The final note hung poignantly in the air like an unspoken question, a symbol of Edward’s own unknown future.

“Edward, are you still there?”

“I’m here,” he said, his voice thick with emotion.

“Well, what do you think?” she asked cautiously.

Edward struggled to keep his composure. “You had someone play it for you,” he stated.

“No, I had someone play it for *you*.” It shouldn’t have been a surprise that Bella did with him in mind, yet once again, Edward found himself in awe of her selflessness. “You’re really talented, Edward.”

“Thank you.” He took a deep breath before asking the only thing that mattered. “Do you like it?”

“I love it. It’s beautiful.”

“It’s you,” he whispered. “It’s all you.”

Before Bella could respond, they were interrupted by another recorded message.

*“You have one minute remaining.”*

“What! That’s all?”

“Yeah, I only get fifteen minutes.”

“Seriously? That hardly seems fair.”

“Fair or not, those are the rules,” he said. “I’m not in a position to complain. Besides, it’s fifteen minutes I got to spend with you.”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have wasted so much time.”

“Don’t apologize,” he said firmly. “That was one of the most thoughtful things anyone has ever done for me.”

Bella sighed. “I’m not ready to say goodbye.”

“You don’t have to,” he said. “Just talk.”

“I don’t even know what to say now.” Bella was clearly upset. He hated hearing her like that.

*“You have thirty seconds remaining.”*

Edward didn’t want to waste what little time they had left, especially if he were never afforded this opportunity again. There were things he needed her to know that he didn’t want to write it in a letter.

“Bella, thank you for being there for me,” he began quickly. “Thank you for visiting and letting me call and for the song. I’m not the same man as I was eleven years ago, but I’m not the same man I was seven months ago, either. I don’t know how I would have made it through this year without you. You’ve given me hope and taught me that I do have things to live for. I hope you have a good trip home and a happy New Year. Celebrate for me, and promise me you’ll be safe.”

“I’ll be safe.” There was no mistaking the way her voice broke during her promise. “It was nice talking to you, Edward. I hope—”

There was a click as the line disconnected.

“Bella?” he asked, even though he knew she was already gone. “Please let me in, Bella,” he sighed into the receiver. “There’s nothing I want more than you in my life.”

December 31, 2009

My dearest Bella,

Talking to you this week was the highlight of my year, probably even my entire incarceration. I look forward to the next time I can hear your voice. Maybe I can call you again when I'm out of here. It would be nice not to have to spend so much or have a time limit. Would that be all right?

I would have written sooner, but I was holding on to the dream that I'd have good news to deliver. So far, nothing. Maybe the parole board has been busy over the holidays. It's probably a good thing I didn't get released before Christmas anyway. Being here is what's familiar. The day is different than the rest somehow, and if I were out on my own, it might have been depressingly lonely. I think I'll be okay if they deny me. Don't get me wrong, I don't want that to happen, but I believe I'm strong enough to handle it. I'm tired of waiting. At this point, I just want to know.

I had never had any prior arrests before moving to Washington if that's what you're asking. That's not to say I was an angel by any means. I wasn't a bad kid. I always did well in school, and I was meticulous with my college work, but with all the discipline I needed an outlet, so I rebelled. I stole to get money for drugs. I drank and smoked. Technically I lived with my father while I went to college because I couldn't afford to move out, but I was seldom home. He paid my tuition because my mom had set up an account for me before she died, but he always resented that I went to school for music instead of a "real career." He never hesitated to tell me how disappointed he was either. When I graduated, he kicked me out. I came home one day and everything I owned was gone. My room had been converted to a study. Our relationship prior to that had been rocky, but that was the moment I gave up completely. The next time I spoke to him was three years later, after I had been arrested. I reached out to him, but he refused to help. He said I had to learn my lesson, it was a long time coming, I deserved what I got, etc. Sometimes I'd like to



think he would have helped had he known the severity of the outcome. Then again, the fact that he hasn't written in the past 11 years says a lot about just how much he doesn't care.

I don't think I'll have a problem with drugs when I get out. Yes, I was forced into sobriety, but it's been a long time and a very eye-opening experience. Fortunately I don't crave the high, physically or mentally. To be honest, I'm worried about being in a position where I have to take prescription painkillers, like if I have surgery or injure myself. There are precautions I can take, but hopefully it's a bridge I won't have to cross. Sometimes I still crave cigarettes. I don't intend to start smoking again, but if I do, at least I won't end up back in prison over it. Why was I carrying a gun? Because I was stupid and thought it was cool. I'm sure I found some way to justify why it was a necessity at the time.

Your dad is going to love me.

How did your finals go? I forgot to ask. I hope they weren't as bad as you thought they'd be. What are you going to do with all your free time now?

You're probably at your friend's party as I write this. I wish I could be there with you. I've always loved New Year's Eve. There's something about celebrating the close of the year with friends and looking forward to new a beginning that is very uplifting. I feel like it's a big analogy for my life right now.

Please don't apologize for doing something nice for me. I know you meant well, and I'm glad it made you happy. I would like to return the favor someday. If you ever need anything, I promise to be there for you. All you have to do is ask.

I've told you before Bella, I'll never ignore you. You are worth every bit of effort. I would never give up on our friendship or stop writing because you pushed me too hard. My guard is up, but only because you're the one person who can hurt me. Knowing more about

me was obviously important to you, and I would be a fool not to do everything in my power to make you more comfortable around me. You have changed my life for the better. Believe me when I say I'd do anything for you.

Happy New Year, Bella. I wish you the very best.

Always,  
Edward

# The Decision

Bella folded the most recent letter from Edward and carefully placed it back in its envelope. She set it on her nightstand before flopping onto the bed. She would add it to the rest later. Right now, she wanted to reflect on what he had written.

Edward always came across so sweet and kind in his letters. Of course, Bella understood written words could be deceiving, but she also felt that she was beginning to develop a fair idea of who Edward really was.

She believed he wanted nothing more than a second chance, and if given the opportunity, he would prove himself worthy of his freedom. He struck her as someone who was devoted to his friends, maybe even to a fault. It was apparent that he was grateful for the support she had shown, and in this last letter, she had really gotten a feel for how ferociously he would fight to make their friendship work. When he had said he wasn't the same man he was seven months ago, she believed him; the change was evident in the tone of his letters.

As she recalled his most recent words, her face began to flush. She had experience with boys—college kids her age—but Edward was in a class all his own. She had a hard time deciphering whether he was just very grateful for her presence in his life or if he was harboring romantic feelings toward her. He was obviously growing increasingly attached, something Bella had been concerned about lately. She could understand why. If she were truly the only person showing him any support, it would only be natural for him to cling to her. Bella liked being important to him, but she knew the level at which he doted on her was unhealthy. However, each time she attempted to distance herself, Edward managed to close the gap.



Her uncertainty toward his feelings only solidified the fact that Bella didn't really know him. The little voice in her head kept reminding her that, despite her gut feelings, Edward could very well be dangerous. She had a hard time reconciling the version of him she thought she knew with the young man he described himself as, who abused drugs, got into fights, and carried a gun. She had always been a strong believer that people can change, and she hoped this situation would prove her right. If she were to ask Charlie, she'd get a much different opinion. "People don't change," he always said. "Once a bad apple, always a bad apple."

Charlie wasn't happy about Bella writing to a man in a state prison, especially one who happened to be more than ten years her senior. Throughout his career he had seen the worst of the worst, and he held no illusions that Edward was any different. He also knew Bella was stubborn once she set her mind to something, and there was nothing he could do to stop her. Because she had promised not to make a hobby out of corresponding with prisoners, he decided to let her continue writing Edward without further interference.

Bella knew her father didn't approve of her friendship with Edward. When they were together, both avoided discussing the subject. It would have been a waste of effort as neither of them would budge on their opinion of the matter.

If there was one thing Bella was absolutely certain of, it was that she was doing the right thing. It was hard for her to continue cautiously when what she really wanted to do was throw caution to the wind and open up to him completely, and she probably would have already if it weren't for that pesky little voice constantly bringing her worst fears to the forefront of her mind.

Bella closed her eyes and rubbed them with the heel of her palm. She knew the stress she was feeling now was nothing compared to how she would feel if Edward were released on parole.

How often would he contact her? Would he insist they meet in person? Would he try to track her down? Bella knew she had a hard time saying no to him. If she asked for space, would he respect her wishes? Or would he interpret such a request as rejection? Was he really as good a person as she thought? Or was he good at hiding his real intentions? What if Charlie was right after all?

Bella didn't know how to answer the myriad of questions in her head, and that was what terrified her the most.

Her cell phone rang, pulling her from her thoughts. She scrambled from the bed and frantically dug through her backpack. On the fourth ring, she found it.

"Hello?" she answered breathlessly.

A familiar recording played, notifying her that the call originated from a correctional institution. Bella's heart fluttered in her chest. She wasn't expecting another call from Edward so soon, especially after he had made the comment about expense and time limits in his last letter. It could only mean one thing.

"Edward?" she asked when the call connected.

"Bella." His voice broke. She couldn't tell whether he was laughing or crying.

"Are you okay?" Bella heard paper crinkling on the other end, and she knew immediately he must be holding the response from the parole board. "Edward, what does it say?"

Edward didn't answer. Her heart fell.

"Oh, no," she whispered. Even with her concerns of the unknown, she wanted him to be released. She felt he deserved it. "Oh, Edward."

"I'm out," he finally choked through his tears. "I'm getting out."

Relief flooded through Bella, her fears momentarily forgotten. "Oh, Edward, I'm so happy for you!"

"I can't believe it," he said, and then he laughed. "I'm getting out!"

Bella sat down on her bed. "When?"

"Monday the eighteenth. Twelve days."

Bella was speechless. Edward breathed deeply, trying to control his emotions.

"I can't believe it," he said again, more reserved this time.

"See? I told you no news was good news. Where are you going to go?"

"The halfway house I applied to back in May has a spot for me. It's right outside of Seattle. I'm not looking forward to more communal living, but the rent is subsidized and I can't afford anything else. It's stupid of me to complain," he added quickly. "I won't be here and that's what matters. God, I can't believe it!"

"I'd offer you a place but, you know . . ." The words were out of Bella's mouth before she could stop herself.

"But I'm a criminal."

"No," she said, not wanting him to think the worst of her comment. "I just mean it's a small apartment. You wouldn't have any privacy."

The silence that followed was charged. Bella could feel her heartbeat throughout her entire body as she waited for him to respond. She wished she could take it all back, but it was too late.

"Bella," Edward said sharply, "you're talking to someone who hasn't had privacy in almost twelve years. Don't talk about how you *would* give me a place to stay because you think it sounds nice. And don't offer it with the expectation that I'd say no, because I wouldn't."

"You wouldn't?" she asked, surprised that he would accept help if she were to offer it.

"No," he answered softly.

Bella felt her grasp on common sense slip away as she thought of Edward sharing her one bedroom apartment. It would be crazy—absolute insanity on her part. She knew this, yet she couldn't help but wonder what it would be like. "You really wouldn't have any privacy."

"Neither would you. Your apartment would be subject to search without notice."

"You'd have to sleep on a couch."

"You couldn't have any drugs, alcohol, or weapons."

"My dad would kill me."

"Your dad would kill *me*."

"Edward—" Bella started but stopped abruptly. A loose thread on the comforter caught her eye, and she tugged at it mindlessly while she gathered her thoughts. She was torn. She wanted to help, and she wanted to protect herself, but she didn't know how to do both. "I don't know what to do," she admitted in a whisper.

"Do what's best for you."

"I want to help you, but I have to protect myself."

"I would never hurt you, Bella," Edward said sincerely, his voice laced with sadness. "You must know that by now."

Bella battled to hold back her tears. More than anything, she wanted to believe him.

"But I understand," Edward continued. "Trust is earned."

"Edward," she began in a shaky voice, "this is against my better judgment, but—oh my god, I can't believe I'm doing this." Bella took a deep breath. "You're welcome to stay with me."

Her offer was met with silence.

"Edward?"

"Are you being serious?" he asked finally.

"Yes."

"You don't sound so sure."

"I am," Bella insisted.

"I don't know what to say."

"You don't want to?" Bella felt both relief and hurt at the thought of being turned down.



"I do, but Bella, this is serious."

"I know."

"Is this really what you want?"

Bella thought carefully before she answered. "What I want is to help you." She tightened the grip on her cell phone, trying to tame the trembling in her hands. "I'm willing to trust you." *Please don't make me regret this*, she added silently.

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure."

"Thank you, Bella," he said reverently. "You have no idea how much this means to me."

"You're welcome."

*"You have one minute remaining."*

"Um, Bella? I'll need your address and probably your last name. For the parole office," he clarified. "They'll need to approve it."

"Oh . . . right."

As Bella rattled off her full name and address, the reality of what she was offering suddenly became real. Not only had she given Edward her personal details, but she had offered to open her home to him as well. She struggled to remain calm as the weight of the situation hammered down on her.

*"You have thirty seconds remaining."*

"Thank you again, Bella. I'll call you later next week, okay?"

"Yeah, okay."

"I'm looking forward to seeing you again."

"Me too." There was barely enough strength in her voice to make it audible.

"Goodbye, Bella."

"Bye." Bella wasted no time disconnecting the call.

*Oh, my god*, she thought as she dropped her phone to the floor. *What have I done?*

# The Arrival

In her entire life, Bella had never been as scared or nervous as she was driving to the pick-up area of Waterview State Correctional Facility. All day long her emotions ran on high. She retained absolutely nothing from her lectures that morning, causing her to wonder why she bothered going to class at all.

Bella parked the car in front of the building but didn't get out. She needed a moment to collect her thoughts. This was it—the day she had been both anticipating and fearing for the past twelve days. Not one of those days passed without her wondering if she should pull the plug, but without knowing how to reverse the damage already done, it would have meant enlisting Charlie's help. She wasn't ready to face Charlie, and she didn't want to hurt Edward by recanting her offer. He had been so excited when he called her with the final details of his release that she didn't have the heart to ask him to make other plans.

Bella tried to give herself a pep talk, but the little voice in her head wouldn't let her derive any comfort from it.

*This is it.*

*This is the stupidest thing you've ever done.*

*Relax. It's just Edward.*

*Just Edward? You don't know him.*

*I know he won't hurt me.*

*He's going to chop you into little pieces.*

*He's not a murderer.*

*Not that you know of.*

“Shut up!” she screamed.

A knock on the passenger window caused Bella to jump. She whipped her head to the side to see Edward standing next to her car, a wary expression on his face. Bella cracked the window.

“Hey,” she said.

“Hi.” Edward frowned. Bella looked on edge, and he could only assume it was because of him.

“You okay?”

“Uh-huh.”

Edward wasn’t sure he believed her. He tried the handle; it was locked. “Bella?”

“Oh, sorry.”

Bella’s fingers hovered over the lock button. She entertained the idea of putting the car in drive and tearing out of the parking lot. Instead, she unlocked the door. Edward opened it and folded his tall frame into the small car.

For the first time, there was nothing between them. No guards, no bars, no phone, no walls. Nothing.

“Were you waiting long?” Bella tried to keep her voice sounding normal.

“No,” Edward lied. His release had officially been finalized three hours ago, but he didn’t want Bella to feel bad for wanting to attend class. Besides, it’s not like he had anywhere important to be.

They drove away, and Edward watched the place he called home for the past 11 years disappear from view. From the corner of her eye, Bella noticed him chewing on his fingernails and tapping his foot.

“Are you okay?” she asked. “You seem . . . nervous.”

Edward shrugged.

“So how does it feel?”

“Like I’m going to wake up at any moment,” he answered quietly. “Thank you again. I really appreciate this.”

“You’re welcome.”

Bella watched him dig through the plastic bag he’d brought with him. She recognized her letters, but there didn’t seem to be anything else inside. Edward pulled out a rectangular piece of paper.

“Can we stop at a bank?” he asked.

“Of course.”



Edward unfolded the paper. It was a check. "How far do you think sixty-three dollars will get me these days?"

"I think, if you're responsible, you may be surprised," she answered carefully.

Edward contemplated her answer while he stared at the check—the only thing to show for his time spent in prison. He would need to buy clothing and personal items. Hopefully there would be some money left to give Bella for food or supplies for her apartment. She could spend it on herself for all he cared. He just wanted to contribute *something*, even if it was insignificant.

The drive and trip to the bank passed quickly, and before they knew it, they arrived at Bella's apartment. Her nerves, which had somewhat settled during the drive, came back in full force. She hoped she was making the right choice.

"Well, this is it."

Edward followed Bella through the parking lot. When she reached the main door, she stopped and turned to face him. "These are for you." She dangled a key ring from her pointer finger. "The big one is for this door. The other one is for the apartment."

"You're giving me keys?" he asked in disbelief. The last thing he expected was for Bella to give him the means to let himself inside whenever he pleased. The way her hand slightly shook didn't escape his notice. "You sure?"

"Take them," Bella insisted. "I don't want you stuck outside if I'm not here."

Edward reached out and silently plucked the keys from her hand. He rubbed his fingertips against them, burning the texture and weight of the metal into his memory. As hard as he tried, he couldn't recall the last time he had held a set of keys. Apparently it hadn't been important enough to remember at the time.

They stood in front of the door for another minute before Edward realized she was waiting for him to open it. He slid the key into the lock and turned it. The bolt made a loud click as it slid into the unlocked position. Pulling the door open, Edward stepped to the side, allowing Bella to enter first. When they reached her apartment, he repeated the process. This time, Bella didn't enter. She gestured to the open door.

"Welcome home."

"Home." Edward said it unsurely, as though the word was foreign and he was trying it out with no prior knowledge of its meaning. He clenched his fists nervously, and the keys dug into his palm.

"After you," Bella said when he didn't budge. Edward slowly entered her apartment. "Kitchen." She pointed to their immediate left. "It's kind of empty right now. I didn't have time to go grocery shopping last weekend. Help yourself to anything, okay?" Edward nodded. "Bathroom." Bella

pointed to a door down the short hallway to the right. “And the living room, which is now yours.” There was a sheet hanging from the ceiling, hiding most of the room from view. Bella walked up to it and tugged gently. “I used tacks. With all my luck they’ll fall out and I’ll step on one.”

Edward pushed the sheet aside and cautiously stepped into the makeshift bedroom. “What is all this?”

The couch was made up with sheets, a blanket, and a pillow. On top of it were small stacks of clothing and three shopping bags.

“Okay, don’t be mad,” Bella began. “You don’t have to accept any of it, although I really hope you will.” When Edward didn’t reply, she went on. “Most of the clothing came from a friend of mine. He’s about your size, maybe a little bit bigger.”

Edward picked up a pair of jeans and unfolded them. It looked like they would fit. He dropped them on top of the pile before running his thumb over a stack of T-shirts. Bella watched him, trying desperately to read his reaction, but she couldn’t figure out what he was thinking. In fact, she was surprised by his lack of emotion since picking him up from the prison. Her first reaction was to assume he was acting strange, but then she realized she had no idea what “normal” for Edward meant.

He finished inspecting the donated clothes and opened the first shopping bag, pulling out a package of socks and frowning.

“I, uh . . . didn’t spend much if that’s what you’re worried about,” Bella said nervously. “I was online, reading about what to expect when someone is released from prison, and I realized you probably wouldn’t have any basics like this.” She quickly glanced at the bag he had brought with him, convinced more than ever that helping him out in this way was the right thing to do.

“Is that so?” Edward mumbled. His eyes widened when he spotted the next item in the bag. He held it up and turned to Bella with a curious expression.

“Oh! Uh . . .” Her face turned red. “My friend helped me shop,” she said quickly. “I didn’t know . . . I mean . . . he picked them out. I know there are different kinds. If you want to return them and get something else—”

“Boxers are fine,” Edward interrupted, feeling slightly embarrassed himself. He moved on to the second bag. It was filled with toiletry items—shampoo, toothpaste, toothbrush, shaving cream, razors, aftershave, deodorant. It was hard for him to accept help, especially knowing Bella spent money on him when she was already giving so much, yet at the same time, a giant weight had been lifted from his shoulders. These were all things he needed, and although he wanted to support himself, he knew he couldn’t do everything on his own.

There was only one small bag left, and Bella held her breath while he opened it, waiting anxiously for his reaction. He pulled out the single item—a tub of Funfetti frosting. Bella’s heart warmed when he turned to her and smiled for the very first time. He had a nice smile, and she couldn’t help but return it.

“Thank you, Bella, for everything.”

Bella exhaled in relief. “You’re welcome.”

“I should probably change,” he said, looking down at the mismatched sweatpants and oversized shirt he was wearing—the outfit he had been offered at his discharge because he didn’t have his own clothing.

“Right,” Bella agreed. “I’ll just . . .” She maneuvered around the sheet so Edward could have privacy.

“Can I shower?” he asked.

“You don’t have to ask. Make yourself at home.”

“Thanks.”

Edward rummaged through his new belongings in search of a change of clothes and everything he’d need to shower. When he stepped around the sheet, he found Bella standing awkwardly in what was left of her living room. She looked worried. He wanted to drop everything and wrap his arms around her like he had when she visited him, but he was afraid of crossing a line, especially now that they were living under the same roof. He didn’t want to do anything that would sacrifice their arrangement or more importantly, their friendship.

But damn if he didn’t want to feel her touch again.

“Towels are in the bathroom,” she said.

Edward nodded and reluctantly headed into the bathroom, trying desperately not to think about the way she had felt in his arms.

“This is okay, right?”

Bella looked up from her computer. Edward had tucked the sheet barrier behind the couch, opening up the room. “Of course.”

“I feel bad. Your TV and balcony are both on this side.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Bella shrugged. “I can still see the TV. Besides, I don’t watch it very much anyway.” She turned back to her computer.

“Um, Bella?”



“Hmm?”

“You don’t have class tomorrow, right?”

“No, why?” She turned to him again.

“I have to check in at the parole office, and I . . .” Edward hesitated. “I have a therapy session,” he added quietly. “Can you drive me? I don’t want to get lost, not knowing the area, and I’m really not sure how far it is. I understand if you don’t—”

“Edward,” Bella interrupted. “It’s fine. I’ll drive you.”

“Thanks,” he mumbled.

Bella watched him sit down on the couch and turn his attention to the television. Before long, his gaze drifted to the window. He looked lost—completely overwhelmed. Bella wanted to help, but she didn’t know what to say. It struck her that she was in over her head in more ways than one.

“Are you hungry? I was thinking about ordering a pizza. If I call now, I should be finished with this assignment by the time it gets here. Does that sound okay?”

Edward nodded. “Whatever you want.”

After dinner, Bella retreated to her bedroom. It wasn’t necessarily that she didn’t want to be around Edward, but the awkwardness between them made her uncomfortable. She made multiple attempts to start a conversation with him while they were eating, but no matter how hard she tried, the only responses she seemed to get were vague, one or two word answers.

She had been under the covers reading for a couple of hours when there was a soft knock on her door.

“Bella?”

“Yeah?”

“Can I come in?”

“Sure,” she answered apprehensively.

Edward opened the door and stepped inside the room. He was holding a pillow and blanket. “I don’t want to be alone,” he said. “Can I stay in here for a little while? I’ll lie on the floor.”

Bella regarded him carefully. In that moment, he didn’t look like the 35-year-old man he was. He didn’t look like an ex-convict. He looked, to her, like someone who was lonely and unsure of what life would throw at him next.

“Come on.” She scooted to the side of her twin bed and patted the small space next to her.

Edward approached the bed slowly and sat down on top of the covers. He angled the pillow to fit on the bed before lying down. They shifted to face each other.

“Are you okay?” Bella asked sincerely.

"No."

"What's wrong?"

He shrugged.

"Hey, talk to me," she said softly. "I'm here for you. Don't shut me out now." When Edward didn't answer, she added, "Do you want to write it down?"

Edward cracked a smile. "No," he answered. He took a deep breath. "How am I going to do this?"

"Do what?"

"Anything. Exist. I have nothing. I need a job, I have to go to three different support meetings per week, and I have no way of getting to any of them. Any day now someone will start showing up at your door on a regular basis and demanding to search the place, which I feel terrible about. It feels like I'll never be at the point where I'll have a car or a place of my own. What if my parole officer is an asshole? What if he's just waiting for me to fuck up so he can send me back?"

"Hey, hey, hey," Bella interrupted. She reached out and placed her hand on Edward's arm. He buried his face in the pillow. "The important thing is that you're out, right?"

"Right." His voice was muffled.

"I have faith in you, Edward."

He turned to look her in the eyes. "Do you really?"

"Of course I do," she answered without hesitation. She removed her hand from his arm and cupped his cheek. "One day at a time. You'll figure it out, and I'm here to help you."

Edward extended his arm and placed it gently over Bella's waist. She tensed at the unexpected contact.

"Is this okay?" he asked. Bella swallowed nervously and nodded. Edward pulled her closer and rested his forehead against hers. "You're an amazing woman, Bella."

"Thanks," she whispered.

He leaned in and brushed his lips against across hers. Bella froze, not knowing how to react. When she didn't pull away, he kissed her gently.

"Edward . . ." Bella's voice wavered with uncertainly.

"I want you," he breathed. His hand slid down her back, causing her to panic.

"Stop," she choked out. His lips moved to her neck. "Edward, stop!"

With a frustrated groan, Edward pushed himself away and rolled onto his back. Bella scrambled to pull the blankets around her and moved as far away as the bed would allow.

"I'm sorry, Edward."

“Don’t!” he said. “Don’t apologize to me.” Edward covered his face with his hands. “Fuck, I’m an idiot.” He lay there for a few moments before abruptly sitting up and swinging his legs from the bed. “I didn’t mean—never mind. I shouldn’t even be here,” he mumbled to himself.

“Wait.” Bella grabbed his arm as he started to get up. She didn’t know if he meant here in the room or here in her apartment, but the thought of him leaving made her heart ache. “Don’t go.”

Edward regarded her carefully before slowly sinking back on the bed. He lifted his arm. “Come here?” Bella curled up against him, and he wrapped his arm around her shoulders. “Sorry for being an ass.”

Bella didn’t respond; she didn’t know what to say. Closing her eyes, she tried not to think about his unexpected advance. Eventually she relaxed enough to fall asleep. When she woke up in the early morning, she was alone in the bed. At first she was disappointed, but then logic kicked in. They were living together, and if it was going to work, there could be no repeats of last night. She got up and dressed quickly before exiting her room to find Edward. To her surprise, she discovered him standing in the kitchen.

“Good morning,” she greeted.

“Morning.”

“You hungry?”

“Not really. Will you show me how to use this?” Edward gestured to the coffee pot. “I’ve been staring at it for half an hour.”

“It looks complicated, but it’s not. Just watch.” Bella began making the coffee. “Feeling better about things?” she asked.

Edward shrugged. “A little.”

“How’d you sleep?”

“I didn’t, really.” Edward shrugged. “Had a lot on my mind. You seemed peaceful.”

Bella blushed.

“Look, Edward, about last night . . .”

Edward looked away.

“That can’t happen again.”

“What part exactly?” he asked through his teeth.

“Any of it.”

He swallowed thickly. “Ever?”

“We’re friends.”

Edward noticed how she evaded his question but decided to let it go, unsure if he really wanted to know the answer.

“I mean it,” Bella said firmly, sensing his uncertainty. “Friends.”

Edward nodded once. “Friends,” he repeated. He was unable to hide the disappointment in his voice.



# The Apology

“Well, here we are,” Bella said when they arrived at the building where Edward’s group therapy was held. She was relieved to discover that the parole office—where she worried her father frequented—was within walking distance, and she wouldn’t need to drive by it. “Do you want to call me when you’re done with everything? We can meet at that little coffee shop across the street.”

“I can walk back.”

“Are you sure? I don’t mind picking you up.”

“I could use the exercise.”

“It’s kind of far.”

Edward shrugged. “I don’t have anything else to do, and I want to see what’s around here. You know, for work or whatever.” He sighed before opening the door. “Thanks for the ride.”

When he stood up, Bella noticed a torn piece of notebook paper flutter to the seat. “Hey, wait! You forgot some . . .” Her voice trailed off as he closed the door behind him. She picked up the paper and immediately recognized his familiar handwriting.

*Dear Bella,*

*I’m sorry about last night. I thought it was okay, but obviously I was wrong. There are no excuses— I was out of line. I have a long road ahead of me, and I know I’ll make my fair share of mistakes, but I hope not to make any more where you’re concerned. You’ve been a great friend and have already given me more than I deserve. Sometimes I’m not sure how to act around you. It was so*

*much easier through letters. Promise to tell me at once if I do anything to make you uncomfortable again. I will try my hardest not to.*

*Edward*

*p.s. Are we okay?*

Bella folded the letter and placed it in her purse. Regardless of Edward's behavior last night, she found herself wanting to trust him. She honestly didn't think he would hurt her, but she realized she might have to stay focused in order to keep him in line.

On the way back to her apartment, Bella stopped at a grocery store. She had no idea what Edward liked to eat, so she just doubled up on the usual. When she got home, she put everything away before flopping on the couch. Edward had insisted on removing the blankets so she could use it, and he went to so much work to organize the area that she almost felt obligated to sit there. Still, she couldn't shake the feeling that she was invading his space.

Her cell phone rang. From the custom ringtone, she knew it was Jake.

"What's up, ugly face?"

"Oh, looks like someone thinks they're a comedian."

"I do. Hey, I thought your classes started this week."

"They did, but I have Tuesdays off. What do you say we get some lunch and chill at your place for the afternoon?"

"Um . . ." Bella wanted to see Jake, but she didn't think having him over would be wise. She had no idea when Edward would be back, and she wasn't sure if the two men would get along. Not to mention she hadn't been completely forthcoming with Jake when she told him about Edward. "I'm not so sure that's a good idea."

"Come on! I haven't seen you since New Year's."

"I'm actually kind of busy this afternoon." It wasn't a total lie, but Bella still felt bad for turning Jake down. She missed her friend, and she really wanted to do something normal. "But I guess I have a little bit of time now. Why don't we go out to lunch?"

"Sounds good. I'll come up and get you."

Bella stood by the door, waiting for Jake to arrive. She wanted to get out of the apartment as quickly as possible, but Jake had other plans.

"I'm gonna piss my pants if I don't use your bathroom right now," Jake said frantically. He pushed past her and disappeared around the corner. "Oh, that feels so good."

“Gross, Jake, shut the door!”

He waltzed out of the bathroom a minute later.

Bella crossed her arms. “Did you put the lid down?” Jake rolled his eyes and backed into the bathroom. The seat clanked loudly. “Thank you.”

“Yeah, whatever. I’ll remember one of these times.” Jake glanced into the living room. “Hey, what’s with the sheet?”

“It’s nothing. Don’t worry about it,” Bella said quickly.

Jake walked over to inspect it closer. “Hmm,” he said. He lost interest pretty quickly, his hunger taking over, but as he turned to join Bella by the door, a pile of his old clothing, hidden halfway behind the couch, caught his eye. “Haven’t given those to your friend yet, huh? I thought he was getting out last month or something.”

“He, um . . . he got out yesterday, actually.”

“Oh.” Jake frowned. “Is that what you’re doing later? Giving him the clothes and stuff? You shouldn’t meet him alone, Bells. I can go with you.”

“It’s okay. I’ll be fine. Don’t worry about me.”

Ordinarily Jake would argue with Bella about doing something so risky, but he didn’t hear a word she said because his surroundings were finally sinking in. The clothes he gave her were folded messily. The bags of socks and underwear were both opened. The pillow, sheets, and blanket—which Bella always insisted he use whenever he spent the night—were folded and sitting on the floor next to the couch. Even the sheet, hanging from the ceiling and dividing the room in half, began to make sense. Jake felt the color drain from his face. He turned to Bella.

“He’s staying here.” It wasn’t a question. Bella nodded. “Are you fucking crazy? What the hell is wrong with you?”

“Jake—”

“No, Bella. This is insane. Do you have any idea how dangerous this is?”

Bella’s irritation spiked. She might not know Edward well, but she knew him better than Jake did, and she was positive he wouldn’t hurt her. “It’s fine.”

“No, it’s not fine. You have a criminal living in your apartment!”

“I’m helping him. Don’t act like you didn’t want to help, too. When I told you about him, you were more than willing to donate your clothes and go shopping with me,” she spat.

Jake stormed up to her and lowered his voice. “I helped your friend, who was in *prison*, because it was important to you. I gave him my old clothes. I didn’t offer him a place to stay. This—” He

paused and gestured to the living room. "This is not helping him. There has to be a better place for him to live."

"Edward is doing fine here," she retorted. "You don't have to worry about him."

"I'm not worried about him. I'm worried about you!"

"I can take care of myself, Jacob."

Jake recoiled at her tone. He didn't want to fight with his friend; he was genuinely concerned for her safety. However, he knew she was stubborn, and he would be unable to talk any sense into her as long as she was being defensive.

"Let's just forget about it for now. Are you hungry or what?"

"Fine." Bella snatched her purse from the counter. "You're driving."

Lunch started out awkwardly, but once they began joking around and teasing each other, things became normal once again. Although they hadn't forgotten their earlier conversation, neither wanted to bring it up again just yet. It wasn't until they arrived back at Bella's apartment that Jake decided to broach the subject once more.

"I'm sorry about getting all over protective before. I just don't want anything to happen to you."

"I know you don't, and it's okay. I can't explain it, but somehow I know I'm doing the right thing."

"That's debatable," he challenged. "Well, now that the cat's out of the bag, can I come up?"

"Okay," Bella conceded. "But only for a little while. I'm not sure when Edward's getting back, and I don't want to make him feel uncomfortable."

Jake snorted and rolled his eyes.

"I'm serious," she said, punching him in the shoulder. "This is his home now. I'm not going to do anything to make him feel like he's intruding or unwanted."

"Whatever you say, Bells. I still think you're crazy."

Edward sat on the couch, attempting to read a book he found on Bella's computer desk. Each time he reached the end of a page, he realized he had stopped paying attention halfway through and needed to start over. His mind kept wandering to last night, replaying the events over and over again.

He was mad at himself for upsetting Bella, but he was also confused. Everything seemed to be going fine, and he didn't understand how he had misinterpreted the situation so severely. Sure, she seemed nervous throughout the day—he was too—but that was to be expected. They were



strangers thrown under the same roof; it was bound to be uncomfortable at first. But she showed him such kindness, opening her home and going out of her way to help. She invited him into her bed and comforted him with her words and her touch. She silently confirmed it was okay after he wrapped his arm around her, and he went slowly when he closed the distance between them, gauging her reaction and giving her time to pull away. When she didn't, he kissed her. He swore he could still feel the warmth and softness of her lips.

But apparently his advances were unwelcomed.

Once Edward heard the discomfort in Bella's voice, he blurted out the only thing on his mind. He truly did want her, but his statement was anything but one-dimensional. He wanted her as a friend, and he wanted her as more. He wanted to make her breakfast and take her on dates and do normal things with her. Naturally he wanted her intimately as well. He just . . . *wanted* her.

Bella's scared, almost inaudible voice played in his head like a broken record, fueling his self-loathing.

*"Edward, stop!"*

He dropped the book to the floor and buried his head in his hands.

Looking back, he understood she must have interpreted his words in the worst of ways, and he wondered if the outcome would have been different had he kept his mouth shut.

A loud laugh sounded from the hallway, pulling Edward out of his memories. The apartment door opened, and in stepped Bella with another man. His jaw dropped when he saw her. She was laughing, looking more carefree than he had ever witnessed. When she noticed him, she stopped abruptly, a look of shock crossing her face. Edward felt a pain in his chest, knowing how effectively his presence killed her good mood. He stood from the couch.

"Edward!" Bella seemed surprised to see him, and he suddenly felt like he was intruding on a private moment.

"Should I go? I can come back . . . whenever."

Bella frowned. "You don't have to leave," she said. "I didn't think you'd be home yet."

"It went quicker than I thought," he answered vaguely, not wanting to say more than necessary in front of Bella's friend.

"That's good, right?"

Edward shrugged. He had been happy to get it over with, but now he wished he was anywhere but here.

"Um, Jake," Bella began, "this is my friend Edward. Edward, this is Jake. He's the one who helped me get everything ready for you."

"Some things," Jake clarified.

"So . . . should we watch a movie or something?" Bella asked. She seemed uncomfortable, causing Edward to feel even worse. "I'll make popcorn."

"Sounds good," said Jake.

"Edward, do you mind?" She pointed at the couch.

"Of course not."

"Okay. I'm going to change," she said before escaping to her bedroom and closing the door.

Edward and Jake regarded each other momentarily. Edward was the first to break the silence.

"Thanks for the clothing. I appreciate it."

"No problem. Must be tough, huh? Starting over, I mean."

"Yeah," Edward said dryly.

"Huh. Bella didn't tell me much, other than you've been in a while."

"It's been a while." Edward wasn't surprised Bella had mentioned his circumstances to Jake, and he was glad she didn't go into detail. When he volunteered no additional information, Jake continued.

"I don't want her getting hurt."

Edward frowned, suddenly defensive. "I would never hurt Bella."

"Okay." Jake raised his arms. "You know who her father is, right?"

"Yes," Edward said through his teeth. His first interaction with a complete outsider was not going as well as he'd hoped.

Thankfully, Bella stepped out of her bedroom, inadvertently putting an end to the awkward conversation. She took one look at the two of them and gave Edward a sympathetic look.

"Jake, why don't you make the popcorn? I'll set up the movie."

Jake didn't hesitate to remove himself from the situation. Granted the kitchen was only four steps away, but his back was turned and he suddenly found the popcorn box very interesting.

Bella approached Edward with an apologetic expression. "Sorry," she whispered. "I really didn't think you'd be here."

"It's okay."

"How did everything go today?"

"Fine." Edward shrugged. Bella looked at him expectantly. He sighed. "Group was okay. I just listened."

"And the parole office?" she prompted.

"That went fine, too. I met my parole officer. She's really nice."

"She?" Bella exclaimed then quickly covered her mouth. "Sorry, that's just surprising."

"I was surprised, too. Oh, I'm supposed to give you this." Edward sank to the floor, and Bella kneeled beside him. He rifled through a folder of paperwork, pulling out a business card and offering it to her. "She said you can call her if you have any questions or . . . problems."

"Oh, okay." Bella took the card.

"She's coming over tomorrow evening. She'd like to meet you. If you don't have other plans, I mean." Edward shot a glance to Jake, who was engrossed by the popcorn in the microwave.

"No, I'll be here."

"Thanks."

"See? You didn't get assigned to an asshole after all. Things are going your way already."

"Yeah, I guess." Edward smiled. "We were talking about jobs for a little bit, because it's a condition of my parole, and she gave me this." He grabbed a packet of paper from the folder. "It's a list of businesses within walking distance of here. She just put this address into her computer, and all of these places came up. It even plotted them on a map. Look." Edward found the page with the map and held it up. "It was so cool. Can you believe it?"

Bella laughed before realizing he was completely in awe of the internet generated map.

"What?"

"Nothing. My computer will do that, too. Do you want me to show you?"

Edward eyed the machine apprehensively. "Maybe some other time," he said quietly. "I've had enough failures for one week."

"Popcorn's done." Jake walked toward the living room, balancing three bowls and three cans of soda in his arms.

"Hey," Edward said urgently. Bella turned to him. "Did you get my note?"

"Yeah."

He waited for Bella to say more, but she didn't. "Are we okay?"

"Of course," she whispered.

"I really am sorry."

"It's okay, really." She smiled softly before standing up and moving to the television. "So what do you guys want to watch?"

"Something funny," Jake said.

"Edward?"

"I wouldn't know."

"Okay." Bella picked out a movie before settling between them on the couch.

Edward was thankful to have something to take his mind off life in general, and it did feel good to laugh. More importantly, though, he enjoyed watching Bella smile. He hoped her relaxed, carefree attitude wouldn't disappear once they were alone again.

Although he was happy that most of the awkwardness from earlier had dissipated, he was envious of the laid back way Bella and Jake interacted. Maybe it was the way she playfully swatted at him when he tried to steal her popcorn, or how she would turn to him and smile when they both laughed at the same time. They kept randomly bumping each other's shoulders as though the physical contact was the most natural thing in the world.

Edward knew, especially after last night, that he had no claim on Bella, but he longed for the two of them to have an easygoing relationship like the one she had with Jake. He recalled one of Bella's earlier letters, where she mentioned seeing someone on and off, and he wondered if this was the guy. He could only hope it wasn't and that he didn't ruin his own chances by his actions the night before.

Bella caught Edward staring and looked at him curiously. "You okay?" she mouthed. He nodded and tried to put on a convincing smile. Bella wasn't fooled, but she didn't press him.

It was late in the evening when Jake finally decided to go home. He didn't want to leave Bella alone with Edward, and all three of them knew it.

"Are you sure you don't want me to spend the night?" Jake asked as he stood by the door. "I don't mind. I have everything I need for school tomorrow, and I can just wear some of my old clothes."

Bella sighed, clearly irritated. "You can spend the night if you want, but you're sleeping on the floor. And those are Edward's clothes now, so if you want to borrow some, you'll have to ask him."

Jake frowned and glared over her shoulder at Edward, who was making up the couch and pretending not to eavesdrop. "Fine," he said before pulling her in for a hug. "Be careful, please."

"I will."

"Edward."

Edward acknowledged Jake with a wave.

"I'll call you tomorrow," Jake said.

"Wow, that was uncomfortable," Bella said once he was gone. "Sorry, I really didn't think he'd be here that long."

"It's all right. He's just worried about you."

"Yeah, well, he doesn't have a reason to be. Right?" Bella added.



“Right,” Edward agreed quietly. “He could have stayed. You didn’t have to stand up for me like that.”

“I wanted to,” she said sternly. “You live here, not him.”

“He’s your friend. I feel bad for causing tension between you two.”

“He’ll be fine,” she said. “Besides, you’re my friend, too.”

“Thanks, Bella.”

“I should go to bed. If you think of anything else you need, let me know.”

“Okay.”

“Goodnight, Edward.”

“Goodnight.”

Edward watched her disappear into the bedroom. Even though he knew she was on the other side of the door, he felt almost as alone as he had been before they met. He switched off the light, cloaking the room in darkness, and as he settled onto the couch, he knew it would be another sleepless night.

# The Officer

On Wednesday morning, Bella was wide awake before her alarm went off. She was exhausted, not having slept very well throughout the night, but knew spending any additional time in bed wouldn't do her any good. She got up, picked out a set of clothing, and tiptoed into the bathroom. It took her less than thirty minutes to get ready. Because she was still an hour ahead of schedule, she decided to make coffee and eat a bowl of cereal instead of her normal routine of grabbing a granola bar and stopping at a coffee shop on the way to campus.

The television caught Bella's attention as she entered the living room. It was on, the volume barely audible. She wondered if Edward was awake. She approached his makeshift room, stopping when she reached the sheet.

"Edward?"

There was no answer. Discreetly, she peeked around the curtain. Edward was sound asleep, curled up in the fetal position. The sheet was tangled around his legs. The blanket had been kicked to the floor. Bella couldn't help herself—she went to the couch and crouched down beside him.

He looked relaxed. No concerned frown. No worried pout. It was the most peaceful she had ever seen him. Afraid he might be cold, Bella retrieved the blanket from the floor and carefully placed it over him. Edward straightened his legs and rolled onto his back. Bella held her breath. She didn't want him to wake up and catch her hovering. He didn't wake, however, and Bella quietly backed away. She turned off the television before slipping out of the room.

The morning dragged on for Bella. Her mind kept wandering to Edward. Was he awake? What was he doing? Did he feel at home enough to make something to eat? Would he be out looking for a job? She hoped the time alone would help him to feel settled in.

By the time her class was over, Bella was anxious to get home. Her apartment was empty when she arrived. The couch was back to its normal state, and Edward's belongings were tucked neatly out of site. For how nervous his presence made her over the past two days, she was surprised by her disappointment to find him gone.

Bella made lunch, cleaned the apartment, studied, and then watched television. Edward had yet to return. It was difficult for her not to worry. She kept telling herself he was a grown man and didn't need supervision. Still, a part of her feared he would find trouble.

It was almost six o'clock when there was a knock on the door. Bella looked through the peephole, quickly opening the door when she saw it was Edward.

"Hey, you're back!" When she saw the bags he was holding, her eyes went wide. "Oh, my gosh. Let me help you."

"I've got it." Edward stepped inside and dropped the bags to the floor. "These are for you." He held out a small bouquet of violet, yellow, and white wildflowers.

"Oh," Bella said, clearly surprised. "They're beautiful. Thank you. What's the occasion?"

"I didn't realize there had to be an occasion to buy a girl flowers," Edward said cautiously.

"There doesn't. I just... wasn't sure if you had a specific reason, that's all." Bella rummaged through the kitchen for a vase. When her search turned up unsuccessful, she opted to place them in a tall glass. "What else did you get?"

"Just a couple more things I needed." Edward shrugged, then his lips curved into a devilish grin. "And this." He retrieved something from one of the bags and tossed it on the counter.

Bella picked up the small box. "Cake mix?"

"Yeah. Something to put the Funfetti on."

"Gross." Bella wrinkled her nose then smiled so Edward would know she was teasing. "You were gone all day. What else did you do?"

"I applied for a few jobs. Not as many as I had hoped, though. Walking around and filling out applications took longer than I expected. I talked to a few managers, too. Wanted to leave a good impression, you know? Some of the applications asked about felony convictions, but even if they didn't, my work history has all been at Waterview. It's pretty obvious where I've been."

"They're not supposed to discriminate. They can't not hire you because of a felony charge alone. I looked it up."

“No, but . . .” Edward shrugged helplessly. “If the conviction relates to the job they can. I was charged with robbery, so that pretty much applies to anywhere with merchandise and cash registers. Besides, they can always find another reason.”

“You’ll get a job. I know you will.” Bella believed that there was someone out there who would give Edward a chance; all he had to do was find them.

“I hope so. Hey, before I forget . . .” Edward reached into his back pocket and pulled out a wallet. It was shiny and stiff, and it showed no signs of wear.

“Is that new?”

“Yeah.” He opened it and pulled out what remained of his 63 dollars. “It’s not much, but I want you to have this.”

“Edward, no.” Bella shook her head.

“I want to contribute *something*.”

“I’m not taking your money.”

“I don’t expect a free ride. I don’t even care what you spend it on. Just take it, Bella. Please.” Edward dropped the cash onto the counter.

Bella eyed the bills sitting between them. She honestly felt bad taking what little he had when he didn’t even have a job, but she could tell it was important to him. Putting her hands on her hips, she looked him squarely in the eyes.

“Tell you what. If it means that much to you, I’ll accept the money. But I’m only taking half. Deal?”

Edward contemplated her proposal. He didn’t want to argue, but he didn’t want push something that made her uncomfortable, either. He nodded once. “Deal.”

Bella divided the money, sliding half of the bills back toward Edward. He returned them to his wallet, relieved that she somewhat accepted and that he still had a few dollars to his name.

“Are you hungry?” she asked, changing the subject to a more comfortable topic. “I’m making spaghetti.”

“It smells good.”

“Have a seat.” Bella gestured to the small, square card table. It took up the entire dining room. “It’s almost ready.”

They ate mostly in silence, but it wasn’t altogether uncomfortable. Edward stared at the flowers, which sat in the center of the table. His intentions weren’t to make any sort of grand gesture with the bouquet; in fact, he had shied away from anything more romantic on purpose. It was simply a



thank you—a way to show Bella that he appreciated everything she was doing for him. He wished he could do something more, but his options were limited while money was scarce.

Even if he had the means to present Bella with a dozen red roses, he didn't want to overstep her boundaries. He still had yet to figure out if there was something more going on between her and Jake—or anyone else for that matter. Besides, Bella had already made it clear that they were friends. He didn't want to hear her say it again.

Edward volunteered to clean the kitchen after dinner and had just finish drying the last dish when the telephone rang.

"That's probably her." Bella picked up the phone. "Hello?"

"Hello, this is Officer Evenson. I'm here to see Edward Masen."

"Sure, come on up." Bella pressed "9" on the dial pad to buzz her in, and then hung up the phone. "I'll put away the dishes if you want to get the door."

It didn't take long for the officer to reach the apartment. When she knocked, Edward promptly opened the door.

"Hello, Edward. It's nice to see you again."

"Officer." He stepped aside to allow her entrance.

Evenson shook her head at his formality but smiled as she stepped into the apartment. Bella watched her with a combination of curiosity and apprehension. The officer appeared older than Edward—maybe late thirties or early forties—and stood a few inches taller than Bella. She looked nice enough. The only thing intimidating about her was the uniform. However, that didn't change the fact that much of Edward's fate lay in her hands.

"How did it go today? Was the map helpful?"

"Very. No job yet, though."

"It's only been a day. These things can take time for anyone. Don't let it discourage you." Evenson turned to Bella. "You must be Isabella."

"Bella," she corrected. "It's nice to meet you, Officer Evenson."

"Please, call me Esme." The women shook hands. For how delicate Evenson appeared, Bella found her grip deceptively strong. "Edward tells me you're a psychology student at UW."

"Yes. I'm graduating this spring."

"Wonderful! What are your plans once you're finished?"

"I, um . . . I don't really know yet," Bella admitted sheepishly.

"I'm sure things will all fall into place. Are you working?"

Bella hesitated. "No, but I'm looking into a few internships at the moment."

“That’s an excellent idea.” Evenson glanced around the small kitchen. “Bella, I need to take a look around your apartment, but before I do, do you have any questions for me?”

“I don’t think so,” she answered slowly.

Evenson pulled two business cards out of her pocket and handed them to Bella. “I’ll be meeting with Edward once a week for the next two months, and then twice a month after that. Home visits will typically be done by me, but any parole officer may conduct a search at any time. If you have any questions or concerns, no matter how small they may seem, even if you just need someone to talk to, I want you to call me. I’m here for you, too.”

“Really?”

Evenson smiled kindly. “I want Edward to be successful. I know you do too, but it can be overwhelming to have a loved one in his situation. He’s going to turn to you for support. It’s a lot of pressure, it can be frustrating, and if you have no one to turn to who understands the position you’re in, you’re going to reach your breaking point. I don’t want that to happen, and Edward doesn’t want that to happen.”

Bella risked a glance at Edward. His expression was unreadable.

“I’m going to have a quick look around. Nothing too intrusive. You’re more than welcome to accompany me if it makes you more comfortable.”

“Sure, I—” The sudden ringing of Bella’s cell phone interrupted the three of them, and they all turned to look at the offensive device sitting on the counter, blaring out a popular nineties tune.

*I’m too sexy for my shirt*

*Too sexy for my shirt*

*So sexy it hurts*

Edward was close enough to read Jake’s name on the screen. He gave Bella a questioning look.

“If you knew him you’d understand,” she mumbled.

“Why don’t you answer it? I’ll show Officer Evenson around.”

Bella nodded gratefully. She grabbed the phone and quickly turned around to hide her embarrassment. “What?” she hissed in answer.

“Uh . . . hello to you too, sunshine.”

“Sorry. I’m just—what do you want?” she asked, less irritated this time.

“Nothing in particular. Just calling to see how you’re doing.”

Bella sighed. “I’m fine. Edward’s parole officer is here right now. Can I call you back?”

"Oh, yeah, sure. Everything's okay, right?"

"Yes, everything's fine. Standard procedure."

"Okay. Call me when you can."

"Of course."

"See ya, Bella."

Bella ended the call. When she turned around, she was shocked to see Edward standing in the living room watching her. She shouldn't have been surprised. Her bedroom and the bathroom were the only two places in the apartment that afforded any privacy.

Edward looked away quickly, abashed to have been caught. He didn't want her to think he was eavesdropping on purpose. He pointed to her bedroom door. "I didn't know if you'd want me in there," he explained.

Before Bella could respond, Evenson stepped out of the room.

"Everything looks good."

"That's it?" Bella asked.

"For now." Evenson turned to Edward and took his hand. He seemed taken aback at first, but Bella didn't miss the way he squeezed her hand in return. "Good luck with the job search. I'll see you next week. If you need anything before then, call me. That goes for you too, Bella."

"Thank you."

Once Evenson departed, Bella let out a deep breath. "That went better than I expected," she admitted.

"How so?"

"I don't know. I guess I just didn't expect her to actually care, you know? She seems to genuinely want you to succeed."

"She cares about you, too." Edward approached her slowly. When he spoke, his voice was quiet and sincere. "She was right, you know. About you reaching your breaking point. I don't want that to happen."

"I'll be fine. I'm more worried about you."

He reached for her but then thought better and dropped his hand. "I'm serious, Bella."

"I know you are. Don't worry. I can take care of myself."

"But Bella, I don't want to end up hurting you."

"Are you planning on doing something illegal?"

"No!"

"Are you going to violate your parole?"

“No.”

“Then we’ll both be okay,” she insisted.

Edward hoped she was right. He wanted to get his life back, and he didn’t want to cause Bella any emotional distress in the process. He also liked the thought of them being okay together.

“Do you truly believe that?” Edward asked uncertainly. He needed to know if she honestly felt that way. The last thing he wanted was for her to attempt to make him feel better with empty words.

“Yes,” Bella answered with conviction. “I truly do.”



# The Father

The sound of Bella fumbling in the kitchen woke Edward from a restless slumber. It felt like he had just closed his eyes, but by the amount of light filling the room, he knew he had been sleeping for a while. The past three nights were hard for him. Bella's apartment was too dark, too quiet. Edward needed to leave the television on just to have something to block out. Although he was still tired, his body was too used to waking up early in the morning, and he didn't think he would find sleep again no matter how hard he tried.

He lay there, listening to Bella move about the kitchen. The smell of coffee filled the room. Edward took a deep breath and closed his eyes. For the first time since being released, he was finally beginning to feel comfortable. Letting his guard down was no easy task. Logically he knew he was safe. Bella was certainly no threat. But after so many years of watching his back, being defensive was second nature.

Not wanting to be alone any longer, Edward got off the couch, put on pants and a shirt, and pulled back the sheet curtain. He tucked it behind the couch to open up the room before joining Bella in the kitchen.

"Good morning," Bella glanced at Edward briefly and smiled before turning her attention back to the bowl of batter in front of her.

"Morning."

"I thought I'd try making pancakes. You want some?"

"Sure," he answered. "Can I help?"

"Do you have any idea how to make pancakes?" She looked up hopefully.

"Um, no."

“Then, no. You sit down. I’ve got this under control.” The sudden seriousness in her expression combined with her appearance—messy bun, fluffy robe, pillow marks on her face—caused Edward to crack a smile. “What’s so funny?” she asked.

“You.” He helped himself to a cup of coffee before slipping into a folding chair that matched the dining room card table.

Bella narrowed her eyes but said nothing more as she went back to mixing the batter. Her first attempt at making pancakes could only be described as an experiment. She ran into constant problems, and every time she tried to fix one, another would appear in its place. First the skillet was too hot. The batter sizzled and burned as she poured it in the pan. Then it was too cold, and her undercooked pancake broke apart when she tried to flip it. By the time the temperature was perfect, everything stuck to the bottom of the pan. She couldn’t form a perfect circle to save her life, and not one of the cakes were cooked evenly on both sides.

Bella placed the pancakes on the table in a lopsided tower. “Dig in.”

Edward looked at them apprehensively before stabbing the top two with his fork and transferring them to his plate. He smeared a pad of butter over the top and covered the small stack in a copious amount of syrup. He took a bite. Bella studied his face for a reaction, but his expression gave away nothing.

“Well?”

Edward chewed slowly. The pancakes, although dark brown and seemingly overcooked on the outside, were cold and doughy on the inside. They didn’t necessarily taste bad, they just didn’t taste like anything. It gave him the overall impression of eating paste.

“Um . . .” Edward didn’t know how to answer. He didn’t want to insult her, but he didn’t want to lie and run the risk of having to choke down another batch one day, either.

Bella didn’t wait for an answer. She used her fork to cut a triangle out of the side of her own pancake and popped it in her mouth. It only took a few seconds before her face twisted into a grimace. “These are terrible,” she said with a full mouth.

“They’re not that bad.”

Bella gave him a stern look.

“Okay, they’re pretty awful,” he admitted.

“Hey!” Bella frowned and pointed her fork at Edward. “You promised to smile and pretend to like anything I made, remember?” she asked accusingly.

Edward, unable to tell if she was serious, grabbed the syrup and doused his next bite. “They’re fine. They probably just need more syrup.”

"Oh, my god, don't!" Bella giggled. "I was just kidding." She used her fork to knock away the chunk of pancake he was about to put in his mouth. It crumbled as it fell onto his plate. "Don't eat it! It's so bad!"

Edward took one look at her smiling face and began to laugh with her.

"Damn. For a minute I thought you were trying to kill me."

"I'm sorry. I'll do better next time," she promised.

"No. Never make those again. Don't even try."

Bella poked him in the arm with her fork while pretending to be insulted. "Do you want pancakes? We can go out to breakfast."

Edward's smile fell. "I can't afford that."

"I'll buy," Bella offered.

"You aren't buying me breakfast."

"You're eating food I bought now. What's the difference?" she countered.

"It's different." Edward's tone was harsh, causing Bella to stiffen in her chair.

"Okay," she said in a small voice.

Edward prodded his pancakes then sighed and dropped his fork. It fell to the table with a loud clatter. He placed his head into his hands. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be."

"I shouldn't have snapped at you."

Bella didn't reply. Instead, she cleared the dishes from the table and replaced them with two bowls and spoons, a box of cereal, and milk.

"I should just stick to what I know." She poured herself a bowl of cereal. When Edward didn't move, she prepared one for him as well. "You have to eat something," she said as she slid the cereal in front of him. Edward raised his head before begrudgingly accepting it.

"I really didn't mean to be an ass. I'm just . . . stressed."

"That's understandable, I suppose."

"It doesn't make it okay," he mumbled under his breath.

"Hey, I don't have class today. Let's go do something fun."

"I need to find a job, Bella."

"You need to stop being so stressed that you freak out for no reason. It's one day. Besides, it's not like you can't apply somewhere if you see something you like. Let's just go out and do something normal."

Edward considered his options carefully before agreeing. He wanted to spend time with Bella. One day wouldn't be too much of a setback—it wasn't like his situation could get worse. And like she said, he could still look for work while they were out.

Unfortunately, as they were about to leave, there was a loud banging on the door.

"Isabella!" The sound of her father's angry voice caused Bella to jump.

*Pound. Pound. Pound.*

"Isabella, open this god damned door right now!"

"Oh, shit," Bella said in a hushed voice. "It's Charlie."

"Charlie?" Edward's mind immediately went to jealous boyfriends and jilted ex-lovers.

"My dad."

"You didn't tell him I was here." It wasn't a question, and Bella's silence confirmed what he already knew. Edward eyed the door, panic setting in. This was much worse than he originally expected. "What should I do?"

"I know you're home, Isabella. Your car's out front. Open the door or I'll break it down!" Charlie Swan shouted.

"Hide."

"Hide?" Edward looked at her in surprise. He gestured around the room. "I think it's pretty obvious you have a house guest, don't you?" he hissed under his breath.

"Crap. Crap, crap, crap."

"Masen, I know you're in there!" Charlie pounded on the door so hard the wood began to splinter. "Do I need to remind you that you're still serving your sentence? If you know what's good for you, you will open this door right now!"

"I'm coming!" Bella choked out. Her father's subtle threat was all she needed to put her in motion. She braced herself for his fury as she opened the door to a fully uniformed Assistant Chief.

Relief flashed across Charlie Swan's face the moment he saw his daughter was safe; however, it didn't last long. The minute his gaze fell on Edward, he pushed Bella aside and marched into the apartment.

"I knew it," he seethed. Instinctively, Edward backed away. "I went to pay you a little visit today. Imagine my surprise when they told me your room had been cancelled last week." Charlie shook with rage as he continued closing in on Edward. "Just what the hell do you think you're doing here?"

Edward struggled to breathe steadily. His heart pounded violently, and sweat began to bead on his forehead. He clenched and unclenched his fists. Everything in his body was telling him to either run or fight. It took everything he had to stand in one spot.



“Bella was kind enough to give me somewhere to stay, sir,” he managed to say.

Charlie’s face turned beet red, and his lips formed a thin line. “You motherfucking piece of shit.”

“Charlie!” Bella tried to call him off, but he didn’t even hear her.

“You’re coming with me.”

“Sir, please—”

“Charlie—” Bella tried again.

Charlie whipped around and glared at Bella. “You stay the hell out of this! And you—” He turned back to Edward and jabbed his index finger roughly into the ex-convict’s chest. “Shut the hell up. Let’s go.”

Edward hesitated. He didn’t want to piss off Charlie—both an officer of the law and Bella’s father—but spending almost 12 years in prison had made him apprehensive of law enforcement. “Am I being arrested?” he asked as respectfully as possible.

“If you don’t come with me right now, I will find a reason to arrest you. Now get your sorry ass through that door.”

In the blink of an eye, Bella moved to stand between her father and Edward. “Edward didn’t do anything wrong!” she shouted angrily.

“It’s okay, Bella.” Edward reached out to place a comforting hand on her arm. The moment he made contact, Charlie sprang into action. It only took a split second before Edward was face first on the ground. Cold metal pressed into the back of his neck, followed by the familiar click of a hammer being cocked. He froze.

“Oh, my god!” Bella screamed.

Edward didn’t struggle as Charlie secured handcuffs around his wrists.

“Don’t mess with me,” he said before holstering the pistol and dragging Edward to his feet.

“Why are you doing this to him?” Bella asked between sobs. Charlie didn’t answer as he roughly shoved Edward toward the door. “Dad!”

Charlie paused briefly. The spontaneous term of endearment was very unexpected. He chose not to respond, however, and continued on his path.

Hearing Bella so upset broke Edward’s heart, but he couldn’t bear to look at her. The sight of her tear-stained face would haunt him forever, and if they never saw each other again, he didn’t want it to be his last memory of her.

Charlie guided Edward through the apartment complex and out the front door, earning some odd looks from curious passersby. It wasn’t until Edward realized they were heading toward an unmarked squad car that he started to lose his composure.

"I didn't do anything wrong. I swear!" Edward didn't resist as Charlie placed his hand on his head and pushed him into the backseat of the unmarked Volvo. He struggled to find a comfortable position with his hands still cuffed behind him.

Charlie circled the car and got into the driver's seat without saying a word. Edward didn't understand what was going on. He hadn't violated his parole or done anything illegal, so there was no reason for him to be arrested if that's what was in fact happening. He hadn't even been read his rights. The only thing left to assume was that Charlie had a personal vendetta against him for moving into his daughter's apartment.

"Where are you taking me?"

"Where you belong."

Edward bit down on his lip to keep quiet. The pain temporarily distracted him from the situation at hand. His nerves were frayed, and he didn't know how much more he could take without breaking down completely. The area wasn't familiar to him, but he knew enough to recognize that they were headed in the direction of Waterview State Correctional Facility.

"Don't do this," Edward begged. "I didn't do anything!" He looked toward the roof of the car, but it didn't stop the tears from falling. "Please, I can't go back. Don't take me back."

Edward's breathing became ragged when Charlie turned onto the prison grounds, and he desperately tried to pull himself together. The evidence of his weakness was on his face in the form of tears and snot, and he wanted more than anything to be able to wipe it away before going inside. To his surprise, Charlie drove up to the front gate and stopped the car.

"You see that place?" Charlie asked as he stared out the windshield at the complex. "You fuck up and you're going back there, but if you ever hurt my daughter . . ." He adjusted the rearview mirror so he could look Edward in the eyes. When he finally spoke, his voice was quiet and menacing. "I can guarantee you'll never see the inside of that place again because you'll be a dead man, do you understand me?"

When Edward didn't answer, Charlie raised his voice.

"I said do you fucking understand me?"

"Yes, I understand," Edward yelled. "I would never hurt Bella."

Charlie scowled at him through the mirror before throwing the car in gear and taking off down the road. Edward was glad to be off prison property once again, but he was disappointed that they weren't heading in the direction from where they came. It wasn't long before they drove past the District Court building where the parole offices were held.

"Where are we going?" Edward chanced to ask.

Charlie didn't answer.

They parked in front of a large brick building. The sign above the entrance read SEATTLE POLICE DEPARTMENT.

Charlie pushed Edward, still cuffed, through the corridors. A few people acknowledged Charlie with a nod as they passed. One man even asked, "Need any help with that one, Swan?"

"I've got it under control," the Assistant Chief answered. "I need one of your rooms."

"Number four is open."

They entered a small, unmarked room. Edward couldn't tell if its purpose was for conferences or interrogations.

"Sit," Charlie commanded.

Edward used his foot to slide the chair from under the table. He struggled to get comfortable with his hands still secured behind his back.

"I don't know what the hell you think you're doing or what you possibly could have said to manipulate my daughter into taking you in." Charlie began to pace the room. "Bella is a good girl. For Christ's sake, she's just a baby! I won't allow some criminal to waltz into her life and fuck it up." He pounded his fists against the table. Edward flinched.

"It was easy for you, wasn't it? Apply to have people write you then wait for a young, impressionable girl to come along? I've seen this before. How many girls did you string along before deciding to prey on my daughter?"

His accusation caused Edward to blanch. This must have been the reason why Bella had been suspicious. "She's the only one."

"So you decided to weasel your way into Bella's life and use her. Tell me something. Were you going to get your hands on her money and run? Or were you going to ride it out as long as possible? Squat in her home until you got sent back to prison or knocked her up?"

Edward's eyes went wide. "No," he said. "It isn't like that."

"What exactly did you tell her to get her to fall for your tricks?" Charlie continued. "That you changed? That you were all alone? That you needed her?"

"I am alone!" Edward yelled. "I've never lied to Bella, not once. I'm not using her. I love her."

Charlie kicked a chair; it flew across the room. Profanities spilled from his mouth. He approached Edward, stopping when he stood directly in front of him.

Edward squeezed his eyes shut in an attempt to stay calm, so he was completely unprepared for the sudden blow to the side of his face. The force snapped his head sideways, and he gasped at the pain radiating from his cheek and eye socket. His vision blurred, and his left eye began to water

profusely. A stream of blood flowed from his nose and past his parted lips. He spit the blood from his mouth, speckling himself and the table in red.

Charlie, shocked by his own actions, shook out his fist as he watched Edward struggle to compose himself. Throughout his career, he had dealt with terrible people. Self-control was always one of his greatest strengths, but never before had his work crossed into his personal life.

He stormed across the room swiftly, and with a shaky hand, lifted the phone hanging on the wall. "Get me Heidi," he said gruffly.

Edward tried to wipe his face on his sleeve, but his chin was the only part that would make contact. The bleeding of his nose had slowed, but it was still trickling out steadily. He bowed his head and watched a crimson puddle form between his feet.

"Heidi, Swan here. I picked up Masen. He was at Bella's. . . . What's he going to do about it? I don't give a fuck about consequences when it comes to my daughter's safety. . . . I want to know who approved the address change after the original parole release had been filed."

Charlie waited impatiently while Heidi searched for his request. He turned his attention to Edward. His previously white shirt was now stained red. From his own experience, Charlie knew that head injuries bled a lot, making them appear worse than they really were. He didn't think it was anything that required a doctor, and if Edward didn't request medical attention, he certainly wasn't going to offer it.

"Yes, Heidi, I'm still here. . . . Evenson?" he asked in surprise. "Why the hell would Evenson approve of a parolee living in a one bedroom apartment with a single female? They aren't related, and she sure as hell isn't old enough to have known him before his conviction. . . . I will take it up with Evenson. Get her on the line."

A minute later, Charlie smashed the phone down onto the hook. "Fucking voicemail," he muttered. "Evenson is done. I won't stand for this." He stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

Edward slumped forward and rested his head on the table. He was about to lose everything all over again. Having people who cared about him—it was too good to be true. He knew he should have never gotten his hopes up.

Edward didn't know how long he was alone in the room, but he was fairly certain it could have been measured in hours. At some point the bleeding had ceased, along with Edward's emotions. He shut them off as he had done during his years spent in prison. It was easier that way.

When the Assistant Chief finally returned, he walked up to Edward and kicked the base of his chair. "Stand up."



Edward stood on unsteady legs.

“If I had one valid reason to hold you here, believe me, I would lock you up and throw away the key. I want you gone, and don’t even think about going anywhere near my daughter ever again. I’ll be watching you, and when you fuck up, because you will, I’ll be the one there to arrest you.”

Charlie unlocked the cuffs, freeing Edward’s arms.

“Now get the hell out of my sight.”

# The Abode

Bella watched as the rain began to fall, hitting her patio door and blurring her vision to the outside world. She turned her head and rested her forehead against Jake's shoulder. Her tears had long since dried, and she sighed deeply. He squeezed her arm and rubbed her soothingly.

"He'll be okay." It wasn't the first time Jake had said that since arriving at her apartment an hour ago.

"I've never seen Charlie so mad," she said. "I didn't know what to do. Edward wouldn't even look at me."

Jake didn't know how to reply. "Are you hungry? Do you want to go get something to eat?"

"No," Bella answered quickly. "I want to be here when he gets back."

"I could bring something back for you."

Bella shook her head. "I'm really not hungry."

They sat in silence awhile longer. The sound of a key in the lock had them both on their feet. Bella made a beeline toward the door but came to an abrupt halt when it opened to reveal a disheveled Edward. The side of his face was red and swollen, and a bruise was forming under his left eye. There was dried blood on the lower half of his face and down the front of his shirt.

"Oh, my god! Edward, what happened?" Bella reached toward his face. Edward took a step back, jerking his head away.

"Don't," he warned.

She dropped her arms and looked at him in shock. "Did my dad do this?" she asked in disbelief.

"Can I use your cell phone?"

"Edward?"

"I need your phone, Bella," he said harshly.

Bella quickly retrieved her cell phone from the living room and offered it to him. Without another word, Edward took it and disappeared into the bathroom. She looked over her shoulder at Jake. His bewildered expression mirrored her own.

Edward locked the bathroom door behind him and pulled Evenson's business card from his wallet. He took a seat on the counter and dialed her number. It dropped into voicemail. He hung up and tried again. This time she answered.

"Evenson speaking."

"Officer Evenson, this is Edward Masen."

"Edward, hello. How can I help you?"

"You told me I was supposed to report any incidents I had with the law . . ."

It took her a moment to reply. "Hold on." There were muffled voices on the other end and what sounded like a door closing. "What happened?"

"Bella's father, he's . . ." He stopped, unsure of how to explain the situation.

"Charles Swan. I'm aware of who he is."

Her statement took Edward by surprise. "You are?"

"Of course I am," she said matter-of-factly. "Did you think I would approve of an address change for one of my parolees without knowing the full extent of their living situation?"

"Why did you?" he asked. "Why did you approve it?"

"Edward, fifty percent of all inmates released on parole return to prison within the first year. In my personal experience, those with the strongest support networks are the most successful. If I have a choice between sending someone to a halfway house, where half the people they live with could potentially be a bad influence, or putting them in a safe environment with someone they know and trust, I'm going to do the latter. I fully reviewed your case, and I didn't believe you posed any threat to Bella or anyone else for that matter. I know the situation is a bit . . . unconventional, but I didn't consider it means for denying you're request. Now, I highly doubt you called to ask me the basis for approving your residence. What do you need to tell me?"

"Bella's father arrested me." When there was no response, Edward continued. "I swear to you I didn't do anything. I'm not even sure I was arrested, technically."

"What do you mean?"

"He showed up at the apartment and told me to go with him. When I asked him why, he cuffed me and brought me to the police station. He never gave me a reason or read me my rights or anything like that."

"Is that so?" Evenson asked. "Did anything else happen?"

Edward hesitated. "No."

"I can't help you if you don't tell me exactly what happened."

"I don't want help," he snapped. "I just wanted you to know he brought me in so I don't get in trouble for not reporting it."

"Fair enough," she replied. "Where are you now?"

"At Bella's." A brief silence fell between them. "I can't stay here," Edward finally whispered. "I don't know where else to go."

"Has Bella asked you to leave?"

"No. Her father—"

"Edward, don't you dare leave that apartment!" Evenson's calm composure gave way to fury. "Officer Swan may be high in the ranks of the State Patrol, but he is not above the law. You have a legal obligation to occupy that residence. If you aren't there tonight, you'll be violating your parole. Then he will have a reason to arrest you."

Edward weighed his options. A night on the streets seemed a lot more survivable than another visit from Charlie Swan.

"Stay put. Please."

"Okay," Edward reluctantly agreed. "I think he's going to fire you," he blurted out.

Evenson laughed dryly. "Charles Swan doesn't have the authority to fire me. It's not something you should be worrying about anyway. Focus on yourself. If he harasses you again, I want you or Bella to call me immediately. Understand?"

"Yes."

"I have to report what you've told me. If at any point you decide there's something you want to add, let me know."

"There's not," he insisted.

Once the conversation ended, Edward stood and looked in the mirror. His vision was no longer blurry, but his eye was swelling shut. He leaned in and looked at his nose. It was still straight and didn't appear to be broken.

Deciding that taking a shower would be more comfortable than wiping off the dried blood with a cloth, he left the bathroom for a change of clothes. Jake was sitting on the arm of the couch, watching television. He stood and faced Edward as he approached.

"Where's Bella?" asked Edward.

"She went to get you ice."

Edward nodded stiffly. He wasn't thrilled that Jake was there with Bella while he was trapped at the police department all day. Jealousy coursed through him.

"Look, if you're going to give me the lecture about not hurting your girlfriend, you can save it for another time. I've already heard it once today, and I'm really not in the mood to hear it again."

"Girlfriend?" Jake's eyes widened. "Bella's not my girlfriend!"

Edward shifted uncomfortably. "She's not?"

Jake made a disgusted face. "No. Bella and I are just friends."

"You're not the guy she's been seeing?" Edward hadn't meant to verbalize the accusation, let alone dig for information, but now that the subject had been broached, he couldn't help but ask.

"What guy?" Jake snorted. "Bella hasn't gone out with anyone in months."

"Oh, sorry. I didn't mean to assume."

They stood in awkward silence.

"So," Jake began suddenly. "First meeting with Bella's dad didn't go so well, I take it?"

Edward chuckled humorlessly. "You could say that."

"I met the guy once." Jake shook his head. "Scared the ever living shit out of me. It was the first and only time I was at Bella's house while he was home."

"Understandable," Edward mumbled.

Bella returned at that moment, interrupting their conversation. "Hey," she said as she frantically dug through a shopping bag and pulled out an ice pack. "I got you this. It needs to be chilled, though."

"That's fine. I was just about to take a shower."

"I should go," Jake interrupted. He patted Edward on the shoulder before walking up to Bella and giving her a hug.

"Thanks for coming over," she said.

"Any time. Call me if you need anything else."

Edward watched them carefully, looking for signs of anything more than friendship. It was a relief to hear Jake say they weren't more than friends, but he still wasn't completely convinced. If they were, in fact, just friends, their closeness only highlighted the shortcomings of his own relationship with Bella.

He took his time in the shower, letting the water rinse the dried blood from his face while he tried to decide what to do. He was stuck in a very delicate position. Charlie Swan had made it clear that he wasn't to be near Bella, but Officer Evenson was right. If he left without first having a new



residence approved, he would be violating his parole orders. He didn't want to leave; however, he also didn't want to be there when Charlie came back, which he undoubtedly would.

Edward spent so much time in the bathroom that he was surprised to find Bella still waiting for him when he got out. She stood and made her way to the freezer.

"The ice pack is probably cold by now. I got two. I didn't know if you had any other injuries."

"You didn't have to do that."

"And *you* have to ice your face," she said in exasperation. She shoved the compress into his hands.

"Thanks." Edward walked to the couch and sat down before holding the ice pack against his face. The cold felt good against the throbbing ache surrounding his eye. "Do you have ibuprofen or aspirin—anything like that?"

Bella fidgeted nervously with the cuff on her sleeve. Her eyes shifted to the floor.

"If you don't, that's fine," he said quickly. "Don't make another trip for me."

"I do, it's just . . ." Bella stopped speaking. Edward looked up at her, waiting for her to continue. "Are you going to be okay if you take something?" she asked uncertainly.

It took Edward a moment to figure out what she was asking. When he did, he sighed and covered his other eye with his free hand. "I can take over the counter meds. It won't be a problem."

Bella fetched a small bottle of pills from its hiding spot in her bedroom and gave it to Edward along with a glass of water. She sat down on the opposite end of the couch, facing him, and placed his pillow on her lap. "Lie down."

Edward moved slowly, positioning himself on his back with his head propped on the pillow. Bella took the ice pack from him and gently held it against his face. He closed his eyes.

"Are you going to tell me what happened?"

"It was nothing."

"I'm not stupid, you know."

"I know."

"Then tell me. I'm a big girl, Edward. I can handle the truth. If you don't, my mind will fabricate something way worse."

Edward doubted she'd find the truth much better. "I don't want to say anything that will jeopardize your relationship with your father."

Bella removed the ice pack and looked him in the eyes. "What did he do?" she demanded.

"He brought me to the station and yelled at me mostly." Edward took a deep breath. "He said I was taking advantage of you."

"That's just ridiculous," Bella spat.

"He told me to stay away from you."

"That's not his decision to make. What else?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

Bella swept her finger beneath Edward's eye. He tensed at first, but relaxed when she didn't use enough pressure to cause pain. It felt nice, and he closed his eyes in order to focus on the softness of her fingertips.

"Why did he hit you?"

Edward shrugged. "I must have said something that upset him," he answered vaguely.

"You didn't hit him back, did you?"

"Would you be mad if I did?"

"Yes, but only because I don't want you to get in trouble."

"I couldn't have if I wanted to," he answered. "I was still cuffed."

Bella froze. Her hand fell from Edward's face. "What?"

Edward didn't repeat himself. Instead he held up one arm, displaying the red mark left behind by the metal handcuffs. Bella wrapped her fingers around his wrist and traced the line with her thumb.

"Does it hurt?"

"Not as much as my face."

"Oh, Edward. I'm so sorry."

"Why are you apologizing? You didn't do anything wrong."

"This is all my fault. I should have told him."

"Why didn't you?"

"I didn't think he'd understand," she whispered.

Edward twisted his wrist out of her grasp and grabbed the back of her hand. He placed her palm against his chest and pressed down lightly. "Is this okay?"

"Yes."

He squeezed her hand. "Is it *really* okay?"

Bella shushed him and placed the compress back on his face. "I can't believe he did this to you," she said sadly. "If I had known he was capable of . . . god, Edward, I'm so sorry. I should have done something." An angry tear slipped down her cheek.

"There's probably nothing you could have done. Don't beat yourself up over it."

"Does Esme know?"

"Only what she has to."

"Are you going to press charges?"

"Of course not."

"Why not?" she asked in surprise.

"Bella, he's your father."

"So what? It doesn't give him the right to hurt you."

"I don't want to cause you any more problems."

"This isn't about me," she growled. "He pulled a gun on you, Edward! He restrained you and punched you. For no reason! Right now I don't care if I ever see him again."

"How can you say that?" Edward asked heatedly. "He's your father. He obviously cares about you."

"Why does it matter to you whether he's a part of my life?"

"Because I know what it's like to not have a family!" he yelled. "You're lucky to have a relationship with him. Don't throw it away because of me. I'm not worth it."

"Yes, you are."

Bella's words were so quiet that Edward wondered if they were a figment of his imagination. He swallowed back the lump in his throat and concentrated on the feel of Bella's hand beneath his. Her skin was warm and soft. The weight of her arm against his chest was soothing. Edward didn't dare hope that their closeness would carry into tomorrow, so he absorbed as much of the affection as he could, memorizing everything about this moment as if it were the last. When he spoke, his voice cracked with the emotions he was trying so hard to push aside.

"I don't want to leave," he said.

"Then don't."

When twenty minutes had passed, Bella removed the ice pack once again. "I think you're all set," she said. "If you're still up in two hours, ice it again. Otherwise do it first thing in the morning." She began to move from beneath the pillow. Edward squeezed her hand tightly.

"Please don't leave yet," he said. "I don't want to be out here alone."

Bella wordlessly shifted into a more comfortable position and leaned her head against the back of the couch. It was late, and she'd had an emotional day. Her eyes drifted closed. Edward trailed his fingertips across the back of her hand, tracing mindless patterns. It was the last thing she remembered before drifting off to sleep.

# The Shiner

When Bella woke up in the middle of the night, she immediately sensed that something wasn't right. She sat up abruptly, and her eyes widened as she attempted to take in her surroundings. It only took a second for her to register that she was alone in her bedroom. The last thing she could remember was being on the couch with Edward, and she realized he must have carried her to bed while she slept.

Once her eyes adjusted to the darkness, Bella slid out of bed and slunk into the living room. Edward was fast asleep on the couch. She went to the kitchen for a glass of water before retreating to her room, undressing, and climbing back into bed. It didn't take her long to fall back asleep. She didn't awake again until her alarm clock went off at a more reasonable hour.

Edward was still sleeping soundly by the time Bella was ready to leave for class. She quickly scribbled a note for him and left it on the counter where he would hopefully see it.

*Edward,*

*Don't forget to ice for 20 minutes every two hours. Both packs are in the freezer. I hope your day goes better. See you soon.*

*Bella*

*p.s. Call me if you need anything.*

Bella only had one class on Friday morning, and by the time noon rolled around, she was more than ready to start her weekend.

"Miss Swan," her professor called out as she was leaving. Bella stopped and begrudgingly gave her full attention.

"Yes, Professor Tanner?"

"Have you thought any more about the internship we discussed last week?"

"Oh, uh, not really," she admitted. "I've had a lot going on lately."

"I think it would be a great opportunity for you, especially since you're graduating in a few months and still undecided about your career path."

"You said it was social work, right?" Bella asked.

"Yes. It isn't for everyone, but I think it's something you might enjoy. There are many entry level positions available for people with undergraduate degrees in psychology," the professor said encouragingly.

"I don't know." Bella hesitated. "It's not something I really pictured myself doing."

"At least speak to the program director before you decide against it. Do you still have the card I gave you?"

"Yes, it's at home. I'll give her a call next week."

"You make sure to do that, and tell her I sent you."

On the way home, Bella's cell phone rang. It was Jake. He asked if he could spend the night. Bella was hesitant, but Jake assured her that he wouldn't be an intrusion and had already figured out an alternative sleeping arrangement. She agreed, and Jake promised to be over after he got off work.

The apartment was quiet when Bella arrived. Her note was gone, and one of the ice packs was missing from the freezer. Edward was nowhere to be seen. At first, she assumed he had left, but upon further inspection of the heap of blankets on the couch, she discovered he was in bed. She pulled the blankets down, exposing the back of his head.

"Edward?" she whispered. "Are you awake?"

"I am now," he grumbled into his pillow.

"Is everything okay?"

"Just peachy," he answered sarcastically.

"What's wrong?" she asked. Edward groaned but otherwise remained silent. Bella placed her palm on his back and rubbed gently. "Come on. Talk to me."

"I spent the morning calling different places I applied to," he said quietly. "So far I've been rejected by half. A few wanted to interview me in person. I can't go anywhere like this!" Edward



turned his face toward Bella. His eye was still swollen, and the bruise below had developed into an angry shade of red. "So I thought, fuck it. Why bother? I'll just lie here and wait for your father to come shoot me."

"Edward," Bella said softly. She sat on the edge of the couch. He shifted to give her more room. "It's a big city, and this is just a minor setback. What's a few more days, anyway?"

"It's going to take at least two weeks for this thing to go away," he said. "I don't want to sit here and be worthless, but no one is going to take me seriously now! It's bad enough that I'm on parole. No one's going to give me the benefit of the doubt. I'm fucked. I hope your father does shoot me. Put me out of my misery." He turned away from her and buried his face in the back of the couch.

"Hush," Bella demanded. She tugged on his shoulder until he rolled onto his back. Then she took his face gently between her hands. She thought back to the first time they met and wondered how she would have felt had he looked like he did right now. Would she have thought the worst of him? Would it have frightened her? She didn't think so. In fact, she was certain that she would have felt the same inexplicable pull regardless of his outward appearance. "First of all, no one is going to shoot you. Second, it's just a bruise. The timing is bad, but it'll heal. You're going to be okay. Everything is going to work out. I just know it."

"I like it when you touch me." Edward's honest declaration was unexpected. Blood rushed to Bella's head, heating her skin and no doubt turning her cheeks a bright shade of pink. "It feels nice."

She recalled the way he held her hand during her visit to the prison. How he hugged her tightly and kissed her cheek.

*It's been so long. Forgive me,* he had written afterward.

Bella noticed how Edward had kept his distance from her on his first day out of prison. It wasn't until they were crammed in her twin bed that he made any sort of move, and even then, she knew his actions were a direct response to her own. After Bella insisted they were just friends, he didn't touch her at all. At least, not until last night, and only after she initiated the contact. Bella couldn't deny that she enjoyed the simple gesture of holding his hand, and after his reaction to it, she understood how important such a basic human touch meant to him.

Without thinking, she bent forward and softly kissed his bruised face. Edward closed his eyes and exhaled sharply.

"Bella?" He said her name with a combination of uncertainty and hopefulness. She pulled away slightly. When their eyes met, Bella saw her own surprise reflected there.

"I'm sorry," she apologized quietly and pushed herself into a seated position.

“Don’t be.” Edward sat up, closing the distance between them. His eyes were focused on her lips. “I liked it.”

“I shouldn’t have—” Bella shook her head, desperately trying to get a grip on her thoughts. It was difficult with Edward so very close, yet she couldn’t bring herself to move from the couch. If anything, she wanted to be closer. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Kiss me,” he whispered.

Edward waited, never taking his gaze off of her lips, afraid that if he so much as blinked, she would disappear. Bella’s breath stuttered as he placed an arm loosely around her waist.

“It’s not a good idea,” she said weakly.

“Who cares?” Edward leaned closer and brushed his nose against hers. “Kiss me.”

Bella couldn’t deny that she wanted to, and it only took her a split second to make a decision. She closed her eyes and kissed his lips. They were warm and soft, and molded perfectly with her own. He smelled absolutely divine. She parted her lips slightly and tasted his skin on her tongue. Edward moaned quietly. The vibrations caused her stomach to flutter in excitement.

Edward broke away first, ending the kiss almost as quickly as it began. He panted as he leaned his forehead against hers. “I could keep going,” he said in a hoarse voice.

“Edward—”

“Friends,” he said, cutting her off. “I know. It was nice, all the same.”

Bella was unsure whether to be relieved or disappointed by his unprompted acknowledgement of their friendship. She stood, and Edward reluctantly let her go. “I’m going to make lunch, and then I have an assignment to finish,” she said. “What time is your group session?”

“Seven.”

“Do you want a ride?”

Edward nodded.

“Okay.” She started toward the kitchen, but then stopped and turned to face him once again. “Jake’s spending the night,” she added. “He’ll be over later.” Edward’s expression darkened. “What?”

He pursed his lips together and regarded her momentarily. “Is he coming over because you’re afraid to be alone with me?”

“No!” It felt like something was suddenly crushing Bella’s chest. “Of course not. Why would you think that?”

“I make you uncomfortable,” he stated.

“Sometimes,” Bella admitted. “But I’m not afraid of you.” She said it with such conviction that Edward didn’t argue.

“How long is this going to last?” Bella asked when they arrived at Edward’s group therapy.

“An hour. You don’t have to wait. I can walk back.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah.”

Bella kept her eyes on him as he climbed out of her car and disappeared into the large brick building. She didn’t feel like going home, but there wasn’t anywhere else she wanted to be either. Turning off the car, she dropped her face into her hands.

When she first started writing Edward, she did it for the sole purpose of bettering the life of a stranger. But he was no longer a stranger to whom Bella felt a casual indifference. Somewhere along the line, Edward had become someone important, someone who was constantly on her mind. She wanted to know more about him. She wanted him to be happy. More than once she had wondered if their relationship could ever develop into something more, but she pushed those thoughts away. Getting involved with Edward would not be beneficial to either of them.

Since moving to Washington, Bella had shied away from romantic relationships. She wanted to focus on college. She needed to figure out a career path. Her entire future was ahead of her, and she would not sacrifice it or allow her heart to become a casualty because of a man. In the past, her decision not to enter into a relationship had been easy. No one had ever captured her heart.

But now—unexpectedly and much to Bella’s surprise—someone had.

Bella’s feelings aside, there were plenty of reasons why she believed Edward, specifically, wasn’t a good candidate for a relationship. He needed to get his life on track, find steady work, and a permanent place to live. Being in a relationship, she believed, would only distract him from the things he needed to do and set him up for failure.

Even if he could somehow handle a relationship on top of all his other struggles, she worried that it wasn’t her, but the idea of her, that he wanted so badly. It’d been years since Edward had any sort of interpersonal relationship with anyone. Aside from her, he was virtually alone, and she didn’t want him to cling to her just because she was the only person he had.

Not only that, but with Edward’s criminal history, he most likely wouldn’t be accepted by her family. If Bella could present him in a good light, then perhaps her mother, Renee, would approve of him. She had a feeling it was too late for him to be accepted by her father, not that Edward would want to accept Charlie after the way he acted yesterday. Had she done things differently—if Edward weren’t living with her and she had introduced him properly—she was positive it wouldn’t have

made a difference in the end. She had lived without a father for the first 18 years of her life. It would be hard to lose him now, but the pain would be bearable. Losing her mother, on the other hand, was quite a different story.

Tears pricked her eyes as she thought about what had happened yesterday. She knew she had to do *something* to make things right by Edward. She just wasn't sure what. Bella wanted to confront Charlie. The only problem was she had absolutely no idea what to say. It was a relief, to say the least, that he hadn't returned to the apartment or tried to contact her. She hoped it was because he was too ashamed to show his face.

She thought of Edward's bruised face, which led to her thinking about kissing his cheek, and then about the kiss they shared. He seemed to like it. She did, too. She wanted to do it again.

Never before had she felt so many conflicting emotions.

A loud knock on the window caused her to jump. Edward stood outside the passenger door. The scene was eerily familiar to the day he was released. Had it only been four days ago? She couldn't believe how much her life had changed in such a short period of time.

"It's open," Bella said loudly.

Edward opened the door and slid into the car. "You came back."

"Er . . . yeah."

"Thanks," he said in relief. "I didn't realize how chilly it was outside. I still need to get a jacket." Edward rubbed his hands together and frowned. "It's cold in here. How long have you been waiting?"

"Not long," Bella lied. She started the car and turned the heat on high. "How did it go in there?"

"Fine." Edward shrugged. "I hope I don't have to go to these for long. Three times a week seems a bit . . . excessive."

"It'll be over before you know it."

"Yeah," he said hopefully. "Still, it's a lot to ask of you. I'm sure you have better things to do than chauffeur me around."

"I don't mind. You can always take my car if you want to."

"Don't have a license," Edward mumbled.

"So get one." Seeing his bewildered expression, Bella suppressed a giggle. "What, never thought of it before or something?"

"Guess I hadn't." He looked at her cautiously. "You really don't mind if I use your car?"

"Of course not."

Edward reached across the center console and placed his hand directly above Bella's knee. The contact caused her to tense at first, but she quickly relaxed. He gave her a shy smile. She smiled nervously in return. His fingers squeezed her gently before he released his hold and placed his hand in his own lap.

When they arrived at the apartment, Bella spotted a familiar tuck in the parking lot. "Looks like Jake's here."

Edward grunted a response. As they entered the building, his insecurities got the best of him once again. "Are you sure he's not here because of me?"

Bella rolled her eyes out of frustration, but when she turned to tease him and saw the pleading look on his face, she decided not to give him a hard time. "Jake's parents fight. A lot," she added. "It's hard for him. He doesn't like to be home. Especially on weekends."

Edward's eyes softened, and he nodded in understanding.

A loud noise was coming from inside Bella's apartment, and they gave each other a curious look as they stood outside her door. She unlocked the deadbolt and opened it. Jake sat on a half-inflated, large, blue air mattress.

"There goes my living room," she muttered under her breath.

"Hey," Jake called out over the sound of the air pump. "I'm almost done." Once the air mattress was inflated to his desired firmness, he turned off the pump and stood to greet them. "Bells." He gave his friend a quick hug before turning to Edward and gesturing toward his eye. "Classy," he teased.

"Yeah." Edward's reply was dry.

"Where'd you find *that*?" Bella pointed to the mattress that took up the remaining floor space of her living room.

"It was Becky's. Found it under her bed this morning. Awesome, huh? This way I'll have somewhere to sleep and we won't have to triple up on the couch. What movie are we watching tonight anyway? I brought popcorn!"

"What—" Bella was about to ask why he was snooping under his sister's bed but decided she'd rather not know. "Never mind. You guys can pick the movie."

One pizza, seven sodas, and two bags of popcorn later, the trio were settled comfortably in the small living room. Jake set up the third movie of the evening before falling onto his air mattress. Bella and Edward shared the couch. As the movie started, she stifled a yawn. Edward, in tune to her every move, turned to look at her.

"Tired?" he mouthed. Bella shrugged noncommittally. "Lie down."



"I'm fine," she whispered.

Edward grabbed his pillow from the floor and tossed it at Bella. She accepted it despite her initial reaction to give it back. It smelled like him, and she blushed, remembering the softness of his lips. Placing the pillow under her head, Bella brought her legs on the couch, curling them beneath her. Edward wrapped his fingers around her ankles and tugged, straightening her legs. He placed her feet on his lap and covered her with the throw folded on the back of the couch. She sighed contentedly and closed her eyes. Once again, she was lulled to sleep with his fingertips burning hot on her skin.

# The Chamber

Saturday passed uneventfully. Edward attended yet another support group. He was convinced it was no accident the meetings were held at night on the weekends and wondered if the powers that be thought it was the best way to keep him out of trouble. Although he didn't mind hearing the parole experiences of others, he didn't feel attending meetings for drug and alcohol addicts was beneficial to him at this point in his life. He decided to bring it up on Tuesday, when he would have a short one-on-one with his counselor.

It was midmorning on Sunday when Edward grabbed his map of potential employers from the counter and silently crept out the door, careful not to wake Bella or Jake. The three of them had played video games and once again watched movies late into the night, and he didn't want to disrupt either of them.

As Edward stepped outside into the weak winter sun, he slid on the sunglasses Jake had offered to let him use. They didn't quite cover the evidence of his run in with Charlie, but they were better than nothing.

Referencing the map every so often, Edward made his way down previously unvisited streets, stopping at businesses that seemed like feasible employment options. Though he believed actively searching for a job with his current appearance would prove to be fruitless, he decided there wouldn't be any harm in picking up applications. He could submit them once his face healed. At least, while doing this, it helped him not to feel like a complete leech.

After visiting countless cafés, coffee shops, and retail stores, Edward was both physically and emotionally exhausted. He bought a sandwich and bottle of water from a convenience store and relaxed on a park bench. His eyes scoured the map as he ate, searching for the best route back to

Bella's. He was torn between taking the shortest way and the way with the most job opportunities. In the end, his fatigue won out, and he chose the path with the least amount of walking.

Edward hadn't gotten very far when the display window of a store caught his eye. He froze, staring at the items inside. Taking a step back, he looked up to read the sign over the door. Then he looked at his map. He frowned. Surely he would have noticed a place like this; he had specifically looked for one. He read the sign again.

#### CULLEN'S CHAMBER

He could barely contain his excitement as he stepped inside.

The store had a wide open floor plan with high ceilings. A wall of electric guitars greeted him as he entered, their shiny bodies glinting in the bright overhead lighting. Edward felt like a kid in a candy store. Amplifiers and speakers. DJ equipment and lighting. Drums and percussion. Walls of accessories and rows of sheet music. Sound proof rooms lined the perimeter of the store. It seemed to go on forever.

"Can I help you?"

Edward turned to look at the man who addressed him. He appeared to be older, but not by much. His warm smile faltered as he took in Edward's appearance—sunglasses worn indoors and a bruise peeking out from beneath them. Edward looked away quickly. "I'm just looking," he said quietly.

"Let me know if you have any questions." When Edward didn't respond, the man walked away.

Edward continued his journey through the store. He passed a display of string instruments and looked at them longingly. It had been years, but he could perfectly recall the feeling of bass strings pressing into his fingertips, a viola fitting snugly under his chin, the weight of a bow in his hand.

He passed by the brass and the woodwinds. Organs and keyboards. He spotted a Yamaha digital piano with a bright yellow sticker that read "used." Edward held his breath as he reached for the price tag; however, before he got a chance to look, a grand piano, elevated on a platform in the rear of the store, caught his eye.

Edward ripped off his sunglasses as he made his way to the glossy black piano. It looked inviting, as if it were somehow calling to him. As if it had been waiting for him to come along. The instrument seemed to hum in anticipation. He traced his finger across the fallboard before lifting it slowly, revealing the black and white keys below.

Running his fingers silently across the keys, Edward looked around the store. The man who approached him earlier was nowhere to be seen. He turned his attention back to the piano and

rested his index finger on Middle C. He pushed gently. The sound sent chills down his spine. He pushed more firmly and closed his eyes as the note rang out.

For the first time in years, Edward felt like he was home.

With a shaky hand, he positioned his left fingers over the keys and struck a chord—the same haunting notes that began the lullaby he had written for Bella. He played the chord again. This time his right hand joined in, adding the melody. A couple of measures in, he hit a sour note, and the music ended abruptly as his hands fell away from the keys. Edward took a deep breath to calm his nerves. He was so deep in concentration that he didn't hear the man from earlier approach him from behind.

"Excuse me," he said abruptly.

Edward took one look at the man's open mouth and wide eyes and quickly stepped away from the grand piano. "I'm sorry."

"What are you—"

"I wasn't sure if . . . I mean, there wasn't a sign or anything."

"No—" The man took a step forward. Edward instinctively moved back.

"I don't want to cause trouble. I'll leave." Edward turned and bolted toward the door, but the next word out of the man's mouth stopped him dead in his tracks.

"Edward!"

Edward turned and stared at the complete stranger.

"You are Edward, right?" he asked. Edward nodded warily. The man caught up to him and extended his hand. "Carlisle Cullen."

*The owner?* Edward thought as they shook hands. It was highly unlikely that they had ever met, and he was still unsure how the man knew his name. "I'm sorry, but do I know you?"

"No," Carlisle confirmed. "But I feel like I know you."

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

Carlisle smiled warmly and gestured toward the piano. "I've had the pleasure of playing your song."

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Jake asked.

Bella climbed into the passenger seat of his red 1953 Chevrolet pickup truck and fastened the seat belt. "Positive."

"All right." It took Jake two times to start the truck. It groaned and rattled in protest.

“Maybe I’ve changed my mind. I’m not sure if I trust this deathtrap to get us there and back alive,” she teased.

“Hey, don’t hate on the truck!”

Bella rolled her eyes as Jake patted the dashboard and whispered an apology for her words.

They drove to Charlie Swan’s house in silence. Bella was nervous about returning the bed and television, but she wanted to do it today.

Charlie always worked on Sundays.

Bella knew it was immature not to confront Charlie face-to-face, but she honestly didn’t know what to say. After thinking it over for a few days, she decided to let her actions speak for her.

The driveway was empty when they arrived, and Jake backed his truck up to the house.

“Let’s unload the truck first,” Bella said. “I’ll set up the frame. Then we can carry everything else inside.”

“By *we*, I assume you mean *me*?”

“Pretty much.”

The pair removed the mattress from the truck first and used it to cushion the television. Bella was about to climb in the back of the truck to retrieve the frame when she heard Charlie’s voice.

“What’s going on out here?”

Bella jumped and spun to face him. “Charlie? Wh-what are you doing here? I thought you’d be working.”

“I’ve been suspended.” Charlie crossed his arms over his chest. “The”—he struggled for the right word—“*incident* is under investigation.”

“Oh.” Bella was surprised. It had only been three days since he had assaulted Edward, and as far as she knew, it hadn’t been reported. “Edward didn’t say anything.”

“No, his parole officer did. She reported that I brought him in without probable cause. If that man knows what’s good for him, he’ll continue to keep his mouth shut.”

Bella couldn’t have prepared herself for the rage she felt toward her father at that moment. She clenched her fists tightly and drew a deep breath. “How dare you?”

“Excuse me?”

“How dare you say that after what you’ve done!”

Charlie’s jaw dropped. He was clearly surprised by his daughter’s outburst.

“Edward is trying *so hard*,” Bella continued. “He didn’t do anything wrong! He finally got his life back. How is he supposed to get ahead with people like you holding him back?”

“I’m not holding him back. It’s just a matter of time before—”



“Save it, Charlie. You don’t know him. You didn’t even give him a chance! You violated his rights. You assaulted him while he was defenseless. You wouldn’t even listen to me, and you scared me half to death when you pulled out your gun! The only reason Edward didn’t report you is because he didn’t want to hurt me.” Bella jabbed a finger into her chest.

“Do you honestly think you know him? You don’t know him, Bella. You only know the side of him that he’s shown you. I’ve seen his file. He’s a drug addict. He has anger issues.”

“Edward does not have anger issues,” she scoffed.

“No? Are you sure about that?” he countered. “He went to prison for beating a man within an inch of his life. He was involved in countless fights over the past twelve years—one of them only a few months before he was released. He is a thirty-five-year-old man manipulating a naïve, young girl to get ahead. That’s not the type of person I want around my daughter, let alone living with her.”

“Yeah? Well, I’m an adult, Charlie,” Bella spat. “I’m perfectly capable of making my own decisions. I offered Edward a place to stay, and yeah, it was stupid, but you know what? It was my choice. I’m glad I did it. *I* offered to help *him*. You don’t have the right to make him leave.”

“You’re right. I don’t,” he conceded. “But people like him don’t change. When he snaps—and he will—I pray that you won’t be the one taking his wrath.”

“Edward won’t hurt me. And even if he did, he could *never* hurt me as much as you have.”

Charlie’s angry façade faltered, and for the first time, he appeared remorseful of his actions. “Bella, I’m not proud of how I acted. I just want to protect you. If I could take it back I would, but what’s done is done. I’m sorry, Bells. I never meant to hurt you.”

“You’re apologizing to the wrong person.” Bella turned on her heel and stormed back to the truck. “I’ll accept your apology when Edward does.”

“Bella,” Charlie warned.

“I love you, and I appreciate everything you’ve done for me.” She grunted as she pulled the bedframe out of the truck piece by piece, tossing it onto the front lawn. “But this is my life. You don’t have to like the decisions I make, but I hope you’ll accept them and the people I choose to associate with. Be the bigger man, Dad.” Bella didn’t look at her father as she hopped out of the truck and stormed to the passenger door. “And maybe you shouldn’t worry about Edward ratting you out. Maybe you should worry about me,” she called over her shoulder. “Let’s go, Jake.”

Jake, who had stood frozen in place during the entire exchange, nodded to Charlie out of respect before scrambling into his truck. He let out a deep breath. “Way to make it awkward, Bella.”

“Just take me home.”

After spending the afternoon talking with Carlisle, Edward arrived home to a dark apartment. When he turned on the light, the first thing he noticed was the empty space where the television previously sat. He looked around, but nothing else seemed out of place.

He called out for Bella, unsure if she was home. When she didn't answer, he peered inside her bedroom. The bed was missing. "Huh," he wondered aloud.

The excitement Edward felt coming home quickly turned into disappointment. He was itching to tell Bella about his day—how he had stumbled across the music store and how the first few notes of his song had tipped off the owner to his identity. Most importantly, he wanted to tell her that, as of tomorrow, he would officially be employed.

Edward couldn't believe what a small world it was. Not once had he inquired about who had played his song for Bella, yet he managed to find himself in the man's music store.

Carlisle had been shocked when he recognized the opening measures of Edward's song. A month ago, when Bella came into his store, he had played for her the exact piece. In fact, he was so impressed by it, and so astonished by the four pages of hand scribbled sheet music, that he pressed for more information about the composer. Bella told him, albeit reluctantly, that it was written by a friend who was in prison. He assumed it would be the last time he heard of her and her friend Edward's brilliant music. The last thing he expected was for Edward to show up in his store and play the song on one of the pianos.

Cullen's Chamber was family owned and operated. It had been founded by Carlisle's grandfather in the 1940s. Right before the new year, Carlisle relocated to a larger building in downtown Seattle. Business was good, and the expansion was too much for him and his current staff to handle. From the rolled up stack of applications Edward was carrying, Carlisle quickly deduced that he was looking for employment. He asked Edward about his music experience and what he intended to do now that he was out of prison. Edward answered honestly. He told Carlisle that he didn't have many long term goals, but someday he wanted a career in music. Right now, his only focus was getting back on his feet.

"I'm looking to fill a position," Carlisle had said. "It's not glamorous by any means, but I can guarantee you forty hours a week as long as you can work weekends." He explained what the job entailed, and Edward accepted the offer without hesitation.

"You really don't care that I'm on parole?" Edward had asked afterward.

"I care more about finding the right person. I want my team to be passionate about music, even if it's not the focus of their job."

Edward grabbed a pen from the counter and began to fill out the paperwork Carlisle had given him, hoping to distract himself from being alone. He thought about calling Bella, but ultimately decided not to impose. He knew from her letters that she was an independent young woman, and he didn't want to interrupt if she and Jake wanted to spend time alone.

Edward had just finished the paperwork when voices from outside the apartment door captured his attention. Bella stepped in the door a few moments later, her eyes puffy and red-rimmed from crying. Jake followed her inside, a helpless expression on his face.

"What's going on?" Edward asked.

Bella breezed by him and stopped in the center of the living room, facing away from both men.

"We were at Charlie's," answered Jake.

*Of course*, Edward thought. The missing bed and television suddenly made sense. He recalled Bella telling him in one of her letters that she had borrowed furniture from her father's house. She must have returned them today.

"Bella."

She turned around, and Edward reached for her. Then he froze and dropped his hand. He wanted to comfort her but didn't want to cross any lines.

"Oh, Edward!" Bella threw herself against him. She fisted the back of his T-shirt and buried her face in his chest. Edward shushed her as he gently wrapped his arms around her shoulders.

"I'm gonna go," Jake said quietly. "I just didn't want her to be alone."

Edward acknowledged Jake with a nod and watched him slip out of the apartment. "I'm so sorry, Bella," he said finally. "This is all my fault."

"No," she argued through her sobs.

"Come on." Edward walked them toward the couch and sat, pulling Bella down next to him. "It'll be okay." He continued to console her, and she clung to him as she slowly calmed down.

"So," Edward began with a lightness in his voice, "looks like I get to sleep on the floor tonight, huh?"

"Don't be ridiculous. You're keeping the couch. I'm going to sleep on Jake's air mattress."

"That makes sense." Edward bowed his head and rested his cheek on Bella's forehead. In her peripheral, she saw him smiling.

"Why are you grinning while I'm sitting here crying?" she asked. "It's creepy."

"I'm sorry." His smile widened. "I can't help it."

"Why not?" Bella was almost afraid to ask.

Edward's lips ghosted across Bella's cheek and stopped by her ear. "I got a job," he whispered, afraid that saying the words too loudly would somehow jinx his luck.

Bella pushed away from him and stared into his eyes with a shocked expression on her face. "You did?" she exclaimed. "Where?"

"Cullen's Chamber. The music store," he added, although he was sure Bella would remember the name.

"Oh, my gosh! Who hired you? Was it the owner? Um . . ." She snapped her fingers, trying to remember his name.

"Carlisle. Yeah, I talked to him."

"Edward, he was the one who played your song for me!"

"I know." His smile got impossibly larger. "I was playing, and he recognized it."

"That is so awesome! What are you going to do there?"

"A lot of stuff. Cleaning, mainly. But I'll also be in charge of keeping the warehouse organized and making sure the instruments are priced correctly and sales signs are current. Carlisle said I can help maintain the floor instruments, too—keep them clean and tuned. If everyone's busy I might have to help answer phones and stuff. Basically all the shit no one has time to do."

"That's really great." Bella sighed. "Now I feel like a jerk, sitting here being a killjoy when you had such exciting news."

"It's not a big deal." Edward understood why Bella was upset. What really mattered to him at the moment was that he could offer her comfort.

"It is a big deal," Bella insisted. "You have a job! It's the biggest hurdle you had to face, and you did it."

"Wanna help me celebrate?" Edward smiled mischievously.

Bella pursed her lips and frowned. "What did you have in mind?"

Edward nodded toward the kitchen. "Help me make that cake."

"Okay!" Bella stood from the couch as the phone rang. "Can you get that? I don't feel like talking to anyone."

"Sure." Edward took four long strides into the kitchen and picked up the phone. "Hello?"

"Hello. I'm looking for Edward Masen," the caller said.

"This is." He shot a nervous glance toward Bella. She looked on curiously.

"Mr. Masen, this is Officer James Chase. I'm investigating a complaint filed against Officer Charles Swan. I'd like to ask you some questions."

# The Coquette

For Edward, much of Monday was spent learning the ropes of his new job at Cullen's Chamber. He arrived before the store opened, and Carlisle spent the morning explaining his new duties and where he could find the supplies he would need. They discussed which days Edward wanted to work as well as the times he absolutely needed off in order to fulfill his parole requirements.

"It's important that the store stays clean and the shelves are stocked," Carlisle explained as they stood in the warehouse. "Once you're done with that, you can work on organizing this mess. We're expecting a few large shipments during mid-February, mostly to replenish what we sold over the holidays, but we're also expanding our professional audio department. You'll have a few weeks to get this place organized according to that layout." Carlisle pointed to the hand-drawn map of the warehouse in Edward's hands.

Edward looked at it, then he looked at the mess of small inventory items and unpacked boxes that surrounded his feet. There was no rhyme or reason to any of the instruments or equipment packed into the corners.

"Any particular area you want me to start in?"

"I'm going to trust you to make the best decision," Carlisle said. "You're the one doing the work. It doesn't matter to me the order it gets done as long as you finish in a timely matter. If you want to work any overtime for the next couple of weeks, that's fine too. If you need any help, or have any questions when I'm not here, talk to Jasper. He'll assist you."

"I appreciate everything you're doing for me," Edward told him sincerely. "This job is exactly what I had hoped for."

"You have your whole life ahead of you. Don't be afraid to dream big."



Edward nodded and looked away. Dreaming was something he'd given up a long time ago. Thinking beyond one day at a time was not something he was used to doing.

"I'm curious . . ." Carlisle hesitated. When Edward looked at him with a guarded expression, he gestured to his face. "I apologize if I'm about to cross a line, but what happened?"

Edward looked away again. "Nothing." He didn't think about his answer; it came automatically.

"Edward," Carlisle said quietly, "you don't have to tell me anything if you don't want to, but know that I'm here for you. You can trust me."

Trust. Everything seemed to boil down to trust. It was neither something Edward gave nor received easily. The concept was foreign to him. Most of his life, Edward operated with his guard up. Bella was the first person he had opened up to in a long time. With a shaky breath, he turned and met Carlisle's gaze. "I don't think Bella's father likes me very much."

"He did that," Carlisle stated. If he had an opinion on the matter, he didn't let it show. Carlisle, ever a perceptive man, could tell Edward was working through something in his head. He waited patiently, sure that Edward would let him in sooner or later.

"He's a State Patrol officer," Edward said abruptly. He raised his hand and gently touched his face. It was still puffy and slightly sore. "There's going to be an investigation. I have to meet with an officer when I leave here and answer questions. I don't know what to do."

"How so?"

"He's Bella's father!" Edward sighed and dropped his hand. "I know I should tell them what actually happened, but I don't want this to hurt her. I'm sorry. This probably isn't making any sense to you. I just . . . I don't want to go into detail. I'd rather just pretend it didn't happen and move on."

"I understand," said Carlisle. He wanted to help, and if Edward didn't want to give him the finer details, he could work with that. "You can tell me whatever you're comfortable talking about."

Edward nodded, grateful someone was willing to listen who wouldn't push him for more information.

"What does Bella want you to do?"

"I think she wanted me to turn him in from the beginning," he whispered. "But I can't. I don't think he's a bad guy. I mean—I get it. I do. If I were a dad, I wouldn't want a guy like me around my daughter, either, and I'm the last person who should be judging someone for losing control of their temper." Edward shot a sidelong glance at his boss. Carlisle was aware of his convictions, but Edward hadn't gone into detail, and much to his relief, Carlisle hadn't asked.

"This sounds like a difficult decision for you. You and Bella must be very close."

Close could hardly be used to describe his relationship with Bella. It had only been seven months since they began writing each other. Sure, there had been a visit and a phone call, but it wasn't until last week that they really got to spend any quality time together, and even then, most of it had been spent in an awkward introductory phase. Edward felt odd admitting this, yet he didn't feel right embellishing their relationship, either. In the end, he decided on the simplest truth.

"She knows me better than anyone."

Carlisle smiled, sensing there was more to what Edward was really saying. "Whatever you decide, make sure it's the decision *you* can live with. Everything else will fall into place." Reaching out, he placed his hand on Edward's shoulder. Edward tensed at first, but then relaxed and returned Carlisle's smile.

"Thanks," he said quietly.

"Can I help you?"

Edward looked down at the bucket of soapy water he was pushing to the front of the store, then up at the man who had addressed him. The man was tall and thin. His face was adorned with metal rings. Tattoos peeked out from the collar of his shirt and the cuffs of his sleeves. He had jet black hair with long bangs that hid half of his face. Black liner rimmed his eyes, which were almost equally as dark. His stare sent a chill down Edward's spine.

Edward looked behind him to make sure the man wasn't talking to someone else. He held up the mop. "I work here?" It came out as a question.

"Oh." The man gave him a once over. "Cool."

"Okay," Edward said awkwardly. He continued pushing the bucket to the entryway and began to mop. He was about halfway done when another voice interrupted him.

"Hey, new boy."

Edward turned and saw a woman leaning against a display stand of strings, picks, and other guitar accessories. Her blond hair was twisted into a messy bun, and her eyes were such a bright shade of blue that he briefly wondered if she were wearing colored contacts. She was undeniably one of the most beautiful people he had ever seen. Stepping toward him, she offered her hand.

"I'm Rose," she said as they shook hands.

"Edward."

"It's nice to meet you, Edward. Nice shiner."

Edward turned his face away, although he wasn't sure why. She had already seen his black eye; it was too late to hide it now.

"It looks good on you. Gives you that 'bad boy' look."

"Um . . . thanks?" Edward took a deep breath and looked at Rose again. She was smiling brightly.

"What are your lunch plans today?"

Edward ran his hand through his hair nervously. "I don't really have any plans."

"Good. You can come with me. There's a deli down the street that makes great sandwiches. You'll love it."

"I don't know . . ." There was a peanut butter and jelly sandwich in fridge that Edward had made that morning. He wasn't keen on the idea of spending money on what was sure to be an overpriced meal.

Rose picked up on his hesitation and correctly assumed his reasoning. "My treat," she said. "Carlisle said you've been out of work for a while. Don't worry, New Boy. I'll give you plenty of opportunities to make it up to me."

"So what do you do, Rose?" Edward asked as they found an open table at the deli.

"I am a piano teacher," she answered proudly. "I've been instructing at Cullen's for almost three years now."

"No kidding! That's really awesome."

"Do you play?"

"Yeah, but it's been years," Edward said sadly. "I've done some composing, though."

"Really? I'd love to hear what you've got."

"I don't know. I'm a little rusty."

"Perfect reason to start playing again," Rose said. Edward shrugged noncommittally. "Just use one of the soundproof rooms. I'm sure Carlisle won't mind."

"Maybe." Edward took a large bite of his sandwich. "Damn, this is good."

Rose giggled as she watched him eat. "It tastes better if you actually chew it."

Edward's cheeks flushed. He put down the remaining portion of the sandwich. "Thanks for inviting me to lunch," he said. "After meeting that one guy, I was worried everyone would be so . . ."

"So standoffish?" Rose finished. "That's just Jasper."

"*That's Jasper?*"

“Yes. He’s kind of socially awkward, but he’s a really nice guy once you get to know him, and he really knows his stuff. He’s like a walking encyclopedia when it comes to guitar history.”

“Does he teach, too?”

“Good god, no! Can you imagine?” Rose laughed. “He’d probably scar some poor kid for life.” She pulled a phone out of her purse to check the time. “Speaking of poor kids, I have a one thirty lesson with a student who’s practically tone deaf. We’d better go soon.”

They finished their lunch and headed back to the store. On the way, Rose linked her arm through Edward’s, taking him completely by surprise. She plucked at the cotton of his long sleeve T-shirt with her other hand.

“You’re freezing!” she said. “Don’t you have a coat?”

“I haven’t gotten one yet.”

“Yet? Are you new here or something?”

“This is all kind of new to me,” he answered evasively.

Rose rubbed his arm quickly with the palm of her hand, creating warmth with the friction. “Today was fun. We should go out after work some time.”

Edward stumbled slightly before composing himself. Slowly he retracted his arm from Rose’s grip. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

“Why not? Do you have a girlfriend?” she asked boldly.

“No.” Once again, Edward struggled with how to describe the way Bella fit into his life. “But there is someone.”

“Oh, well.” She shrugged. “Too bad for me. But don’t say no quite yet. It’s just dinner. Think about it. Besides, if things with this other girl don’t work out . . .”

Edward nodded stoically. Rose looped her arm through his once more. Her insinuation made him uncomfortable, but he had to admit it was nice to feel wanted.

Edward was mentally and emotionally exhausted by the time he returned to the apartment that evening. The door was locked, and he pushed away the feeling that he was intruding as he used his key.

Bella sat cross legged on the couch with her cell phone pressed to her ear. She turned to him with wide eyes when he opened the door, her cheeks immediately turning a deep shade of scarlet. Edward watched her watching him and smiled softly. She smiled back wistfully, seeming momentarily lost in thought. Finally, she shook her head, breaking the trance.

“Wha-huh? . . . Yeah I’m still here,” Bella told the caller. “No, I just, um, I . . .” she stammered. Edward gave her a curious look. Bella sighed and in a defeated tone said, “Yes, he just got home. . . . I don’t think—”

Bella closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Then she silently offered the phone to Edward. He crossed the room slowly. “Who is it?” he mouthed.

“My mother.”

Edward blanched. He had already made a bad impression with one parent. He didn’t know if he was ready to face the other yet. Wordlessly, he removed the phone from Bella’s hand and placed it to his ear.

“Hello?”

“Is this Edward?”

“Yes.”

“This is Bella’s mother. Have you been treating my baby girl well?”

Edward looked at Bella questioningly. She dropped her head into her hands to hide her growing embarrassment.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Oh, please don’t call me ma’am. I am way too young to be a ma’am.” The inflection of her voice sounded so much like Bella’s that Edward couldn’t stop the smile that spread across his lips.

“Got it. No more ma’ams. Um, Mrs. . . .”

“You can call me Renee. Or Mom.”

Edward choked, and then coughed to hide his surprise. Bella looked up at him, curious what her mom said to make him go from absolutely ashen to beet red.

Renee struggled to hide her laughter. “So you’re living in my daughter’s one bedroom apartment, sleeping on her couch. I trust you’re behaving yourself.”

“I’m trying.”

“Bella tells me you were in prison.”

This was the part that always made Edward anxious—having to admit his shameful past. His stomach twisted, and his mouth went dry. Part of him wished Bella hadn’t told her mother about him, but he knew it was unreasonable to hide the truth. He cleared his throat. “That’s correct.”

“For how long?”

Edward closed his eyes.

*Breathe in.*

*Breathe out.*



“Eleven years.”

“Eleven years,” Renee repeated thoughtfully. “My daughter is a very special girl, you know.”

“Yes, she is,” Edward agreed wholeheartedly.

“She’s going to make a big difference in someone’s life one day.”

“She already has,” Edward said almost inaudibly.

“I want the best for her.”

“Me, too.”

“She shouldn’t have to settle for anything less than the best. Ever.”

Edward’s heart sank. This was one more approval he wouldn’t receive. “I wouldn’t want her to.”

“Good. Because if I find out you aren’t doing everything in your power to make my baby girl happy, I’m going to fly up there and kick your ass clear to the other end of the country. Do you understand me?”

Renee’s closing sentence echoed the words Charlie had once said, but the sentiment behind it was completely different.

“You what?” Edward asked in disbelief.

“You heard me, young man,” Renee chided. “Now put Bella back on the phone. We haven’t talked since Christmas, and it sounds like she has a lot to fill me in on.”

Edward handed the phone back to Bella, wondering what else she could have possibly told her mother about him.

“How did it go today?” Bella asked once she finally said goodbye to Renee. She set her cell phone on the end table and turned toward Edward, who sat next to her on the couch.

“Really good.”

“Does Carlisle seem like a good boss?”

Edward nodded. “He’s nice. And he’s pretty flexible with my schedule.”

“That’s good. Any interesting coworkers?”

“Actually, yeah.” Edward thought about the people he had met, some more memorable than others. “There was this one guy who was pretty strange. I tried talking to him a few times, but he wasn’t much of a conversationalist. Not that I am.”

“Don’t talk like that about yourself.” Bella swatted his arm. “There’s nothing wrong with your social skills.”

Edward rolled his eyes, but a smile threatening the corner of his lips gave away his annoyed façade. “Anyway, he was a strange guy, and it sounds like I’m going to be working pretty closely with him.” He considered mentioning Rose but decided to refrain, mainly because he didn’t want Bella to discover someone had flirted with him. He didn’t want Bella getting the idea that he was interested in someone else, and even worse, he didn’t want her encouraging him to reciprocate.

“Did you meet with Officer Chase after work?” Bella asked apprehensively.

“Yes.”

“And? What did you tell him?”

“I told him the same thing I told Esme. That Charlie took me to the station and held me in custody all day without a reason.”

Bella remained quiet for a few moments. “Do you think he believed you?” she finally asked.

“No, but something tells me he’s not going to press the issue.”

“You didn’t have to do that for me. You should have told him the truth.”

Edward leaned closer to Bella and dropped his voice. “I did it for me.” He chose his next words carefully. “But I would do anything for you.”

# The Truth

The next two weeks passed quickly for Edward. He went to work every day. He attended support meetings on Tuesdays, Fridays, and Saturdays. With the use of Bella's car, he even managed to get his driver's license. Having a schedule again was a comfort to him. After so many years of being on a strict routine, he had felt lost without anything to do.

Work was going well; Edward couldn't have asked for a better job. He got along with his coworkers. Jasper still acted cold, but Edward quickly learned that it was just his odd persona, not a reflection of Jasper's feelings toward him. Rose was as sweet as ever. She continued to flirt, but she didn't push him. Although he had no intentions of starting anything with her, he reveled in the new found attention.

Edward was disappointed to have to turn down multiple happy hour invitations. He wanted to go out with his new friends, but his parole orders prevented him from visiting an establishment that served alcohol. He would decline regretfully with a promise of maybe next time. His reasons were always evasive. The only one who knew the truth of his circumstances was Carlisle, and he hadn't told a soul.

When Edward received his first paycheck, he was ecstatic. His hourly wage wasn't high by any means, but compared to the pocket change he made at the prison, he felt wealthy. The overtime he put in the week prior had almost doubled his check. He knew that if he were responsible with his money, it would be enough to live on. For the first time, he started to believe that maybe things really would be okay.

There was one thing in specific about working that Edward didn't enjoy. Between the time he spent at Cullen's Chamber and at the mandatory support groups, he had hardly spent any time with

Bella. Once he was done with the warehouse project, he was going to talk to Carlisle about having Tuesdays and Thursdays off so he could be with her during the day.

It was Saturday night, and after a full day of work and a hour long group meeting, Edward was finally home. He wasn't surprised to see Jake there; however, the tense atmosphere in the apartment was unexpected.

"What's going on?" he asked. Bella and Jake held each other's gaze, neither backing down from the confrontation.

"Nothing," Bella said through her teeth. "We were just discussing sleeping arrangements. Jake's being stubborn."

"I'm being stubborn?" Jake scoffed.

"Yes, you are. The air mattress is yours. You brought it here, so you're going to sleep on it."

"What kind of friend would I be if I made you sleep on the floor in your own apartment?"

Edward had a feeling Jake was not the stubborn one in this situation. He knew Bella wouldn't back down when her mind was set on something, and like Jake, he also didn't want her sleeping on the floor. "Jake can take the couch," he said. "I'll sleep on the floor."

Bella looked at him and rolled her eyes. "Don't be ridiculous, Edward." They were silent for a few moments. Then Bella came up with an idea. "The air mattress sleeps two. Why don't you guys take it. I'll sleep on the couch."

"No, no way," Jake said. "I'm not sharing a bed with another dude. No offense," he added.

"None taken," Edward said.

"Hey!" Jake's eyes lit up when he looked at Bella again. Edward immediately guessed where his train of thought was headed. "Why don't we share—"

"I'll sleep with you," Edward interrupted. Both Bella and Jake looked at him in surprise. "In the bed, I mean." He pointed to the bedroom, suddenly self-conscious under their scrutinous eyes. "Jake can have the couch."

Bella snapped her mouth shut once she realized it had fallen open. Slowly, she nodded in agreement. "Okay." She turned to Jake. "Is the couch okay?"

"Sure." Jake didn't sound so certain.

Edward struggled to keep his eyes open as the three of them sat on the couch, watching a movie on Bella's computer, which was now located where the TV once sat. He leaned in to whisper in her ear.

Sensing his intentions, Bella inclined her head, causing his nose to brush against her cheek. Neither of them pulled away.

“Would you mind if I went to bed?” Edward knew it was probably a silly question, but he felt odd going in Bella’s room without permission, even if he was sharing her bed tonight.

“Of course not,” she said. “Tired?”

“Long day.”

“Okay, I’ll be in soon.”

After Edward left the room, Jake cleared his throat. “Do you want me to talk to him?”

Bella frowned, not understanding what he meant. “About what?”

“That you’re not comfortable having him sleep in your room. Or if you don’t want to confront him about it, I can leave. You can just tell him the couch is open and be done with it.”

“What are you talking about?” she asked, clearly confused. “I don’t have a problem with Edward in my room.”

“He makes you uncomfortable.”

“Edward does not make me uncomfortable. He doesn’t,” she insisted when Jake gave her a skeptical look.

“Come on, Bella. It’s obvious. I know you. You’re not yourself when he’s around. He walks in the room and you get all jumpy. You watch him like you’re waiting for him to strike or something. I kind of feel bad for the guy. He has to notice. Hell, it even makes me uncomfortable sometimes.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” The confusion Bella felt was quickly turning to irritation. She didn’t act weird around Edward—at least, she didn’t think so. The truth was, most of the time she didn’t know *how* to act. Bella knew he had feelings for her; she was attracted to him as well. There were reasons why she didn’t want to give in to her desires, but each day it became harder and harder to remember what they were.

Maybe his presence made her uncomfortable at first. After all, they were sharing her one bedroom apartment. He was older and virtually a stranger, and as much as Bella tried not to judge him, Edward was still serving his prison sentence even if it wasn’t within the walls of Waterview State Correctional Facility.

In the past three weeks, she really felt like some of the awkwardness had dissipated. She didn’t think they were still tiptoeing around each other, but Jake made it sound like they were.

“Look, I’m not trying to tell you what to do. All I’m saying is that I’ll help you, you know? If you need it.”

Bella took a deep breath and attempted to let down her defenses. Jake was only looking out for her. "Thanks, but I'm okay," she said.

They dropped the subject.

When Bella went to bed, she found Edward sprawled across the air mattress on his stomach. His long legs occupied the two bottom corners. One pillow was balled up under his head, while his arm hugged the other. She approached the bed and sank down on the edge. Even in the dark she could make out the peaceful expression on his face.

"Edward," Bella said softly, not wanting to startle him. She brushed a stray lock of hair off his forehead. His head jerked slightly when their skin made contact.

"Hmm," he mumbled into the pillow.

"I thought you *didn't* want me to sleep on the floor," she teased.

Edward opened his eyes a crack, taking in his surroundings. It took him a moment to remember he was in her bed, and he was apparently taking up the whole thing. He rolled onto his side and moved to the opposite end of the mattress. "Sorry."

"Don't be. You warmed my blankets." Bella slipped under the covers, straightening them and fixing her pillow as she got comfortable. She lay down facing him. It was reminiscent of their first night together but without the added anxiety and apprehension. "You looked so comfortable, I didn't want to wake you."

"Mm-hmm. I could get used to this."

"What, sleeping on an air mattress or sleeping with me?"

Edward was suddenly very awake. Her question came unexpectedly. His eyes locked on hers, and he thought about his answer carefully. "Both."

Bella let out a shaky breath as Edward held his. They continued looking at each other until Bella's inquisitive expression turned into a smile. It gave Edward the courage to go on.

"Can I take you out next Sunday?"

"Sunday?" Bella repeated. It seemed like a strange night to go out. She quickly counted the days in her head. "Wait, that's Valentine's Day."

Edward didn't respond. He studied her face, looking for any signs of discomfort, anything that would help him brace for rejection. Her expression gave away nothing.

"Do you mean, like, a date?"

"If you wouldn't mind, I'd like that a lot." Edward shifted uncomfortably when Bella didn't respond. At this point, he wasn't sure which was worse—putting his heart on the line or hearing her say no. He wanted to pull the covers over his head and hide. "Or we could go as friends," he



amended. "It doesn't have to be anything romantic or anything like that. I don't want to do anything to jeopardize our friendship. I just want to take you out for a change. Do something nice for you."

"What did you have in mind?"

"Dinner, a movie? Whatever you want."

Bella thought it over briefly. It'd been a while since she'd gone out and done anything fun, and Edward had been so busy working over the past two weeks that she'd barely seen him at all. Spending time together, outside of the small apartment, sounded like a nice change.

"I'd love to go out with you."

"Really? You mean it?" Edward failed at hiding his excitement. The last thing he expected was for her to agree.

"Yeah."

"Seriously?"

Bella giggled at his enthusiasm. "Uh-huh."

Edward reached out tentatively and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. It was hard for him to keep his hands to himself when she was this close. In the past weeks, he had experimented with casual touches; Bella never seemed to mind. He let his fingers trail over her shoulder and down her arm before enclosing her hand in his.

"So a date or . . .?"

Bella smiled shyly and squeezed his hand. "Yeah, a date."

Slowly so he could judge her reaction, Edward snaked his free arm under Bella's neck. She lifted her head to make it easier. Taking it as a sign to continue, he rolled onto his back, pulling her with him. Their bodies easily molded together. Bella even slid her top leg between his.

"Goodnight, Bella," he whispered into her hair.

"Goodnight."

For Edward, the week leading up to their date seemed to drag on forever. It felt longer than the ten days he spent waiting for his first letter from Bella. Longer than spending the holidays anxiously awaiting an answer from the parole board. It even felt longer than the twelve days between the parole approval and his release date.

On Saturday evening, he looked around the warehouse at Cullen's Chamber. Everything was in perfect order. He smiled, feeling a foreign sense of accomplishment.

"It looks great!" Carlisle beamed. He, too, was excited to see everything in its proper place. This store expansion was his dream, and he knew how fortunate he was to be living it. He placed his hand on Edward's shoulder and jostled him playfully. "You did good. I'm impressed."

Edward shrugged off his compliment. "Just doing my job."

"And I'm fortunate to have you." Carlisle dropped his hand. After working together for three weeks, he was relieved that Edward no longer seemed to shy away from him. "So," he began, "tomorrow's Valentine's Day. You and Bella have any big plans?"

"We have plans. I'm not sure how big they'll be."

"What are you doing?"

"Dinner and a movie." Edward rolled his eyes. "Cliché, I know. I wish there was something I could do to make it special."

Carlisle retrieved an envelope from his back pocket and handed it to Edward. Edward peeked inside before looking at his boss questioningly. "Is this . . . why are you giving me this?"

"If you want to make it special, you should do what you do best." Carlisle nodded to the envelope. "You're a smart man. I'm sure you can figure it out."

Edward had some time to kill before his Saturday night meeting, and he decided to pass it by reading in the break room. He was only a few pages in when Rose interrupted him.

"New Boy," she sang as she entered the room.

Edward looked up from his book and smiled. "Hey, Rose."

"Let me guess." Rose stood facing him and leaned back against the table. "You want to come out with us tonight, but you're too shy to ask, so you decided to stick around in hopes that someone would extend an invite."

Edward laughed and shook his head. "You figured me out."

"Come with us," she insisted. "It'll be fun."

"Sorry, there's somewhere I have to be."

"You always say that. I'm beginning to think you don't like me," she teased.

"It's not that." Edward closed the book and leaned back in the chair. "I want to, but I can't."

"Hot date?"

He smirked and shook his head. "I wish."

"Okay, New Boy, what's the deal?"

"What?" he asked, completely baffled.

"It's been three weeks, and you haven't gone out with us once. Do you have a problem with crowds? Carousing with coworkers?"

“No, nothing like that.”

“Is it because of the girl you’re pining over? You can invite her. I mean, I’d rather have you all to myself, but . . .” Rose shrugged, and then winked to let him know she was mostly joking.

Edward shook his head. “I can’t.”

“Can’t what?”

“I can’t go to the bar!”

Rose straightened a little and looked him square in the eye. “Drinking problem? It’s okay. I won’t tell anyone.”

Edward briefly entertaining the idea of telling her yes, he was a recovering alcoholic. It would solve the issue of having to constantly turn down his friends and probably require a lot less in way of explanation. However, he didn’t want to tell a lie, especially one he had to maintain. And if he were going to cover the truth, he’d rather come up with something that didn’t have a stigma attached to it at all. Anxiety was starting to overwhelm him. He looked at the clock; in a few minutes, he would have to leave. Hopefully he could dodge this conversation until another day.

Before Edward could formulate a response, Rose pulled the book from his hand and tossed it onto the table. Without warning, she straddled his legs and sat down on his lap. Edward was too stunned to react.

“I understand if you don’t want to talk about it here,” Rose said quietly. “Why don’t we just go back to my place. We can talk or . . .” She trailed her fingers down his chest suggestively. “What do you say?”

Edward gently slid her off his lap and stood. He grabbed his book from the table and turned to leave.

Rose knew she was crossing a line. She thought by making a bold move, she could get a dramatic response out of him. Instead, he was shutting her out. It frustrated her. She hated being lied to. Steeling herself, she followed him out of the room.

“Why won’t you tell me what’s going on?” she spat.

Jasper looked up as the pair stormed through the showroom, both looking equally as frustrated. He glanced around, relieved that no customers were in the immediate vicinity to witness the altercation.

Edward spun around. Rose almost ran into him. The look on his face caused her to take a step back.

“I told you I can’t go,” Edward said coldly. “Can’t you just drop it?”

“I won’t drop it. I’m your friend, Edward!”

“Friend?” he asked condescendingly. “You don’t even know me. If you did—”

“Try me,” she challenged.

Edward stared at Rose for a long moment. His anxiety was building, and he wanted to run. He clenched his fists at his side to keep his hands from shaking.

“You want to know why I can’t go out with you?” he asked sharply. Rose nodded. “I spent the last decade in prison. I’m out on parole; that’s why I can’t go to the bar. Are you happy now?”

Rose paled. Her hands shot up to her face to cover her mouth. Even Jasper looked on with a wide-eyed expression.

“Edward—”

“Save it,” Edward snapped. “There’s somewhere I have to be.” He turned without another word and fled from the store, wondering how many bridges his admission had just burned.

# The Date

Bella stood in her bedroom, studying her reflection in the full length mirror. Surrounding her feet was a sea of clothing. She felt ridiculous. She never cared this much about how she looked before. Sighing in frustration, she fell back onto the air mattress.

*It's just Edward, she told herself. He sees you every day.*

Bella didn't own any really nice clothing. Everything in her closet consisted mostly of casual shirts and jeans. She didn't think Edward was taking her anywhere fancy, but she still wanted to look nice. Bella looked at the clock. It was a little past five thirty—definitely not enough time for her to supplement her wardrobe with something date worthy.

"Bella, you ready?" Edward called through the door.

"Yeah, just give me a minute." Bella jumped onto her feet and kicked the scattered clothing into her closet, not wanting to leave visual evidence of how crazy she was acting. She took one last look in the mirror. What she had on would have to suffice. She adjusted her shirt. It was her first time wearing it, and she hoped it wouldn't be bothersome throughout the night. If push came to shove, she could always leave her jacket on. Bella dug through an old jewelry box. It had been so long since she'd worn jewelry that she didn't even remember what she owned. She put on a chunky necklace and matching bracelet. Then she decided it made her look ridiculous and took them off. "Screw it," she said and slammed the box closed.

Edward waited patiently on the other side of her bedroom door, holding a red rose. Bella was relieved to see he was wearing jeans and a long-sleeved shirt. At least she had the comfort of knowing she wouldn't be underdressed.

"Happy Valentine's Day," he said shyly, handing her the rose.

“You already said that this morning.” Bella smiled and sniffed the flower. “It’s beautiful. Thank you. When did you get this?”

“I went out while you were in the shower.”

Edward let his eyes wander over Bella’s body. She was wearing tight blue jeans and a deep blue shirt with a neckline in the shape of a V. It went low. Very low. The stark contrast between the shirt and her pale skin only helped to draw his attention to her cleavage. He wasn’t as discreet as he had hoped, and Bella caught him staring.

“Do I look okay?” She resisting the urge to fidget with the shirt one more time. “I can change.”

“No, you look fantastic.” Edward let out a deep breath. “It’s going to be hard to keep my eyes off you.” As he said this, he realized his focus had drifted back to her chest. He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to clear the enticing visual from his head. “Are you ready?”

“Yeah.” Bella grabbed her jacket and purse, and Edward led her out the door.

The night was chilly, so they decided to take Bella’s car. Edward opened the driver’s side door for her. She surprised him by offering the keys.

“I don’t know where we’re going,” she explained. “Besides, you have your license now, and I’d kind of like it if you drove.”

Once they were situated inside the car, Edward reached across the center console and took Bella’s hand. A large part of him was waiting for her to withdraw and tell him she was having second thoughts about their date. Instead, when their fingers wove together, Bella held his hand tightly.

“I hope this is okay,” he said when they arrived at the restaurant. It was a small café off the beaten path. The parking lot didn’t look busy despite it being Valentine’s Day. “I wanted to take you somewhere really nice, but nice places serve liquor.” He shrugged, his voice barely audible.

“I think it’s perfect. Have you eaten here before?”

Edward hesitated as he remembered having lunch with Rose. “Yes. I came here with someone from work once. It seemed like somewhere you’d like.” He reluctantly released Bella’s hand so they could get out of the car.

Between the dim lighting and high-back booths, the restaurant had a private feel. The hostess showed the couple to their table. Bella slid into the booth, and Edward took a seat across from her.

“I like it,” she said. “It’s cozy.”

“I’m glad.” Edward waited until Bella opened her menu, and then he let his eyes drop down to her chest once again.

“They have stuffed mushrooms!” Bella suddenly exclaimed. “God, I love stuffed mushrooms.”



“Order them.”

“I don’t know . . .”

Edward gave her a skeptical look. “This isn’t one of those things where you won’t order them because you think you’re fat, right?”

“No!” Bella’s eyes widened. “I mean, I do, but that’s not why. It’s just . . .”

“You aren’t fat, Bella. You’re beautiful.”

Bella raised the menu in front of her face to hide both her blush and her smile. Unfortunately for Edward, it blocked the view of her chest as well.

When the waitress arrived, Edward ordered the stuffed mushrooms.

“You didn’t have to do that,” Bella said. “If you want, I can pay for half or something.”

“Is that what this is about?” Edward asked in surprise. “You’ve been supporting me for the past month. The least I can do is buy you an appetizer.”

“I know, but I feel bad. You just got a job. You shouldn’t be wasting all your money on me.”

Edward reached across the table and grabbed Bella’s hand. “I’m not wasting anything. I’m spending money on my—” He paused, uncertain of how to label their relationship. “On someone special to me, as a thank you for everything she’s done.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, so don’t go ordering the cheapest thing on the menu, because I’ll see right through you. And you’d better save room for dessert. And popcorn,” he added. Bella didn’t look convinced. “Please just let me do this for you. For once in my life, I want to feel like a normal guy.”

“You are normal.”

“I don’t feel like it.”

“Why not? You’re free. You have a job. Friends.”

“I can’t bring you somewhere where you can order a drink. I can’t even go to the bar with my coworkers.” Edward wondered if they would even *want* to hang around him now that they knew the truth.

“So? Not everyone goes to the bar.”

“I have to go to meetings.”

“Lots of people go to meetings.”

“I’m sharing your one bedroom apartment.”

“It’s called having a roommate.”

“Yeah, but I’m not paying.”

“Neither am I! Pay for something if it makes you feel better. I don’t care.” Bella leaned back and crossed her arms over her chest, silently challenging Edward to continue. He sighed in resignation. “Normal people go on dates, right?”

A smile threatened the corners of Edward’s lips. “Yes.”

“And we’re on a date, so that makes you . . .” Bella motioned for him to finish the sentence.

“Lucky,” he said, even though he knew it wasn’t the answer she was looking for.

“Darn right, you’re lucky,” Bella teased. She looked down at her menu and noticed her shirt had shifted, revealing more skin than she intended. Discreetly as possible, Bella adjusted the neckline. When she glanced up, she saw Edward quickly look away. He smiled and laughed to himself, knowing he was caught. Bella decided maybe the shirt wasn’t so bad after all.

“What do you want for dessert?” Edward asked once their plates were clean.

“I can’t.” Bella rubbed her stomach. “I ate so much already.” As she spoke, a server passed by the table carrying a tray with a large slice of chocolate cake. Bella pointed after her. “Oh, my god. Look at that!”

Edward ordered one piece of chocolate cake—two spoons. When the waitress brought the dessert to the table, he slid the plate away from Bella.

“Wha—” Bella scoffed.

“You said you were full. You don’t get any.” Edward shoved a large bite into his mouth.

“No fair! I wanted the tip. It’s the best part.”

Edward choked on the cake he was chewing. Bella took the opportunity to steal the plate from him. She took a bite and moaned.

“Wow, this is heavenly.”

Edward tried to attack the cake with his spoon, but Bella swatted his hand away. “Get out of here, chocolate hater. Go find some Funfetti or something.”

After a few more attempts to recover the plate, Edward changed tactics and plucked the spoon from Bella’s hand.

“Hey!” she protested.

“Shush.” Edward slid the plate back to the middle of the table. “There’s something I want to try.” He took a spoonful of cake and held it up to Bella’s lips. Her cheeks flushed as she took the spoon into her mouth. She hoped Edward wouldn’t notice in the dim lighting. He did. He also noticed how her blush went all the way down to her chest.

Edward was disappointed when they were finished, but it was quickly forgotten once they left the restaurant and he was able to touch her again. He wrapped his arm around her waist and led her to the car.

Bella brought up the topic of money again at the theater. One look of warning from Edward was all it took for her to drop the subject.

“What do you want?” he asked as they lined up for concessions.

“Seriously, Edward, I’m so full. How can you even think about eating more?”

“It’s been twelve years since I’ve had movie theater popcorn. Twelve years!” He held up his arms dramatically. Bella giggled and rolled her eyes. Edward stepped behind her and leaned down to whisper in her ear. “What do you want?”

“Um . . .” Bella was looking up at the menu when she felt Edward’s arms encircle her torso. Her breath caught in her throat, and she lost all train of thought. Letting out a deep breath, Bella crossed her arms over his and allowed her head to fall back onto his shoulder. Edward immediately tightened his hold, pulling her body so it was pressed against his.

Bella focused on the menu, trying to keep herself calm. The feel of his breath fanning across her cheek wasn’t helping, and she wondered if he could feel the way her heart beat out of control. With how tightly she was pressed against him, Edward wondered the same thing.

“We could get the combo with the jumbo popcorn and two drinks.” Bella’s voice was weak and shaky.

Edward hummed against her neck approvingly. When the line moved, he walked her forward, still holding her closely. “Is that all you want?”

Bella wondered if he was still talking about movie concessions. “For now.” Goose bumps covered her skin when she felt Edward brush his lips against the spot below her ear. She pouted when they reached the counter and Edward released her in order to pay. Her expression gave him the courage to be a little bolder, and he guided her toward their seats with his hand on her lower back. When her shirt rode up, he took the opportunity to slide his thumb across her bare skin. He loved how soft and warm she felt.

“Pick a seat.” Edward followed Bella as she selected the perfect row to sit in. It didn’t matter to him where they sat, and by walking behind her, he was able to appreciate her body from a new angle. Edward didn’t look for long, though; he wanted to remain a gentleman, and he’d already been caught checking her out more times than he would have liked.

Bella stopped and turned to him. “Is this okay?”

“Perfect.”

When they were seated, Edward placed the popcorn between them and rested his arm across the back of Bella's seat. He paid attention to the movie as best he could, but his focus throughout was mainly on the woman next to him.

Bella struggled to focus on the movie as well, especially once Edward began caressing her arm with the tips of his fingers. She found herself slowly leaning further into his side. Something softly grazed her chest, causing her to jump. She looked down but didn't see anything. The second time it happened, she felt Edward shake with silent laughter. She glared at him, but he kept his eyes glued to the movie screen. When she looked down again, Bella spotted a piece of popcorn down her shirt. She dug it out and tossed it at Edward.

"Pay attention," she whispered.

"I am."

"To the movie!"

Edward's smile grew impossibly larger, and he hugged Bella closer to his side.

"Where are we going?" Bella peered out the car window as Edward turned down an unfamiliar road.

"It's a surprise." Edward did his best to sound normal, but internally he was struggling to hide his excitement.

Bella couldn't imagine where he was taking her. It was past ten on a Sunday night, and she couldn't think of anything that would still be open. The night was too cold to be outside for very long. She crossed her fingers that his plan included something indoors.

Edward parked in front of a large building. Bella squinted through the darkness, trying to read the sign over the door.

"Is this your work?" she asked. Edward didn't reply. Instead he got out of the car and walked around to the passenger side to open the door. "What are you doing? Are we supposed to be here?"

"Quit asking so many questions." Edward took Bella's hand and pulled her out of the car. "Come on." He led her to the front door and fished a key out of his pocket, grinning when he unlocked the door for the first time. He quickly disarmed the alarm system with the code Carlisle had included in the envelope and locked the door behind them. Edward wrapped his arm around Bella's shoulders and guided her to the back of the store. Her eyes lit up when she saw the black grand piano.

"Are you going to play? You're going to play!" Bella practically vibrated with excitement. She had imagined what it would be like to hear him play since they first started writing each other.

Edward's smile was enormous, something Bella didn't see very often. He slid his hand down to her hip and pushed her toward the piano. "Sit."

Bella sat on the end of the bench, and Edward took a seat in the center. She watched intently as he positioned his hands over the keys.

"You'll have to forgive me if I'm a little rusty," he apologized. "I haven't really played since I've been out."

"Go on!" Bella encouraged. She didn't care if he wasn't as good as he used to be. She didn't care if he messed up completely. All she wanted in that moment was to hear his music come to life.

"Okay."

Edward took a few deep breaths. A look of deep concentration slowly replaced his smile. When he began to play, it wasn't the song Bella expected to hear—the one he had written for her. She kept the thought to herself, remaining silent as his fingers danced across the keys.

Traces of a melody seemed to form, but every time Bella thought she could pick it out, Edward would change what he was playing. The music was strange. Disjointed. He kept stopping. His brows would furrow, and sometimes he would nod as if he approved of what he heard. Sometimes he would concentrate on the keys. Other times he would gaze across the room, not focusing on anything in particular. Bella was confused. It barely resembled a song. It wasn't at all what she expected from someone who had created something so beautiful on notebook paper.

Edward stopped playing, looking at Bella for the first time since he started. He smiled nervously and wiped his hands on his jeans. Then he began to play again. The melody began the same, but this time the song flowed. Bella recognized the different parts he had been playing, and that's when the realization hit her. Edward wasn't just playing the piano.

Edward was composing.

Bella listened in disbelief as the song came alive. It was beautiful, and he played it with so much passion that it brought tears to her eyes. As the last note hung in the air, Bella flung her arms around Edward's shoulders. He laughed as his hands fell from the keys.

"I wasn't finished," he whispered into her hair.

"That was amazing! I can't believe you can play like that."

Edward ducked his head. He wasn't used to receiving praise, and Bella's excitement was almost more than he could process. "Thanks," he mumbled.

Bella released Edward from the bear hug, and he slipped his arm around her, not wanting to lose the physical contact. It had been far too long since he'd received any kind of affection. Without knowing what tomorrow would bring, he was determined to get as much now as possible.

“You have to know how I feel about you.” Edward swallowed back his nervousness and met her gaze. “I know you said you want to be friends, and I don’t want to do anything to jeopardize that, but Bella . . . if anything has changed for you in the last month . . .” He left the question in his mind unasked, hoping Bella understood what he was trying to convey.

Bella wasn’t sure what to say. In a way things hadn’t changed. Her brain still warred with her heart over what to do, but every day her feelings for Edward grew stronger, and her heart was winning the battle. She decided he deserved her honesty.

“Yes, things have changed. But that doesn’t mean we should.”

“Why not?”

“We live together. What if it doesn’t work out?”

“What if it does?” he argued. Bella gave him a warning look. She didn’t want to be the only one taking this situation seriously. “I’ll leave if things don’t work. I’ll get my own place now if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“It’s not just that.”

“Then what?” Edward’s desperation was dangerously close to the surface. His voice shook as he spoke. He stared at Bella, waiting for her to answer, to say something. Anything. She wouldn’t meet his eyes. Suddenly he was hit with the realization that no matter what Bella’s feelings were, it might not be enough. Maybe she didn’t want to settle for him.

“If my past is the reason you don’t want a relationship with me, then please just say it. I’ll understand,” he said quietly. “You deserve to be with someone who can give you everything you’ll ever want. Someone your parents will approve of. If I were stronger, we wouldn’t even be having this conversation right now. I’d walk away and let you live your life. But I’m selfish, and I want you for myself.”

“This isn’t about me and what I want, Edward; it’s about you. The last thing you need is to be worrying about me. You need to focus on yourself. I know adjusting has been a struggle. You need to take some time to—”

“Don’t presume to know what’s best for me!” Edward’s angry voice echoed in the empty store. He dropped his arm from around Bella and rubbed his face with his hands. “I have spent the last decade waiting to start living again. I know what I want. I don’t want to waste any more of my life.”

“That’s what I’m worried about.” Bella spoke so quietly, Edward wasn’t sure if he heard her correctly.

“What is?”



"I'm afraid . . ." Bella hesitated. Edward watched intently as she silently ran her fingers across the keys in front of her. She dug her teeth into her bottom lip, ignoring the pain it caused. "I'm afraid you only want me because I'm the first girl who's come along."

"You think I'd be *settling* for you?"

Bella shrugged. "I think you like the idea of having someone like me."

"Are you serious?" When she didn't answer, Edward shook his head in disbelief. He didn't understand what he had done to make her feel that way. He wanted her because of who she was, not because it was convenient. "If all I wanted was a warm body to pass the time, I'd have found someone else by now. It's not like the opportunity hasn't presented itself."

The moment Edward saw the dejected look on Bella's face, he wished he could take back his comment. He wrapped his arm around her again.

"Believe me when I say I want *you*."

Bella molded against his side and leaned her head on his shoulder. She liked being in his arms, and she didn't want to think about him holding anyone else.

"Come on," Edward said when she didn't reply. "I'll take you home."

The car ride was spent mostly in silence. Much to Edward's disappointment, they arrived home all too quickly. He followed Bella closely as they walked down the halls of the apartment complex. He wanted to tell her how much he enjoyed their date and how he'd like to do it again, but the right words escaped him. He wanted to know what, if anything, had changed between them. What would happen when they crossed the final threshold? Would the date officially be over? How should they act now? After an evening of touching her freely, the thought of going back to being strictly friends made his heart ache.

As Bella began to open the door to the apartment, Edward sprang into action. She jumped as he reached in front of her and pulled the door shut.

"Edward, what are you doing?" She turned to face him. He stepped closer, and Bella backed up against the door.

"Saying goodnight."

Edward brushed his fingers across Bella's neck before taking her head in his hands. He moved in slowly, and when her eyes fluttered closed, he kissed her. Bella parted her lips, allowing Edward to kiss her deeply. She brought her hands to the back of his head and tangled her fingers in his hair. Edward moved his hands to her hips. His body pressed her against the door.

Edward was completely lost in her; he never wanted the sensation to end. When he felt Bella pulling away, his kisses became frantic, and he squeezed her tighter. She began to move backward into the now open apartment, her fist gripping Edward's shirt and tugging him along. He followed blindly as she led him into the bedroom and fell onto the air mattress. Edward dropped to his knees and crawled on top of her. When his lips found hers again, she pulled him closer. He left a fiery trail of kisses down her neck. When he reached her chest, he stopped and smiled against her skin.

"You taste like butter."

"That's because someone kept throwing popcorn down my shirt all night."

"You were asking for it," Edward groaned. "Do you have any idea what this shirt was doing to me?"

With their bodies pressed so closely together, Bella had a fairly good idea.

Edward's touches were tentative. He gauged Bella's reaction carefully, not wanting a repeat of his first night in the apartment. His hands shook as he explored the curves of her body. They undressed slowly, taking time to kiss and caress every new piece of exposed skin.

"What's wrong?" Bella asked when Edward tensed and pushed her hand away from his body.

"Nothing. I'm just..." He buried his face in her neck and took a deep breath. "A little too excited."

Bella's soft laughter filled the room. "It's okay."

"Sorry."

"Don't be." She kissed him again. "There are condoms in the drawer."

The words were not something Edward expected, but he wasn't about to question her now. Rummaging through the nightstand, he quickly found the small package. Bella took it from his hands.

"Let me."

In that moment, there were many things Edward wanted to say. Mostly, he wanted to tell Bella how special she was and that he thought he was falling in love with her. But as she pulled him close, the only thing he could concentrate on was the warmth of her body and how perfectly they fit together.

# The Morning

Bella was confused when she first woke up on Monday morning. It took her a few moments to realize she was in her bedroom, lying against Edward's side. His arm was underneath her with his hand curled gently around her hip. Memories of the night before came rushing back. She felt her face heat as she thought of what his hands and lips, among other things, had done to her and buried her face further into his chest. His skin was soft and warm against her cheek.

The air mattress had deflated during the night, and the hard floor had taken its toll on Bella's body. Slowly, she stretched and flexed the muscles in her back and legs, careful not to move too much. She wasn't ready to get up and didn't want to wake him. She lifted her head to look at the clock. There was still a few minutes before her alarm was set to go off.

Bella risked a glance at Edward's face. He appeared to be sleeping peacefully. She rested her head against his chest again, feeling her body rise and lower slightly with each slow breath he took. Her eyes scanned his body, which was bare except for the sheet covering his groin and the leg closest to her. The rest of the covers were wrapped securely around her; she always had been a blanket hog.

She reached out to place her hand on his stomach, but the blankets shifted as she moved, revealing more of Edward's skin. She gasped when she laid eyes on what the dark room had concealed the night before.

Peeking out of the blankets, nestled on the inside of his hip bone, was a loop of black ink. Bella had completely forgotten that Edward mentioned having a tattoo. She pinched the sheet between her fingers and slowly lifted it.

“See something you like?”

Bella yelped and abruptly pulled her hand away. Edward chuckled softly when he saw her shocked expression.

“How long have you been awake?”

“Long enough.”

Once again, Bella hid her face against Edward’s chest.

“You can look at it if you’d like.”

Bella studied his face. His expression was serious, but there was mischief behind his eyes. Her gaze traveled back to his hip. Edward pushed the blankets away just enough to reveal the tattoo. Bella reached out and traced the treble clef with her thumb. Edward tilted his face toward the ceiling and sighed.

“I love it when you touch me.” Edward couldn’t contain his smile as Bella’s cheeks turned pink. He rolled on top of her, pinning her to the flattened mattress. “I love your blush.” He kissed her cheek. “I love kissing you.” His lips traveled to her neck. “And I love . . . being with you.” He shifted his hips to accent his words.

“Edward . . .” Bella knew what he wanted, even without the minimal coverage of the thin sheet giving it away. “I have school, and you shouldn’t be late for work.”

“I can be quick,” he said playfully.

Bella opened her mouth to tease him about just how quick he could be, but decided better of it. “Maybe if you didn’t already break my bed . . .”

“Me?” he asked in surprise.

“Yes, you.” She pushed her palm softly against his shoulder. “We should really get up.”

When Edward rolled to the side, Bella gathered the sheet around her and stood before making her way to the door. Edward told himself Bella was just being her normal, responsible self, but as he lay alone in her room, he couldn’t help the way her rejection caused his heart to sink.

When Edward arrived at work, his anxiety level was running high. Carlisle knew about his past, so he wasn’t worried that he’d lose his job now that the truth was out, but he knew word traveled fast. He refused to keep the job, no matter how much he liked it, if his coworkers were going to alienate him. He took a deep breath before pushing through the front door.

Out of the corner of his eye, Edward saw Jasper standing at his usual spot behind the checkout counter. He kept his eyes on the floor, not bothering to look up for Jasper’s signature nod. He knew

Rose wouldn't be in yet, as she typically worked in the afternoons and on weekends. Still, he breathed a sigh of relief when he made it to the warehouse unacknowledged.

Edward set to work for the day. He cleaned the warehouse and put away the shipments that arrived over the weekend. He took his time, feeling guilty for not being as efficient as usual but not wanting to have any awkward interactions with his coworkers. When he couldn't avoid it any longer, he decided to restock the accessory shelves, hoping he would go unnoticed in the aisles.

The door to Rose's piano room was closed when he walked passed it, meaning she was currently giving a lesson. He glanced at the clock and wondered how long she would be inside. For a brief moment, he considered looking up her lesson times in order to avoid her more easily, but that would mean possibly conversing with Jasper.

He kept his head down as he continued his job duties on the showroom floor. He was in the process of dusting the percussion instruments when there was a soft touch on his shoulder. He jumped but quickly composed himself when he heard Rose's voice.

"Edward?"

"Hmm?" His response was aloof.

"Look, I uh . . ." She dropped her voice further. "I wanted to apologize."

"About what?"

Rose could tell by Edward's tone that he wasn't playing dumb and quickly took the hint. She shifted uncomfortably and cleared her throat. "Um . . . nothing. Never mind."

Edward nodded and continued wiping the dust off the instruments, relieved when she walked away without another word.

"Edward," Carlisle said as he breezed past. "My office, please, when you have a moment."

Edward's heart was suddenly very heavy. He dropped the rag into the pail of various cloths and polishes and followed Carlisle into his office. Carlisle sat behind his desk and gestured toward the door. Edward closed it before taking a seat on the opposite side of the desk, wondering if today was going to be his last day on the job.

"How was your date last night?"

It wasn't the question Edward expected. His jaw dropped and he sputtered. "What?"

"Or, you know"—Carlisle waved his hand dismissively—"whatever you want to call it."

Edward took a moment to process what he was asking. This conversation was a far cry from terminating his employment. Perhaps, he thought, Carlisle was just making small talk to cushion the blow.

"It was good. Great."

“Glad to hear it.” Carlisle gave a genuine smile for the first time since they entered the small office, but it quickly faded. “Jasper said the alarm wasn’t set when he opened the store this morning.”

Edward smacked his forehead with the palm of his hand. He had been distracted by playing for Bella and the conversation that followed, and without having done it before, setting the alarm slipped his mind.

“God, Carlisle, I’m so sorry! I—” He didn’t know how to explain without sounding irresponsible.

“It’s okay. No harm done. I’m sure it was an oversight. I just want to make sure it doesn’t happen again.”

“It won’t,” Edward promised.

“Good, because I’m putting you in charge of closing the store from now on.”

Edward watched Carlisle closely, waiting to get the joke. “You what?”

“I’d like you to lock up at night. Only if you’re comfortable with it, of course,” he added.

“Me? Why?” Edward winced once the words were out of his mouth. He didn’t want to come across as ungrateful. “I mean, you have Rose and Peter and Charlotte. They’ve worked for you a lot longer than I have.”

Carlisle shrugged. “It’s an important task. It should go to someone who *wants* the responsibility.”

Edward did want it. He wanted to prove himself. He wanted to know there were people willing to see him for the man he was now, not the criminal who spent a third of his life in prison. “I’d love to, but my meetings . . .”

“I know you can’t do it on weekends; I’ll take care of it on those days. I’d also like to nail down your schedule so it’s the same every week. I was thinking ten to six Friday to Sunday, and one to close for two days during the week. Do you have any days in particular you’d like off?”

“Tuesdays and Thursdays,” Edward answered without hesitation.

Carlisle produced a calendar from his drawer. He concentrated on it for a few moments before scribbling some notes across it. “That should work. Now according to this, your probationary period is up next week, and all the full-time employment benefits will be available to you. Are you still interested in health insurance?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Great. I’ll get you the paperwork this week.” Carlisle jotted down more notes. “I think that’s all for now. Go ahead and finish your scheduled shift today. I’ll see you in here Wednesday at one.”

The men stood and shook hands.



“Thank you for having faith in me,” Edward said. “I won’t let you down.”

“I know you won’t,” Carlisle said with a smile. “Oh, and one more thing. Have Jasper start training you on the register before you leave today.”

Edward felt sick to his stomach as he walked back onto the showroom floor, not knowing how Jasper would act toward him. He waited until Jasper was done helping a college-age kid pick out a guitar and took a deep breath as he approached the registers.

“Do you have a minute?”

Jasper briefly looked up from what he was doing behind the counter. “What’s up?”

“Carlisle wants you to show me how to use the register.”

“Oh.” Jasper sounded mildly surprised. “Sure, okay. Just give me a second.” He picked up the piece of paper he’d been writing on and began to cut slits in the bottom. Edward tried to mind his own business, but curiosity got the best of him.

“Selling something?”

“Huh? Oh this? Nah, I’m looking for a roommate.” Jasper stopped cutting, and his head snapped up. “You aren’t looking for a place to live, are you?”

“Me? No.” The answer came automatically. When Jasper shrugged casually and kept cutting, Edward started to think about what he actually implied. “But if I were looking . . . are you saying you’d consider me for a roommate?”

“Why not?”

“Even after . . .”

Jasper snorted through his nose as his face broke into a grin. The light-hearted expression was an odd contrast to the dark makeup and piercings. “No offense man, but what’s the worst you got? Death by awkward conversation?”

Edward didn’t try to hide his smile. “Probably.” He started to think about what Bella had said the night before. She seemed reluctant to be in a relationship with him while living under the same roof, and although Edward didn’t share her concerns, he didn’t want to discount them. He had said he would move out if she were worried about it, and he meant it. Besides, after being rejected this morning, he worried she might change her mind about the whole thing anyway. “Actually, I may be in the market for a new place, but there’s someone I have to talk to first, and I don’t know how soon I could make the move.” Even if Bella wanted him to leave, there was still the issue of his parole. All address changes had to be approved by Officer Evenson prior to the move.

“How soon would you know?” Jasper set the flyer on the counter. “I can probably wait a month or so to put this up, if you’re interested I mean.”

Once again today, Edward was taken off-guard. He couldn't believe Jasper would put his roommate search on hold for him. "I don't want to hold you up. If someone comes along . . ." Edward shrugged.

"Fair enough." Jasper gestured for Edward to step behind the counter. "Come on," he said. "I'll show you how to run this thing."

Bella ferreted through her purse, searching for her cell phone. She could tell by the ringtone that Jake was calling.

"Hey," she answered breathlessly.

"Hey, yourself." There was a short pause. "You training for a marathon or something?"

"No," she said indignantly. "I'm taking the stairs."

"Are you running up them?"

"No! Okay, maybe I'm a little bit out of shape," she admitted.

"Sounds like someone's been doing too much partying."

"I wish. I haven't gone out in forever." Bella reached her apartment. Once inside, she tossed her purse on the counter and collapsed on the couch. "So," she began, "to what do I owe the pleasure of this phone call?"

"My class was canceled, and since you're a slacker and only have two classes this semester, I thought you could help me pass the next fifty minutes."

"Very funny. Spend the next three summers earning course credits and then call me a slacker."

"I don't know what good it did you. It's not like you're graduating early or anything. Do you even know what you're going to do yet?"

Bella's anger flared. "No, I don't," she said pointedly. "Can we talk about something else please?"

"Sure." Jake thought for a moment before asking, "So how'd the date go?"

"Fine." Her anger quickly subsided, replaced by a strange combination of elation and anxiety.

"What did you do?"

"Edward took me to dinner and a movie. Then he showed me where he works." Bella spared her friend the more intimate details of the evening.

"Did he *kiss* you?" Jake drew out the word, singing it in a teasing manner.

Bella felt her embarrassment rising, but she wasn't going to let him get the best of her. "As a matter of fact, he did. *Jealous?*"

There was a beat of silence. When Jake spoke, his voice took on a serious tone. "Yes."

Bella's mouth dropped open, and she silently choked on words that wouldn't come out. She looked around her apartment frantically, but nothing she saw helped her formulate a reply. "Jake—"

"Come on, Bella. How could I not be jealous? Edward's so *dreamy!*"

Bella growled into the phone.

"Gotcha, didn't I?"

"Shut up!" She felt silly for falling for it in the first place. "Paybacks are a bitch, you know."

"Yeah, I know."

This time, it was Bella's turn to become serious. "I really like him." Normally she didn't talk about boys, especially to Jake, but he understood her better than almost anyone.

"That's . . . unusual."

"Tell me about it. I just feel like . . . I don't know. It's weird. I've never felt this way about anyone, but a little voice in my head is telling me one of us is going to get hurt."

Being privy to Edward's circumstances, Jake couldn't have agreed more. "Isn't that the risk in any relationship?" he asked, hoping to offer her some comfort. "I think you're thinking too hard. Quit being such a girl."

Bella snorted. "Is that your great advice? Don't overthinking it? Stop acting like a girl?"

"I'll send you the bill."

Edward walked in the door just as Bella let out a hearty laugh. He gave her a curious look.

"Hey, Jake, I gotta go."

"But I still have forty minutes to kill! Wait a minute. Lover boy is home, isn't he?" The silence on the line told Jake all he needed to know. "I see how it is. Give lover boy a kiss for me." Jake began making kissy noises into the phone.

"Jake," Bella warned. The kissing noises continued. "Bye, Jake." *Can't wait till you get a date*, she thought as she hung up on him.

Edward approached where she was sitting on the couch. Bella stood to greet him. "Hi," he said quietly.

"Hey."

Slowly, Edward reached out his arms and placed his hands on Bella's waist. When she didn't move away, he pulled her body against his and wrapped his arms around her. He sighed against her hair, expelling all of the day's anxiety and stress from his body. "I missed you," he whispered.

"You just saw me this morning."

“I know.” Edward leaned down. Their lips met for a brief kiss, and he smiled. “I’ve been waiting to do that all day.”

In the entire time that they had known each other, Bella had never seen Edward looking as relaxed and happy as he did in that moment. Her heart soared knowing she was the reason why. Standing on the tips of her toes, she hugged his neck and pressed her lips to his once more.

Edward held back the words he was afraid to say. He squeezed her tightly, trying to tell her with his body how much he cared for her. He didn’t want to think of a life without her, and in that moment, he knew there wasn’t anything he wouldn’t do for the girl in his arms.

# The Title

"Pinch me."

"What?" Bella laughed.

"Pinch me."

Gripping a section of Edward's skin between her fingers, she squeezed tightly.

"Ouch!" He grabbed her hand and pulled it away from his chest. "What the hell?"

"You told me to pinch you."

"Yeah, but I didn't want you to do it that hard!"

"Sorry." Bella gave Edward her best pout. He wrapped his arm around her waist and drew her closer. "Why did you want to be pinched anyway?"

"Just want to make sure I'm not dreaming."

"Why, does it feel like a dream to you?"

The expression on his face became serious. "I was in a bad place for a long time," he said. "A year ago, I never would have believed that I'd be out of prison by now . . . that I'd have a decent job . . ." Smiling, he shook his head. "A beautiful girlfriend."

Edward didn't miss the way the girl in his arms froze and suddenly looked like she wanted to bolt from the bed. Their relationship status wasn't something that had been discussed, but he assumed, after the last two nights, that they were on the same page when it came to having a committed relationship. But she hadn't corrected him, and that offered him a bit of reassurance.

Bella took a deep breath and forced a smile on her face. She shouldn't have been surprised. She knew how strongly Edward felt about her, and although she cared deeply for him as well,

categorizing their relationship turned out to be more difficult than going to bed with him. She bit her tongue when she saw the nervous expression on his face. It was just a title. She reminded herself that they were the same as they'd always been. It obviously made him extremely happy to call her his girlfriend, and if he wanted to label her as such, she wasn't about to burst his bubble.

"I knew you'd be okay."

Taking her cheek gently in his palm, Edward closed the small space between them and placed a kiss on her lips. He was happy when she returned the kiss without hesitation. As he rolled on top of her, the sides of the mattress lifted into the air, and they both sank onto the floor. He had repaired the air mattress with duct tape the night before, but overnight half the air had leaked out, turning them into a human taco any time they got too close.

"I'm going to buy you a bed," Edward said.

"You don't have to do that. "

"I want to. It's my fault you got rid of the other one. Besides, you did blame me for popping this one."

"Is that how you plan to weasel your way into my bed next?"

"I'm here by invitation, remember?" Edward recalled his uncertainty the night before, trying to decide whether to ask Bella if he should sleep with her or start putting sheets on the couch.

"Coming to bed?" she had asked as she stood in the doorway to her bedroom.

Edward didn't hesitate to join her.

"I will gladly sleep wherever you tell me to. If you want me back on the couch, just say so."

Bella studied his face carefully. She saw nothing but honesty in his eyes. "No," she said with a shake of her head. "I like you in here."

Edward's smile slowly faded as he wondered how much longer their living arrangement would last. "Actually, there's something I want to talk to you about."

Bella instantly picked up on his nervousness. "What?"

"One of the guys I work with—Jasper—he's looking for a roommate."

Bella sat up and propped herself up on her elbow, causing Edward to roll onto his side. She looked down at him intently. "And?"

"And I think it might be a good opportunity for me."

"You don't want to live with me anymore?" Bella couldn't understand why else he'd want to move out. She always thought he had been happy staying with her, that he wanted to be with her. Now he was taking the initiative to leave. It didn't make sense, and if she were being perfectly honest with herself, she was a little hurt, too. She knew that sex didn't have to mean anything, but



with Edward, it did—for her anyway. And after two nights of being intimate with him, his statement came as a shock. Hadn't he just referred to her as his girlfriend?

Edward frowned at the unexpected disappointment in her voice. "I do."

"Then why do you want to leave?"

"Bella, I can't keep taking advantage of your generosity. "

"You're not," she insisted.

"Eventually I'm going to have to support myself."

"But you don't have to yet. This place is paid for through July."

It was hard for Edward to explain the full extent of his reasoning. He wanted to prove himself, and he wanted Bella to see that he could provide for her. "Because I want to be responsible. I want to prove that I can do this."

"That's a stupid reason to leave!" Bella understood his desire to be independent, but she felt it was blinding him to what was in his best interests. "You'd be throwing your money away. Taking advantage of me and taking advantage of a situation that's presented to you are two completely different things."

Edward sat up and looked her in the eye. "I'm serious about us, Bella. You told me on Sunday that it wasn't a good idea to live together if we were going to be more than friends. If you think we'll stand a better chance if I leave . . ."

Bella's eyes stung with unshed tears. She was surprised by her reaction to him leaving. As unsure as she was about their future together, she had never pictured a time when he wouldn't be there. She always just assumed he would be. "Don't go." Her voice was soft and pleading. "If you want to be here, then stay."

"But I thought that's what you wanted."

"I don't want you to leave. I like having you here."

"Are you sure?"

When Bella nodded, Edward wrapped his arm around her and pulled them both down onto the bed. "Okay. I won't go."

"Thanks for considering me as a roommate, but I'm not going to be moving," Edward told Jasper on Wednesday afternoon.

"Oh." Jasper seemed surprised. "Okay. Where do you live anyway?"

"In an apartment here near the university."

“Why’d you decide to stay?” Jasper asked cautiously. “It’s okay if you don’t want to tell me,” he quickly added.

“No, it’s fine. I never really wanted to leave. I discussed it with Bella; she asked me to stay.”

“Bella?” Jasper smirked.

Edward ducked his head. He could feel heat spreading across his cheeks. His coworkers knew he had someone special in his life, but they didn’t know the full extent of it, and not once had Edward mentioned Bella by name to anyone but Carlisle. “Yeah,” Edward said with a smile.

“Hmm.”

“What?”

“Nothing. You two been living together long?”

Edward shrugged. “No, only about a month.”

“Yeah? Where were you before that?”

Edward regarded Jasper carefully. Although they had spent time together almost every day for the past three weeks, they didn’t really know each other. Edward wasn’t sure if he was comfortable with his coworkers knowing more about him than they already did. But Jasper never struck him as being malicious or having ulterior motives. In fact, Jasper initiated conversation so rarely that Edward felt obligated to answer his questions.

“Before that?” Edward rubbed the back of his neck. “I was an inmate of the state. I still am, technically.”

“That recently?” Jasper quickly reined in his shock. “Sorry, it’s just . . . you seem so . . . I don’t know. Normal?”

“Normal?” Edward repeated skeptically.

“Yeah.”

Edward shook his head.

“Well, it’s not like anyone can tell,” Jasper said in defense of his word choice. “You don’t exactly fit the stereotype.”

“Maybe the stereotype is wrong,” Edward snapped. Jasper held up his hands. “Sorry. I’m a little on edge. I didn’t want everybody to know.” He sighed and shrugged his shoulders.

“I’m not going to tell anyone. Your past is your business.”

“*You* may not, but . . .” Edward looked over his shoulder in the direction of Rose’s lesson room. He wondered if she had arrived while he was in the back. It wouldn’t surprise him if she wrote him off completely now that she knew his secret, and the prospect made him sad. As excessive as her flirting was at times, they otherwise got along well, and he would miss their friendship.

“Rose isn’t going to say anything either. She has a way of getting into people’s business, but she’s not a gossip.”

“If you say so,” Edward said.

A few silent moments passed until Jasper spoke again. “Does Carlisle know?”

“He knew before he hired me.”

Jasper nodded.

“I’m not a bad person.” Edward could barely whisper the words.

“Never thought you were. Besides, I trust Carlisle. He’s a good judge of character.”

Edward looked at Jasper, with his multiple facial piercings, makeup, and tattoos. In the short time he had known him, the only thing Edward knew about the man was that he was socially withdrawn and had a seemingly neverending knowledge of guitars. He didn’t know about his past or present life outside of work. He didn’t know what made Jasper who he was. His appearance must cause people to judge him no matter where he went or what he did, and their preconceived notions were probably wrong. Edward realized that, even if Jasper was an outstanding citizen who had never so much as rolled through a stop sign, he probably faced more discrimination at first sight than Edward himself ever would.

For the first time since Edward began working at Cullen’s Chamber, he felt an anxiety he didn’t realize he was carrying start slipping away. Jasper accepted him, just as Bella and Carlisle had. He no longer needed to make excuses for why he couldn’t go out with his coworkers or why he always left during the store’s busiest hours. He didn’t have to worry about saying the wrong thing or dance around the eleven year gap in his past. He could finally start being himself.

“So this girl, Bella,” Jasper said, attempting to bring the conversation back to a lighter topic. “You must have known her before?”

“Actually, I didn’t. We met while I was in prison. She wrote to me,” Edward admitted.

“Really?” This time Jasper didn’t bother masking his surprise. “Nah, you’re fucking with me.”

“I’m not.”

“Whatever, man.” Jasper laughed and shook his head in disbelief. “You must be one smooth writer. That or she’s a really amazing woman.”

Edward’s grin was wide as he leaned forward and rested his arms on the counter. “You have no idea.”

“Your apartment is so awesome!”

"Thanks," Bella said as she followed her fellow classmate inside and closed the door of her apartment.

"You are so lucky. I would kill for a place of my own. If I have to live with my roommate much longer, I might end up in a padded room."

Bella laughed at the serious expression on her newest friend's face. "Whatever, Alice. How bad can it be?"

"Ugh!" Alice flopped onto the couch dramatically. "I didn't have any silverware last week. None! I found my entire set in her room, along with my dirty cereal bowls and coffee mugs, which were growing some sort of lab experiment if I may add. And she eats my food all the time." She took a deep breath and sighed. "Speaking of food, can we eat before we start studying? I'm famished."

"Sure. Pizza okay?"

"Oh, my god, yes! Can we get an extra-large? With extra cheese? Oh, and breadsticks, too? You have soda, right?"

Alice paced the apartment after Bella ordered from the pizzeria down the street, becoming more and more impatient the longer she waited. When the food finally arrived, she wasted no time filling up a plate and devouring everything on it. Twice. Then she grabbed the last piece of pizza before they began to study.

Bella looked at her friend and wondered how she could eat that much food. The girl was petite and built like a twig. Her thighs didn't touch, and she was so thin that Bella wondered on more than one occasion where she stored her organs. She didn't appear to be malnourished, though—her weight complimented her fine bone structure perfectly.

Bella was instantly jealous of her metabolism.

"I need a drink," Alice groaned an hour later. She spiked her pen onto the table and closed the lid of her laptop. "We should do a mid-semester celebration after we take this test. What are you doing Friday night?"

"Nothing?" Bella answered lamely.

"Great! Let's go out and have some fun."

"Okay, sure." The prospect of having some girl time sounded fun to Bella, and she couldn't remember the last time she went to a bar. Guilt briefly washed over her as she thought about Edward. It wasn't possible to invite him along, and she hoped he wouldn't take it personally that she was going out without him.

"Yay!" Alice clapped her hands together. "I can't wait." She picked up her pen and chewed on it as she thought. "Almost as much as I can't wait to graduate."

“What are you going to do once you graduate?” Bella asked.

“I won’t actually be done with school this spring.” Alice grimaced. “I’m going on to get my Master’s in Social Work. I’ve always wanted to work with foster families.”

Bella replied with a grunt. She was hoping to find someone else who was in the same dilemma as she was. “How did you know you wanted to do that?”

Alice shifted in her chair. Her eyes met Bella’s, and she gave her a soft smile. “It hits close to home.”

Her words sank in slowly. Bella’s eyes widened as their meaning dawned on her. “Ah, I see.”

“What about you?”

“I don’t know. I have no clue what to do with a Bachelor’s in Psychology. I’ve been so focused on plowing through everything that I never stopped to think about what I wanted to do with it. I should have picked something else. *Anything* else.”

“What are you passionate about?” Alice asked.

Bella thought for a moment. What was she passionate about? “I don’t know,” she answered honestly. “I want to make a difference in people’s lives, I guess.”

“That’s a good place to start,” Alice said reassuringly. “You’ll figure it out.”

Bella wasn’t so sure.

The girls were interrupted by the sharp ring of the telephone. Bella groaned as she went to answer it. Her suspicions were confirmed when the caller ID showed the name of her apartment building. The caller introduced himself as Officer Cameron, and Bella buzzed him in. When she hung up the phone, she stood in place and stared at the door, worrying her bottom lip with her teeth. This was going to be awkward. What would she tell Alice? Deciding honesty was the best policy, she took a deep breath.

“Look, Alice—” Bella winced as a knock on the door cut her off. “I’ll explain everything later, okay?”

Alice was confused but nodded anyway and watched as Bella opened the door for a uniformed police officer.

It wasn’t the first time an officer had inspected the apartment since Edward moved in. Bella knew it was going to happen, and often, but it still made her uneasy, nevertheless. She much preferred when Officer Evenson was the one to perform the inspection. Sometimes Esme only glanced around, and sometimes she performed a more thorough search, but her warm smile and soothing nature always made Bella feel comfortable.

This was Officer Cameron's third time in the apartment. He never made small talk, and he went through everything with a fine-toothed comb. The drawers, the cupboards, the refrigerator and freezer, the closets—he even pulled apart the couch once. Fortunately the apartment was small and Bella didn't have many things to clutter up the place.

When he was satisfied that everything was on the up-and-up, Officer Cameron dismissed himself. Bella turned to Alice and gave her a sheepish smile.

"Do I want to know what that was about?" she asked.

"My . . . boyfriend is on, uh . . . parole, so . . ." Bella wrung her hands together as she slipped back onto her chair at the kitchen table.

Alice gawked at her, eyes unblinking and jaw open wide. "Your *boyfriend* is on *parole*," she repeated just to be sure she heard correctly. "That's—" Alice shook her head in an attempt to collect her thoughts—"the craziest thing I've ever heard!"

"Tell me about it," Bella mumbled.

"And he lives here?"

Bella nodded.

Alice felt completely lost. "I didn't even know you had a boyfriend!"

"It's kind of new."

"Where is he now?" She glanced around the living room as though she could have somehow missed Edward's presence during the past couple hours.

"He's at work."

"Do I get to meet him?"

Bella glanced at the clock. She didn't expect Edward home for a few more hours. The smile on Alice's face was bright, and she felt a sense of relief because of it. Her friend had taken the news surprisingly well. Bella found herself smiling in return and said, "Only if you're willing to stick around."

Edward was exhausted when he arrived home Wednesday night. The only thing he wanted to do was wrap Bella in his arms and be close to her again. It took him by surprise when he entered the apartment and found her sitting on the couch with a girl he didn't know. The feeling that he was intruding struck him once again, but he pushed it away as he closed the door behind him.

"Hey," Bella called. She stood and gestured for him to join them in the living room. "This is Alice. We have a class together. Alice, this is Edward."

"It's nice to meet you," Alice said as she stood and extended her hand. Her bubbly nature instantly put Edward at ease.

"You, too." Edward looked between the two girls briefly. Alice was beaming, and Bella's cheeks were a lovely shade of pink. He suddenly found himself self-conscious as they both looked at him. "I'll just be in the other room." Unsure of how Bella felt about displays of affection in front of others, he leaned in and placed a quick peck on her cheek. Then he retreated to the bedroom.

"He's cute," Alice mouthed once Edward's back was turned. Bella had to place her hand over her mouth to keep from giggling. For the first time, Bella felt giddy about her relationship with Edward. Alice's excitement was contagious, and for once, Bella was relieved to not have to defend her decision to let Edward into her life. It was a much welcome change from the reaction she was used to.

"Yes," Bella agreed. "He is."



# The Bar

“Are you sure you’re okay with picking us up?” Bella asked as Edward parked the car in front of Union Bar. The college dive bar wasn’t exactly what Bella had in mind when she and Alice made plans, but their prices were decent, and Alice insisted they go somewhere low key.

“You’re not walking home drunk.” The tone of Edward’s voice was final. “What time do you want me to come back?”

“I don’t know, midnight? What do you think, Alice?”

Edward looked at Alice in the rearview mirror. She shrugged.

“Midnight it is,” he said. “I’ll be at the apartment. Call me if you want to leave sooner, all right?”

Bella agreed, and Alice hopped out of the car, chanting, “Imma get my drink on!” Edward grabbed Bella’s arm as she opened the door. She turned to look at him.

“Be careful, please,” he said quietly. The last time Edward had been in a bar, it ended in an arrest and a 15 year prison sentence. Although he knew it was irrational to be worried about Bella finding a similar fate, the experience made him worry about her safety, nonetheless.

“I will. I promise.” Bella stretched her body across the car and kissed his pouting lips. “I feel bad,” she admitted.

“Don’t.”

“Doesn’t it bother you at all?”

Edward thought about it for a moment. Aside from wanting to keep Bella safe, he had no desire to enter the bar. “It bothers me that I *can’t* go, not because I want to.” Looking outside the window, he spotted Alice bouncing on the curb. Whether it was out of impatience or an attempt to ward off

the chilly February air, Edward wasn't sure. "Besides, I don't need to monopolize all of your time. You should spend it with your friends."

He waited until both girls were allowed inside the bar before driving away. It was late. He already attended his group session, and without anything else to do, he returned to the apartment.

Once inside, Bella and Alice made their way to the bar. Alice ordered four Long Island Iced Teas. "We're not fucking around tonight," she explained. They found an empty high-top table, and Alice worked her charm on the group of guys next to them to get an extra chair. As they sipped their drinks, they talked about the exam they took that morning.

"I feel good about it," Bella said. "I think I passed."

"Me, too. Studying on Wednesday definitely helped."

"Yeah. We should do it again."

"We should. At your place. When Edward's home."

Bella laughed in surprise. "What?"

"Have you seen the man? I mean, come on!" Alice slumped back in the chair and fanned her face with her hand. The alcohol was kicking in, causing her skin to have a permanent tinge of pink and her mouth to start saying whatever was on her mind. "You may get to look at him every day, but the rest of us don't."

"Oh, my god, Alice!" Bella buried her face in her hands, trying to hide her embarrassment.

"What? He's hot, in case you haven't noticed."

"I've noticed." Her muffled voice barely made it past her hands.

"He's older than us, isn't he?"

Bella nodded and answered without looking up. "He's thirty-five."

"So he's—" Alice paused, and a devilish grin spread across her face. "Experienced?"

If Bella wasn't mortified before, she definitely was now. "We are so not talking about this."

"I thought so." An air of pride colored her voice. "The older ones are always better in bed."

"Alice," Bella warned.

"Are you saying he's not?" Alice took another sip of her drink as she watched Bella squirm and tried to keep from laughing.

"He's very . . . attentive."

"I knew it! It's because he loves you. I could tell by the way he kept looking at you all googly eyed on the way here." Alice's statement was accentuated by a loud hiccup. "It's time for another round," she declared, slamming her empty glass onto the table.

"I'll get it," Bella said, happy for an excuse to get away from whatever crazy thing was going to come out of Alice's mouth next, even if it was only for a few minutes. "Wait here." She stood and made her way to the bar, careful not to make eye contact with any of the male patrons. The last thing she wanted was to attract unwanted attention. To her, there was nothing worse than a guy offering to buy her a drink as an excuse to hang around her all night. When she finally returned to the table, Alice wasted no time guzzling half of her drink.

"So back to Edward . . ."

"Seriously, Alice? Aren't drunk people supposed to be easily distracted?"

"No, and I'm not drunk." Even as she said it, Alice's eyes were glossy and slightly unfocused. "I want to know more about how you met."

Starting from the beginning, Bella told Alice all about how her relationship with Edward had developed. She told her about the website she found him on and how sweet his letters were. Alice listened with rapt attention as Bella described in great detail her visit to Waterview State Correctional Facility. She told her about offering Edward a place to stay, and even though she knew it was dangerous, there was also something about it that felt right. She also talked about the song Edward composed for her birthday and how having someone play it for her eventually led to Edward's job at Cullen's Chamber. A blush spread over Bella's face when she told Alice about their Valentine's Day date. However, not all of Edward's story was happy. Tears filled Alice's eyes as Bella told her about Charlie's reaction to them living together.

"He hates him," Bella said dejectedly. "I know it sounds ridiculous because we haven't known each other that long, but I can't imagine not having him in my life. If I have to choose between Edward and my father . . ." Sighing, she rubbed the wetness from her eyes. "I'm afraid, Alice. I'm feel like I'm going to mess up or, I don't know, something's going to go terribly wrong. Then this would have all been for nothing."

Alice scooted her chair to Bella's side of the table and gave her friend a hug. "Would you regret the decisions that led you here?" she asked.

"No, never."

"Then it wouldn't be for *nothing*. You wanted to help him, and it sounds like you did."

"You're right. I just don't want to get hurt. And I don't want to hurt him, either. I'm afraid what it would do to him."

"You're not giving the guy enough credit," Alice scoffed, the liquor making her more crass than usual. "It sounds like he's been through a lot. He can handle himself. You just worry about you." She punctuated her advice with a nod and took another drink.

Bella contemplated her words. She knew she was holding back, and she knew her hesitancy didn't escape Edward's notice. Relationships were never something Bella excelled at. Then again, she had never before put in the effort. She watched her mother flit between men. The effort Renee put into dating seemed to consume all her time. And what was the point? Her relationships never lasted long, and Bella watched time after time as the breakups left her mother heartbroken.

At a young age, Bella vowed never to let any man get in the way of her hopes and dreams. She went on dates, she had sex, but getting attached wasn't an option. Somehow, without even realizing it, she lost sight of her goals. It was easy to dream about her future when she was a 12-year-old—a famous actress, a Grammy Award winning artist, a life-saving medical doctor—the sky was the limit. By the time Bella was a teenager, she quickly discovered that she couldn't tell a lie or hold a tune, and even the thought of blood made her stomach churn.

Bella thought becoming a psychologist would be the best way to help people. She took college seriously. Her grades were always high, and she never partied, in excess anyway. The problem was that somewhere down the line, she realized her heart wasn't really in it, but instead of taking a step back and reevaluating her future, she put her head down and kept trudging down the same path.

Now she was at a pivotal point in her education career. She had no desire to continue her original plan and earn a doctoral degree. Not only that, but she didn't know what to do. Nothing interested her. Even if she started over, which she most definitely did not want to do, she would have no clue where to start.

Her thoughts were interrupted as someone approached the table.

"Bella," said a familiar voice, "I thought that was you up at the bar."

Bella took a large gulp of her drink before looking up at the man standing next to her. She wasn't surprised to see him—The Union was frequented by the university students, after all—but she had hoped their paths wouldn't cross again.

Ever.

"Paul," she acknowledged in an icy voice.

"I haven't seen you since before Thanksgiving. You never returned my calls, then your number was disconnected. Did you get a new phone or something?"

Actually, Bella had his number blocked, but she wasn't about to inform him of that. "Now isn't a good time, Paul." She nodded toward Alice.

"Oh, you don't see me for months and now you can't spare a few minutes of your precious time?" His eyes were blazing as he stared daggers at Bella. Alice sat up a little straighter and glared right back at him. Paul's sudden change in attitude didn't surprise Bella. When they first met, he

was kind and charming, but after going out a few times, she quickly found out what he was really like. Paul was controlling and possessive, and when he didn't get his way by charm, he became angry—especially after a few drinks.

Bella remained calm as she spoke. "I don't have anything to say to you. Take the hint. It's over."

"We'll see about that." Paul gave Alice a quick once-over before turning his attention back to Bella. "See you around," he promised, mumbling a few choice insults as he turned away from the table.

"What the fuck was that about?" Alice asked once he was out of earshot.

"Nothing. We went out a few times. He doesn't deal with rejection well, that's all."

"I can see that," Alice mumbled. "Does Edward know about him?"

"No, and no one's going to say anything about this, either," Bella said pointedly. "I don't want him to worry."

"Does he have anything to be worried about?"

Bella shook her head. "I can take care of myself."

Alice didn't look convinced.

"I need some fresh air," Bella said as she stood from the table and pulled out her phone. "Are you ready to leave?"

"You call Edward," Alice said. "I'll buy us another round."

Edward once again pulled up in front of The Union. Bella sounded stressed when she called, and he was relieved to see the girls standing outside the doors, seemingly unscathed. Actually, Bella was propped up against the building, and Alice was sitting on the curb, head between her knees.

"Everything okay?" he asked as he helped maneuver Alice into the car.

"Everything's fine," Bella answered. "We were just ready to leave."

"I am *so* hungry," Alice slurred before flopping onto the backseat. "Let's go to Denny's!"

Bella was feeling hungry as well. "Do you mind?" she asked Edward.

He looked at Alice, who was practically passed out in the backseat, and wondered if he and Bella would be eating alone. "Show me the way."

It wasn't hard for them to get Alice into the restaurant. With food so close at hand, she somehow found the wherewithal to stay upright as she walked inside. She didn't even bother to look at the menu once they were seated.

"I want pancakes," she said. "And eggs and a Coke and a side salad with ranch and French fries and a quesadilla."

"It's not because she's drunk," Bella said when she saw Edward's dumbfounded face. "She always eats like this."

Edward wasn't as worried about Alice overestimating her appetite as he was about her eating it all and then vomiting it up in the car. He watched in disbelief as she ordered, and then proceeded to eat everything placed in front of her.

"So, Edward," Alice said once she placed the last forkful of food into her mouth. "I hear your fingers are quite talented."

Bella's panic started to rise. If her friend was going to start talking about sex in front of Edward, she was going to abandon her at the restaurant. "Alice!" she squeaked.

Edward looked between the two questioningly. "Pardon me?"

"Bella tells me you like tickling the ivories."

Bella let out a breath of relief. Edward shifted in the booth, uncomfortable at being the center of attention.

"I can't say I've ever heard it put that way, but yeah. I guess I like to . . . tickle the ivories."

"He's good at it, too," Bella added. She blushed as her mind wandered to other things.

"I'll bet he is." Alice then launched into an onslaught of questions regarding his time spent incarcerated. Edward took them all in stride, especially once he realized Alice only wanted to satisfy her curiosity. Her open-mindedness immediately put him at ease, and along with holding Bella's hand under the table, he actually found himself relieved to talk about his past so openly.

Bella listened carefully but didn't interject anything, already knowing the majority of his answers. But there were a few things that took her by surprise—things that she wouldn't have even thought to ask.

"So the whole 'don't drop the soap' thing doesn't hold true?"

"No," he laughed. "Most of the time we kept as much space between us as possible. It was kind of an unwritten rule to leave at least one empty shower head between you and the next guy. But . . ." Edward's voice faded and he looked down at the table. The girls waited for him to finish. Finally, Alice couldn't take the silence any longer.

"But?"

Edward frowned as he pulled himself out of his thoughts. "But that's not to say we weren't cautious of our surroundings. When I would—" He stopped abruptly and shook his head.

"What?" Bella asked quietly.

“We took our pants off when we used the bathroom.” Bella and Alice looked at each other in confusion, then back at Edward. He sighed and continued. “Nothing like getting in a fight when your pants were around your ankles.”

Bella’s jaw dropped. For the most part, Alice remained unfazed. “Were you in a lot of fights?” she asked.

Edward’s eyes shot to Bella, watching carefully for her reaction as he answered. “At first, yes. I was angry, and I was scared, and I didn’t want anyone messing with me. Violence was the only way I knew how to communicate.

“But I got help, and after a while the fights got old, and the solitary got old. Being in prison . . . it took all the fight out of me. I didn’t trust anyone; I couldn’t. And eventually I just . . . I was alone.” A sad smile formed on Edward’s lips, and he squeezed Bella’s hand. “And then Bella started writing to me and completely turned my outlook on life around.”

Edward’s story was sobering. Any buzz that Bella had left over from the bar faded away as she listened to Edward talk about his past. Seeing her downcast eyes and the way her teeth dug into her lower lip made him wonder if he had said too much.

“Sorry, that was quite the mood killer.”

“I’m glad you told us,” Alice said in a gentle voice. “It sounds like you’ve come a long way.”

Edward nodded in agreement. “I have.”

It wasn’t much longer before the wall was the only thing keeping Alice upright. Edward paid the bill, much to Bella’s disapproval, and carried the passed out girl to the car.

“What are we going to do with her?” Edward asked.

“Her car’s at the apartment, and I’m not sober enough to drive it anywhere. We should probably just bring her inside.”

Alice didn’t even weight 100 pounds soaking wet, and for that Edward was thankful. He pulled her out of the backseat and followed Bella upstairs, wishing the entire time that she’d walk faster. Once in the apartment, he deposited Alice on the couch. Bella shoved a pillow under her head and covered her with a blanket.

“She’s going to hate herself for this in the morning,” Bella said. She went to the kitchen for a glass of water. As she was standing at the sink, Edward stepped behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist. Bella tensed for a moment before relaxing and bringing the glass to her lips.

Edward took a step back and dropped his hands to the counter on either side of her. He didn’t want to think about the reason behind her reaction, but he needed to find out why she kept pulling away from him.



“Do you not want me to touch you like this?” he asked softly. “Do you not want to be with me?”

Bella set the glass in the sink, and with watery eyes, slowly turned to face him. “I’m sorry, Edward.” His heart sank, even as she buried her face in his chest and slid her arms around his body. “I’m a terrible girlfriend.”

“What are you talking about?” His arms wound around her shoulders and held on tightly, but he didn’t allow himself to feel relief just yet. He wondered if something had happened at the bar, or perhaps at school. Maybe he finally said too much about his past, and Bella came to realize she didn’t want to associate with someone like him.

“You need someone strong to support you. Look at me! I’m not what you need.”

“You’re what I want,” he said quickly. “And I already need you. Besides, you’re doing fine.”

Bella shook her head. “I’m not.” she insisted. “I’ve never allowed myself to be in a serious relationship before, and I have no idea what I’m supposed to do.” She pushed away from him and wiped the tears from her eyes. “My entire childhood, I watched my mom put her life on hold, time and time again, because of some stupid guy. I didn’t want that to be me.”

Edward placed his hands on Bella’s cheeks and forced her to look him in the eyes. “I would never stand in the way of your dreams. You have to know that by now.”

“That’s the problem,” Bella sobbed. “I don’t even know what my dreams are anymore!” She was crying in earnest now. Edward swept away her tears with his thumbs. “How am I supposed to figure it out when all I can think about is you?”

She wasn’t breaking up with him. Edward could finally breathe again. “For what it’s worth, I know how you feel.”

“You do?” Bella looked at him curiously. Things seemed to fall into place for him once he got out of prison. He knew what he wanted, and she couldn’t imagine that he could understand where she was coming from.

“Yes.” Edward’s heart beat violently, pounding out a rhythm he could feel throughout his entire body. He took Bella’s hand and placed it on his chest. “Having a job is a condition of my parole. If I don’t have one . . .” Edward couldn’t even bring himself to finish the thought. “I like working for Carlisle, but sometimes I feel like I’m in over my head. I don’t know anything about sales or business management. I can’t work a Friday or Saturday night for the foreseeable future. They trained me in on the computer this week. It was literally the only thing I did. And I still don’t know what the hell I’m doing. I type with these two fingers for crying out loud.” He held up his hands and wiggled his index fingers in front of Bella’s face. She laughed for the first time since they were in the restaurant.

"I haven't been on a date since the nineties," he continued. "What were you then, ten?" He smiled to let her know he was teasing. "I know I've pushed for this. I can't get enough of you, even though I definitely don't deserve you."

Bella shook her head and opened her mouth to speak, but Edward didn't give her the chance.

"I know you have a lot of stuff to figure out. I want to help you, not hold you back. I want to be there for you like you've been there for me. We can figure everything out together. Just let me be your rock for once."

"Do you really mean that?" Bella asked hopefully. Confessing her fears felt good, and she could already feel the weight lifting from her shoulders. "I don't want to burden you with my problems."

"What was it you wrote once? 'You are not burdening me. . . . I don't expect or want you to put on a happy face and pretend that everything is okay.'" He gave her a pointed look. Bella's mouth popped open as she stared at him.

"You can randomly recite something I wrote to you, what, like, three months ago?"

"Four," Edward corrected. "I think you underestimate how much every single one of your letters meant to me. I spent a lot of time rereading them and thinking about what you said."

Bella knew the letters were important to him, but she never imagined him reading them over and over until they were ingrained in his memory.

"I know what it's like to face things alone," he continued. "I don't want that for you."

"I don't want to be alone anymore," she said in a small voice.

"You're not." Edward leaned down and kissed her forehead. He wiped the last traces of tears from her cheeks. "Let's go to bed. You've had a long night." He chose his next words carefully, not wanting to come off offensive or patronizing. "You'll probably feel better once you sleep some of that booze off."

Bella agreed and allowed him to lead her to the bedroom. "I'm really glad you're here, Edward," she said.

"Me, too."

# The Bed

On Saturday morning, Bella woke up a splitting headache. She sat up slowly, not wanting to make it worse. The room was too bright, even with the shades drawn. The light did nothing to diminish the steady pounding in her temples. Once she was assured her stomach would be fine and the headache was the extent of her hangover, she stood and walked with small, cautious steps to the bedroom door.

The smell of coffee and bacon filled the small apartment, and Bella's stomach growled in eager anticipation. She took the four steps from the bedroom into the kitchen and stopped in her tracks.

"What are you doing here?" The question came out sharper than she intended, but she felt too crappy to care.

"Nice to see you, too," Jake said through a mouthful of food.

"I asked him to come over," Edward said. "I hope you don't mind that I used your phone."

"That's fine." Bella waved off his concern. "But why is he here?" she asked, removing a glass from the cupboard and pouring herself some orange juice.

"I wanted to buy that new bed for you today. Jake said he'd help me get it in here."

"He's just using me for my truck," Jake added. He didn't seem to mind.

"Edward, you don't have to—"

"I want to," he interrupted.

Something about the desperate insistence in his voice stopped Bella from arguing. She nodded, accepting the support he was determined to give her.

"Where's Alice?"

"She left about an hour ago." Edward broke off a small piece of bacon from the pile that was cooling and held it up to her lips. "Hungry?"

Bella took the bacon between her teeth. Edward licked the grease off his fingers before leaning down and kissing her.

"Ew," Jake muttered.

Ignoring the comment, Edward let his lips linger a little longer than necessary. "How are you feeling?" he asked in a hushed voice only Bella could hear.

"I'm okay," she whispered. "My head hurts; that's all."

"Do you feel up for a little bed shopping? Otherwise we can go some other time. I don't want to get one you won't like."

"I'll be fine," she insisted.

"Okay." Edward smiled as he leaned down and kissed his girl again. "Have some breakfast, and then we'll go."

"I like this one the best," Bella said.

"Me, too," Edward agreed. "It's nice."

"It's too soft."

Bella's gaze moved from the ceiling to Jake, who was lying to her left. "Good thing *you're* not going to be sleeping on it."

"Whatever. It's kind of soft. That's all I'm saying." Jake shrugged before rolling off the bed. He was bored and more than ready to go anywhere that didn't sell furniture.

Edward grabbed the price tag that dangled over his head and internally groaned at the amount. It was more than he originally intended to spend, but after comparing prices all morning, he realized they weren't going to get anything decent for much less. He rolled onto his side and placed his arm across Bella's waist, capturing her undivided attention. "Is this the one you want?"

Bella bit her lip as she turned to face him. "It's too much."

"No, it's not," he said softly. "Besides, we're going to have it for a long time."

A smile crept across Bella's lips. It was the first time Edward had referred to anything as theirs jointly. The thought brought butterflies to her stomach. "Are we?"

Edward's eyes flickered down to her mouth, and he found himself smiling in return. "Yes," he said. "A very long time."

The look in his eyes was so intense, so passionate, that Bella sucked in a deep breath. She recalled their talk the night before, and for the first time, the seriousness of their relationship finally struck her. Edward was completely and utterly devoted; it showed in everything he said, everything he did. She would be lying if she said she didn't feel the same way. The thought of losing him made her feel sick, and the thought of being with anyone else seemed nothing short of appalling.

"How long?" she heard herself ask.

Edward looked her in the eyes, no trace of humor in his expression.

"Forever."

Saturdays were typically busy at Cullen's Chamber, and this one was no different. Although Edward felt only slightly comfortable in his new role at the store, he was left to answer phones and man the register by himself. Knowing help was right around the corner was comforting to him, but it didn't stop the hit on his ego every time he had to call on Jasper for assistance.

Around four o'clock, he took a call from a panicked parent who needed to cancel their child's piano lesson for the evening. Edward searched behind the counter, tossing around catalogs and inventory reports and instruction manuals, but the ring binder which held the private lesson schedules was nowhere to be found. He grabbed a piece of paper from the mess he had made and took down their information, promising someone would call them back to reschedule. No sooner had he hung up the phone when a deep voice spoke from across the counter.

"Hello."

Edward looked up to see a man standing in front of him. He was tall—standing a few inches taller than Edward—with short dark hair and a strong build. The smile he wore softened his otherwise intimidating appearance.

"Hi," Edward said when the man didn't say anything else.

"I'm Emmett." His grin widened as he rocked back and forth on his feet, apparently excited about something. Edward wasn't sure what, but he found himself smiling in return.

"Can I help you?" he asked.

"We talked on the phone."

Edward frowned as he tried to place the name. He hadn't spoken to that many customers on the phone, and he didn't recognize the name or the voice.

"I don't—"

“About the apartment,” Emmett said as he pointed to what Edward had been writing on. Realization dawned on him as he looked down at the paper before him—one of the many “Roommate Wanted” flyers Jasper had distributed.

“Oh, I’m not—”

“Man, I am *so* relieved. You don’t know how many freaks there are in this city! Tattoos and piercings and being all emo or whatever. The last thing I want to do is move in with some druggie or a sociopath, know what I mean? I gotta be honest, I was kind of nervous when you said you worked at a music store, but you seem pretty normal.”

Edward was speechless. It took him a few moments to gather his thoughts enough to speak. “I’m not Jasper if that’s who you’re looking for,” he said finally.

“Oh.” A confused look briefly crossed Emmett’s face. Then he smiled once again. “Sorry ‘bout that,” he mumbled. “Is Jasper here?”

Jasper was there. In fact, he stood a few feet behind Emmett and had overheard his every word. Edward saw him over Emmett’s shoulder, the discomfort written on his face as plain as day. Sensing the shift of Edward’s gaze, Emmett turned around to face him as well. His jaw dropped as he took in Jasper’s appearance.

Edward immediately felt bad for Jasper. Jasper might have chosen to appear the way he did, and he was probably used to people passing judgment, but witnessing it firsthand saddened Edward. Jasper had been more than accepting of him over the past weeks, and Edward wasn’t about to walk away when he had the opportunity to stand up for him.

“That’s Jasper,” Edward said. He took a deep breath to calm his nerves. Despite his discomfort, his voice came out even and strong. “You shouldn’t judge people based on looks, you know. Jasper’s a great guy. I’m the ex-junkie who just got out of prison.”

Laughing uncomfortably, Emmett whipped around to face Edward once again, his smile weakening slightly when he saw the serious expression on Edward’s face. “You’re kidding, right?” Edward’s gaze didn’t waver as Emmett looked him in the eye. He turned back to Jasper. “He’s joking,” he said uncertainly.

Jasper shrugged in a way that clearly said “no comment.”

“I’ll leave you guys to it.” Edward stepped out from behind the counter, happy to excuse himself from the situation. Jasper gave him a satisfied smirk as he walked past, while Emmett looked at the floor, abashed.

A quick glance at the clock told Edward it was almost time for his break. The store was mostly empty of customers, so he slipped into the break room.

He didn't expect to come face-to-face with Rose.

"Edward, hi," she said in surprise.

"Hey. Uh . . . your six o'clock needs to reschedule. There's a message on the desk."

Edward moved to step around her. They had remained civil toward each other ever since Edward let his secret slip, but he still tried his best to avoid her. What bothered him the most was that he didn't know what Rose thought about him now. She had stopped flirting with him completely, for which Edward was grateful, but he hated thinking that his presence made her uncomfortable.

Much to his astonishment, Rose followed him.

"So how've you been?"

Edward looked at her questioningly. "Fine, you?"

"Good." She stayed by Edward's side as he retrieved his dinner from the refrigerator and sat down at the long rectangular table.

"Jasper and I were going to get a small group together after we close tonight. I know there's somewhere you have to be, but I thought maybe after . . ." Rose looked at him, silently begging for him to agree to go. The hopefulness in her eyes was so unexpected that Edward didn't know what to think.

Once the initial shock wore off, there was a heaviness in his chest. He was frustrated that Rose hadn't taken the hint, and he was angry that she hadn't paid attention when he told her he couldn't go. At the same time he was hurt, because even though he couldn't go, he desperately wanted to.

"Rose, I can't," he whispered, not trusting his voice.

"We found a new place—no bar. You can bring your girlfriend," she added. "It's not strictly a work event or anything like that. Please, Edward? It'll be fun."

"You guys shouldn't change your plans for me. I'm an adult. You don't need to worry about hurting my feelings."

"Stop right there." Rose scowled as she pointed a threatening finger in his direction. "For Christ's sake, Edward, we're not throwing you a pity party. Believe it or not, we want to hang out with you." She took a few steps back and turned toward the door, put out by his continual refusals and irritated by his apparent self-depreciation. "It seems you don't feel the same about us," she said before fleeing from the room.



It was dark when Edward pulled into the parking lot of the 24-hour restaurant. He gripped the wheel tightly, his nervousness betrayed only by the stark white skin covering his knuckles.

"I can't wait to meet your work friends," Bella said. "It was really nice of them to come here." When Edward didn't reply, she inspected his face closely, noticing the tension in his eyes and jaw. "What's wrong?"

Edward shook his head. With a deep sigh, he dropped his hands from the wheel and slouched back against the seat. "I don't understand why they're doing this," he admitted.

"Why they're doing what?"

"Changing their plans for me. They don't really even know me."

"Maybe they're trying to get to know you better," Bella reasoned. When Edward's lip turned up in a doubtful smile, she reached across the center console and placed her hand on top of his. "Why don't you think so?"

"Gee, I don't know. Maybe because I'm an ex-con."

Bella stared at him for a moment, wishing she could read his mind. When she realized he was using sarcasm to mask his seriousness, she could barely hide her astonishment.

"Edward, these people see you almost every day. I think they're capable of forming their own opinions about you. Besides," she continued, "I thought you didn't want people to judge you based on your past."

"I don't, but it only makes sense that they would."

"I didn't."

"That was different." Even as he said it, Edward knew his argument held no validity. For some reason, Bella had given him the benefit of the doubt. He didn't know why, just as he didn't understand why his coworkers were doing the same. He wanted to believe Bella had befriended him out of the kindness of her heart. She was his savior. She was an anomaly. Everyone else was supposed to judge him. It was to be expected; it was what he had prepared for. To think otherwise was to get his hopes up, and Edward didn't want to deal with the potential disappointments he faced because of his past.

"No, it's not! Don't you see? I'm not the special one here, you are."

"Me," he said skeptically.

"You have a good soul, Edward. I knew it even before we met in person. If I could see it through your letters alone, then the people who are around you on a daily basis are going to see it too."

Edward contemplated her words. It was strange for him to think that anyone would want to be his friend when he had nothing to offer. His previous friendships had all been based on money,

drugs, or, when he was in prison, tradable items. People were always surprisingly nice when he had something they wanted—a cigarette, a postage stamp, an over-the-counter tablet of pain medication. A group of people wanting to hang out with him for no other reason than his company was a foreign concept to Edward—one he couldn't quite grasp.

With a deep sigh, Edward exited the car and walked swiftly to the passenger side. Bella had already opened the door by the time he got there, so he offered her his hand and helped her from the car. When she stood on her toes and kissed him, Edward knew there was nothing he couldn't do as long as she were by his side.

Inside, the hostess asked if they wanted a table for two. Before either of them could answer, a burst of applause came from the small group on the far end of the restaurant. Edward's face flushed as the hostess smiled and gestured for them to join their party.

Carlisle stood when the couple reached the table. "I normally don't get invited to these things," he said in good spirits, "but when I heard you might be coming I insisted on being here." He shook Edward's hand before turning his attention to Bella. "It's nice to see you again."

"It's good to see you too," she replied.

Edward wrapped his arm around Bella's shoulders, more for his comfort than her own, before beginning the introductions. "Bella this is Jasper—"

"Hey, I remember you," she interrupted. Of all the times Edward had mentioned Jasper in conversation, she never realized it was the same man she had briefly spoken to the day she brought Edward's sheet music to the store.

"Most people do," he said with a shrug.

"Next to him are Peter and Charlotte," Edward continued. He didn't know the couple very well, and he hoped they were both okay with the change of venue.

"Hello," said Peter. Charlotte gave a little wave.

"And this is Rose."

Rose smiled at Bella warmly, and Edward hoped it was genuine.

"Everyone, this is my girlfriend, Bella." The moment the words left his lips, Edward felt himself begin to relax. Because no matter what happened, at the end of the night they would be leaving together, and if he had anything to do with it, that would never change.

"Have a seat," Rose said. "We ordered appetizers. They should be out any minute."

Edward hesitated. The two open chairs were between Carlisle and Rose. He considered sitting next to his boss, but he worried how Rose might act toward Bella. Perhaps he should let Bella sit next to Carlisle since they had met before, but he didn't want to encourage Rose by taking the seat

next to her, and he didn't want his decision to cause Bella to draw any conclusions about their relationship.

In the end, the decision was made for him. With her eyes trained on Bella, Rose pulled out the chair next to her, and Bella slid onto it without any hesitation or indication of discomfort.

The conversation around the table flowed easily, and although Edward didn't say much, he enjoyed watching Bella interact so easily with his coworkers.

His friends.

She and Rose seemed to get along especially well, and he wondered if it really was possible for him to have a friendship with Rose after all.

"Well," Peter finally said as he looked at his watch. Their time together flew by, and it was already past midnight. "We should get going. The babysitter is probably ready to be relieved."

"Yeah, I gotta go, too," said Jasper. "My new roommate is moving in tomorrow morning. I told him I'd give him a hand."

"The guy in the store today?" Edward asked.

Jasper nodded. "I think he felt pretty stupid after you set him straight, but it worked out in the end."

Bella looked at Edward questioningly, and he gave her a secretive wink. "Are you ready to go?" he asked.

"Sure, if you are."

The small group said their goodbyes before parting ways. Once in the car, Edward couldn't contain his smile.

"See . . . that wasn't so bad, was it?" Bella asked.

"No," Edward agreed. "It wasn't."

Once they were back inside the apartment, Edward wasted no time pulling Bella into his arms. He walked backwards, leading her into the bedroom. The moment they were inside, he closed the door and pressed her body against it. "I've been waiting for this all day," he said between kisses.

"For what?" she asked coyly.

"To show you how much I—how much you mean to me."

Edward grabbed Bella's right leg and hitched it over his hip. She lifted her other leg, and he braced his weight against her, holding her off the floor. It took some difficulty, but he managed to remove her shirt without dropping her.

"Bed," she gasped as his lips made their way back to her bare shoulder.

"Maybe I want you right here," he said.

A shudder through Bella's body. "But it's new," she said in weak protest.

"And we have the rest of our lives to use it."

Edward used his mouth to silence any further arguments.

# The Altercation

The weeks leading up to the end of Bella's second trimester at the University of Washington were filled with study dates with Alice, even if they did spend more time watching movies than reviewing their classwork. Edward was never surprised to return home after work to find the two of them on the couch, wearing sweatpants and eating pizza, eyes glued to the flat-panel television Bella had found on Craigslist for a quarter of the price of buying it new.

While Bella and Alice became close friends, Edward fell into a comfortable routine with his coworkers. He made it a point to go out with them at least once a week, and each time, they found a new restaurant, café, or coffee shop that fit his parole requirements.

Edward still wasn't thrilled to attend meetings, but because there was nothing he could do about it, he begrudgingly showed up three times a week. Worse than the meetings were the apartment inspections. Edward didn't mind them so much personally; after all, anything was better than being in prison, and he had nothing to hide. What bothered him the most was Bella's visible discomfort when the officers went through her things. She had told him multiple times she didn't mind—if anything, their invasion of *his* privacy angered her. Still, Edward couldn't shake the guilt he felt each time there was an unexpected knock on the door. The only time he felt any sort of respite was when Officer Evenson performed the search herself. Her friendly demeanor and laid back attitude always made it seem more like a social call than a mandatory home inspection.

"I'm really proud of you, Edward," Evenson had told him at the end of her visit the night before. "The first three months are the hardest. You've only been out for ten weeks, you have a permanent job, you haven't missed a meeting..." She grabbed his hand and squeezed it tightly. When she spoke again, her voice was low and reverent. "There are so many people in your position who don't

seize the opportunities presented to them. They don't believe they can change their lives, and they don't have good people supporting them. You've done so well in such a short period of time. There's not a doubt in my mind that you will have a great life."

Edward thought about Evenson's words carefully, especially the part about support from good people. He was certain he wouldn't have been half as successful if it weren't for Bella. Whenever he was feeling down about himself, she always had something positive to say. She pushed him to keep searching for a job when he got discouraged after only a few days. He hadn't even considered getting his driver's license until Bella suggested it, and she insisted he use her car to get to work and meetings, opting to walk the short distance to campus instead. Even his job was a result of her one-time exchange with Carlisle.

On top of all the things Bella did for him, Edward found himself striving to do better *for her*. He wanted to be worthy of her love, and he wanted to make her proud. She deserved the best; he was determined to be the best for her.

It was Friday night. After spending an exhausting day at work, and sitting silently through yet another group therapy session, Edward was relieved to finally get home. He was worn out and wanted nothing more than to sit on the couch and mentally unwind. He kicked off his shoes as he stepped into the dark and seemingly empty apartment.

"Bella?"

"In here," she called from the bathroom. "Alice and I are going out tonight. She should be here any minute. Do you think you could give us a ride?"

The bathroom door was slightly ajar, casting a thin beam of light across the living room carpet. Edward nudged the door open with his toe. Bella stood in front of the mirror, wrapped in a towel. She smiled at him as she ran a styling iron through her hair, creating loose curls that cascaded over her shoulders. Leaning against the doorframe, Edward let his gaze wander over Bella's face. Her eyes were accentuated with a heavy black line, and her cheeks were tinted a darker shade of pink than the natural blush he was accustomed to seeing. She was still beautiful to him, nevertheless, just as she would undoubtedly be to any man who set eyes on her tonight.

"I want you to be careful," Edward said.

Bella smiled and rolled her eyes playfully. "I'm always careful."

"I'm serious, Bella. I know how guys think . . . what they want."

Bella finished curling the last section of her hair and set the curling iron on the counter with a loud clink. She fluffed her hair before placing her hands on her hips and meeting Edward's eyes in the mirror. "I'm not going there to meet guys, if that's what you're worried about."

“I know you’re not. I just don’t want anything bad to happen to you.”

Bella frowned as she leaned closer to her reflection and applied a sticky layer of gloss to her lips. She was excited to go out with Alice again, and she didn’t like the way Edward was putting a damper on her good mood.

“I can take care of myself.” There was a slight degree of exasperation in her voice. She shook her head and sidestepped Edward, making her way to the bedroom.

Edward followed her, this time leaning against the bedroom doorframe. His body was tense, and he crossed his arms as he watched her select a low-cut shirt from the closet. “You might think you can.” The words were harsher than he intended. Bella turned and glared at him, but the warning in her eyes wasn’t enough to make him back down. “You’re asking for trouble, going out like that.”

“Edward, it’s twenty ten. Everybody goes out like this.” She tossed the shirt on the bed and rummaged through her closet for a pair of jeans. It was the same pair she had worn on their first date. They were tight, but she liked the way they made her look. Besides, she didn’t want to appear frumpy in comparison to Alice, who always managed to look perfectly put together. “Relax and let me have a good time,” she mumbled.

“I just want to protect you.”

“I don’t need protection.”

Their argument was interrupted by a knock on the door.

“That’s probably Alice,” Bella said. “Will you let her in? I still need to get dressed.”

“Fine.” Edward took a deep breath and dropped his arms to his sides. “And yes, I’ll drive you.” He stepped out of the bedroom, closing the door behind him with more force than necessary.

“Come get us at eleven?” Bella asked.

“Sure.”

“Bye, Edward!” Alice sang as the girls slid out of the car.

Edward gave her a half-smile and a small wave, and he watched until they disappeared safely inside the bar before driving away. His argument with Bella had gone unresolved because of Alice’s untimely arrival. The more he thought about his reaction, the more he felt like an ass. Tonight, once they were alone again, he would apologize for overreacting.



With almost two hours to kill before having to return to the bar, Edward went home and attempted to occupy his time. He ate dinner. He watched television. He read. Somehow his eyes kept returning to the clock, counting down the minutes until he could see Bella again.

Impatient and unable to wait any longer, Edward arrived at the bar with ten minutes to spare. He became antsy while waiting for the clock to strike eleven. He felt on edge, and by one minute past the hour, it took everything he had to stay in the car. He kept having to remind himself that he had been early, and the girls weren't as late as they seemed.

At 11:05 Edward drummed a steady rhythm against the steering wheel with his fingertips. By 11:10 the nervous shake of his leg seemed to vibrate the entire car. He couldn't enter the bar, and he cursed himself for not having bought a cell phone. Now that he was in need of one, it was much easier to justify the price. When the clock read 11:15, he decided to head back to the apartment in hopes that the girls had changed their mind about leaving and left a message on the answering machine.

Edward was disappointed to discover no new messages when he returned home. A million thoughts swirled through his mind as he stared blankly at the red zero on the message indicator screen. He was positive there was a logical explanation for their failure to meet him. Perhaps they lost track of time. Maybe he had misheard and was supposed to pick them up at midnight. Was Bella being rebellious, having been more upset about their argument than she'd let on? *No*, he thought. *She wouldn't do that to me.* He grabbed the phone and, with shaky hands, dialed Bella's number.

It rang four times before dropping to voicemail.

He hung up and tried again. No answer. He waited five minutes and redialed, but the result was the same.

Edward pushed the worry to the back of his mind, but the steady hammering of his heart in his chest made it difficult to focus on anything else. He told himself that perhaps Bella was upset with him after all. Changing tactics, he picked up the phone once again, this time dialing a different number.

"Hello?" a sleepy voice answered.

"Jake, I need your help."

"What's wrong?" Jake asked, suddenly wide awake.

"Will you call Bella's cell phone?"

"Okay," he said, confused. "But why?"

Edward clenched the phone tightly and sputtered, "Please . . . I just . . . she's not answering, and I don't know if it's me or . . ." A lump formed in his throat, but he swallowed it back. "Will you please just call her?"

"What do you want me to say?"

"I don't know. I don't care! Just make sure she's all right."

Jake, sensing the urgency in his words, didn't waste any more time. "Okay, sure."

Edward hung up and paced the short distance of the kitchen, unsure of what would happen next. When the phone rang mere seconds later, it was too soon for his liking. "Well?" he answered.

"I got her voicemail."

"Shit."

"What's going on?" Jake demanded.

Edward fought to keep his composure. There could be any number of reasons why Bella wouldn't answer her phone. If the bar was noisy, she might not hear it. She could have left in the car or dropped it in the bathroom.

"It's probably nothing," Edward said, trying to convince himself more than anything else. "Do you think you could drive out to Union Bar and see if Bella is still there?"

"Dude, I can't go in a bar. I'm only twenty."

Edward cursed again. "You know what? Never mind. I'll figure something out myself." He hung up without giving Jake a chance to reply and tossed the phone onto the counter.

The clock on the wall read 11:45.

Edward didn't know what to do. If he returned to the bar to wait, he'd have no way to get a hold of Bella. If something were wrong, or if they left and went somewhere else, he would never know. His best bet was to stay by the phone. Bella would call once she realized he wasn't out front waiting.

Unless something had happened.

He didn't think he could wait another two hours for the bar to close to find out.

Jasper had met Bella a few times; he would be able to recognize her in a crowd. Edward picked up the phone, intending to dial Jasper's number, but decided to call Bella one last time instead.

The phone rang once, twice, and then he heard the unmistakable noise of a bar.

"Bella!" he said without waiting for her to answer.

He heard muffled voices, but between static on the line and the background noise, he couldn't make out what they were saying. He wasn't sure, but he thought he heard Bella's voice right before the call ended.

Without another thought, Edward grabbed the car keys from the counter and raced out of the apartment.

He parked as close as he could to the front of Union Bar, which meant leaving the car in a no parking zone. It was the least of his worries as he approached the bouncer standing just inside the front door.

“I.D. please.”

Edward removed the license from his wallet and offered it to the bouncer, who looked at the card casually before comparing the image on the front to the man standing before him. He marked the back of Edward’s hand with a stamp before returning his license and gesturing for him to enter.

Inside, the lights were dim. A steady beat of dance music set the tone of the evening. Edward navigated through the crowd, afraid to draw attention to himself. Although it was irrational, he couldn’t shake the feeling that he stood out, like everyone just *knew* he shouldn’t be there.

Edward made a slow sweep of the bar, but Bella was nowhere to be seen. He was about to give up the search when a flurry of activity in the back of the dance floor captured his attention. He looked just in time to see Alice flying backward and landing on her rear end. Next to her stood a man, his arm still outstretched from the force of the shove, and just beyond him, pressed against the wall, was Bella.

The expression on her face could only be described as livid. Her hand flew toward the man’s face, but he caught her arm mid swing and pinned it against the wall. With his other hand he grabbed Bella by the chin, digging his fingers into her cheeks. The back of her head hit the wall and she winced.

Edward saw red.

He made his way across the dance floor without making the conscious decision. When he reached the pair, Edward clasped his hand on the man’s shoulder and yanked him backward. The man stumbled away from Bella, no doubt taken off-guard by the unexpected attack.

“What the f—”

Edward slammed his hands against the man’s chest, pushing the air from his lungs and cutting him off mid-sentence. “Stay away from her,” he warned.

They stood a few feet apart, facing each other. When the man didn’t respond, Edward turned to look at Bella. Her expression of pure horror captured his attention so completely that he was completely unprepared for the blow to his stomach.

The man rammed into Edward with his shoulder, knocking them both to the ground, and made contact with a few good punches before Edward could block his face.

“Paul!” Bella gasped.

Paul threw punches relentlessly, aiming for Edward’s head and torso, wherever he could get in a shot. But Paul was firing his fists too fast to do any real damage, and he was so focused on where he was going to hit next that he overlooked his own defenses. Edward waited for the perfect opportunity. It only took one well-placed right hook to throw Paul off balance.

If Bella had looked away, she would have missed it. One minute Paul was hovering over Edward, pummeling him with his fists. The next he was tumbling onto his back, arms pinned beneath Edward’s legs. Edward landed each subsequent punch strategically, and Paul’s head bounced around like his neck was made of rubber.

“Edward, stop,” Bella begged, over and over again. “Please stop.”

He didn’t stop. Not when his hands and clothing were splattered in blood. Not when Paul stopped struggling beneath him. His surroundings faded into the background, the only image filling his head the one of Bella up against the wall.

Two strong hands clamped down on Edward’s arms and began pulling him away.

Had Edward taken the time to look over his shoulder, he might have thought twice before throwing his elbow into the nose of a uniformed officer. As it turned out, he didn’t realize the full extent of his indiscretion until he was face down on the floor, a pair of handcuffs secured tightly around his wrists.

“You are under arrest for assaulting an officer. You have the right to remain silent. . . .”

As the officer continued reading Edward his Miranda rights, his surroundings slowly came back into focus. The music was still playing, but the crowd was frozen in place, giving them a wide berth. One figure was standing closer than the rest. It was Bella. Her hands were clasped over her mouth, and she shook as tears streamed down her cheeks.

“Do you understand each of these rights I have explained to you?”

“Yes.”

“Having these rights in mind, do you wish to talk to us now?”

“No.”

Unlike his run-in with Charlie, this time Edward kept his eyes glued to Bella as he was dragged to his feet and escorted from the bar.

# The Jail

From the inside of a cell, King County Jail didn't seem all that different from Waterview State Correctional Facility. It consisted of three steel walls and a barred door, a toilet, and a bed. There was no window.

Despite it being the middle of the night, Edward couldn't sleep. He sat with his head in his hands, contemplating what would become of his future. He would return to a six by eight cell at Waterview, about that he had no doubt. Entering the bar was a direct violation of his parole, more than enough reason to send him back to serve his remaining sentence at the prison, with added time for assaulting an officer, and perhaps for the man he beat up as well.

He had been so close—a mere three years away from being completely free. Edward had never felt so hopeless, or helpless, in his entire life.

His return to prison was inevitable; it was only a matter of when. He could be transferred first thing in the morning, but there was also a chance he would remain at the jail until his arraignment.

Upon his arrival, Edward had declined to make any phone calls. He didn't see the point. No one could help him now. He couldn't even afford an attorney, not that one would do him any good.

It pained him to imagine what everyone would think of him now. Officer Evenson had spoken so well of his progress. It was only two nights ago, but to Edward it felt like an eternity. He wondered if she would be disappointed when she found out or if she would look at him as just another bad apple, a criminal who would never be cut out to exist freely in society.

In a few more hours, Cullen's Chamber was scheduled to open. Would Carlisle be disappointed in him? Would he be angry at himself for promoting a parolee to an integral position in the store? Edward felt terrible for the time and money Carlisle had wasted on him. Carlisle mistook his

musical talent for dependability, but Edward always knew he deserved neither the job nor Carlisle's kindness.

Edward wished he could see Rose's face when she found out. She would probably be disgusted with herself for all the times she pursued him, and he would deserve whatever cutting remarks she wanted to give. He didn't know how Jasper would react. Edward imagined him shrugging and continuing on with his life as though the past two months had never happened.

And Bella.

It hurt to think about her.

Was she disappointed? Was she angry? Would she even want to see him again?

Edward replayed their argument over and over in his head, each time adding a new scene—something he should have said or done. Each reprise was preceded by another of the nights' events: Bella grimacing as she was pressed against the wall, her voice as she begged Edward to stop his attack, the tears cascading down her cheeks as he was hauled away.

He couldn't bear to call her. He wasn't ready to hear her voice, and he didn't know what to say. Edward wondered if she would visit him here, if she even wanted to see him again. She had watched him beat a man into unconsciousness. A man she apparently knew. How would she look at him now, knowing what he was capable of? Knowing that he was apparently the same man he had been twelve years before?

Maybe he had misread their exchange and overreacted. Was that her reason for wanting him to stop? She didn't want to see *Paul* hurt?

The thought made him sick.

Edward didn't regret the decisions that led him to this cell tonight. He always said he would never go back, yet here he was. Bella's safety was more important to him than his freedom. He wouldn't want to be out at her expense. He couldn't have lived with himself if something bad happened to her and he had done nothing.

Edward's only wish was that he'd had the courage to tell Bella how he felt. He loved her, but he was always afraid to say the words.

It was too late now.

He refused to tell her like this. He refused to say something now, something that would guilt her into waiting for him. In fact, he would tell her not to wait. He would tell her to move on and enjoy life, even if it meant cutting ties completely.

Maybe she already had.

Edward's lips were dry, and when he licked them, he tasted salt. He could not recall crying.

At some point, Edward drifted into an uneasy sleep, unaware he had until a loud bang awoke him with a start. He was immediately on his feet, confused and disoriented. The memories of the night before came crashing back. There was a painful twisting in his stomach; nerves and hunger had gotten the best of him. But when his brain registered the scene before him, his stomach dropped, and his knees felt weak.

On the opposite side of the cell door, uniformed and stone-faced, stood Officer Charles Swan. He was flanked by two officers, who were equally expressionless yet seemed to radiate an air of hostility.

Edward didn't imagine an assault on an officer, whether it be intended or not, would be taken lightly.

"Let's go, Masen. You're coming with me," Charlie Swan said. The guard on his right opened the cell door and stood to the side.

Edward stood, frozen and unable to move. He didn't want to leave the safety of his cell. It was better than Waterview. It was better than the unknown. And it was definitely better than being anywhere near Bella's father.

"I said, let's go." He spoke in a low, menacing voice, annunciating each word.

Edward knew it was over. Numbness overtook him as he made his way to the door of the cell. He felt like a prisoner being led to the gallows, which, he reasoned, might not be far from the truth.

"Not going to cuff me this time?" he deadpanned.

"No one asked you to speak, Masen."

With one hand gripping his arm and the other clasped tightly on his shoulder, Officer Swan escorted Edward down the long corridors, the footsteps of the other officers echoing closely behind them. They came to a stop at a large steel door with an illuminated exit sign hanging overhead.

"You got him from here, Chief?" one of the guards asked.

"Yes, thank you, gentlemen."

Charlie pushed open the door. Edward squinted as the bright morning sun hit his eyes. A familiar car was parked on the street—the Chief's Volvo. Edward tried not to think about what happened the last time he took a ride in that car, but the memories flooded back regardless of his efforts to forget.

When they reached the car, Charlie released his hold on Edward. "Get in."

"In the front?" Edward couldn't hide his surprise. Charlie didn't answer as he rounded the front of the car and opened the driver's door. Edward scurried to get inside, not wanting to try the officer's patience.



Charlie peeled down the street, and Edward fastened his seatbelt with shaking hands. Neither of them spoke for a long time. Edward knew the area better now. They weren't heading toward Waterview, but when they got on the freeway, he realized they weren't returning to Bella's apartment either. He didn't dare inquire about their destination.

"I know this may sound like the pot calling the kettle black," Charlie began after a painfully awkward stretch of silence, "but violence isn't the way to solve things."

Edward snorted. Charlie ignored him.

"What you did last night was . . . inexcusable. You assaulted a man. You hit a cop for Christ's sake!" Charlie shook his head. "You should have never set foot in that bar."

Edward didn't reply. He dropped his focus to the floor.

"You made a series of poor decisions last night. Decisions that were detrimental to your future. You gambled with your freedom, and you lost. You had many options, Edward, and you chose wrong."

Edward swallowed back the lump forming in his throat. His chest burned, and his eyes stung with unshed tears. He didn't want to cry now. He refused to look weak in front of Officer Swan again.

"With that being said—" Charlie paused dramatically and waited until he had Edward's full attention before continuing. "You were acting on behalf of my little girl, and I can respect that. I'm not going to hold a grudge against you for punching someone in Bella's honor."

Clearing his throat, Edward said, "I don't think she wanted my help."

"No," Charlie said, changing his inflection as though he were talking to a small child. "Bella didn't want your help if it meant jeopardizing your freedom."

"I was worried. I wasn't thinking."

"That is exceedingly obvious."

Charlie reached across the car. He removed a small pile of napkins from the glovebox and dropped them onto Edward's lap, careful to keep his eyes on the road. Edward fixed his gaze out the passenger window and wiped his eyes as discreetly as possible.

"I don't want to go back," he said once he was sure his voice wouldn't break.

"You should have thought of that before you went guns a blazing into a bar and beat a man into a bloody pulp."

Edward nodded. He knew Charlie was right. Hindsight was twenty-twenty, after all. "What's going to happen to me?" he asked, desperate for some sort of hope, even if it was small.

"That depends on whether you continue acting like an idiot."

"I know I'm getting added time for the cop, but what about the other guy, Paul?" Edward spit out his name like a curse.

"I don't think Paul will cause you any problems," Charlie said. The corners of his lips turned up in a smirk. "I paid him a little visit this morning."

Edward shuddered as he thought about his own visit from Officer Swan. "I should feel pity for the bastard if he got a visit from you, but I just can't bring myself to give a shit right now."

"I didn't lay a finger on him, though I wanted to. Believe me." Charlie's smirk turned into a full blown grin. "You did a pretty thorough job. He won't be going anywhere near Bella, and there were enough witnesses at the bar who will vouch for your self-defense. Even if you did go a little bit overboard," he added tersely. "He won't win a case against you—not with the girls backing you up, anyhow." His lips hardened into a straight line, and he sighed loudly through his nose.

"Look, Edward. I apologize for the way I treated you. I'm not proud of what I did. Thank you for being the bigger man. If you hadn't, well . . . let's just say I probably wouldn't have a job right now."

Edward shrugged. It wasn't the first time he had been beaten by a father figure. "I did it for Bella."

"I can appreciate that."

Charlie Swan turned onto a residential street. Edward watched the houses pass, still unsure of where they were going, still afraid to ask. There were people outside, running, walking dogs, mowing their lawns—things they probably did every Saturday, most likely taking the activities for granted.

"It's no secret I don't approve of your relationship with my daughter." Charlie slowed and pulled over on the side of the road. He turned to look Edward in the eye. "Bella's an adult, and I can't control who she dates. However—" Charlie held up his index finger, punctuating his words with a shake of his fist. "You *will* move out of my daughter's apartment."

Edward frowned. "Sir, I—"

"I don't expect you out by tonight. I know there are procedures to be followed, and I expect you'll need time to find another place. But I want you out, and I don't want you two living under the same roof, at the very least until you're done serving your time."

"I don't understand," Edward admitted. "I violated my parole. I'm going back to prison."

"This wasn't a social call, Edward." Charlie put the car in gear and began to drive again. "You acted with Bella in mind last night. I know the officer you elbowed in the face; he's a close friend of mine. He owed me a favor, and I owed you for what I did."

Edward stared at Officer Swan. He was absolutely speechless.

"It won't be easy for me to make this go away. All I ask in return is that you find somewhere else to live. I don't think it's too much to ask in return for your freedom, do you?"

"No, sir."

"Good." Before Charlie turned into his driveway, Edward noticed Bella's car parked on the street. "Just so we're on the same page, if you fuck up again, you're going back to prison. And if my daughter ever shows up on my doorstep in the middle of the night again, in tears because of something you did, you're going to wish prison was an option." He stopped the car in front of the garage, and without looking at Edward, sighed and said in a less menacing voice, "Now, get out."

As if on cue, Bella appeared from inside her father's house and ran down the front steps toward them. She flew into Edward with such force that it knocked him a few steps backward. If the car wasn't there to catch them, they surely would have toppled to the ground. He placed his hands on her hips to steady her.

"Oh, Edward, I'm so sorry," Bella said between sobs. "I lost track of the time, and when you called he took my phone . . . I thought I had everything under control!" She buried her face into Edward's neck as she cried. "I wasn't thinking. If I had known . . . if I had any idea you'd come inside . . . I am so, so sorry."

Edward said nothing. He was at a loss for words. Bella had turned to her father for help, and he had come through. Edward wasn't even sure if he had understood Charlie correctly. It seemed too good to be true, like any minute he would wake up, back in the jail cell, waiting to be shuttled off to Waterview.

"It's okay now," he said uncertainly.

Bella pulled back, and Edward reluctantly let her go. She took his hands in hers. His knuckles were swollen and bruised. She ghosted her lips over a small cut, and then looked up at him. Tears brimmed her eyes. "I love you."

Edward stood back to get a better look at her face. There wasn't a trace of doubt in her eyes. "You do?"

Bella nodded profusely and stood on her toes to place a kiss on his lips. He wrapped his arms around her, not caring that her father was witness to their exchange.

"I love you, too," he said. "I love you so much."

EML

April 21, 2010

Dear Bella,

It's strange, not being with you at night or seeing your face first thing in the morning. The three months we spent together were the best of my life. Life before prison doesn't exist for me anymore, and life in prison really wasn't life at all. For everything else, there was you.

Carlisle owns a really nice house. His business has obviously done well throughout the years. The guest room is nice, but I feel just like that—a guest. I'm not sure if that feeling will ever go away, but I know every day I'm one step closer to getting my own place. It won't be anywhere near this size, so I should probably enjoy it while I can. He owns a piano, which is really great. Playing at the store always made me uncomfortable. There was always a customer or another employee watching and listening. Here I can play whenever I want, and Carlisle's not intrusive, so it works out well. I'd tell you more about the house, but you'll see it soon enough.

I miss you, and I can't wait to see you again. The past week has been hard, but I think this will be good for us both.

Yours forever,  
Edward

p.s. I love you.

EML

April 21, 2010

Dear Mr. Swan,

I want to thank you again for helping me. If it weren't for you, I would be back in prison right now. I'm sure it wasn't a simple task, and I imagine it wasn't without risk to you. Considering my history and relationship with Bella, it couldn't have been an easy decision for you to make. I'm not foolish enough to believe you did it for me, but please know I am appreciative, whatever your reasoning. There are no words to describe how truly grateful I am.

If you haven't already heard, I moved out of Bella's apartment last week. She believes I came to the decision on my own. I didn't discuss your request with her. I think it's better this way.

I understand why you don't approve of me, but I want you to know that everything I do, I do with Bella's best interest in mind. I plan on being around for as long as she'll have me. You don't have to like me, but my hope is that someday you'll accept me.

Thank you again.

Respectfully,  
Edward Masen



June 4, 2010

Dear Edward,

I can't believe I just took my last class at UDub. All I have to do now is pass one final exam and figure out what to do with the rest of my life. It's actually really kind of scary.

I landed an internship for the summer. I'll be working mostly with foster families, but it will give me a chance to see what other opportunities are in the field that may interest me. I start a week from Monday. Wish me luck!

My dad and I went out to dinner last night. It was nice. I didn't realize how much I missed him. He didn't bring up anything that happened at the bar, thankfully. I was prepared for another lecture. Not just about you, but about me, too. He was pretty upset about what happened that night. I didn't realize just how detrimental my lack of responsibility would be to you. I would do anything to change how I handled the situation. I know you said you weren't upset with me, but you should have been. And I know I've said it a million times already, but I am so sorry for everything you had to go through because of my stupid decisions.

(over)



Anyway, by the time we were finished with dessert, I actually thought he might go the whole evening without mentioning you at all, but before we left he asked if you were behaving yourself. I told him you were. Then he told me I could do worse. I'm pretty sure it was an attempt at being funny. I hope that's a good sign.

I can't wait to see you next weekend. My mom is really looking forward to meeting you as well. Just a heads up, she's a hugger. Also, my dad will be there. Don't freak out. You're freaking out, aren't you? Call me so I can talk you down.

Yours forever,

Bella

xoxo



# The Graduation

The afternoon sun was bright, warming the inside of Husky Stadium. Family and friends of the University of Washington graduates steadily filtered into the open-air stadium, excited to see their loved ones claim their diplomas.

Edward stood outside, waiting for Bella's mother, Renee. She had flown in late the night before, and because Edward spent the morning opening the store, they had yet to meet in person. Under normal circumstances, he might have been nervous about their initial introduction, but today, there was something else occupying his mind.

Edward should have been watching for Renee, but for the past ten minutes his attention was focused on the man standing 50 feet away from him. Edward knew saying hello would be the right thing, the mature thing, but every time he started heading in Charlie Swan's direction, nerves got the best of him. He didn't know what to say, and he didn't know what to expect, not having spoken to him since the car ride from the jail.

As if he could read minds, Charlie turned his head, his eyes immediately zoning in on Edward. His chest puffed out almost imperceptibly, and he placed his hands on his hips as he angled his body to face him. Edward knew he would have to act, that Charlie expected him to make the first move. His feet began to close the distance.

Charlie waited, nodding when Edward stood a few feet in front of him. "Edward."

"Sir."

Edward held Charlie's gaze, fighting the urge to drop his eyes to the ground. He was relieved when Charlie looked away first.

"How's the new place treating you?" Charlie asked.

"It's good."

"I assume you're still seeing my daughter or you wouldn't be here."

Edward wasn't sure how to interpret his comment. "Yes, sir. I am."

Charlie nodded. "Staying out of trouble, I presume?"

"I do my best."

The corner of Charlie Swan's mustache twitched. "Good."

Without knowing what else to say, Edward stood next to Bella's father in amicable silence. He breathed a sigh of relief, happy to have had somewhat of a conversation with him and come out relatively unscathed.

"Charles!"

Their silent companionship was interrupted by a woman running toward them. She had blond hair and light eyes, but Edward knew without a doubt that she had to be Bella's mother. She stopped in front of Charlie and threw her arms around his neck.

"Oh, Charles, it's so good to see you!"

"Renee."

"Can you believe our baby is graduating from college? It seems like just yesterday I was sending her off to kindergarten."

"Time flies."

Renee stepped back and straightened Charlie's tie. Then she turned to the man who was standing too close to be a stranger. Her eyes lit up, and her smile widened.

"You must be Edward."

Edward returned her smile. "Yes."

"Oh, it's so nice to finally meet you in person!" Renee wrapped her arms around Edward's shoulders and squeezed him tightly. When she pulled away, she took the time to flatten his collar. When she was satisfied, she rested her hands on his chest. "My, you are so handsome in person. Charlie—" she tapped him on the arm to capture his attention "—isn't he handsome?"

"Oh, yes." Charlie looked away, clearing his throat. "Handsome."

"How is your job going, Edward?"

"Very good."

"Bella tells me you're going to be playing piano for an audience."

Edward looked down. It had been years since he played in public, and he wasn't sure how he would handle the attention. He was trying not to think about it, but someone—Bella, Carlisle, another of his coworkers, and now Renee—always seemed to bring it up.

“Not an audience, really,” he admitted. “My boss wants to advertise music lessons, and he thinks having live music in different locations around the city will attract more attention than a flyer. There are five of us who will be doing it.”

“Well, I think it’s a fabulous idea.”

Edward and Renee continued to talk while Charlie stood by patiently. When it came time for the ceremony, the three of them entered the stadium. Renee sat between the men, acting as a buffer.

When Bella’s name was finally called, Renee clapped loudly, tears in her eyes. Charlie’s hard expression softened to one of pride as his only daughter accepted her diploma. All Edward could do was smile at the woman he loved, at the woman who reached out to him when he needed someone the most and stood by him ever since.

After the ceremony was over and people flooded out of the stadium, Bella found her parents and Edward where they had agreed to meet. She hugged Charlie and Renee briefly before flying into Edward’s arms.

“I’m so proud of you,” he whispered, placing a covert kiss on her cheek.

Bella released him from her arms and slipped her hand into his. “I see you found my mom.”

“Yes.” Edward grinned widely at Renee. “And she had plenty of time to tell me lots of incriminating stories about you.”

“Oh, no.”

Charlie chuckled. Bella turned to face him directly.

“Thanks for not killing him, Dad.”

Charlie crossed his arms over his chest. He had promised his daughter that he’d give Edward the benefit of the doubt, that he’d judge him based on the man he was today, not the boy with the criminal record he was 12 years ago. Clearing his throat, he said, “Well, if he doesn’t watch it, he won’t be as lucky next time.”

Bella squeezed Edward’s hand and smiled up at him. It would only be a matter of time before he won Charlie over, just like everyone else he had met since being released from prison five months earlier. Besides, Charlie would have to come around. Edward was in her life now.

For good.

# The Move

"I can't believe you made it fit!"

"Of course I made it fit, Bella. I'm a guy. This is the type of stuff I was made to do." Edward wiped the sweat from his brow and collapsed onto Bella's couch, which was now wedged in the corner of Alice's living room. "Thank god that's done. I'm never moving you again."

"Never?" Bella plopped on the couch next to him, settling her feet on his lap. "Not even if I make you another Funfetti cake?"

"No deal."

"How about . . ." She poked her toe into his chest. "Sexual favors?"

"Now you're talking." Edward captured her foot, tickling it before massaging the sole. Bella sighed and rested her head against the back of the couch.

"Do you think we'll live together again someday?" she asked.

"Of course. Why wouldn't we?"

Bella shrugged. She hugged a small throw pillow to her chest and twirled the fringes around her fingers. She hadn't sulked when Edward first moved out, but when the contract on her apartment ended and she was forced to search for someplace new, without him, his absence really began to affect her.

"Don't take this the wrong way." She paused to gauge Edward's reaction. He gave a small nod, letting her know to continue. "I know you wanted to have some space, and I get that. I do. I just—" Bella sucked in a deep breath. She didn't know how to put her fears into words, afraid that

admitting them would make the situation more real somehow. It would be so much easier to continue pretending everything was okay.

“Tell me.” Edward’s soft voice brought her mind back in focus.

Bella exhaled in a heavy gust as she collected her thoughts. “I’m afraid you’ll realize you don’t need me. And I feel terrible for thinking that way because you shouldn’t need me. I don’t want to hold you back, but I don’t want to lose you.”

Edward sat up a little straighter. “You’re not going to lose me. I promise.” He waited for her to acknowledge his vow, but she clung to the pillow still in her arms, her focus trained on the floor. “Bella.” When she didn’t respond, he captured her chin in his hand and tilted her head up. Her eyes were glassy with unshed tears. “Don’t you believe me?”

“You spent so long in . . . I mean . . . you wanted to be on your own, and now that you are . . .” She rubbed at her eyes as tears began to escape. “I’m afraid you’ll like the independence so much you won’t want me at all.”

“You think I won’t want you?” Edward couldn’t believe, after everything they’d been through, that she doubted his intentions toward her. A tear rolled down Bella’s cheek as she nodded. Edward pulled his shirtsleeve over his hand and brushed it away. “I miss you every day.”

“Then why aren’t we together? Why am I here? Why are you at Carlisle’s?”

Edward sighed. He’d been deliberately vague when he explained his reasons for moving out, and he knew it was only a matter of time before Bella asked more questions. He was stuck between a rock and a hard place, not wanting to lie, but not wanting to damage Bella’s relationship with her father either. Deep inside he knew some space would be good for them, and the more time he spent reflecting on their situation, the more confident he was that the change was for the better.

“Sweetheart, I don’t want to be apart from you, but I have to be able to stand on my own two feet. I’m essentially starting my life over. I need to know I can support myself. I’ve already done so many things wrong in life. I can’t feel good about myself if I’m burdening the people I love.”

Bella wanted to argue, to tell him that he wasn’t a burden. When she opened her mouth to speak, Edward shook his head. It took everything Bella had to press her lips shut.

“I know you don’t look at it that way, but I do. I will not rely on you for the rest of my life. I have to prove to myself that I’m worthy of having you. Carlisle is doing me a great favor by parole-proofing his house and allowing me to rent his basement, but I don’t want to stay there forever. I want to have a place of my own, a place of our own. Maybe it’s silly of me to think I’ll ever be able to support the both of us, but I have to try.”

Bella understood, but she was afraid to think about what would happen to them if he wasn't successful. She didn't broach the subject, not wanting Edward to think she didn't have faith in him. She did, but she was realistic too. Edward had nothing to his name. It would be a long time before he could afford a house or a car, and if those were the things their future together hinged on, she couldn't expect their relationship to progress anytime soon.

"Promise you'll come to me if you need help."

"Who else would I turn to?" Edward leaned down and gently kissed her lips. He could still sense her worry. He understood. If their roles were reversed and she were the one to have moved away, he would've felt the same way. "Bella, one day this will all be behind me. I'll be done with home inspections and mandatory meetings. I'll be able to set foot in any establishment and travel outside of King County." He wrapped his arms around Bella's shoulders and pulled her against him. "Someday I'll truly be a free man, and when I am, the first thing I'm going to do is ask you a very important question."

Bella's eyes widened. Her lips parted slightly as she looked up to meet his gaze, uncertain if she'd misinterpreted his statement. His next words confirmed her suspicions, sending warmth through her chest as her heart went into overdrive.

"And I hope your answer will be yes."

EMD

September 26, 2010

Dear Bella,

I know it's been a while since we've written. There's something I've been wanting to talk to you about, but it's not an easy subject for me to discuss.

The other day you asked me how my group therapy has been going. I told you it was fine. I always tell you it's fine. The truth is, it's been really rough. In the past I thought I was too good to be there, like I was better than everyone else. I understand now that's not the case. I've been speaking more, especially in the anger management sessions, about what I did both back in March and 12 years ago. Neither are easy to relive. I think I'll always have to be conscientious of my temper. Unfortunately, until I'm in a situation which calls for self-control, I have no way of knowing how far I've progressed. It makes me nervous. So much is on the line. It also makes me wonder if I have as much control over the other aspects of my life as I thought I did. All I can do is take one day at a time. At least I know I'm not alone. I have you and Carlisle and my friends at work. Everyone in my sessions is really supportive as well.

One of the counselors suggested I write a letter to my father. You know the drill, one of those "write everything that comes to mind because you're not actually going to send it" letters. I did it. The problem is that I don't want to send it, but I can't bring myself to throw it away either. I don't know why I'm doing this, but I'm sending it to you. You don't have to read it if you don't want to. I don't even care what you



EML

do with it. Keep it, throw it out, send it if you can find him—whatever you see fit as long as I don't have to deal with it ever again.

Thank you for everything you do for me. You make my life worth having.

I love you,  
Edward

p.s. You still owe me a tub of Funfetti frosting, and if you think I'm going to forget about it, you're wrong.

EML

September 3, 2010

Father,

A lot has changed in my life since we last spoke. I asked for your help. You told me you were sick of my bullshit and it was time I took responsibility for my actions. Well, I did.

I spent 138 months in federal prison—almost 12 years of my life. I was released on parole back in January. I'm clean and sober. I'm a manager at a locally owned music store in Seattle. I might not have fulfilled my dream of becoming a famous composer, but I get to work with instruments and I love my job. I even got to play for audiences over the summer. You are probably rolling your eyes right now, but I want you to know that I have never been happier than I am right now.

I'm not going to blame you for my mistakes, because they are mine. I take full responsibility for all the things I've done. My life isn't without its struggles, but I wouldn't trade it for the world.

With that being said, you were a shitty excuse for a parent. You made me miserable. You made Mom miserable. You were never there for me, so I shouldn't have been surprised that you didn't help me when I needed it the most. I spent most of my life wondering what I did to deserve your constant hatred. I always loved you because you were my father. Now I realize you were never worthy of my love.

EML

I met someone. I love her and plan on spending the rest of my life with her. I could never lay a hand on her or my future children. I am no saint, but my ghosts pale in comparison to yours, and for that I am thankful.

You've never asked for my forgiveness, but I do forgive you. I have to in order to heal and move on with my life. Please know, no matter what happened in the past, I wish you nothing but the best in the future.

Edward

# The Holiday

Bella stepped out of her car and into the cold December night air. It had taken her forever to find a parking spot. She hurried toward the mall, pulling a scarf over her nose to ward off the chill. Once inside, she checked her watch and breathed a sigh of relief. There was still time to see Edward.

Excitement buzzed in the air as shoppers browsed for last minute gifts. Brightly decorated Christmas trees lined the aisles, twinkling lights covered pillars, and giant bows adorned shelves. Signs for last minute sales were everywhere.

The scent of chocolate captured Bella's attention, and she spared a glance over her shoulder as she passed display cases filled with fudge and other confections. She didn't want to stop and risk missing Edward's final performance of the season. It wasn't the first time Bella had come to watch him play, but her new work schedule seemed to always conflict with his performance times, and she didn't get to listen to him nearly as much as she'd hoped.

The sound of Christmas music became louder as she journeyed farther inside the store—a familiar melody played by a solo piano. If she didn't know better, she'd have thought the song was a professional recording.

In the middle of the rotunda, bent over a grand piano, sat Edward. Around him a small crowd had gathered, watching intently as his fingers danced over the keys. Edward's performance didn't go unnoticed. Even people seemingly in a hurry slowed as they passed. Next to Bella, a little boy came to a halt, tugging at his mom's shirt and pointing at Edward. A smile lit his face as he stared with undisguised amazement. Bella felt her own smile spread across her face as well.

As if he could sense her presence, Edward cocked his head in Bella's direction. His eyes never left the sheet music in front of him, not that he needed a reminder of which notes came next. The pages were there to serve as an added assurance in case his memory failed him under pressure, and although he hadn't yet needed to use them, they made a better focal point than the inquisitive audience.

The music slowed mid-song, changing in key and dropping an octave as the cheery, fast-paced holiday tune transitioned into the familiar lullaby Bella loved. It still warmed her heart every time Edward played her song, and her cheeks ached from smiling so widely. If anyone in the crowd noticed the change in the music, they didn't seem to mind.

Edward played Bella's song, pouring the same amount of passion into it as he always did. Instead of letting the ending trail off and fade into an unfinished cord, he made another fluid transition back to his planned set list.

Once he was finished playing, the onlookers dispersed. Bella waited patiently while the woman whose son had been fascinated by Edward stopped to take a flier and inquire about lessons. When they were finally alone, he turned to her and pulled her into his arms, the nervous tension he felt while playing in public still apparent in his embrace.

"You sounded great."

Edward's cheeks blazed. He looked at the floor as he smiled, unable to meet her eyes. "Thanks."

Giggling, Bella nudged his shoulder with hers. Edward had played in various public places over the past six months, and he was just as shy now as when he began. For how fantastic he always played, she found his modesty endearing.

"Come on," she said, placing her hand in his. "Buy me some chocolate and let's get out of here."

Carlisle was out of town visiting relatives, so the house was dark and empty when they arrived. Edward changed out of the suit he wore and into something more comfortable. He retrieved Bella's gift from where it was hidden in the dresser and joined her in the living room.

"Merry Christmas," he said, offering her the small box. Excitement lit Bella's face as she reached for it, and he hoped she wouldn't be disappointed over what was inside. "It's not much, but I hope you like it."

Bella untied the ribbon holding the box closed and opened the lid. Inside appeared to be a coil of thin steel. "Thanks," Bella said uncertainly. "Um..." She looked at Edward, feeling sheepish for having to ask. "What is it?"

"Give me your wrist." Smiling, Edward removed the bracelet from the box and stretched it over Bella's hand. "It's piano wire," he said. "I made it myself."

Bella's jaw dropped open as she traced her fingers along the wires, spinning the small black and white beads that were strung along it.

"It's like a keyboard," Edward explained, pointing to the beads. "White, black, two whites, black, white, black, two whites, black, white, black. It's probably not as cool as I think it is, but . . ."

"No, I love it!" she assured him. "It's really creative. I can't believe you made this." Bella twirled the bracelet around her wrist, stopping when she noticed a silver charm hanging from the center. A heart was engraved on one side. Bella flipped it over and traced the inscription across the back.

*Plus que ma propre vie.*

"It's French," Edward said. "I'm not sure how to say it, but it translates to 'more than my own life.' That's how much I love you."

Bella looked at him and smiled, the impending tears causing her throat to tighten. "Thank you," she said. "I will treasure it, always."

Edward breathed a sigh of relief. "I'm glad you like it."

"Wow, my gift seems really lame in comparison."

Edward shook his head. He didn't think anything from Bella would disappoint him.

"Okay, I wasn't sure what to get you, so I talked to Carlisle. He told me you put a guitar on layaway."

"Bella," Edward warned, afraid of what she was about to confess.

"I paid the balance. It's still at the store because I didn't want to risk breaking it, but it's officially yours." She gestured to the now empty gift box he'd given her. "Sorry you didn't get to open it."

Edward stared at her, unable to hide his surprise. "You can't do that. It's too much."

"Well, I did. You've been saving like crazy ever since you started working. I wanted you to have something frivolous that's just for you. Not rent or food or clothes."

"You still shouldn't have done it."

"That's what you said when I sent you money in prison."

Edward closed his eyes. Accepting help still made him uncomfortable, as did references to his time spent behind bars. He didn't like knowing Bella had spent so much on him when she was just getting her feet into the workforce as well. But he reminded himself it was a gift, and she had wanted to give it to him.

"Thank you," he said. "You're the best thing that's ever happened to me."

Bella shifted uncomfortably. "I have something else for you too."

The sudden change in her demeanor put Edward on alert. "What is it?" he tried to demand, but it came out sounding weak and unsure.

"You know that letter you gave to me? The one to your father?"

"Yeah?" Realization dawned on him. "You found him. Oh, shit. You sent it." Edward's stomach flipped. He staggered backward and collapsed onto the couch. It had been so long since he felt emotion over the man who raised him that his reaction surprised him. Resting his elbows on his knees, he tugged his hands through his hair.

"Not exactly."

"Did you speak to him?" Edward asked in a rush. "What did he say?"

Bella reached into her purse. She pulled out a red envelope and a white piece of paper, folded in half. "I didn't know how to tell you," she said. "I was waiting until after the holidays were over, but then they sent this." She held up the card.

Edward took the two items hesitantly. He unfolded the piece of paper first. It was a printout from the Chicago Sun-Times website. When he realized what he was looking at, his heart sank.

*Masen, Edward R. age 52, of Chicago, IL passed away on August 18, 2004. Preceded in death by wife, Elizabeth. Survived by current wife of 4 years, Victoria; and children, Edward and Tanya.*

His eyes continued down the page, but he'd stopped reading. There was more information in those first sentences than he could process at once.

"Are you okay?" Bella asked.

Edward let out a shaky breath. "I'm fine."

"Open the card."

Doing as he was told, Edward slid his finger under the flap and tore open the envelope. Inside was a hand-drawn Christmas card of Santa placing gifts under a tree. Glitter covered the front, and it got everywhere. Edward groaned as it sprinkled down onto the carpet. Without thinking, he wiped his hand across his jeans, leaving a sparkling patch on the denim. Bella stifled a giggle, and Edward shot her a warning look, though he couldn't keep the corners of his lips from turning up when he saw her smile.

Taking a deep breath, he flipped open the card. Both sides were filled with a child's loopy cursive.

*Dear Edward,*



*My name is Tanya and I'm 10 years old. I'm in the 5th grade and my favorite class is art. I wish you lived closer so we could hang out. Maybe someday you can come visit me and my mom. I think you'd make a pretty cool big brother.*

*Merry Christmas.*

*Love,*

*Tanya*

Edward stared at the card for a few minutes, absorbing everything he'd just learned. He didn't stop Bella when she reached out and plucked it from his hands so she could read it herself.

"You knew about this?" Edward's face was blank. His tone gave away nothing, and Bella couldn't tell by if he was angry, upset, or filled with some other emotion.

"Only for a couple of weeks," she said. "I contacted Victoria after I found the obituary. I wanted to be sure I'd found the right Edward Masen before I said anything to you. I didn't tell her anything about you, just that I was looking for him on your behalf. I gave her my contact info, but I didn't think she'd send you anything so quickly."

Edward nodded once.

"We can cancel tonight, if you need some time."

"No." Edward glanced at the clock. "We're already late. We should probably go."

Charlie Swan was lighting the fireplace when there was a knock on his door. Bella didn't wait for him to answer, instead letting herself inside the house.

"Merry Christmas, Dad," she called out, and crossed the small living room to meet him.

"Hey, kid." Charlie stood to hug his daughter, the fire temporarily forgotten. "Glad you could make it out to spend Christmas Eve with your old man."

"Of course I did." Wrapping her arms around Charlie's neck, she added, "Thanks for waiting for us. Sorry we're late."

Charlie shrugged her off. Eating dinner an hour late was better than spending Christmas Eve by himself.

Edward stood inside the doorway, feeling anxious and unwelcome even though the invitation had been extended to them both. He tightened his grip on the package he carried as Charlie approached.

“Edward,” Charlie said.

“Sir.” Edward kept his chin up, but it wasn’t without difficulty. Unlike the last time they’d seen each other, at Bella’s graduation ceremony, this time they weren’t on neutral ground. Charlie’s career was in law enforcement, something of which Edward was conditioned to be leery. He had emasculated him in front of the woman he loved, had done him a favor Edward didn’t feel he could ever repay, and as if those weren’t enough reasons to be uncomfortable in his home, Edward’s desire to gain his approval trumped them all.

He also didn’t have Renee as a buffer.

“Let me put that under the tree,” Bella said. She took the present from Edward and brought it to the living room.

“Well,” Charlie grumbled, “don’t just stand there. Come inside.”

Edward shoved his hands in his pockets and took a few tentative steps. Charlie closed the door behind him.

“Thank you for having me.”

Grunting an acknowledgment, Charlie nodded toward the kitchen. “Dinner’s ready. I hope you like fish.”

Bella and Edward took a seat at Charlie’s kitchen table. The room was small, especially once the table was moved away from the corner to accommodate three people. Charlie removed a tray of baked potatoes from the oven, cursing when his hand slipped and came in contact with the hot metal.

Edward gave Bella a questioning look. She shook her head. Charlie wasn’t incredibly efficient in the kitchen, but he was the type of man who didn’t want help when he set his mind to something.

Arranging the fish and potatoes on a serving platter reserved for special occasions, Charlie sighed. “It’s nothing fancy, but it’s been a Christmas Eve tradition for me and Bella ever since she moved up here.”

Edward wanted to tell him it was the fanciest Christmas dinner he’d had since before his mother died, but he wasn’t comfortable voicing his feelings around Bella’s father. Besides, Edward

didn't want him to think about where he spent his past 12 Christmases, not that Charlie needed a reminder.

"I think it looks great," Edward said as Charlie placed the dish on the table.

Charlie took his seat and filled his plate. Bella and Edward followed his lead.

"So, kid," Charlie began, "tell me more about this new job of yours."

"It's really interesting," she said. "Right now I'm assisting people who work with foster families—everything from interviews to home inspections to monthly meetings. I'd really like to work directly with the kids. I'll have to take a few more courses to get a degree in social work if I want to advance, but I think it'll be worth it."

"That's a tough line of work," Charlie said, his tone one of caution. He didn't want to discourage his daughter from doing something she enjoyed, but he knew firsthand the frustrations of a career in public service. "A lot of those kids come from tough backgrounds. It's sad to see them get pushed to the wayside. Not every kid will have a success story, no matter how hard you try."

"I know." Bella took a deep breath. She had expected her father to have a similar reaction, but this wasn't a decision she'd made on a whim, and she was prepared to defend it. "It's sad, but it's real. Ignorance isn't bliss; ignoring the bad side doesn't mean it goes away. What's sad are the children who aren't in the system but *should* be." Bella shot a knowing glance at Edward, who was placing an unnecessary amount of concentration on searching for bones in his fish. "Maybe I'm naive to believe I can make a difference in someone's life, but I do."

Pride filled Charlie, and he grinned. "You've never been one to shy away from doing something difficult," he said. "You got that from me. You also got your mother's ability to see the positive side of everything. I hope you never lose that, Bella."

Bella looked down, blushing from the compliment. Edward looked at her in time to see the red rush to her cheeks. He smiled, unable to hide his adoration for her.

"What about you, Edward? Are you still working at that music place?"

Edward froze, his eyebrows rising in surprise. His eyes shifted to Charlie, and then back to Bella. She was trying to hide her smile. He finished the bite he was chewing and cleared his throat.

"Yes." He wasn't sure what else to say or if Charlie even cared, but he figured if Bella's father was making an effort to socialize, he should take full advantage of the opportunity. "It's going well so far. I have benefits and a steady income. I was promoted to manager a few months ago." Edward was suddenly self-conscious under Charlie's penetrating stare. "I mean, not that it means anything, really. It's not like I have any experience managing anything."

“Give yourself some credit,” Bella interrupted. “You have keys to the store, you close the tills at night, you even run the scheduling for lessons, and you haven’t even been there a year.”

This time it was Edward’s turn to blush. He looked at Bella, a silent thanks in his eyes.

“Well, for what it’s worth—” Charlie paused. His lips pursed together as he hesitated. “All things considered, I think you’re doing well.”

Edward wasn’t sure if that was Charlie’s way of expressing his approval or if it was just a passing comment, but hope filled his chest, nonetheless.

“Thank you, sir. It means a lot to me.”

After dinner, the trio settled in the living room to exchange presents. Charlie sat in his favorite recliner while Bella and Edward sat on the floor in front of the fireplace. Charlie was the first to open his gift—a large box wrapped in metallic gold paper.

Inside was a tackle box, filled with lures, lines, hooks, and maintenance knickknacks. Charlie smiled in appreciation before pulling an unmarked paper bag out of the bottom.

“What’s this?” he asked.

“Oh, that’s a homemade fish fry. One of my friends knows someone who makes it. You might want to get it in the fridge soon,” she added.

Charlie appraised the package again, as though the brown paper would give something away that he missed the first time. “Thanks. I’ll give it a try.”

Bella tore into her present next, feeling like a kid again. A stack of paperback books spilled onto the floor. Edward picked up a book that had fallen near him. He flipped it over and absently read the back as Bella thanked her father.

“Edward?”

At the sound of his name, Edward looked up. Charlie held his arm out toward him, an envelope in his hand. Edward took it cautiously, surprised Charlie had thought of him at all. Inside the Christmas card was a *Get Out of Jail Free* card from a Monopoly game. The corner was clipped off, the way an expired driver’s license would be. He looked at Charlie and held up the game piece, a bewildered frown on his face.

“I wanted you to have a reminder.” Charlie waved his hand in dismissal when Edward’s face fell. “Not about what happened, specifically,” he said. “I want you to remember what a precarious position you’re in, and how your actions not only affect you, but also the people you care about.”

“You’ve made it longer than I thought you would. Previous indiscretion aside,” he added as an afterthought. “I don’t *want* you to fail, Edward. My expectations of you are based on my past experience with others in your position. Quite frankly, that’s why it’s so hard for me to accept your relationship with my daughter.”

“Dad—” Bella whined. She’d worried something like this would happen the next time Edward and Charlie were in the same room. She didn’t want her dad to put a damper on Edward’s first Christmas since being release.

Charlie held up his hand. “Let me finish. You never bring the boy around and this needs to be said.” He turned his attention back to Edward. “I may not have raised her, but she’ll always be my little girl. You’ll never be good enough for her in my eyes; no man will. But I’m not blind. I see how well you’ve done for yourself over the past year. I see how happy Bella’s been.”

Edward took a calming breath and cleared his throat. He hated the way Charlie made him feel like a criminal, and he hated the way doubt always crept in when faced with the question of whether he was good enough for Bella. Constantly feeling inferior to everyone, especially Chief Swan, was tiring.

“I love her.” Edward looked at Bella. Glossy eyed, she smiled at him, encouraging him to go on. “I love her more than anything in the world,” he continued. “More than my own life, and by some miracle she loves me too.” He squared his shoulders and looked Charlie in the eye.

“I wish there was some way I could prove myself to you,” he said. “To show you I’m not just another number in your file. That I’m human, and I’m doing my best.”

“I know you are,” Charlie conceded. He retrieved a thin package from beneath the tree and stood before handing it to Edward. “Just keep doing what you’re doing; you’ll be fine. Merry Christmas.”

There was a slight tremor in his hand as Edward opened the present. He couldn’t imagine what Charlie could possibly have gotten him, but he hoped it wasn’t another “reminder.” Beneath the wrapping paper was what appeared to be a leather journal. He slipped off the strap holding it closed and opened the cover. Familiar horizontal lines in sets of five filled the pages—a staff. He looked up at Charlie, surprised.

“Bella tells me you write music. I don’t know if you could use something like this, but . . .” Charlie let his explanation trail off as he scratched the back of his neck.

“Thank you, sir,” Edward said, staring in awe at the book in his hands. He had difficulty grasping the fact that Charlie put so much thought into a gift for him. “I will definitely use it.”

"I'm glad." Charlie stretched his arms over his head and yawned. "Well, I'd better get to bed. Gotta be at the station early. You kids have a merry Christmas. Bella, lock up when you leave."

Bella stood to give her father a goodbye hug. Once he was gone from the room, she returned to her spot on the floor next to Edward. Between telling him about his father, and having dinner with her own father, the evening had gone better than she'd expected.

"That was nice of your dad." Edward gestured to the music journal.

"Yes," Bella agreed. "He's trying. I think he finally realized what we have is more than a fling or me rebelling."

"Rebelling?" Edward laughed. "You could do better than me if you were rebelling."

"I don't know. Parolee, musician, tattoo . . ."

Edward chuckled and shook his head.

"How are you holding up?" Bella asked.

It was a difficult question to answer. For years Edward had considered his father to be dead, but now that he found out he really was, it was strange. In the back of his mind, he had always longed for some type of acceptance or reconciliation. That would never happen now.

The revelation that his father had remarried and had another child was astounding to him. After witnessing firsthand the volatile relationship his parents had, he couldn't imagine anyone else filling his mother's shoes or what life must have been like for his half-sister.

Yet his name appeared in his father's obituary, which meant his new wife had known about him at the very least. Edward wondered how his father must have spoken about him, because if it was anything like he expected, he doubted Victoria would let her ten-year-old daughter send him a Christmas card, and she definitely wouldn't have squeezed in their address and phone number in a blank space near the bottom.

The whole situation was confusing.

"I'm just trying to process everything," Edward said. "I'm not really sure how I feel about it all yet."

"You have family."

Edward didn't know if he could classify strangers who lived halfway across the country as family. Maybe someday, but he wasn't about to hold his breath.

"I thought you were going to be my family." He leaned down to steal a kiss from her, and then squeezed her against his side.

"You do realize that means having Charlie as your father-in-law, right?"

“Hmm.” Edward tapped his chin, pretending to think it over. When Bella scoffed, he tightened his hold on her. “I suppose I’ll keep you around,” he said.

If Edward had it his way, he would never let her go.



# The Song

*Three years later . . .*

“Seriously, Edward.” Bella pounded once on the bathroom door as she walked past. “Aren’t you ready yet?”

His voice was muffled as he called from inside. “I just need another minute.”

Bella trudged across her apartment. She didn’t want to show up late to the party, especially knowing Edward was the guest of honor. Checking her watch once again, she sighed and plopped onto the couch. Even if they left now, there was no way they’d make it on time.

Bella took a moment to look around her living room. Her lease would be up in another month, and she and Edward had yet to find a place of their own. It wasn’t for lack of searching. They spent the past two months looking at apartments and rental houses. Edward was antsy to sign on the dotted line, wanting to be out of Carlisle’s hair and officially living with Bella as soon as his parole ended. She could sense Edward’s frustration with her every time she turned down a place he liked; but she knew the surprise Carlisle had in store for tonight, and she didn’t want to rush into anything.

Edward emerged from the bathroom, looking normal despite the amount of time he’d taken to get ready.

“Finally! Are you ready?”

“Yes.” Edward didn’t sound certain. He toyed with his shirtsleeves, unrolling them before changing his mind and pushing them above his elbows once again.

“Don’t be nervous,” Bella said. “It’s just a small group of your friends, remember?”

Edward seemed confused at first. Then he shook his head and smoothed down his shirt one last

time. "I know."

Bella frowned. Edward had been acting strange all week. She knew he didn't want Carlisle to throw him a party. He'd even tried to talk him out of it. Being the center of attention was never something Edward desired, but in the end he conceded, knowing a celebration was important to his friends.

Bella grabbed her purse from the end table and made her way to the door. Edward stood in place. He patted down his pockets, then glanced toward the bedroom, hesitating.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"I'm fine."

Bella wasn't convinced, but Edward stepped toward her and took her hand before leading her to his car.

The pair entered the private room where the party was being held. All eyes turned to them, and a resounding cheer filled the room.

"There's the man of the hour!" Carlisle approached them with open arms. He hugged Bella and kissed her cheek before placing his hand on Edward's shoulder. "Congratulations."

"You already congratulated me." Edward smiled to let Carlisle know he appreciated the sentiment.

"It's worth being said again."

Jasper joined their small group, giving Edward a fist bump. "How does it feel to officially be a free man?" he asked.

"It feels good." Though Edward had lived the past three years outside the confines of Waterview State Correctional Facility, there was something refreshing about knowing his time had officially been served. There would be no more mandatory meetings or home inspections. His restrictions had all been lifted. He could finally put the past completely behind him. "Really good, actually. It's a relief."

"I'm happy for you, man."

"Congratulations, New Boy," Rose interrupted. She threw her arms around Edward's shoulders, squeezing as hard as she could. "And you." Rose released him from her arms and turned to Bella. "It's been too long."

"I know," Bella agreed. "Work's been crazy. Are things still going well with Henry?"

"Yes!" Rosalie couldn't help but smile when she thought of the preteen she'd fostered for the

past six months. "He's such a sweet kid, Bella. I'm so happy to be able to help him."

"Me too. I'm glad it was a good match."

With Rose occupying Bella, Edward turned to Carlisle. "Did they come in?" he whispered.

"Just this morning."

"Did you bring one?"

"It's in my jacket."

Edward breathed a sigh of relief.

"Nervous?" Carlisle asked.

"Yes."

"Don't be. She'll . . ." Carlisle, distracted by something over Edward's shoulder, lost his train of thought. "Man, I'm going to miss her dropping by unannounced."

Edward turned, spotting Officer Evenson across the room and returning her wave.

"Well, that should be everyone," Carlisle said. "Come on, everything should be just about ready."

"We are here tonight to honor the man seated to my left." Carlisle spoke with ease as he stood before the small group. He knew Edward didn't think the gathering was necessary, but he felt it was important, nonetheless.

"I remember the first time I met Edward. He came into the store one afternoon, went straight to the grand piano, and began to play." Carlisle didn't mention that Edward was jumpy or how the sunglasses he wore barely concealed his fresh black eye. He also left out how Edward tried to flee when Carlisle approached. Carlisle knew a side of Edward that no one else did, save for Bella. A side Edward didn't freely share. The fact that Edward had let him in was a privilege, and he would never do anything to jeopardize his friend's trust.

"I think most of you here have heard Edward play, so you understand what I mean when I say that passion radiated from him. I knew right away what a talented musician he was. I didn't want to let him leave the store, so I asked him to stay and talk with me. Edward told me a bit of his story that day, but despite what happened in his past, I knew I wanted him to join my team.

"In the past three years, I have gotten to know Edward very well. I consider him not only a valuable employee, but an irreplaceable friend. In fact, I don't think anyone in this room would disagree." Carlisle scanned his eyes across everyone at the table. Bella sat beside Edward, looking at him with adoration. Tears welled in Esme's eyes. Jasper and Rosalie, who had known him from the beginning, both wore smiles on their faces. A handful of Edward's work friends as well as Bella's

friend Alice were also among the small crowd, listening to Carlisle with rapt attention.

“Earlier this week, Edward officially finished his prison sentence. Hence the champagne,” Carlisle added as he picked up his glass from the table. “But as you all know, that’s not the only reason we have to celebrate tonight.

“When Edward asked me to help him record a CD, I didn’t hesitate to tell him yes. I also talked him into letting me order a few extra copies to sell in the store.”

Rose, tipsy from indulging at the open bar, cheered, starting a round of applause in the room. Bella ruffled Edward’s hair as he ducked his head.

“He doesn’t think it’s a big deal, of course,” Carlisle continued, “but it is. He has poured a lot of time, talent, and love into his music. I hope someday he’ll get the recognition he deserves.” Smiling widely, Carlisle held up his glass. The rest of the guests did the same. “Here’s to you, Edward. I wish you nothing but happiness and success in the next stage of your life.”

The party went on until the bar closed. Even though Bella insisted he enjoy a few beers, Edward didn’t indulge in too much liquor, wanting to keep a clear head. The group said their goodbyes and disbanded until Edward, Bella, and Carlisle were all that remained.

“I hope that wasn’t so bad.” Carlisle grinned as he lightly punched Edward’s shoulder. He handed him a small paper bag, which Edward slipped into his jacket without fanfare.

“It wasn’t,” Edward said. “Thank you. I know I was a pain in the ass about it, but I had fun.”

“I’m glad.” Carlisle held out a white envelope. “This is for you.”

“You didn’t need to get me anything, really.” Edward took the envelope. He opened it and pulled out a rectangular piece of paper. It took a moment for him to register what he was holding. When he did, disbelief set in. He wasn’t sure how long he stared, slack-jawed, at the cashier’s check in his hand. He probably would have continued standing frozen in place all night if Bella hadn’t nudged him with her shoulder.

“What is this?” Edward asked, failing to keep his voice steady.

“That is everything you paid me in rent for the past three years, plus interest.” Carlisle draped his arm over Edward’s shoulders and gave him a sideways hug. “I never wanted your money, Edward, but I knew how much it meant to you to be able to pay me, so I accepted it. It’s yours now, to do with as you please. Maybe you and Bella can use it for a down payment on a house.”

Edward looked at Bella. Her eyes were bright, and she wore a smile. “You knew about this?” he asked. Her answering nod confirmed his suspicions.

Edward turned his attention to the man who filled so many roles in his life. Carlisle was his mentor, his boss, his father figure, and above all, his friend.

“Thank you, Carlisle, for everything you’ve done for me. I’m not sure how I would have made it without you.”

For the most part, the drive back to Bella’s apartment was quiet as Edward reflected on his life. He had done such ridiculous things, made such stupid choices. He lost a third of his life to incarceration, yet he couldn’t bring himself to regret the decisions that led him to where he was today. He had a career he loved, friends who were good for him, and most of all, a woman he adored more than anything in the world.

“What did Carlisle give you before we left?” Bella asked, bringing him out of his musing.

“The CDs came in today. He gave me a copy.”

“Really?” Bella clasped her hands together. “Let me see it.”

Edward’s heart skipped a beat, but he managed to smile and remain calm on the outside. “Patience,” he teased. “You’ll see it soon enough.”

Bella crossed her arms and pretended to pout, but Edward didn’t give in. He couldn’t.

When they arrived, he led her inside. The bag tucked under his arm was burning a hole almost as big as the ring in his pocket. Once inside, he handed it to Bella. She removed the CD from the case, wasting no time sticking it in the stereo. The opening track was her lullaby. She smiled as the familiar notes filled the room.

Edward watched with nervous anticipation as Bella inspected the cover. It was matte black with a glossy black treble clef printed at an angle across the front. “Edward Masen” and “solo piano” were printed in an elegant white script, while the album title, *No Regrets*, was displayed in bolder letters beneath.

She traced the words with her finger before glancing at Edward, who stood with his hands in his pockets, his shoulders tense. “It’s looks great,” she reassured him. “And it sounds great, too.”

Bella flipped over the case to read the tracklist. The first was titled “Bella’s Song.” She smiled and shook her head. She’d encouraged Edward to change the name to fit in with the rest of the songs, names like “Hope,” “Desire,” and “Freedom,” but he’d insisted on keeping the original title. He reasoned that he was only making the CD for her. It wouldn’t exist without her, and she deserved the acknowledgment.

Bella read over the titles, frowning when she reached the end. Printed beneath what she’d

previously thought to be the tenth and final song was a bonus track.

## 11. Will You Marry Me, Bella?

Gasping, Bella dropped the jewel case and turned to face Edward. He was down on one knee, a diamond solitaire pinched between his thumb and forefinger. Nerves had gotten the best of him, and his lips trembled as he smiled up at her. Each second of silence that passed felt like an eternity as he awaited her answer.

Bella covered her mouth with her hands and stared at the ring. It was far from extravagant, and Edward hoped it would be enough. Little did he know, Bella wouldn't have cared if he gave her a ring made of twist ties.

Edward took a shaky breath, prepared to repeat the words printed on the back cover; but before he got the chance, Bella flew into him, knocking him onto his back.

"Yes!" Bella wrapped her arms around Edward's neck and covered his face with kisses. He returned her embrace, laughing in relief.

Edward didn't let her continue the assault for long. He flipped Bella onto her back and settled on top of her. Taking her left hand, he slid the ring into place. Bella wiggled her fingers, watching the diamond reflect the dim lighting in the room.

"Thank you for waiting for me."

Bella stopped her inspection and turned her attention to Edward. She reached up and cupped his cheek with her palm. "I'd wait forever for you."

The words were almost Edward's undoing. For so long, he questioned whether he was good enough for her. He'd worried the repercussions of his past would eventually drive a wedge between them, but Bella remained by his side through it all. She never allowed him to get down on himself or dwell on future obstacles. She was his rock, but he was also hers.

Edward closed his eyes and dropped his forehead to hers. "Just don't wait too long to marry me, Miss Swan."

"Why?" Bella pulled away to look him in the eyes. "When do you want to get married?"

"Tomorrow." Edward laughed, but he was only half joking. Bella frowned, worrying her bottom lip with her teeth. A lump formed in Edward's throat as he waited for her to say something, *anything*.

"Edward, we can't get married tomorrow."

"I know." Edward pushed away the feeling of rejection and reminded himself he never expected

to marry Bella so quickly. "It's too soon. We should—"

"No, I mean we can't. My mom would never be able to make it on such short notice."

It took a moment for her words to sink in. When they did, Edward couldn't keep the smile from his face. "You want to get married right away?"

"Yeah," she agreed, not a hint of hesitation in her voice. "You've made me wait long enough already."

"When?"

"Next weekend?"

"Next weekend," Edward agreed. He leaned in for a kiss, but Bella gasped and sat up.

"Oh, crap. Charlie!" She barely stifled a giggle. "He's going to kill us."

Edward grinned at her. Bella's amusement turned to shock.

"Oh, my god. You did *not* ask his permission," she said in disbelief.

"No." He shook his head. "But I did tell him my intentions and asked for his blessing."

Bella couldn't believe Edward broached the subject with her father at all. It wasn't because the men didn't get along; in fact, they'd become amicable over the years. Still, neither of them went out of their way for the other if Bella wasn't directly involved. It warmed her heart knowing Edward would take the initiative to discuss something this important with him.

"And?" she asked. "What did he say?"

"Oh, he said something about behaving myself and not hurting you. Might have mentioned his shot gun. You know how your dad is."

Bella laughed as she pulled Edward back down to the floor. He captured her lips with his.

"Are you sure you don't want a fancy wedding? A dress? Cake?" he asked between kisses.

"Oh, there'll be cake all right. And it's going to be Chocolate."

"Funfetti."

"Chocolate."

"I bet I can change your mind." Edward ran his hand down Bella's body; she wrapped her legs around his waist and pulled him closer. "Would you like to hear your new song?" He tried to push onto his knees, but she held him tighter.

"Not if it means we have to stop."

"You don't want to hear it?" It was hard for Edward to feign disappointment while Bella placed wet kisses along his neck.

"We have all night," she said. "What's the rush?"

Edward couldn't argue with her logic. They had all night. They had the rest of their lives.

“We have forever.”

“Forever.”



# The Epilogue

The miles between O'Hare International and Edward's childhood home flew beneath the tires of the rental car. Edward was deep in thought as memories flooded his mind. It was his first trip home since he initially left Chicago over 15 years ago. He'd never envisioned himself returning to the city, especially under these circumstances. The reunion was bittersweet.

"Are you excited to meet them?" Bella asked. She reached across the center console and took Edward's hand in hers.

"I am," he admitted. "I'm a little surprised Victoria invited me. She's not obligated to make me a part of her life. It's not like we're related."

"You underestimate people." Squeezing his hand, she brought it to her lips and placed a kiss on his knuckles. "When are you going to accept that people can see beyond your past?"

"It's not that."

"What then?"

Edward and Victoria had remained on the outskirts of each other's lives ever since Bella tracked her down. They didn't communicate much outside of obligatory Christmas cards and birthday phone calls. Tanya, however, was a different story. She was enamored by her long-lost big brother.

Their relationship had developed through pen and paper, much like his and Bella's. Not a month went by where they didn't have some sort of correspondence. At first Tanya sent him a lot of drawings; she was a talented little girl. As she got older, her artwork became few and far between, and their handwritten words were replaced by email.

"It's got to be strange, right? Meeting your late husband's son? I used to live in that house. My mother..." Edward pressed his lips together and tightened his grip on the steering wheel. It still troubled him to know his father had moved on, started a new family when the first didn't work out.

“I just can’t imagine her wanting anything to do with me.”

“It’s not like you’re competing for his affection, Edward. She has nothing to lose. Besides, you may be the only sibling Tanya will ever have, and she looks up to you so much.”

Edward couldn’t argue. It comforted him, if only slightly. Under different circumstances he would have met his extended family sooner, but Victoria couldn’t afford the trip to Seattle, and Edward was unable to travel while on parole.

Much to Edward’s surprise, the neighborhood only vaguely resembled the vision in his head, though he couldn’t pinpoint any specific changes. It had been so long since he’d seen the houses and roads that were once so familiar. His memory was hazy and unclear. It felt like another lifetime, and in some ways, it was.

The house looked smaller than Edward remembered. It’d been painted a different color, and some of the trees in the front yard were absent. He thought he’d feel the pull of home as he turned the car into the driveway, but other than a brief wave of nostalgia, he felt nothing. It had been too long, and his home was in Seattle now, with Bella.

“This is it.” Edward met Bella at the front of the car and took her hand as they advanced to the front door. It opened before they even reached the front steps.

Victoria stepped outside to meet them. She clamped a hand over her mouth, and her eyes brimmed with unshed tears.

“Oh, Edward.” Her whisper was filled with longing, and somehow Edward knew she wasn’t speaking to him. As the first tear slipped down her cheek, Victoria wrapped her arms around him and sobbed.

Bella stood next to them, feeling like she was intruding on a private moment. She averted her eyes and spotted Tanya standing inside the entryway. Her arms were wrapped around her waist. She looked just as uncomfortable by the situation as Bella felt.

With a smile, Bella stepped around Edward and Victoria and entered the house. “Hi,” she said as she approached. “I’m Bella, Edward’s wife. You must be Tanya.”

The girl nodded but otherwise remained silent.

“Do you want to sit down?” Bella gestured toward the kitchen. She didn’t know how long Edward and Victoria would be, but she wanted to give them privacy.

Bella followed Tanya into the kitchen. They sat at opposite ends of the table.

“He looks a lot like my dad.” Tanya shrugged, clearly embarrassed by her mother’s emotional display.

“I never met your dad. Do you have any pictures?”

Tanya stood and left the room. She returned a minute later, a photo album in hand. She sat down, closer to Bella this time, and flipped open the album.

"That's him." Tanya tapped her finger against the page.

Bella noticed the resemblance right away. Edward was taller, lankier than his father, who had a much more solid build, but they shared the same facial features—angular cheekbones, straight nose, strong jaw. She glanced at Tanya; the girl had the same eyes as Edward and their father, but her features were softer, like Victoria's. They even shared the same fiery red hair.

"I don't really remember him," Tanya said. "I was only four when he died. I wish I had the chance to get to know him. Edward's lucky."

Bella smiled but refrained from commenting. Now a teenager of 14 years, Tanya would probably be old enough to know more of Edward's history with their father, but it wasn't her place to talk about the things Edward so rarely discussed himself.

The sound of laughter had them both looking toward the door. A moment later, Edward and Victoria entered the room. She was smiling as she wiped tears from her eyes.

"Hello, Tanya," Edward said.

Tanya stood as he approached. Despite her obvious judgment of her mother's initial reaction to Edward, she fell into his arms and dissolved into tears. He hugged her to his chest, smoothing her hair down with his palm as he rested his chin on the top of her head.

Bella turned to Victoria and held out her hand.

"Bella, it's so nice to finally meet you," Victoria said as she clasped Bella's hand in her own. "Both of you."

"Thank you for inviting us here." Bella gestured to the two siblings. "Edward's been looking forward to meeting her for a long time."

Once the initial introductions were over, the four of them settled around the table. Victoria had prepared dinner, and small talk came easily as they ate.

"I suppose you want to go through your stuff while you're in town," Victoria said as they were clearing the table.

Edward froze, the plates he was stacking forgotten. "My stuff?" he asked as he frowned.

"Things of your mother's, mostly—photo albums, jewelry, mementos from when you were a child. There are some things of yours too. I know there's a record player and a bunch of albums. I'm not exactly sure what else; I've never gone through the boxes. Edw—your dad packed them up and put them in the attic when I moved in."

"Oh." They had been estranged for so long, it was hard for Edward to believe his father had kept

any of his belongings. Even more surprising was that Victoria held on to everything ten years after his father's death, especially anything that had belonged to his mother. "I'm sorry. I had no idea you had anything of mine."

"You're not gonna take the piano, are you?"

Edward snapped his head in Tanya's direction. "What piano?"

"Tanya!" Victoria admonished. "We discussed this. It belongs to Edward. If he wants to take it or sell it, that's his choice."

Tanya didn't argue. She hung her head and stared down at the table, a pout on her full lips.

"I'm sorry." Edward squeezed his eyes closed and shook his head. "My piano?"

It couldn't possibly be his piano. *His* piano had been stored at a music warehouse before he moved to Seattle. It would have become their property when he defaulted on the lease.

Victoria's entire face flushed red, and she diverted her eyes. "When your dad died, I couldn't afford to keep the piano in storage. I couldn't get rid of it; it meant so much to him. Tanya's been playing it faithfully for the past ten years. I hope you don't mind. She's been very responsible with it."

Edward missed half of what Victoria had said. He struggled, not quite comprehending the meaning behind her words. "My father hated that piano," he said, more to himself than anyone else.

"It's in my room."

"It's here?" Edward looked down the hallway where he knew the bedrooms were located. "Can I see it?"

Tanya jumped up to lead the way. Bella was prepared to let them go alone, but Edward grabbed her hand and dragged her along. He didn't need to follow Tanya to know where she was headed. They entered his old bedroom, which looked nothing like he remembered or expected. The room was covered in graffiti-style artwork, hidden by photos, paintings, and sketches hanging on the walls.

"Wow, did you do all this?" Bella asked.

"Yeah. My mom grounded me for a month, but she didn't make me repaint the room."

Edward barely noticed the busy walls. His gaze immediately fell on the piano on the opposite side of the small room. He felt the air leave his lungs. If he wasn't looking at it with his own eyes, he'd never have believed it was there.

"I just learned 'Clair de lune,'" Tanya said. "Wanna hear?"

"We'd love to," Bella answered.

Tanya took a seat on the bench and placed her hands over the keys. With one deep breath, she

began to play. The notes flowed from her fingers like it was second nature. If she made a mistake, Bella didn't notice. Once the song ended, she stood and faced them.

"That was fantastic," Bella said when it became apparent Edward wasn't going to speak. "How long have you been taking lessons?"

"Oh . . ." Tanya folded her arms over her chest once again. She shifted her weight from foot to foot. "I've never taken lessons. We can't afford it. I taught myself how to play."

Edward wondered how his father would have felt had he still been alive. Tanya was obviously gifted in both art and music, things that were frowned upon in the severe household he was raised in. It was clear she could go a long way with a career in either.

"You sounded great." Edward swallowed audibly and took a shaky breath. "The piano's a little out of tune."

Tanya threw a longing glance over her shoulder. "I know." With one long, thin finger, she touched Middle C but didn't depress the key. Her hand fell from the instrument a few moments later, and she turned back to the couple.

"I could tune it for you," Edward offered. "Before I leave."

"Really?" Tanya's eyes lit up. A broad grin stretched across her face. "You mean I can keep it?"

"You've loved it for the past ten years. It's yours." Edward smiled at Tanya. His lips remained tight, and it didn't reach his eyes. Bella could tell he was torn over the decision. With the full arsenal of pianos he had access to every day, she figured it had more to do with the sentimental value than the instrument itself.

"Thank you, Edward!" Tanya gave him a hug before fleeing the room. "I'm going to tell Mom," she called behind her.

"I can't believe he kept it." Edward moved toward the piano, sighing as his hand came to rest on the top. "He wouldn't even talk to me." His voice was barely audible. Bella placed a comforting hand on his back. "I wish I had the chance to say goodbye."

"I know you do." Bella didn't know what else to say. She'd never dealt with death on a personal level, but she understood Edward's desire for closure, despite the rocky past he and his father shared.

"Why would he keep it?"

"I don't know," she answered honestly. "But I think it was his way of accepting everything that had happened. The piano was an extension of you. He didn't want to let it go."

Edward nodded but didn't comment.

"That was very nice of you," Bella said in a quiet voice so not to be overheard.

"It means more to her than it does to me at this point."

"She'll never forget that you did this for her."

"I'm glad..." Edward dropped his hand from the instrument and stepped back. "I'm glad Victoria supports her. I wish I'd had that."

"People support you now." Bella smiled as she placed her hand in his. "A lot of people."

The rest of the weekend passed in a blur. Tanya was glued to Edward's side for most of it, and when she wasn't, Victoria monopolized his time. They opened up to each other in hushed, late-night conversations, both gaining their own forms of closure. Though most of the information Edward gave was new, Victoria hadn't been completely naive to the way Edward's father treated him.

"He didn't speak about you often," Victoria told him one night. "He was disappointed, but he never spoke ill of you. I think he blamed himself for the trouble you got into. He thought you were a lost cause."

Edward suspected as much. He used to think his father had given up on him when he needed him the most, but over the years he'd come to realize he'd given up long before that.

"Personally, I don't think he could have been more wrong about you. I'm sorry he treated you so terribly."

"I probably shouldn't have told you anything. It's all in the past. I don't want to change the way you feel about him."

"I would rather know," Victoria insisted. "I'm just happy you're a part of our lives. Tanya thinks the world of you."

Edward and Bella's last morning in Chicago was hard on everyone. Tanya clung to Edward, not wanting him to leave. "I'll miss you," she said.

"I'll come back soon," he promised.

"You two are welcome any time," Victoria said as she hugged them both. "Our door is always open."

There was a lightness in Edward's heart as he drove back to the airport. Bella didn't miss the change in his mood.

"You seem happy," she said.

Edward's smile widened. "I am."

"It must feel good to know you have family out there."

"Yes," he agreed. "But there's something that feels even better."

"What's that?"

He placed his hand on hers, running his thumb over the set of rings on her finger.

"Knowing I have a place to call home, and that no matter what, you'll be there with me."

"Forever?" Bella asked.

"Forever."

*The End*

# Outtake: The Player

**This outtake was written for Fandom for Texas Wildfire Relief. It takes place prior to Chapter 24.**

Bella drove to the outskirts of Seattle, armed with a map she printed off her computer and the four pages of sheet music Edward had given her for her birthday. She read the building signs carefully until she spotted what she was looking for. There was a lot adjacent to the store, and she pulled inside of it to park.

The door of Cullen's Chamber, a full service music store she found on the Internet, had a large sign that read "Moving Sale." It was busy inside, Christmas being a week away, and Bella had to wait at the counter for what felt like an eternity before a sales associate was available to assist her.

"Can I help you?" a young man asked. He pushed up the sleeves of his hooded sweatshirt, revealing skin concealed by colorful tattoos. There were metal rings in his nose, lip, and eyebrow. He brushed a lock of long, black hair out of his eyes. They were a deep shade of brown and lined with black makeup. He stared at Bella with such intensity that it made her uncomfortable.

"I, uh . . ." Bella stumbled over her thoughts. "I was hoping to get a song recorded." She held up the sheet music.

The man squinted as he looked at the papers. "Piano?"

"Yeah."

He reached under the counter and pulled out a laminated sheet of paper. "These are our recording studio rates. You can use one of our pianos at no additional cost."



“Oh.” Bella frowned as she looked at the pricing guide. “Is there anything shorter than an hour? It’s just one song.”

“Sorry,” he answered. “One hour is the minimum for studio rental.”

It was a lot of money, and as much as she wanted to be able to hear the song, she wasn’t sure if she could justify the expense. “It doesn’t need to be professional sounding or anything. If someone can play it, I can just use my phone to record it.”

Realization dawned on him. “You need someone to play it?” He flipped through a schedule sitting behind the register. “Rose is out until after Christmas. I’m not sure what she charges for something like that, but she’d probably do it for a reasonable fee.”

“After Christmas?” Bella didn’t know when or if she would speak to Edward, but she wanted to have the song ready in case he called. “Do you know of anywhere else I can go? I’d really like to get it done this week.”

“Hmm . . .” The man looked out the window, deep in thought. “Encore Music has recording studios, but I don’t think they have pianos. Hey Carlisle!” he called out to another man who was walking swiftly past the registers. He had dark blond hair and a friendly smile. Stopping in his tracks, he turned and made his way to the pair.

“What’s up, Jasper?”

“Do you know where she can go to get something recorded on piano?”

Carlisle gave him a blank stare. “We have a recording studio here.”

The first man, Jasper, sighed. “She doesn’t play,” he said exasperatedly, as though it were common knowledge.

“What have you got there?” Carlisle asked Bella. She handed him the composition. He took a couple moments to scrutinize the piece. “For being handwritten, that’s pretty detailed. Where did you get this?”

“A friend,” she answered vaguely.

“Your friend wrote it?”

“Yes. He sent it to me for my birthday. I’ve never even heard it.”

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Bella.”

“I’m Carlisle.” He held out his hand, and she eagerly shook it. “Come on back with me, Bella.” Carlisle gestured for her to follow, his eyes never leaving the pages of notes.

Bella trailed behind him. “You know someone who can help me?”

“Sure.” Carlisle looked up at her and smiled. “I’ll play it for you.”

“Really?” Bella could hardly contain her excitement. They entered a soundproof recording room. A small piano sat in the corner.

“It’s a good thing you came in when you did. We were just about to dismantle the recording rooms for the move.”

“Is it okay if I just record it on my phone? I can’t really afford to rent the room.”

“Nonsense.” Carlisle waved off her concern. “It’s on the house.”

“Are you sure? I don’t want you to get in trouble.”

“I won’t tell if you won’t.” He winked before turning on the recording equipment and taking a seat behind the piano. “Now, let’s see what we have here.”

Bella sat quietly on the other end of the small room. Hearing Edward’s music for the first time took a toll on her emotions. The song was complex and beautiful. It was also haunting and sad. The melody held so much pain that her chest hurt, yet she found her heart beating faster in hopeful anticipation.

Carlisle ran through the piece a few times before he was satisfied with the results. When he was finished, he noticed tears pooling in Bella’s eyes. He stood from the piano silently, letting her have a moment to herself. It only took him a minute to cue the recording to the proper spot and burn the final recording onto a CD. When he was finished, he placed it in a jewel case, along with a business card, and handed it to her.

“Your friend is very talented,” he said. Bella nodded and wiped at her eyes. Carlisle took a seat in the chair next to her and thumbed through the pages again one last time. “This is amazing. How long did he work on it?”

“I’m not sure. A few months, maybe?”

“Wow. It’s brilliant. Does he compose for a living?”

“No. He can’t even play right now.” Bella’s lips turned into a pout, and she struggled to keep her tears at bay. “I’m going to play this for him over the phone. For Christmas. He’s never heard it either.”

Carlisle hesitated at first, but his curiosity got the best of him. He had to know more about the mystery musician. “Illness? Injury?”

“No, nothing like that,” she answered, shaking her head.

“I take it he’s not local.”

“Um—”

“I’m sorry to pry, but talent like this is so rare. And to know he composed it without the use of an instrument . . .” Carlisle shook his head in wonder.

“He’s local. He’s—” Bella took a deep breath. “In prison.”

“Prison.” For a moment, Carlisle was at a loss for words. Then he smiled. “It must be hard for you. To be away from him, I mean. Young love is hard enough without any added challenges.” He held up the pages in his hand. “It’s obvious how much he loves you.”

“Oh, no,” Bella said quickly. “It’s nothing like that. We’re friends.” Referring to Edward, who was virtually still a stranger, as a friend was odd for Bella, but it was the second time she had to clarify that their relationship was strictly platonic.

“My apologies,” Carlisle said. “I just assumed . . . well, it’s apparent you’re very special to him. I’m sure he doesn’t send things like this to all his friends.”

Bella laughed humorlessly. *All his friends*. “No, I’m sure he doesn’t.”

“What’s his name?”

“Edward.”

“Well, I wish you and Edward the best of luck, wherever your lives may lead you.” Carlisle handed the sheet music to Bella and the two of them stood. “If he sends you any more music, you’re more than welcome to come back. Just ask for me next time.” He tapped the CD case where his business card was visible through the clear plastic. “We’ll be moving after Christmas. This is the new address.”

“Thank you.” Bella’s eyes widened as she read his name. “Carlisle Cullen. This is your store?” she asked.

Carlisle’s laugh was as bright as his smile. “That’s right, and it was my pleasure to help you out today.”

“That’s very kind of you, Mr. Cullen.”

“It’s the least I can do. Besides, I can’t say it’s completely unselfish on my part. I’m anxious to see what else your friend has up his sleeve.”

Bella thanked Carlisle profusely. She clutched the CD to her chest the entire way home.

# Outtake: The Mother

**This outtake was written for Fandom for Texas Wildfire Relief. It takes place in Chapter 34 and covers Bella's phone conversation with Renee prior to Edward arriving home.**

"Hey, Mom."

"Bella! I was just thinking about you. How are you? How is school going?"

"I'm fine. School's going good. Only a couple more months."

"Are you calling to tell me you want to move home when you graduate?" she teased. "I'll terminate the lease on the apartment early if you don't want to stay there until August."

"Sorry, Mom. That's not why I called." Bella almost added that she would probably stay in the Seattle area indefinitely but decided to keep that information private. She knew with Edward's new job that it wouldn't be long before he didn't need her support anymore, but she couldn't imagine moving away from him. And since he was stuck in the area for the duration of his parole, which could be another three years, she didn't see herself moving away—to Phoenix or anywhere else—any time soon. "There's actually something I should tell you. Before Dad does."

"You're pregnant!"

"What? Geez, no! Why do you even sound happy about that?"

"You've met a man?" The excitement in Renee's voice was still clear.

"No." Bella sighed in frustration. "I have a roommate."

"A roommate? In a one-bedroom apartment? Why on Earth . . . oh, baby, you *did* meet a man!"

"Ugh. No, Mom." Bella struggled for the right words to describe Edward but came up blank. "Okay, I admit my roommate is a guy, but—"

"I knew it!" Renee exclaimed. "Are you being safe?"

"Mom!"

"I'm really not ready to be a grandma."

"Oh, my god. It's not like that. We're just friends. He sleeps on the couch."

"Mm-hmm." Renee had her suspicions. "So tell me about him. Is he cute? Is he smart? I bet he's smart."

Bella struggled to keep the smile off of her face but failed miserably. "He's very cute. And yeah, I think he's pretty smart."

"What's his name? And Charlie's met him? Did they get along?"

Bella's smile abruptly faded. "Yeah, see, that's actually what I need to talk to you about. Promise to hear me out before you start the lecture?"

"Bella," Renee said cautiously, "what did you get yourself into?"

Bella knew she was delaying the inevitable by not talking. If Edward were to be a part of her life—in any capacity—she would have to be honest with her mother. The truth would come out eventually, and when it did, she didn't want it blowing up in her and Edward's faces like it had with Charlie. She decided the best approach was to get this over with as quickly as possible.

"His name is Edward. We met last summer while he was in prison. He was released on parole last week, and I offered him a place to stay because he had nowhere else to go, hence him sleeping on my couch. I failed to tell Charlie, and when he found out, he snapped and broke about ten laws and is now suspended from the force. So no, they didn't exactly hit it off." Bella took a deep breath. "Oh, and he's thirty-five."

There was no response. It was so quiet, Bella could hear a pin drop.

"Mom?"

"Prison? How—" Renee's voice faltered. "How did you meet someone in prison?"

"I found him online. We got to know each other through letters." Bella waited, but Renee didn't speak. "I know it's far from the best decision I've made, but I don't regret helping him," she said confidently. More silence. "Edward is the sweetest guy I've ever met. He's made mistakes, but he's a good person. He would never hurt me."

The perpetual quiet on the other end was beginning to make Bella squirm.

"I know I should have told you before, but I knew you wouldn't approve, and I didn't want you trying to talk me out of it."

"You have always been so stubborn. I shouldn't be surprised. Tell me more about this Edward."

“He plays the piano, and he’s really talented. He even wrote me a song. I know it’s only been a few months, but I feel like I know him. Really know him. He’s unlike anyone I’ve ever met. I like having him here, and if I had to do it all over again, I wouldn’t change a thing.” Bella stopped talking when she heard Renee take a deep breath.

“My baby’s in love,” she whispered.

“What? No, I . . .” Bella’s first instinct was to disagree, but she couldn’t bring herself to say the words.

“So when do I get to meet Prince Charming? Is he there now? Can I talk to him?”

“No!” Bella exclaimed. “I mean, no, he’s not here. And I already said it wasn’t like that.”

“Not yet,” Renee said all too knowingly. “I can’t believe a boy finally stole your heart.”

“He’s not a *boy*, Mom.”

“Well he is to me!” Renee sighed happily. “I always knew you would find love in the most unconventional of places.”

“Mom—” The apartment door opened, distracting Bella from her conversation. She turned to see Edward standing in the doorway. Heat flooded to her face at the sight of him. He smiled. It made him look so young, so innocent. Bella realized she was smiling back like a love sick puppy and quickly shook her head to recompose herself. It was then she noticed her mother was still talking.

“Hello! Bella?”

“Wha-huh?”

Renee laughed. “Are you still there?”

“Yeah I’m still here,” Bella told her.

“What’s got you so distracted? Am I boring you already?”

“No, I just, um, I . . .”

“Is it Edward? Is he there?” Renee asked excitedly.

Bella sighed and in a defeated tone said, “Yes, he just got home.”

“Put him on.”

Bella hesitated. “I don’t think—”

“Bella,” Renee warned in only the way a mother could. Bella steeled herself and held the phone out to Edward.

“Who is it?” he mouthed.

“My mother.”

# Outtake: The Lemon

**This is an EPOV outtake of the fade-to-black in Chapter 36.**

Bella didn't speak on the drive home. I struggled for something, anything to say. Small talk didn't seem right after the conversation we'd just had. And as for us . . .

There was nothing left to say.

She knew how I felt, and while I could plead and beg and profess my love for hours, I wouldn't push her. If she chose me, I wanted it to be because she wanted me, not because she was pressured.

Tonight had been the best night of my life. It was nice to go on a date like a normal man. Dinner and a movie might be cliché to some, but it was something I hadn't done for a very long time. Besides, it was time I got to spend exclusively with Bella, outside the walls of her apartment and without another party vying for her attention.

And she looked amazing.

Her blue shirt was going to be the death of me. It was so low, showed off so much skin. She had to have known what it would do to me when she chose it. We never discussed our sexual history, but it was obvious I was in the middle of one hell of a dry spell. Perhaps it was why Bella wore that shirt in particular. She didn't seem to mind the handful of times she caught me staring, at least.

In fact, she didn't seem to mind a lot of things throughout the course of the evening.

Sometime during dinner, the nervous energy that always seemed to surround us had disappeared. Bella was more relaxed than I'd ever seen her—with me, anyway. I saw her smile and laugh more tonight than she had in the past month. She let me hold her hand, touch her, hug her. She even snuggled up to me during the movie and again after I played for her at the store. Each time we made contact, I half expected her to withdraw from me, but she never did. It felt real. *We* felt

real, like she was really mine.

For a moment, I'd even forgotten about my past.

Bella had neither confirmed nor denied that my incarceration was a problem when it came to us having a relationship, but regardless of whether it was a deciding factor, it still shaped her opinion of me. She thought I was settling, that I wanted her out of convenience. It couldn't have been farther from the truth. The more I got to know her, the harder I fell. I didn't want anyone else.

There were so many things I wanted to say as I followed her into the apartment complex, but I couldn't force the words to come. My mouth was dry. My heart raced.

*I had a great time tonight.*

I meant what I'd said about moving out. If that was what it took for her to give me a chance, if that were the only way she'd let me be close to her, I wouldn't hesitate to leave. I'd start searching for a new place tonight.

*Can we do this again?*

I bit my tongue as we walked down the hallway. Each step brought the apartment door closer into view. I needed to know what would happen to us now. She knew how I felt. Could she ignore that? Pretend our date never happened?

*What will happen once we walk through that door?*

I couldn't imagine going back to how things were after knowing what it felt like to wrap her in my arms, after experiencing an evening of touching and caressing her, of flirting. She hadn't said yes to me, but that didn't mean someday she wouldn't say yes to someone. The thought of her going out and doing those things with another man killed me.

*Where do I stand?*

Time was running out.

Bella inserted the key into the lock. I had to act now. I couldn't walk through that door and let tonight slip into the past. At the last minute, I reached around her. She released the handle when my hand came to rest on hers, and I pulled the door closed with more force than necessary. She spun around and looked at me with wide eyes.

"Edward, what are you doing?"

"Saying goodnight."

I stepped forward, trapping Bella between my body and the door. I brushed my fingers against the soft skin of her neck and watched her flush under my touch. I thought she would pull away as I slid my hand to her cheek, but instead she closed her eyes and leaned into my palm.

Bella's lips were soft as they met mine. She wove her fingers through my hair and pulled me



closer. I allowed my hands to slide down her body, memorizing the curves of her waist and barely able to contain my excitement. With our bodies pressed together, she must have had a fair idea of how excited I was. Still, she didn't stop me. Somehow her acceptance both encouraged me and gave me the confidence of a 13-year-old boy. Never before had I been so sure of what I wanted and so unsure of what to do. It had been so long, and this all seemed so new. I didn't want to mess things up.

When Bella started to pull away, I panicked. I wasn't ready for it to end. My hold on her tightened, silently begging her to stand in that hallway with me for the rest of eternity. Her lips moved just out of my reach as she backed away, and then she was pulling me inside. I followed her willingly, somehow managing to kick the door closed behind us.

Bella led me to the bedroom. With a final kiss, she released me from her hold and fell back onto the air mattress. I wasted no time dropping to my knees and crawling on top of her. Our lips met once again, and Bella clutched my shoulders with all the desperation I felt.

She turned her head away, gasping for breath. I took the opportunity to kiss a path down her neck. The low cut of her shirt had taunted me all night, and I shifted my attention to her chest.

"You taste like butter," I said through kisses.

Bella laughed, breathy and light. "That's because someone kept throwing popcorn down my shirt all night."

"You were asking for it. Do you have any idea what this shirt was doing to me?"

Bella swiveled her hips. She knew exactly what she was doing to me.

I grazed my palm over her chest. She sighed and arched into my touch. When I slipped my hand beneath her shirt, my only coherent thought was *I'm touching her boobs*.

Bella surprised me by sitting up and helping me remove her shirt and bra. It was her silent approval to continue. I covered her with kisses, tasting every inch of her skin. Being with her like this made me nervous and excited. My hands shook with every caress. I was cautious with each new touch, gauging her reactions as best I could. Intimacy was new for us, and I had no idea where she would draw the line. The last thing I wanted was a repeat of our first night together, when I'd somehow misread the signs. I'd felt awful after my unwanted come-on. Never again did I want to reach the point where she had to tell me to stop.

Bella pulled my T-shirt over my head and smoothed her hands down my back. There were no words to describe how good her touch felt. I wrapped my arms around her back and held her to me as we kissed, creating as much skin to skin contact as humanly possible. I needed this, needed her. My chest tightened, and I had to fight back the tears that stung my eyes.

My fingers struggled with the button of her jeans, but I managed to get it open and slipped my hand between her legs. If I had any doubts that she wanted this just as much as I did, they disappeared when I discovered how wet she was.

Bella sighed, her breath fanning hot across my cheek. My entire body tensed as she trailed her hands down my sides. She gripped me through my jeans. A needy moan escaped me, and I captured her lips with mine to stifle it.

She unbuttoned my jeans without any awkward fumbling. There was no hesitation as she wrapped her hand around me. I was stuck somewhere between shock and elation. With her leading, I didn't have to question if I was taking things too far. When she began to stroke, it almost proved to be too much. I cursed and pushed her hand away from my body.

"What's wrong?" Bella asked.

"Nothing. I'm just . . ." I collapsed on her, hiding my face in her neck. "A little too excited."

Bella laughed, but the way she wrapped her arms around me softened the blow. "It's okay," she insisted.

"Sorry." Practically coming the moment she touched me was far from okay in my opinion. I wanted to impress her, please her, not embarrass myself. I'd done that enough.

"Don't be." She turned her head, seeking out my lips with her own. "There are condoms in the drawer."

I pulled back, surprised by her words. I didn't expect to move so quickly or for Bella to be so forward, but I wasn't about to question her. Apparently she knew what she wanted, and so did I.

I sat up and rummaged through the nightstand until my fingers clasped around a foil packet. Bella plucked it from my hands before I could tear it open.

"Let me."

Bella set down the condom and guided me onto my back. I tugged at her pants, but she captured my wrists in her hands and placed my arms over my head.

"Slow down," she whispered. "There's no rush."

"Bella—" I didn't want to rush things, but I didn't want this to end before it even started.

"I know." Her smile was reassuring, as if she knew what I was thinking. Time seemed to slow as she stripped off my jeans, boxers, and socks. She moved with a calm confidence, and I found myself becoming more and more relaxed. She shimmied out of her pants before retrieving the condom.

In that moment, there were so many things I wanted to say. I wanted Bella to know how special she was to me, that I couldn't imagine my life without her. I wanted to reassure her that I wasn't using her. If this changed us, it was going to be for the better. I would do anything for her, anything

to make her happy.

Bella rolled the condom down my length, then settled onto her back. I situated myself between her legs, lining us up. As I pushed inside of her, the only things I could focus on were the warmth of her body surrounding me, her arms encompassing me, and her hips meeting my every thrust.

I imagined telling her I was falling in love, but when I opened my mouth to speak, the only sound that came out was a strangled moan. I was too close to finishing. I wouldn't last much longer.

"Bella," I whispered. It was a plea, though I didn't know for what.

"It's okay," she whispered.

"But you . . ."

She curled her fingers into my hair and lifted her head enough to place a kiss on my jaw.

"We have all night."