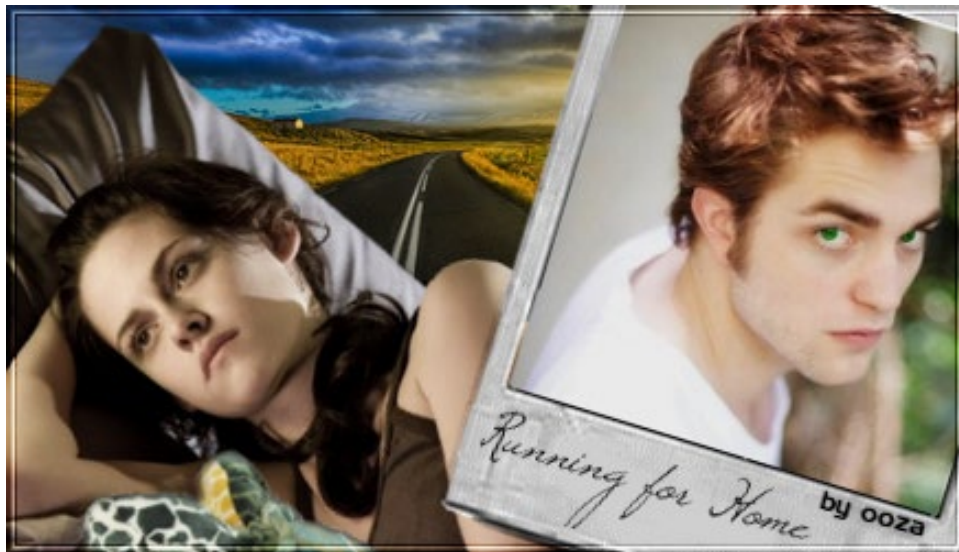


Running for Home

a Twilight fan fiction by ooza



After a lifetime of feeling out of place, Edward is told his entire past is a fabrication. On his journey to uncover the truth he meets Bella, a young woman who is neglecting all responsibility for the first time in her life. Will these two strangers help each other discover who they really are? Road trip!

Edward/Bella/Volvo, BPOV/EPOV, AH, AU, OCC, NC-17 for language & lemons

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chapter one

Bella

I dig through my purse trying desperately to find my cell phone. My hands are shaking so badly that I manage to fumble the stupid thing. It shoots out of my hands, hits the ground hard, and skids across the pavement. The battery and battery cover fly in different directions and I scramble to pick them up before someone can run over them with their car.

“Shoot,” I mumble as I reassemble the stupid thing and wait for it to turn back on. I quickly dial my mother, Renee. Expecting my call, she picks up on the first ring.

“Hey baby! How did the last of your finals go?”

“Everything went great, Mom. I think I did really well!” I tell her.

“I knew you would do great. I wish Phil and I could be there to celebrate with you guys tonight,” she whines.

“It’s fine. Don’t worry about it. I won’t have the official grades until you get back from . . . there anyway.” Lately she and my step-father, Phil, have been traveling a lot because of his Minor League Baseball career. I can’t even keep track of where they are anymore.

“I know, but I still want to be there for you. Say hi to Jake for us, will you? Is he in town yet?”

“His plane landed about twenty minutes ago. Hopefully I’ll beat him to the house.”

We exchange a few more pleasantries before hanging up. I drive home quickly hoping Jake isn’t waiting for me. Our timing is perfect because he pulls into the driveway behind me in his rental car. It’s Friday night and Jake is staying with me at Renee and Phil’s for the weekend. He wants to stay longer but he is still finishing up his senior year of high school back in Washington and has to fly back on Sunday morning.

“Jake!” I call to him as I jump out of the car. I run to him and he scoops me up into his arms.

“Bella, I missed you so much,” he says, placing a big wet kiss on my forehead.

“Gross, put me down,” I tease as I wiggle out of his grip and slap him playfully on the shoulder. “How was the flight?”

“It totally sucked.” He laughs. “Do you know they don’t give free food anymore? Not even peanuts. I’m starving.”

I laugh with him. Jake’s appetite is insatiable. “Come on.” I motion toward the house. “I’ll make you lunch.”

We eat lunch and spend the rest of the afternoon chatting and watching movies. There isn’t too much to catch up on since we talk on the phone all the time. I haven’t seen Jake in person since December when I flew out to Washington to spend Christmas with my father Charlie.

Jake and I have been dating for almost two years. We were friends growing up even though we didn't see each other often because he lived in Washington and I lived in Arizona with Renee. I moved to Forks to live with Charlie when I was 17. It only took a few months of living there before Jake and I were hanging out together all the time.

I love Jake; I really do. The problem is that I don't share the same passion for him as he does for me. After becoming close friends, our relationship had a natural progression; dating and sex were the next logical steps. I would have been fine if we stayed friends, but he wanted more, and I wanted him to be happy.

Sometimes I feel like a pushover because I agreed to be in a relationship with him even though it wasn't what I wanted. Most of the time I just feel selfish because I did it to ensure I wouldn't lose his friendship.

"I really do miss you, Bells," Jake says solemnly as we sit on the couch.

"I miss you too, Jake."

"I think you should really consider going to U-Dub this fall instead of next year," he says cautiously.

"We've been over this a billion times," I sigh. "I want to get my generals done before I go to an expensive university. Besides, I'm not ready to go back to cloudy, crappy Washington. I like the sun here and it's nice to be able to spend time with Renee."

"You don't even see Renee. She's gone with Phil all the time. That was the reason you moved in with Charlie to begin with, remember?"

"That's beside the point, Jake. I only have one more year until I'm done anyway."

"There are community colleges in Washington, you know. You can finish your generals there."

"I'm already registered for the fall. Besides, I have no idea what I want to do for a career. I'm not even sure if I'll end up at U-Dub."

He scoffs at the possibility. I'm pretty sure he feels my decision to move across the country to attend a community college is ridiculous. The truth is that I didn't want to stay in Washington for college. Two years of overcast skies and constant rain was quite enough for me the first time around. I wanted to go to school somewhere warm and sunny. I chose Florida Community College because I could live with Renee and Phil for free. Renee was more than happy to have me around again and with Phil to take care of her . . . well, let's just say I didn't have to anymore.

"You know," he pauses, wrapping his arm around my shoulder, "I have an apartment lined up for after I graduate next month. You could live with me while you go to school. It won't cost you anything and you won't have to be alone all the time."

"Jake—" I don't know how to finish.

"How 'bout this," he starts, and I can almost see the light bulb going on over his head. "I won't bug you about where you go to college this fall if you come stay with me for the summer."

Now I really don't know what to say. Spending the summer here, mostly by myself, is something I have been looking forward to since I moved here last August. I want time to read, sit in the sun, and figure out what I want to do with my future. I don't want to spend the summer living with Jake.

"Are you sure you miss me? Because it sure doesn't seem like it," he snaps when I don't reply. "What about Charlie? You'd rather sit here alone all summer than see him? He misses you too, you know. And Alice? What about Alice? Isn't she coming home for the summer?"

"Alice's family moved after she graduated and Charlie is—"

"What about your other friends?" Jake interrupts. "Do you even talk to any of them anymore?"

Now he's pissing me off.

“First of all, Jacob, I talk to Alice all the time. At least once a week. Second, as far as my other friends go, I never got close to any of them in the year and a half I went to school in Forks because I was too busy spending all my time with you! Third, I am not alone here, Jake. I have friends from college that I talk to all the time.

“Yes, I miss you, but I’ve spent my entire life making sure other people were taken care of, and for once I just want to spend some time by myself!” By the time I finish my rant I am yelling. I am also shocked at what came out of my mouth because I’ve never consciously given any of it much thought.

“How are we supposed to keep our relationship strong if we never see each other?” he asks angrily. “If you don’t come home we’re going to fall apart.”

I’m not sure how to answer him. We already are falling apart.

“Do you love me, Bella?” he asks.

“Of course I do,” I assure him.

“Prove it,” he says, his voice filled with determination.

“What?”

“If you love me, then prove it. I’m not going to lose you, Bella. If you won’t come live with me then let’s get married. Tomorrow,” he demands.

The blood drains from my face and I feel sick to my stomach. Marriage? Jake and I have never even discussed marriage before. I stare at him in shock for a few seconds, but it feels like days. I also might need a doctor because I’m pretty sure I hyperextended my jaw when it hit the floor.

“What?”

“Please, will you marry me?” he asks kinder this time.

“I can’t marry you, Jacob,” I whisper in disbelief. “I don’t even know if marriage is something I even want to do. Ever. We’ve never even talked about it before and you propose to me like this?”

“Please, Bella. I need you.”

It's funny, the power three little words can hold. I. Need. You. Those words set my resolve. I'm tired of people needing me. I don't want to be responsible for anyone other than myself. I close my eyes and take a couple of deep breaths. I feel him slide closer to me on the couch. He wraps his arms around me and his lips meet mine.

"Jake, stop. I'm sorry but I can't handle this right now."

My heart is pounding like crazy, and the steady beat of the pulse in my head drowns out all the sounds in the room. I push his arms away from me and stand up. Without me telling them to, my legs start walking to the door. I can barely make out Jake calling for me to wait as my feet hit the driveway and I break out into a run.

The sun has set, and I easily blend into the shadows of the neighborhood. I can hear him following me, but I'm not ready to be found. How did this day turn into such a disaster? I felt great about my finals. I was happy to see Jake even if I've been having doubts about our relationship lately. How did everything turn out so wrong?

I run a few more blocks until I am sure I lost him. I search my purse for my phone so I can call one of my friends to pick me up, but after a quick content check, I recall my phone is on the kitchen counter. Crap. I remember there is a gas station a few miles down the road and start heading in that direction. I wonder how much pay phones are now. I wonder if pay phones even exist anymore.

As I walk, I keep my eyes peeled for Jake. I feel like an idiot for being an irresponsible coward and running out of the house like that. At the same time, I enjoy the adrenaline rush it gives me and I'm overcome with the sudden urge to do something irresponsible.

I finally make it to the gas station and sigh in relief when I spot the block of pay phones out front. I dig out some change and look for the current rate when I

realize I don't actually have anyone's phone number memorized. Crap. I slam the phone back on the hook and lean against the side of the building as I try to come up with Plan B.

A shiny black car in the parking lot catches my attention. It catches my attention because, apparently, the driver of said car is a jackass who doesn't know how to park as it's sitting diagonally across two spots. Upon closer inspection, I see it's a Volvo; a four door sedan no less.

"Yuppie," I mumble under my breath as I turn and enter the gas station. That walk was longer than I expected and I'm parched. I purchase two bottles of water and a giant bag of M&M's. Nothing cures a bad day like an abundance of chocolate covered peanuts coated in a candy shell.

The Yuppiemobile is still in the lot when I leave the store. I give it the stink eye as I walk past, pouring all my emotion into the gesture as if the car itself was responsible for my crappy evening. I pause as something else about the car catches my eye.

It has Illinois license plates.

I stand there lost in thought while staring at the plates until a voice pulls me out of my reverie.

"Can I help you with something?" His voice is deep and smooth and sexy as all get out. I turn to look at the man the voice belongs to and am shocked to see that the voice suits him perfectly.

He is at least six feet tall. His dark brown hair is a sexy mess on the top of his head, and he has a beard that looks about a week old. My eyes follow the natural line down the center of his body. The t-shirt he is wearing is tight enough to reveal the outline of his pecs. His frame is thin, but from his bare arms, I can tell he is well toned. His waist and hips are narrow, and just as my eyes are about to pass the juncture of his legs, he clears his throat loudly.

My eyes snap up to meet his. They are an intense shade of green and I'm surprised I didn't notice them the first time I gave him the once-over.

"Is this your car?" I ask him.

"Yes." He cocks an eyebrow at me as he answers.

"You're from Illinois?" Again with the stating-of-the-obvious.

He frowns and looks pointedly at his license plate before meeting my eyes again. "Uh-huh."

"Can I go with you?" I blurt out without a second thought.

The man starts to laugh at me but abruptly stops when he realizes I'm serious. "I'm not going back there," he says.

"Where are you going?"

He pauses before saying, "I don't know yet."

"Well neither do I. Please, take me with you."

He contemplates me for a moment before one side of his lips turns up into a smile. "How old are you?" he asks.

"Nineteen."

"Uh-huh, sure you are," he says. I can't tell if he's teasing or not.

"Look, if you're not going to give me a ride let me know so I can find someone who will." I'm not sure where this crazy hitchhiking idea came from, but at the moment, I desperately want to get away from everything.

"This is a dangerous game you're playing here," he says seriously as he leans in closer to me.

His warning rings loud and clear. I immediately take a step back and assess him again. He still looks like sex on legs, but upon further inspection he also looks . . . menacing? His dark hair is greasy, and his beard has obviously not been managed. His shirt is wrinkled, and his jeans have dirty smudges on the thighs. He doesn't smell bad, but he doesn't smell clean either. He reeks of cigarette

smoke, and I notice he is older than me by a few years. My head is screaming that this is a bad idea in every way, but it only makes me want to go with him more.

“I trust you,” I tell him. It feels like I’m trying to convince myself.

He laughs out of his nose as his half-smile fades. “Of course you do. You’re just a stupid, fucking kid.”

I take a step toward him and square my shoulder, all the while holding his gaze. For some unexplainable reason I want to go with him. I need to go with him. I am not going to let him scare me off.

“You won’t hurt me,” I tell him confidently. I can pinpoint the exact moment in time when his resolve waivers. His expression softens, and this time, he steps back from me.

“No, I won’t,” he says softly, “but the next guy might.”

“Please. I can’t stay here.” The thought of having to deal with Jake for another two days makes me want to cringe.

He sighs and looks at the ground, breaking eye contact for the first time. His brow furrows, and he is lost in thought for a few moments before fixing his gaze over my head.

“Get in the car, Kiddo.”

chapter two

Edward

I have driven 4,000 miles in seven days and I am exhausted. My mind feels fuzzy, and it takes every ounce of concentration I have just to stay awake. I even had to turn off the radio earlier today because my brain couldn't process it as anything more than noise.

It took me three days to drive from my home in Chicago to my ex-girlfriend's place in Los Angeles. I brought her everything she couldn't take with when she flew down a couple of weeks ago. All of her fucking clothes, books, movies, smelly bathroom things, and kitchen gadgets had been crammed into my Volvo. She wanted me to keep some of it, because god forbid I don't own a blender, but I didn't want any physical reminders of our relationship left behind.

I slept on her couch that night. I would have been fine sleeping in my car, which I've done every other night of this trip, but she wouldn't take no for an

answer. At least staying there afforded me the luxury of taking a shower. There is only so much one can do for personal hygiene in rest stops and convenience store restrooms.

Delivering her belongings to L.A. wasn't the main purpose of this trip, of course. It was just a detour along the way. I am on the road right now because I have a second chance. A second chance at having a family. A second chance at feeling like I belong. A second chance at being wanted. I refuse to go on with my life thinking "what if?" all the time even if it means suffering the rejection of a lifetime. If he doesn't want me at least I'll know. I would rather know.

I'm just not ready to know yet.

The only reason I'm still on the road right now is because I'm a fucking coward. When I left L.A., I intended to take The 101 north. Instead, I went south. It was an honest mistake. I was paying more attention to my iPod than the road. Instead of turning around and going in the right direction, I kept on driving.

That was almost three days ago.

It wasn't long before I ended up on Interstate 10. I stopped when I got hungry or needed to smoke, I slept in the backseat of my car, and I realized how big of a fucking state Texas is. Each night I told myself I would turn back in the morning, but I never did.

By tonight, I'll arrive in Jacksonville, Florida. I'm going to get a motel room so I can sleep in a bed again. I am also in desperate need of a shower and change of clothes, because I haven't done either since spending the night in L.A. I refuse to even touch my hair because it's so oily, and my face is incredibly itchy from not shaving for so long. I could have stopped and cleaned up sooner, but I wanted to spend as much time on the road as possible. I figured if I wasn't on the way to my originally intended destination, at least I was on my way to *somewhere*. Besides, I didn't want to stop and get too comfortable. I still have half a mind to keep going

once I hit Jacksonville, but I can't stand feeling like this any longer. Not to mention that if I don't sleep, in a bed, I'm going to lose my fucking mind.

After I get a good night's sleep I'll decide what to do. Tomorrow I will make a plan and stick to it. But first I need to regroup my thoughts and—

Shit, did I pack a razor? Most likely not. I probably didn't think about it while I was packing. If I did, I would have seen already when I was at—

Focus!

God, I need to sleep.

Tomorrow. What was I going to do tomorrow again? Something about . . . right, tomorrow. A plan. Either I'm going to follow through with this or go home. Not that I have anything to go home to.

If I go home I will be alone. Throughout my entire life I've felt alone, even if I wasn't alone physically. Growing up, I always had the feeling I didn't belong. Something always felt off. My life never felt normal. Turns out my feelings were justified after all.

Recently, someone I was very close to revealed a secret that had been kept from me my entire life. The things she told me before she died, basically that my entire past is a fabrication, turned my whole world upside down. I wish she hadn't told me. I wish she had taken those things to the grave with her. For some reason she couldn't let it go and felt obligated to tell me before she left this world. The truth overshadowed her death, and now I can't even properly grieve for her. I don't even know *who* I'm supposed to be grieving for.

At first I tried to let it go. Ignorance is bliss, and had I not found out, my life would have gone on just fine. The problem is I am no longer ignorant, and every day that passes makes it harder to pretend everything is okay. The worst part of this is that all of the people with the answers are gone. But I have a name and city from 27 years ago. Maybe some of the blanks will get filled in, maybe not. I'm not looking for answers at this point, only acceptance.

Being alone doesn't scare me. Starting a new life doesn't scare me. The unknown, however, is giving me a goddamn ulcer. I do my best to try not to think about it. Right now, I just need to concentrate so I don't fall asleep and drive off the road.

It takes me longer than I thought it would to reach Jacksonville. The sun has already set, and I drive around aimlessly in search of a cheap motel. Once it's completely dark, I give up and pull into the first gas station I see to ask for directions.

I park my car haphazardly. I'm in too much of a hurry to straighten it out and I need a cigarette. Badly. In fact, I end up having one before going into the gas station and one after coming out. While I'm finishing up, I notice a small girl standing behind my Volvo. Her long dark hair is covering most of her face, but I can still see she's glaring at the car as if it somehow offended her personally.

I put out my cigarette and walk toward her, stopping a couple feet away. I stand there for a few seconds waiting for her to notice me but she doesn't.

"Can I help you with something?" I ask. She spins around quickly, and her big brown eyes meet mine. She's younger than I would have guessed. High school age maybe? But she's hot. Really fucking hot. Or maybe it's just my dick talking since I haven't beat off since before I left home. I have a strict set of rules for my car, one of them being no jizz stains.

I watch as her eyes scan my hair, my face, my body. Her eyes widen and her mouth pops open slightly. I am dying to know what she makes of my appearance. I'm used to being checked out by girls, but I'm sure I don't look very pleasant under the circumstances. Is she disgusted by me? I feel pretty fucking disgusting right now. Her head tips down as her eyes keep going south. I'm suddenly aware of the fact that I'm sporting a semi, and if her eyes continue along that path, she's bound to notice. A wave of discomfort settles over me as I remember she's just a kid. I cough to get her attention and her eyes snap back to mine.

“Is this your car?” she asks.

“Yes.” Wow, do I look that bad?

“You’re from Illinois?”

Wait, how does she . . . right, the plates. “Uh-huh.”

“Can I go with you?” she asks in such a rush that I start laughing at the absurdity of the question . . . until I realize she’s still standing there with a straight face and hopeful eyes. I would love nothing more than to have the company of someone as sexy and beautiful as her but she would only distract me from what I need to do.

“I’m not going back there,” I say, hoping to dissuade her.

“Where are you going?”

Fuck, that didn’t work. “I don’t know yet.”

“Well neither do I. Please, take me with you,” she says.

Fucking Christ. She looks so hopeful. I really don’t want to be the one to burst her bubble but I can’t have her with me. I wonder how old she is. There’s no way in hell I’m giving her a ride anywhere if she’s a minor. “How old are you?” I ask, trying to keep the smile off my face.

“Nineteen,” she answers without pausing.

“Uh-huh, sure you are,” I say sarcastically even though I don’t think she’s lying.

She frowns a bit and leans in toward me saying, “Look, if you’re not going to give me a ride let me know so I can find someone who will.”

Shit. For some reason I honestly do not want to say no to this girl. I want her with me even though I know it’s a bad decision for me. It’s probably a bad decision for her as well. I am a complete stranger who basically told her I have no idea where I’m headed, and she has absolutely no problem with that. If she was underage, I could have straight out told her no. Nineteen is still really young but at least not something I could potentially be arrested for. Now she’s telling me

she'll just get a ride with the next guy? This girl has no sense of self preservation. Maybe I can frighten her into turning around and going home. I lean toward her and tilt my head down so we are at eye level.

“This is a dangerous game you’re playing here.”

She steps back from me, her discomfort apparent, and looks me over again.

“I trust you,” she says with a shaky voice.

“Of course you do. You’re just a stupid, fucking kid,” I growl, causing her to flinch away from me. As true as I believe my words are, I feel bad the minute they are out of my mouth. I don’t want to insult her for her choice, poor as it may be, but she needs to understand how reckless she’s being. I expect her to back down and run away, but instead she gets closer to me, causing the phrase “if looks could kill” to run through my mind.

“You won’t hurt me,” she says with such conviction it takes me aback. She’s right of course. No matter how hard I’m trying to make her believe otherwise, I would never hurt her. Unfortunately, not everybody out there has honorable intentions.

“No, I won’t, but the next guy might.”

“Please,” she begs. “I can’t stay here.”

I can tell by the look in her eyes that she means it. I can’t imagine what she’s running from, but apparently it’s bad enough that she is willing to ask a complete stranger for a ride to nowhere in particular. She wants to come with me, and I want to take her. Besides, I know she’s safe with me and I would probably feel guilty for the rest of my life wondering what happened to her if I say no. Not that I think for a minute that I could outright tell her no. Suddenly, her company doesn’t seem like such a bad thing.

“Get in the car, Kiddo,” I concede.

chapter three

Bella

I very ounce of confidence I have quickly dissipates as he pulls out of the parking lot. I can feel my heart pounding in my chest. I take deep breaths while trying to remain quiet. I'm afraid if I start panicking he'll rescind his offer. Or he'll smell my fear. Can people do that or is it just animals? No, I'm pretty sure it's just animals. Shoot, do the doors have latches? I should have checked when I got in.

"Are you okay?" he asks, causing me to jump.

"Yes," I answer.

"What's your name?"

"Bella."

"Bella," he repeats. "Bella, do you live here?"

"Uh-huh."

“Is there a discount store close by? There are a few things I need to pick up.”

I want to ask him what he needs, but decide it would be rude. Besides, if he needs duct tape, garbage bags, and a shovel he probably isn't going to tell me anyway.

“Bella?”

“Yeah?” I chance a glance in his direction. He is looking at me expectantly. “Oh, sorry. There's, um, one right up the road. Just keep going straight.”

He doesn't say anything else until we pull into the parking lot. I realize he never offered me his name. I'm afraid if I open my mouth to ask him nothing is going to come out. Or something stupid is going to come out, which is probably more likely.

“There's a motel toward the highway that I thought we could stay at tonight,” he says slowly. “That way if you end up changing your mind—”

“I won't,” I interrupt, causing him to laugh quietly under his breath.

“If you say so, Kiddo. Either way,” he says. “I'm too exhausted to drive any father tonight.”

“I don't think I can afford to pay for a room,” I say quietly.

“Don't worry about it. I was stopping there anyway. Would you like to come inside with me?” he asks, motioning to the store. “You can't possibly have everything you need squeezed in that tiny purse of yours.”

Up until this point, I hadn't realized I was completely unprepared for leaving home. Not that I really made the decision to leave while I was still *at* home. I could probably benefit from a toothbrush and extra underwear. I nod to him and open the door, silently relieved the handle could be operated from the inside.

We make quick work of the store and are back in the car in less than fifteen minutes. I can't see through his bag to see what he bought, but he definitely did not buy a shovel, so unless there's already one in his trunk, I should be good. The

sooner I figure out whether or not he's a masked murderer, the sooner I can either relax or form an escape plan.

"Are you sure you're okay, Kiddo?"

"Yes."

"Really?" he asks skeptically. "You've barely said anything since we've been in the car. You were much more talkative outside the gas station."

I take a deep breath and mentally prepare to talk to him. "W-what's your name?" I manage to stutter out.

"Edward."

Edward. Is that his name for real? It could totally have serial killer potential. "What did you buy?" I ask next. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

"A razor," he answers.

I gasp involuntarily and feel my eyes open wide as I stare at him. Edward frowns at my reaction then laughs and shakes his head.

"To shave with," he explains, gesturing toward his face.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to—"

"Relax, Kiddo, it's fine. Is there anything else you want to say now that you're talking?"

Somehow I think asking him if he's going to kill me and stuff me in his trunk is inappropriate. I need to think up a clever way to test him.

"Do you have a cell phone I can use? I need to let someone know I'm okay." A crazy psycho would not let someone use their phone. If he lets me use his cell phone, I know everything will be okay. If he doesn't, then I will consider him a suspicious character and run away as soon as he stops the car.

"Sure, but you'll have to wait until we're inside the motel. It's dead and I can't find my car charger."

Hmm. That didn't work out as expected.

Edward parks in front of the main office of the motel and tells me to wait in the car. When he returns a few minutes later, he leans through the driver's side window with a key clenched in his hand.

"Is it all right if we share a room? It's got two beds."

I nod my answer, feeling a little anxious about sharing a motel room with a complete stranger. I did want to do something wild, crazy, and stupid, right? This probably falls under all three of those categories.

Edward gets back into the car and drives around the motel, parking in front of our room. He hops out and grabs his shopping bag and a black duffle bag out of the back seat. I am in the middle of giving myself a silent pep talk when my door opens. Edward is standing there with concern etched on his face.

"You coming in?" he asks.

I follow him into the motel room. There are two queen sized beds with a night stand nestled in between and a tube television on the dresser across the room. In the corner by the door sits a small table with two chairs. The bathroom is in the back.

Edward throws his bags down on the bed farthest from the door. He absentmindedly scratches his face and neck for about the tenth time in the half-hour we've been together. He digs around in his bag and pulls out a cell phone and a wall charger. After plugging it in, he sets it on the nightstand. When he looks at me I realize I'm awkwardly standing in the middle of the room, staring at him.

"Do you mind if I use the bathroom first?" he asks quietly. "I feel so disgusting. I can't stand it anymore."

"Go ahead."

"It's turning on," he says, gesturing to the phone. "Give it a couple minutes." He grabs some stuff from his bag and goes in the bathroom.

I find the remote and plop on my bed. I flip through the channels, finally stopping on some crime show marathon. The phone chirps a few times, and I grab it off the nightstand. I flip it open and contemplate who to call as I watch the battery indicator blink.

I'm not ready to talk to Jake yet. I know he's probably worried, but he'll try to get me to come back home. I feel bad leaving him there alone for the weekend, but the thought of going home actually makes me feel ill. Besides, I'm already committed to this little adventure, as stupid as it is. I'll call him once we're out of town so I won't be tempted to turn back.

If I call Renee she'll try to be all motherly and offer me advice. I don't want to be given advice right now, especially from her. The conversation will probably turn into me comforting her somehow. There is no way in hell I'm calling Charlie, so he's out of the question. There's only one more person whose number I know by heart. I dial my best friend, but it goes directly to voicemail. Ugh, I hate leaving messages.

Hi, you've reached Alice! Sorry I'm not available right now. You know what to do!

"Hey Alice, it's Bella. Um, I'm just calling because . . . I want to let someone know I'm safe. I had to, uh, get away for a while. Jake and I, well . . . it's complicated and I, uh, I left and I'm not ready to talk to him. If you hear from him or my parents will you please let them know I'm all right? I'll call you soon. Oh, and don't give anyone this number, it's not mine. Please trust me . . . everything's gonna be okay . . . I think. Okay, um . . . bye."

I end the call and return the phone to the nightstand. I turn to the television, immediately getting sucked into watching the show with the interrogation room questioning, courtroom drama, and the DUN, DUN, DUN before every commercial break. Before I know it two hours have passed.

The bathroom door opens, and Edward steps out. He drops his duffle bag on the floor with a loud thud that distracts me from the show. The first thing I notice are his bare feet. Bare legs. He's wearing shorts. Another tight t-shirt. Clean shaven face. Damp hair ruffled from a towel. It looks a shade lighter now that it's clean. Wait, clean shaven face?

I can feel myself staring. I know it's rude, but I can't tear my eyes away from him. Well, now that his face isn't hidden behind a greasy layer of fuzz, anyway. I am blown away by how attractive this man is. He is devastatingly handsome. Beautiful really. I want to reach out and touch him. Trace his nose and his jaw line and his lips. I want to cup his cheeks and feel how soft his freshly shaven skin is. I want to lean into him and see if he smells of soap or after shave. I want to . . . run and hide because he's been watching me drool over him this entire time. As I snap my mouth closed, I feel my face flush with heat, and I'm really glad the only light in the room is coming from the television.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to take so long." Edward's voice cracks as he apologizes. He takes a seat on the side of his bed nearest me, and his eyes fall on the courtroom scene playing out before us. I notice he looks younger without the facial hair, but he also looks more . . . haggard? Like he emotionally aged ten years while he was in the bathroom. There are dark circles under his eyes that I hadn't noticed before, and his eyelids are puffy. I think for a minute he might have been crying, but it's too dark to tell for sure.

With a sigh I grab the toothbrush and toothpaste I bought at the store before realizing I have nothing to sleep in. "Shoot!"

"What?" Edward asks, sounding slightly panicked.

"I don't have any pajamas."

I internally chastise myself for not thinking about it while we were in the store. The button-up shirt I have on now will be uncomfortable to sleep in, and I want to get another day's wear out of it. And it's not like I can sleep naked while

sharing a room with a man I barely know. A soft thud on my bed pulls me out of my thoughts. I look down to see Edward has tossed a neatly folded, blue t-shirt in front of me. I pick it up. The material is thin, but it's soft. I look at him and he smiles sheepishly.

“Thanks,” I tell him and head into the bathroom to get ready for bed.

It takes me less than ten minutes, but when I come out, Edward is already asleep. He's curled in a tight ball so close to the edge of the bed that I wonder if he's going to fall off. I get under the covers of my bed before removing my jeans, leaving them close to me. I flip on my side and watch him sleep. He sounds stuffed up but it looks as though he's sleeping soundly. The position he's in makes him look young and vulnerable. I drift to sleep while wondering what he could possibly be running from.

chapter four

Edward

I know I had a good night's sleep as I start coming to. I feel well rested and my head is clear. I am surprisingly calm. The bed I'm on is comfortable and I experience a brief moment where I'm not quite sure where I am. Then I realize I'm in a motel and all the events of the past weeks come crashing down on me. My mind is instantly cluttered with anxiety and uncertainty. I think back to yesterday. What happened yesterday?

Bella. My future companion for an undetermined amount of time. Is she still here? God, I hope she is still here.

I try opening my eyes but they are painful and swollen, a reminder of my quasi breakdown in the bathroom last night. The room is bright, brighter than I expect, and I squint. I rub my palms into my eyes as I sit up. Bella is dressed and

sitting up in the bed next to mine. Her eyes are glazed over as she stares at the television screen. It looks like the same show she was watching last night.

“What time is it?” I ask. My voice sounds as rough as my throat feels.

“I don’t know. Almost one o’clock, maybe?” Her voice is monotone. Her eyes don’t leave the TV.

“Fuck,” I groan out. “I’m sorry, Kiddo. You shoulda woke me up or something.”

“It’s fine,” she says.

“No, it’s not fine.” My words come out harsh even though I don’t mean them to. In a way she is dependent on me even if she doesn’t want to be. “You’re basically stuck here with me. It’s past lunch time already. You must be starving.”

“It’s fine, really,” she says as she holds up a half-eaten jumbo bag of Peanut M&M’s and a bottle of water. “Besides, I asked to be here, remember?”

I cringe as she pops a handful of the candy in her mouth. Great. I’m already feeling guilty about her lack of nutrition and we’ve only been together for a little over twelve hours. “Fine, but you need to let me know if you need anything, okay? I’m not used to having to be . . . responsible for others.” I look at her to see her reaction, but her gaze doesn’t leave the screen in front of her.

“Really? You’re lucky,” she says nonchalantly.

I wonder what she knows about taking care of others. She’s just a kid.

When the credits start to roll she shuts off the television and turns toward me. Her eyes widen and for a moment I think she’s going to flip her shit or something, because I’m convinced it’s going to happen sooner or later, but instead she starts giggling. It’s damn near the cutest sound I’ve ever heard, and I can’t help but smile even though I’m not in the mood.

“What’s so funny?”

“Your hair!” she manages to say through her fit of laughter.

I get out of bed and make my way into the bathroom so I can check myself out in the mirror. I'm not sure what she thinks is so funny about it. It looks the same as it always does. I guess it's a little messy. Nothing to go into fucking hysterics over or anything.

I wash up quickly. I need a cigarette to calm my nerves, and I need some fucking coffee. I don't care if it's one in the afternoon and fucking hot and humid as hell outside. I'm about to grab a tissue when I realize they are all gone. Bella must have used the last one. I really did a number on that box last night when I broke down in here. What an inconvenient time to lose my cool. I've had plenty of opportunities for my emotions to catch up to me. Why did it have to happen the minute I'm in the company of a pretty girl?

"So . . .," she says as I leave the bathroom. "Where are we going today?"

"I need a fucking cigarette," is the only thing I can say as I leave the room. I am not ready to have this conversation yet.

Stepping outside feels like the equivalent of diving into a hot tub. I might as well just toss my cigarette into a coffee mug and drink it. Ish. I guess the thought of coffee really isn't appealing anymore. Maybe I'll get my caffeine fix from a Coke instead. I don't even get halfway through the cigarette before I put it out. I am never complaining about smoking outside in winter again.

Bella is still sitting in the middle of the bed when I reenter the room. She's playing with the handles of her plastic shopping bag. The top is tied closed in a knot, and I briefly picture her hitchhiking down the street with it hanging off of a stick. The visual makes me smile, and I can feel some of the tension lifting from me. I'm glad she's safe with me instead of with some asshole.

"Sorry about that," I tell her. She shrugs. "Do you want to figure this out over lunch?" She shrugs again. "Okay . . . I'll, uh, pack."

As I'm throwing things into my bag I notice the shirt I gave her last night sitting on the edge of my bed. I fight the sudden urge to hold it to my face and

sniff it. That would probably be creepy, at least while she's still in the room. It's folded nicely and I wonder if she even wore it. I wasn't awake long enough last night to see her in it which is probably good. The last thing I need is to start having sexual fantasies about her wearing my shirt. Creamy skin, bare legs, braless. Fuck.

After putting real clothes on I quickly pack my things. Bella eyes me warily as I grab my cell phone. It seems like she finds some sort of comfort in it since she kept it next to her all night. I ask her if she wants to hold on to it for me, spouting off something about not liking it in my pocket and not wanting it to slide around and scratch the center console of my car. She seems happy enough as she takes it from me and slides it in her purse.

We carry our stuff from the room, and I check us out of the motel before driving to a little café for lunch. Bella hasn't said anything to me since she asked where we were going today. I'm not sure if it's because I snapped at her or because she's having second thoughts.

"Bella," I begin, "I promise after today I'll never bring this up again, but are you sure this is what you want to do? Are you sure you want to come with me? Because, if not, there's still time to change your mind. I'll bring you home after we eat if that's what you want."

I expect her to interrupt me again. In fact, I am banking on her doing just that. She doesn't. She doesn't even acknowledge that I'm talking to her. Fuck. My attempts at being Mr. Nice Guy are backfiring. She's going to leave. I don't want her to. Yesterday I questioned the practicality of having her with me, but not today.

"Look, Bella, I don't know what you're going through right now. I wish I could read your mind to know what you're thinking. Just know that if you change your mind, at any time, I will see to it that you get home safely. If it means buying you a plane ticket and driving you to the airport, I'll do it. Okay?"

Bella holds her hand up to me, and I stop my rambling. I am fully prepared to drive her home after lunch, so her next words shock me. “I still want to go with you, Edward.”

“You . . . yeah?”

“Yeah. I’m sorry. Yesterday is just kind of . . . finally sinking in. I’m just not sure how I’m going to handle things yet.”

I can appreciate that. “What can I do to cheer you up, Kiddo?”

This makes her smile, which in turn makes me smile. “You’re already doing it.”

We eat lunch in silence, but it’s not really awkward. When we are finished I hand the waitress my credit card before she has a chance to bring the tab to the table.

“What are you doing?” Bella asks, surprised.

“Paying so we can leave,” I say. It seems obvious to me.

“I mean, you can’t . . . pay for me.”

“Oh? Why not?”

“Edward, I don’t have any money to spend on hotels, and I can’t give you gas money. At least let me pay for the expenses I directly contribute to.”

“It’s not a big deal; it’s only 10 dollars. Put the money into a pajama fund or something,” I say as a joke, but internally I scream, because I want her to wear my shirt again.

Bella sighs. “I don’t want you to spend money on me. I don’t like to be indebted to people, and it makes me feel uncomfortable because of the situation we’re in,” she explains.

Fuck me. I try to do something gentlemanly and I end up making her uncomfortable. It’s not like the money makes any difference to me. I would get Bella her own room and a new pair of pajamas every night if she wanted me to which, apparently, she doesn’t.

“I’m sorry,” I tell her honestly. “I was just trying to do something nice since you made the comment about money yesterday.”

“It’s fine. Don’t worry about it,” she says, but I can tell she’s still agitated.

“Bella, I don’t expect anything from you. You know that, right?” She nods. “How can I make it up to you?” Please ask for my shirt again.

“Let me pay for dinner,” she says after contemplating for a few moments.

“Is that what it will take to put that beautiful smile back on your face?” I ask.

Bella looks away and smiles as her face flushes bright pink. The color is beautiful on her. I mentally pat myself on the back.

We don’t get on the road until almost three o’clock. Since we never got around to discussing where to go, I hand Bella a map and tell her to pick a major roadway. So much for me making a plan.

“Let’s take I-10 west. It looks like it goes along the coast which would be cool. Hey, we could go to Phoenix, that’s where I grew up. There are lots of big cities we can stop at along . . . the . . . what’s so funny?”

“Nothing.” I laugh. “It’s really not funny at all, it’s just that I came from there.”

“You’re from Phoenix, too?” she asks in amazement.

“No, I drove from L.A. I took the interstate all the way here.”

“Oh. Wait, aren’t you from Illinois,” she asks with a confused frown on her face, making her look adorable.

Making her look *adorable*? What the fuck?

“I live in Chicago, actually,” I explained. “I just happened to stop in L.A. first.”

“How long have you been on the road?”

I do some quick math in my head before answering, “This is day seven.”

“Wow, that’s a lot of driving. What did you do in L.A.?”

“Personal business,” I tell her after a long pause. I try to keep my voice light, but it comes out tense.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to pry,” she apologizes.

“It’s okay,” I tell her. And it is. I don’t really want to talk about it, but I want to keep talking with Bella. Besides, I want to know about her, and I’m afraid she won’t tell me anything if I don’t answer her questions. At least she’s asking easy ones at the moment. “My girlfriend and I broke up last month. She moved back to L.A. a few weeks ago, that’s where her family lives. I brought some things she left behind,” I explained.

“Oh. So why did you come this way? I mean, you said you aren’t going back to Illinois. Where are you going?”

That’s the million dollar question, isn’t it? Where am I going? “I’m looking for some . . . family.”

“Really?” she asks enthusiastically. Not exactly the same reaction I had to the situation. “Do they live down here somewhere?”

“Uh, no. They live in Seattle.”

“Seattle!” she exclaims. “As in Washington?”

I nod.

“So why didn’t you go there? How did you end up in Jacksonville?” She clearly finds this amusing.

“Wrong turn,” I say angrily which causes her to laugh at me.

“I’ll say.”

“Where are we going, Kiddo?” I ask bluntly, trying to change the subject. I’m not in the mood to talk about my situation right now.

Bella studies the map for a moment before she answers. “Atlanta,” she says with a nod.

“Atlanta,” I repeat. “Any particular reason?”

“Not really. I’ve never been there, and it’s a big city that isn’t off of I-10.” She looks at me with a smile I could never say no to. Not that I would ever want to.

“Atlanta it is then.”

“Do you think we’ll make it there by tonight?” she asks.

“I don’t know, maybe. It depends on traffic and how many times we stop.” I assume now that Bella’s with me I’ll have to stop more often. Girls and their small bladders. Plus, it’s not like I can just pull over and have her go on the side of the road. I mean, she’s a girl. They have to pop a squat or some shit.

“I have family in Washington,” she offers after a few minutes of silence.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. My dad lives there.”

So does mine, I want to tell her. Wouldn’t it be ironic to find out we are related? I bet it would be a sure fire way to kill an erection.

“Who’s your dad?” I ask.

“Charlie Swan, why?”

“No reason.” Phew. Now if I have sexual fantasies about her I won’t have to be creeped out wondering if she’s my sister.

“I lived there for a couple of years.” Her voice sounds sad as she says it. I wonder if it has anything to do with what happened yesterday, but I don’t want to get into that right now. It’s not that I don’t want to know, I’m just not ready for the questions to be turned around on me again.

“Bella Swan, then?” I ask.

“Yes. Isabella, actually.”

“You have a pretty name.”

“It’s silly,” she dismisses but blushes again. “What about you, what’s your last name?”

“Masen.”

“Edward Masen,” she coos before speaking in a serious voice. “Have you always gone by Edward? Not Ed, Edd or Eddy?”

“Huh?” I ask, confused by the reference at first.

“Ed, Edd . . . never mind. It’s a cartoon. You’re probably too old to have seen it.”

Ouch.

“No, no, I get the reference,” I tell her, even though I’ve never seen the show. “And yes, I’ve always been just Edward. How . . . how old do you think I am anyway?” Maybe I’m a hypocrite, but I don’t want her to think of me as older even though I think of her as younger.

“Um, I really don’t know, but you keep calling me Kiddo so . . .,” she trails off.

“I’m twenty-seven,” I tell her and look over to gauge her reaction. A small smile creeps on her face but she doesn’t comment. “It’s not . . . *that* old, right?”

“No, it’s not,” she answers, and the car falls silent for a few minutes.

It occurs to me that maybe Bella doesn’t want me to think of her as young just as I don’t want her to think of me as old. Eight years isn’t really that much of a difference after all. “Does it bother you when I call you Kiddo?” I ask.

Bella stares at me pensively. She smiles and looks away before saying, “Not at all. Call me whatever you want, Gramps.”

“I deserve that.” I can’t help but shake my head and chuckle.

We drive for a few hours without saying anything else. I give Bella control of my iPod. It doesn’t take her long to make a playlist, so I assume she finds my music acceptable.

Bella is an easy girl for me to talk to. It’s almost scary how easily my secrets threatened to pour out of me as she asked her questions earlier. I am comfortable just being in her company even as we sit here in companionable silence. Maybe, with her by my side, I can do this after all. Even without her knowing my situation, I feel like she can give me the strength to follow through with everything. I was right when I thought she’d be a distraction to me. I just didn’t think it would turn out to be a good thing.

For the first time since leaving home, I feel the sudden urgency to get to Seattle. If she decides to leave me before I can find my father, I'm afraid I'll give up and return to Chicago. It shouldn't be too hard to get her to stay. Maybe she'll want to go to Washington since her dad lives there somewhere. I decide to bring it up after we get to Atlanta.

I am pulled out of my thoughts by the sound of a something crinkling. I look over at Bella just as she's tipping a fistful of M&M's into her mouth.

"What are you doing?" I panic.

"Eating M&M's," she mumbles through her full mouth. "You want some?" She offers the bag to me.

"What? No!" I yell. "No, I don't want any fucking M&M's!"

"Okay," she says as she pulls the bag into her chest. Her eyes are wide, and I can see her throat straining to swallow the candy down quickly. "What's wrong?"

What's wrong? What's wrong is that I've had my car less than six months, and there has never, and I mean never, been food inside of it. I want to tear the bag out of her hands and throw it out the window. Then I want to yell some more. But she's looking at me with those big, beautiful, doe eyes like I'm fucking insane, and I just can't. I grip the steering wheel tightly and keep my eyes straight ahead.

"Nothing," I say through clenched teeth.

"It doesn't look like nothing."

"I just . . . don't typically let people eat food in my car. I haven't even had it for six months. Sorry for flipping out," I force out the apology. I expect her to apologize and get rid of the M&M's, but I'm quickly learning that Bella never reacts the way I think she's going to.

"Edward, it's candy." She laughs. "It hardly counts as food!"

Once again her laughter causes me to relax a little bit. I realize it's a little anal of me to not allow any type of food in my car when we're going to be on the road

for an undetermined length of time. I suppose candy is better than beef jerky or ice cream. If it makes her happy I'll allow it, but it doesn't mean I have to like it.

"Just don't get chocolate on anything," I utter under my breath.

"Don't worry. Haven't you heard the slogan 'Melts in your mouth, not on your upholstery'?" I crack a smile at her joke, but as if it is listening to the conversation, Karma decides to rear its ugly head. I watch in slow motion as the biggest fucking Peanut M&M I have ever seen rolls out of Bella's hand, falls on her lap, bounces onto the floor, and rolls under her seat.

"Oops," she says as she bends down and makes a half ass attempt at pretending to look for the lost candy. She shrugs and grabs another one out of the bag.

"You're fucking kidding me, right?"

"What?" she asks with a straight face.

"Aren't you going to pick it up?"

"Yeah. I'll find it at the next stop. Don't let me forget." Again with the nonchalance.

It takes everything I have not to slam on the brakes and pull onto the side of the road right now. Is she fucking serious? She can't be serious. "Are you fucking serious right now?" I look at her in disbelief and notice her body is quivering. Fuck, I hope I didn't scare her again. Jesus, what the hell is wrong with me?

"Well, Edward," Bella says with a shaky voice, "you didn't expect the car to stay new forever, did you?" She busts out laughing before she can finish the question.

"I'm glad you find this so amusing." I don't know whether to laugh with her or be pissed because the M&M is still under the seat.

"Honestly, Edward, what is with you and the Yuppiemobile?" she asks. "Seriously, I have never seen anyone turn into such a grump so quickly over a car."

“I’m not a grump,” I retort.

“Whatever, Gramps,” she teases. “Is it because you’re tired? Are we cutting it too close to your bedtime? I know how people your age like to go to bed early so they can be up at 5:00 A.M.”

I want to tell her that I’ll willingly go to bed at whatever time she wants as long as she’s the one tucking me in, but I think it’s too soon to say something like that. I try to think of a comeback, but I just can’t come up with one. I don’t feel too defeated over it, though. Bella is clearly entertained by her witty joke and my reaction to the M&M incident, because she is still trying really hard to stifle a case of the giggles.

We make more stops along the way than I would have had I been alone. Sometimes to fill up on gas, other times because Bella needs to use the bathroom. She drinks water like crazy throughout the day. I am surprised when she asks my permission to drink a bottle of water in the car. I think she secretly feels bad about the incident with the candy, which she did manage to find when we made the first stop. I tell her it’s fine, leaving out the fact water is the one exception I have to the “no eating or drinking in the Volvo” rule, even if I am the only one who has done it.

As we drive through Macon, Georgia, Bella asks to stop at a store again.

“Seriously, Kiddo? What could you possibly need that you didn’t think to get the other six times we stopped today?”

“Well, I want to get some shampoo and conditioner, because I never like ones in hotels, and I kind of forgot to buy deodorant yesterday.”

“That explains the smell,” I tease.

“Har har, Edward,” she deadpans. “I don’t smell. I kind of . . . used your deodorant this morning.”

“You what?” I asked in disbelief.

“Well, I didn’t want to get all stinky, and you left yours on the counter so . . . sorry.”

“It’s okay, Kiddo,” I assure her. “You can use anything of mine you want.”
Sleep in my shirt. Sleep in my shirt.

“Thanks, but I want to get some other stuff too.”

“Like what?”

“I’d like to buy a couple of books, some shirts, pajamas—”

Fuck.

“—a bag to put everything in, a hair brush, lotion—”

“How can you possibly need lotion in this muggy-ass, wet environment?” I interrupt.

“I have dry skin. I can’t help it!”

Seeing a sign for Walmart, I take the exit for Macon. “I have shampoo and conditioner you can use if you want to save on money,” I tell her. “Really, you can use anything of mine, okay?”

Bella nods and blushes again, and I can’t help but wonder why. Maybe she needs something girly like tampons or something and I’m just embarrassing her. I ask her if she’s okay to go in by herself so I can take some time to look at the map. When she asks me if there’s anything she can get me, a brilliant plan forms in my head.

“There is something you could . . . no, I don’t want to inconvenience you,” I say, putting on my serious face.

“What?”

“It’s nothing. I can wait.”

“No, what is it, Edward?”

Hook, line and—

“Well, it’s just . . . you can get me something, but it has to be in lieu of buying me dinner or I wouldn’t be comfortable asking.”

“Of course,” she agrees.

“Promise?”

“I promise, Edward. What do you want?”

Sinker.

“Just get me a bottle of Coke.” I try to keep the smirk off my face, but when I see her expression, I just can’t. “You promised,” I manage to say through my laughter.

“You tricked me,” she hisses through clenched teeth. She gets out of the car and slams the door behind her.

Fuck.

chapter five

Bella

The look on Edward's face when I slam the door is priceless. I almost feel bad walking away and leaving him alone with his own thoughts while I'm in the store. As irritating as he's been at times today, I'm not actually mad at him. Still, I was surprised he used trickery to keep me from buying him dinner. Two can play at that game, though, and paybacks are a bitch.

When I get inside I grab a basket and start loading it up. The first thing I do is select a book from the best seller section. After that I pick out a few t-shirts and a sweatshirt. I contemplate getting a pair of pajamas as well but decide that if I "forget" to buy them maybe Edward will give me another shirt of his to sleep in. He did say I could use anything of his, after all.

I collect the other items I want quickly, but I get stuck in the lotion aisle. There are so many options, and I'm not sure what to get. Normally I buy plain

old, unscented, down-to-business lotion, but now that I have a very attractive male traveling companion, I feel like I should get something more feminine. I smell almost every scented lotion they have. There are some I like, but what if Edward doesn't like them? Not that I want to smell good for him. I mean, if he doesn't like the way I smell and we're sitting together in a car all day that would be bad. Maybe I should go with one of the shimmer or tanning lotions. I am pretty white and pasty. Not that I want to be tan because I think Edward would find me more attractive . . . ack!

I play eeny, meeny, miny, moe and select a bottle without looking.

Once at the register I grab a Coke for Edward out of the refrigerator. I pay for everything with my check card and calculate how much money is left in my account. Maybe it's a good thing I'm not buying us dinner after all. Between not working since I lived in Forks and paying for college, I barely have any money left. I'm not sure an extended road trip was a good financial decision for me.

Edward is watching me cautiously as I climb back into his car. I instantly feel bad for leaving him the way I did. "So, um . . . listen," he says slowly, looking down at the map in his hands. "It's late and I'm exhausted. Atlanta is still eighty miles from here. What do you say we just . . . stop here for the night?"

"Oh, okay. I can drive awhile if you want," I offer.

"Sorry, Kiddo. No one drives the Volvo but me." He gives me a sad smile.

"Edward, are you okay?" I worry I am responsible for his melancholy mood since he seemed fine before I stormed out of the car.

"I'm sorry about earlier," he says, confirming my suspicions. "I was just having fun with you. I didn't mean to upset you."

"Edward, it's fine. I was just playing."

"You were?" he asks. He wears the same hurt expression as he did before I left.

“Yeah, here,” reaching into one of the shopping bags I pull out the Coke and untwist the cap before offering it to him. His eyes widen in shock but he doesn’t reach for it. I hold it under his face and give it a wiggle, watching as the liquid swirls precariously toward the top. He quickly seizes the bottle out of my hands before any sloshes out.

I laugh at him, and he gives me a genuine smile.

“Youth these days,” he mumbles, “and their blatant disregard for the rules.” He takes a large swig of Coke, and I know everything will be okay.

There is a small motel down the road from the store, and I wait in the car again as Edward gets us a room.

“We got the last one,” he says as we carry our bags inside. We both stop abruptly as he turns on the lights. Instead of two beds there is only one.

“Huh,” he says.

“I’ll sleep on the couch,” I offer.

“No, you take the bed. I’ll sleep on the couch.”

We order pizza for dinner since it’s late and we don’t want to leave the room. I try to give Edward some cash, but he won’t take it. “We agreed I would pay for my own expenses,” I complain.

“Technically I didn’t agree to anything,” he argues.

“Edward, you bought me lunch, you are not buying me dinner too. A bottle of soda is not equivalent to two meals! It’s only fair I pay for half.”

“You want to pay for half the pizza?”

I nod.

“Bella, let’s look at this logically,” he says patronizingly. “You’re okay with not giving me gas money because I’d be driving anyway, right?”

“Right.”

“And you’re okay with not giving me money for the motel because it would cost the same without you here, right?”

“Right.”

He looks at me expectantly for a few seconds before continuing. “Bella, the last time I checked, you can’t buy half of a pizza. I would be paying the same amount regardless of whether you were here with me.”

Touché.

“What about leftovers?” I counter. “If I weren’t here you could eat the other half tomorrow.”

“I don’t eat leftovers, Kiddo.”

“Another one of your rules?” I ask in a mocking tone.

“Yep.”

“I don’t believe you.”

Edward’s only response is a shrug. He wins in the end, of course. We eat together on the bed while watching a movie on HBO. When it ends, I start collecting everything I need in order to get ready for bed.

“All my stuff is in the bathroom if you need anything,” Edward offers.

“Thank you.” I want to ask him for his shirt but chicken out. Much to my surprise he has set out his shampoo and conditioner on the counter. I smile when I see his bag on the floor, the blue shirt draping over the top.

I wake up in the middle of the night to the sound of rustling. I strain my eyes to make out where the noise is coming from, but it’s too dark to see anything.

“Edward?” I whisper.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“What are you doing?” As my eyes adjust I can make out his form walking toward the door. I assume he’s going outside to smoke even though he doesn’t seem like the type who would have a craving in the middle of the night. He was

pretty adamant about smoking this morning, but other than that he only did it periodically throughout the day.

“This couch is horrendous,” he answers. “I’m going to sleep in my car.”

“Edward, no,” I protest. “Why don’t you sleep in the bed? I’ll take the couch.”

“Trust me, you do not want to sleep on that couch. I’m going to have at least three bruises from rogue springs.”

“I’m smaller, I’ll sleep in the car.” I would much rather sleep on the couch than in the car, but I’ll do whatever it takes to keep him inside. He’s been on the road for so long, and I would feel awful if he didn’t sleep well because of me.

“You’re not sleeping in the car, Bella. I’ll be fine. I’ve spent most nights in my car anyway; it’s not that bad.”

“But you are paying for the room!”

“It’s fine, Bella. I want you to have the bed.”

“You can sleep in it with me.” The words are out of my mouth before my brain can thoroughly process them. I am shocked when I realize what I just offered him. It shouldn’t be a big deal. The bed is huge, and I trust him. He’s been nothing but a gentleman up to this point.

Edward pauses at the door and takes a ragged breath before turning around to face me. It’s too dark to see the expression on his face. Now that the offer is out in the open, I desperately want him to accept it. The thought of sleeping next to him all night is thrilling. “I don’t think that’s a good idea, Kiddo,” he says slowly. “Keep the door locked. If you need anything come wake me up.” With that, he walks out of the room.

I toss and turn for a while after he leaves. My mind will not turn off. Part of me feels rejected he wouldn’t stay with me, but part of me feels relieved. Why does he think it’s not a good idea? Maybe he doesn’t trust himself. Maybe he doesn’t trust me. Whatever the reason, I desperately try to tune out my thoughts. Eventually I drift off to sleep.

I wake up before Edward again in the morning. At least I assume he is still asleep because he's not in the room. I shower right away so I can pack and be ready when he wants to leave.

Last night I was hurt when Edward wouldn't stay with me, but I feel differently about it now. I don't think he left because of me. He was only doing what he was most comfortable with. Besides, I don't have the energy to fret about it when thoughts of Jake keep popping into my head.

I should call him soon. I know what I need to tell him, I just don't know how I'm going to word it yet. I really don't want to break up with Jake over the phone, but at this point my options are limited. I don't know how long it will be before I actually see him in person again, but I do know it's not fair to either of us to let our relationship continue in limbo. When I call him I have to be strong so I can get the words out of my mouth. I need to do it the first time I talk to him. I just have to.

It's Sunday, which means Jake is flying home today. I don't know what time his flight is. If I don't call him later tonight I'll have to call him tomorrow after he's done with school. That should give me plenty of time to straighten it all out in my head.

Once I pack everything, including Edward's shirt, in my new backpack, I walk outside to wake him up. To my surprise he is standing outside the door smoking his morning cigarette. "Hey," I greet him.

"Good morning."

We stop for breakfast right away. I ask the waitress to split the bill before she takes our order. Edward frowns at me but doesn't argue.

It takes us about 90 minutes to get to Atlanta. Edward drives us around the city to see what it has to offer. A large glass building catches my eye. “Edward, look at that!”

“Georgia Aquarium,” he reads. “Do you want to go?”

“Yes!” I am practically bouncing in my seat.

Edward drives a few blocks and pulls up to the front of a large hotel. I see a sign that reads “Hyatt Regency.” As the valet opens my door I whip my head around and look at Edward in shock. “Grab your stuff,” he tells me with a wink.

“Good morning, miss,” says the valet as I climb out of the car. I am too shocked to say anything. All I can do is stand there and stare into the impressive looking lobby as I wait for Edward.

“What are you doing?” I finally ask him in disbelief.

“I’m going to get us a room for tonight,” he says.

“Edward, we’re at the Hyatt!”

“I know,” he says with a smirk. “Come on.”

“Edward,” I reprimand him quietly. “A room here is going to cost a fortune! You’d better not be doing this for me. Is this because of breakfast?”

“Bella, I’ve spent the majority of last week sleeping in my car. I’m doing this to spoil myself. It’s probably not as expensive as you think. Besides, we need to stay somewhere that has a laundry service on occasion. Now, come on.” He reaches out and wraps his fingers firmly, yet delicately, around my wrist. My breath catches in my throat at his touch. It’s the first time we’ve made physical contact. His hand is soft and warm and feels really, really good. He gives me a slight tug, encouraging me to enter the hotel with him. Once my feet start moving he drops my arm. I internally pout at the loss of contact. I swear I can still feel exactly where his finger gripped me.

He books a room for the evening, sweet talking the front desk attendant to let us check in early. The room is bright and welcoming. The beds look soft and are

covered in luxurious blankets and decorative pillows. I immediately run across the room and jump onto the one nearest to the balcony door.

“I get this one!” I call as I bounce on it, knocking the small pillows to the floor.

Edward laughs at me as he picks the pillows up from the floor and throws them at me. He then proceeds to chuck all the pillows from his bed at me as well. With a final bounce I pull my legs up and land on my behind in the center of the bed.

“Do you want to go to the aquarium after lunch?” he asks.

“Sure,” I tell him.

“Can I . . . can I take you there?” he asks with uncertainty.

“Well, I didn’t really want to go by myself.” I’m kind of hurt that he thinks I would want to go without him.

“No, I mean,” he pauses, struggling with how to explain. “Can I take you there and . . . pay for you and . . . stuff?”

Oh, we’re back to the money thing. Or does he mean—

“Like a date?” I blurt out.

Stupid, stupid, stupid!

“What?” he exclaims. “No! Geez, no, Kiddo. Nothing like that. I didn’t mean it like that,” he rambles.

“Oh.” The rejection I felt last night comes flooding back. I’m okay with it not being a date. I still technically have a boyfriend, after all—not that he knows that—but I can’t deny that I’m attracted to him, and it really sucks that he seemingly doesn’t feel the same way toward me. Apparently he really does think of me as just a kid.

Edward regards me for a moment with a confused expression on his face. His mouth is open like he wants to say something else but he doesn’t. Instead, he stands up and grabs the remote from next to the TV. He fumbles with it for a while before finding something to watch.

We sit in awkward silence for a few minutes. Just when I think I will explode from embarrassment and rejection and am seriously considering running out of the hotel, Edward speaks. “Kiddo,” he says with confidence, “when I ask you out on a date, you’ll know it.” I smile at him, but look away quickly as the blush starts burning in my cheeks. It didn’t escape me that he said “when.”

We relax in the room for the rest of the morning. Edward even dozes off for a while. I don’t imagine he slept well in his car, especially after doing it all week. No wonder he slept so long yesterday.

We eat a quick lunch before going to the Georgia Aquarium. I pay my own admission, much to Edward’s dissatisfaction. He’s quiet for most of the afternoon. I worry he’s not enjoying himself and hope it’s not because of me, but he laughs as I run excitedly through the exhibits and smiles when I point out my favorite animals. I am especially captivated by the sea turtles. I stand there watching them for at least 30 minutes while Edward patiently waits next to me.

Before we leave I drag him into the gift shop. I am so enthralled by all the toys and souvenirs that I don’t even notice when Edward wanders away. Eventually I see him by the exit. He’s leaning carelessly against the doorframe looking better than any human being has the right to. He appears to be lost in thought and his brows are furrowed, causing a crease in his forehead. He looks so forlorn and I am overwhelmed with the urge to run to him and offer comfort. I want to hold him tight, smooth away his frown, and tell him everything will be okay—whatever his everything entails.

“Edward,” I say softly when he doesn’t notice me standing in front of him.

“Hey, Kiddo.” He gives me a small smile.

“I’m sorry I took so long.”

“Don’t be. Did you have fun?” As he pushes himself off the door I notice he’s holding a bag with the aquarium logo on it.

“Yes. What did you buy?” It didn’t seem like he enjoyed the day enough to buy a souvenir. Maybe he has nieces and nephews. Oh god, what if he’s a dad?

“Oh, this?” His smile gets bigger as he holds the bag out to me. When I make no move for it he says, “Take it, it’s for you.”

“Really?” I ask skeptically. I slowly look into the bag and see a plush face looking back at me. “Oh! Edward, you bought me a sea turtle.” The thought of this man, this man with the glum smiles and somber moods, buying me something to make me happy brings tears to my eyes. As I pull the stuffed turtle out of the bag his smile brightens even further. For the first time, it occurs to me that maybe he is so persistent about paying for me because it makes him feel better. I suddenly feel guilty for being difficult about buying food and turning down his invitation to pay for today.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, suddenly concerned.

“Nothing, it’s just . . . this is just . . . really sweet of you,” I finish.

“I couldn’t help it,” Edward says. “He was just so cute. He reminded me of you.”

I feel myself blushing again. Does that mean he thinks I’m cute? Or do I remind him of a hard-shelled sea creature? I hope it’s the former. “So it’s a *he*, huh?” I ask.

“If you want it to be.”

“I think I do.”

“Oh? Why is that?” he asks curiously.

“I think I have the perfect name for him.”

“Oh yeah?” he asks as he cocks an eyebrow. “What are you going to name him?”

“Well, sea turtles can live to be *really* old and he kind of looks grouchy, so . . . I’m gonna name him Eddie.”

“Eddie? That’s real funny, Kiddo,” he says bitterly but I can tell by his failed attempt at hiding his smile that the name amuses him. “I’m not grouchy. And I’m not old.”

We walk the few short blocks back to the Hyatt. I hug Eddie to my chest the entire way back, earning curious stares from onlookers. When we get back to the room Edward insists on ordering room service for dinner because he’s too worn out to go anywhere. He also mentions he’d like to stay in Atlanta another night. I ask him if there’s something else he wants to see. There isn’t, he’s just not in a hurry to get anywhere. I really don’t want him spending money on another night at this ridiculously posh hotel. When I mention I’d like to move on in the morning he seems more than willing to comply.

Immediately after he leaves the room to retrieve the map from his car, I hear a phone ring. I look around puzzled before I remember his cell phone is still in my purse. I dig it out quickly, wondering whether or not I should answer it. The caller ID reads “Jane.” I decide not to.

My mind starts to run wild wondering who Jane could be. Maybe Edward has a sister or maybe she’s a friend. He said something about an ex-girlfriend yesterday but they broke up a month ago. Edward hasn’t said anything about currently having a girlfriend. Then again, I have a boyfriend he doesn’t know about.

The thought of Edward having a girlfriend causes my chest to ache. I don’t have a right to claim him, and I am in absolutely no position to be jealous. Still, I can’t help but think about the way he treats me. He does nice things all the time, like offering to pay for food, loaning me sleep wear, buying me a plush sea turtle. Sometimes it seems like he’s flirting with me by the way he smiles or by alluding to asking me on a date in the future. He makes me feel special, and now I’m wondering if it’s the way he is toward all women. I have to remind myself I’m just a kid to him, and he probably doesn’t think of me as anything more than that.

I find comfort in the fact that I've been in possession of his phone for the almost 48 hours we've been together and this is the first time it has rung. Maybe it means he's not close to whoever this Jane person is.

When Edward returns with the map I hand him his phone.

"Here, someone named Jane called you."

"What did she say?" he asks, clearly irritated.

"Um, I didn't answer it, but I think she left a message."

Edward snatches the phone from my hand. He looks extremely pissed off. I'm not sure if it's because she called or because I didn't answer. Maybe it's because he doesn't want me to know about her. I expect him to leave the room to call her back or at the very least listen to the message. Instead, he angrily tosses the phone into his bag and flops on his bed with a sigh. I consider making another joke about his mood, because it seemed to cheer him up yesterday, but decide not to.

We watch TV, only talking occasionally. Our conversations usually revolve around a movie preview or infomercial we see. Eventually, Edward's mood returns to normal. Or at least he doesn't appear angry or sad. I have absolutely no idea what normal is for Edward. There are a million questions I want to ask him, like why he didn't go to Seattle, what family he is looking for, how he can afford to be on the road so long without working, and of course who Jane is . . . and maybe if he has a girlfriend. He looks so relaxed right now as he lies there sprawled on the bed with his hands behind his head, and I can't bear the thought of saying something that will make him tense again or cause him to look as sad as he did at the aquarium.

Tomorrow, I vow to myself. I will ask him tomorrow.

chapter six

Edward

A knock on the hotel door wakes me. It's a little after seven o'clock. I fly out of bed frantically searching for a shirt and shorts to put on. Through my sleep induced haze I realize I'm already wearing a shirt and shorts. What the hell? Oh yeah, Bella. I'm trying to be polite for Bella.

"Edward?" she says groggily as she sits up from her bed.

"Shhh, stay in bed, Kiddo."

I open the door for the room service attendant who wheels in a small garment rack with our clean clothing and a tray of food. After Bella didn't make any negative comments about ordering room service last night, I hoped she wouldn't be opposed to ordering in breakfast as well. I didn't want to press my luck by

asking, so I decided to surprise her instead and ordered last night on the way back from the car.

“Bella,” I say quietly as I move the cart next to her bed. When she doesn’t answer I take a seat next to her. She is facing away from me, and I lean over trying to see her face. “Hey,” I whisper. Still no reaction.

I reach my hand out and let it hover over her head briefly in indecision before gently smoothing the hair away from her face. Bella is beautiful. She looks like an angel as she sleeps. Her unconscious state allows me to stare unabashedly at her for a few moments before trying to wake her again.

“Bella,” I say a little louder as I run the back of my hand across her cheek. Her skin is silky and warm, and it feels like my entire body is going to melt from the closeness. It’s a strange sensation for me to take comfort from physical contact like this, but I’ve been yearning to touch her ever since our brief contact yesterday in front of the hotel.

“Bella,” I say again.

“Go away,” she groans.

“Bella, do you want something to eat?”

“No,” she says into her pillow.

Huh. I expect her to put up a fuss about the food, not to full out reject it. “Bella, I really think you should eat something before it gets cold,” I persuade.

“The food is here?” she asks in confusion as she rolls over to face me. Her eyes widen as they meet mine and I realize I’m still leaning over her, my arms on either side of her body, my face inches from hers. Bella gasps in shock at the proximity, and I stand up abruptly.

“I’m sorry,” I apologize. God, I hope she doesn’t think I was going to take advantage of her. “I didn’t mean to . . . I wasn’t . . . I’m not—”

“It’s fine,” she’s out of breath as she cuts me off. “I just didn’t expect you to be right *there*.”

I don't know why I'm so cautious around Bella, but I find myself censoring what I say and do. Maybe because she's only 19, or maybe because she has an innocent quality about her. I'm afraid if I unintentionally make her uncomfortable she'll run away screaming. I mean, she can't be all that stable if she's here with me to begin with, right? I can't help but feel there was someone she ran screaming from to get her to this point.

Maybe I should be asking myself why I don't want her to run away from me.

Yesterday, when she thought I was asking to take her to the aquarium on a date, I completely panicked. I honestly didn't intend it that way at the time. I only wanted to do something nice for her. The thing is, if it were any other girl I would have played into it and said yes, but I was worried about her reaction so I backpedaled instead. And then, just when I thought my damage control was a success, she looked at me like I just kicked her puppy.

Did she want me to say yes? I don't know where the lines are with this girl. She wanted me to share a bed with her for fuck's sake!

"Edward, what did you order for me?" she asks.

"Oh, uh . . . I didn't know what you'd like so I got a variety. Just take whatever you want and I'll eat the rest. I'm not picky."

I sit back down cautiously on the edge of her bed, telling myself repeatedly that this isn't weird. We've eaten on a bed together before. Granted, Bella wasn't half naked and under the covers, but it's the same concept. She looks so hot in my t-shirt, even if I can only see her from the shoulders up. I left it in plain sight in the bathroom last night, and I'm so fucking glad she saw it. It's a turn on knowing she's wearing it, making it smell all girly. I start to fantasize about what she'd look like without the blanket covering her up.

"Edward," Bella's voice pulls my mind out of the gutter, "are you gonna eat breakfast or stare at me all morning?"

“Sorry, Kiddo.” I can’t allow myself think about her like that. If I let the floodgates of my mind open it’s going to cause me to do all sorts of stupid shit. It’s better if I put an end to the fantasy now.

“Did you sleep okay last night?” she asks curiously.

“Yeah, why?”

“You were really restless.”

“I was? Huh. Sorry if I kept you awake.”

“Oh, you didn’t.” she quickly assures me. “I didn’t sleep well. I have a lot of stuff on my mind.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. Do you want to talk about it?” I ask. I want to know what she’s going through.

“Not right now, maybe later,” she muses.

Maybe isn’t a no. Between that and her not complaining about me buying breakfast, I think it’s going to be a good day.

“Do you know you talk in your sleep?” she asks.

“No shit, really?” I can’t even begin to imagine what I might have said. “What exactly did I say, anyway?” God, please don’t let me have said something stupid or embarrassing or overtly sexual about Bella last night.

“Oh, you weren’t really saying words. You mostly just made, like, little moans.”

“I was sleep moaning?” I ask with a relieved laugh.

“Yeah, it was pretty entertaining.”

“Glad I amuse you, Kiddo.”

“I don’t want to pick where we go,” Bella complains as we pack our bags. “Can’t we just drive?”

“Sure. If that’s what you want.”

“Ugh, Edward, I don’t want you to change your plans for me. I’m just along for the ride. Go wherever you want to go.”

“I don’t really have plans, Kiddo.”

“I thought you were going to Seattle.”

Why does she have to remind me?

“I’m not ready to go there yet,” I tell her.

“Wanna talk about it?”

“Not right now, maybe later,” I repeat her words from earlier.

“Fair enough.” She smiles. “I’m gonna hold you to it though.”

“If it’ll make you happy.”

“It will,” she assures me.

We leave the hotel just after ten o’clock. I’m disappointed we aren’t staying longer, but I can tell Bella is uncomfortable staying in such a nice place. It was only a little over \$200 for the night, not including food. I really don’t think the price is too outrageous, but I have a feeling Bella will, so I don’t mention it to her. I give her the ticket to bring to the valet while I check out so she won’t see the final bill.

“I thought you said no one drives the Yuppiemobile but you,” she says as I pull onto the street.

“Valets don’t count.”

“So you’ll let a perfect stranger drive your car before you’ll hand the keys to someone you know?” she asks.

“Yes,” I tell her with confidence. “I’d feel bad if I had to sue a friend.”

She scoffs at my reply. I might be offended by her reaction if the way she scrunches her nose up when she does it isn’t so damn cute.

So damn cute? I am so fucked.

“Can I ask you something, Edward?” she asks uncertainly.

“Of course.”

“I don’t want you to get mad.”

“I won’t.” She thinks I’ll get mad at her? Has my mood really been that bad? I thought I was doing a good job of hiding it.

“You don’t have to answer,” she’s quick to assure.

“Just ask, Kiddo.”

“Okay.” She takes a deep breath. “How can you afford to drive all around the country like this? I mean, you obviously don’t have a job, so—”

“I have a job,” I cut in. “I took a leave of absence.”

“For how long?” she asks.

“Indefinitely.”

“Oh.” The car falls silent for a few moments. “What do you do?”

“I’m a doctor,” I tell her with a sigh. I knew this would come up eventually.

“You’re a doctor?” she exclaims.

“Yeah. Sports medicine,” I offer.

“Dr. Masen,” she says in the same far off tone she used the first time she said my last name. “So they don’t care when you go back to work?”

“I’m not sure I’m going to go back.”.

“That’s cool. You can do that anywhere,” she says supportively.

“No, I mean I don’t think I’m going to be a doctor anymore.”

“Really? Why not? It had to have been a lot of work to become one.”

“It was but my motivations for becoming one aren’t really valid anymore.” I’m hoping she’ll sense my discomfort and drop the subject, but of course, she doesn’t.

“What was your motivation?”

“My *father* was a doctor,” I spit out. “Throughout my entire life my *so-called parents* pushed me to follow in his footsteps.”

“What changed? When did you decide it wasn’t right for you?” she asks quietly.

“When I found out he wasn’t really my father.”

“Oh,” she says, doing a poor job at hiding the shock from her face. “The way you said *parents* . . . Edward, are you adopted?”

“I guess you could say that,” I answer bitterly. I’m trying to keep my tone light. After all, I did tell her I wouldn’t get mad. But at the same time I’m not ready to disclose my entire past to her. This time Bella picks on my apprehension and doesn’t ask me to elaborate further.

“I take it you two don’t get along well?” she asks.

“He’s dead.”

“Oh! I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. We were never close.”

“Can I ask you one more thing?” she asks anxiously.

“Shoot.”

“Who’s Jane?”

I take a deep breath and exhale roughly. “What about you, Kiddo? Work? School?” I ask tersely, effectively changing the subject. I feel like a dick as I do it, because I had good intentions of answering all of her questions without getting upset, but I know when I’m reaching my breaking point. Getting angry and yelling is not the breakdown I’m worried about right now.

“Oh, uh, I’m,” she stammers, clearly taken by surprise. “Um, I just finished my first year of college. Last Friday actually.”

Ah, the day we met. My body starts to relax at the prospect of learning more about her. “Is that why you left town? Bad final or something?” I try to joke, but the frown on Bella’s face tells me she didn’t think it was funny.

“N-no, I . . . I sort of had a . . . fight . . . with my b- . . . withmyboyfriend.”

Huh?

“Did you just say your *boyfriend*?”

No! No, no, no, no, no, no, no!

“Yeah. The whole thing was really stupid actually.”

Bella starts talking about something that happened Friday afternoon, but for the life of me, I cannot concentrate on what she’s saying. Her phantom voice is playing like a broken record in my head. “*With my boyfriend, with my boyfriend, my boyfriend, boyfriend, boyfriend, boyfriend.*” The possibility of her dating someone never even crossed my mind. Guess I don’t have to worry about whether I should flirt with her. Or ask her on a date. I really thought she wanted me to. How could I have misread her signals for the past three days? This can’t be right. Did I mishear her? No, I couldn’t have.

My head returns to reality long enough to hear something about a proposal. A marriage proposal? Fuck. All this time my biggest concern had been that I would scare Bella away. She was in every vision of my foreseeable future, and I failed to recognize she would eventually leave in order to return to her normal life. A life in Florida which includes college and apparently a husband-to-be. This wasn’t going to last. This never could have lasted.

I was right; she was running away from someone. I don’t understand why she would want to go back to marry him. How much could he mean to her if she skipped town to begin with? I have her now. She chose to come with me. She should stay here with me. I helped her when she needed it. Not him. She wanted to be with me.

Or did she? Bella said herself she would get a ride with anyone.

It suddenly feels as though I’ve been punched in the chest. It’s physically painful, and my emotions start to overwhelm me. I feel hurt and angry. A little betrayed. Stupid. Embarrassed. Resentful. Am I . . . am I jealous? I can’t believe it. I’m jealous of some douche bag who’s probably just a kid himself. Some asshole who doesn’t realize what a great thing he has. I would never do something to cause Bella to run away from me. And I sure as hell wouldn’t let her go if she were mine.

“I can’t do this anymore, Edward, I just can’t,” Bella confesses on the verge of tears.

I take a deep breath, pulling myself together so I don’t sound completely dejected as I speak. “I understand,” I say solemnly. “I’ll keep my promise, Bella. I’ll get you home.”

“Wh—Edward, what are you talking about?” she asks in surprise.

“I promised . . . wait, what? What are you talking about?” I obviously missed something.

“Did you listen to anything I just said?” Her eyes widen as she asks.

“Uh—” Tell the truth or lie? Tell the truth or lie? “Honestly, Kiddo, I didn’t hear much after the words ‘boyfriend’ and ‘proposed,’” I admit.

“Whatever,” Bella grumbles.

“I’m sorry,” I apologize. “Tell me again, I’ll listen.”

“Edward, I’m not repeating all that,” she says angrily. “It was hard enough to say the first time.”

“Bella, I’m sorry. Please?” I need to know what she told me while my mind was running its own course. She sighs exasperatedly. “Please? Just give me the Cliff Notes version. I promise I’ll listen,” I say, giving her my most convincing pout.

“Fine,” she agrees. “Basically I said that Jake and I have been dating for two years, ever since I moved to Florida I’ve realized we aren’t right for each other, Friday night he proposed to me, it really freaked me out, and that’s why I wanted to get away, it was immature of me, I should have stayed and talked to him, but I didn’t, I overreacted, and now I have to break up with him over the phone.” She inhales deeply after rushing through the retelling.

“So you’re not . . . you don’t want to go home? You want to stay with me?” I ask without disguising the excitement in my voice.

“Is that what you’re so concerned about all of a sudden?” Bella asks in amusement. “Yes, Edward, I want to stay with you. That is, if you can keep your head out of your ass long enough to have an actual conversation with me.”

“Ha!” I can’t help the slightly maniacal laugh that escapes my lips. Bella giggles at me. The sound of her laughter causes all the awful feelings I experienced a few minutes earlier to dissipate. Being with this girl is like being on an emotional rollercoaster. Not that I want to get off. Well, actually I do

She doesn’t want to go home to her douche bag, asshole, kid of a soon-to-be-ex-boyfriend. She wants to be with me after all. She chose me.

“I love listening to you laugh,” I say without filtering my thoughts. Bella’s cheeks flush red again, and she looks away as a small smile plays on her face. “Don’t hide from me,” I tell her softly. “You’re beautiful.”

“Edward, are you flirting with me?” she asks in a voice half shy, half teasing.

“Kiddo, when I flirt with you, you’ll know it,” I tease back, echoing my statement from earlier.

“That’s a relief,” she says with a smile.

“Why? Do you not want me to flirt with you?”

She laughs under her breath before composing herself. “No,” she says seriously. “You’re, like, a hundred and nine. I shouldn’t be flirting with such an older man, it’s gross. I should be thoroughly repulsed.”

I shake my head at her, but I can’t wipe the grin off my face.

We drive for a little over seven hours, only making a couple of stops for gas and food along the way. It’s almost seven o’clock when we arrive in Louisville, Kentucky. Even though we agreed to drive without a destination for the time being, I can’t help but feel my driving toward Chicago isn’t completely unintentional. This is my ninth day on the road, and I’m sick and tired of driving.

It's hard to be this close to home and not want to go there, especially now that I don't have immediate plans for Seattle. And I'm not alone anymore. Now that I know a bit more about Bella's situation and know she wants to stay with me, I don't feel it's necessary to be constantly in motion.

I'm not sure how she'd feel about going to my house. Hell, I'm not sure how I'd feel about bringing her there. I could offer to put her up in a hotel, but I honestly don't think she'd go for it. Besides, now that I've spent the majority of the day thinking about being closer to Bella, there's no way I'm letting her out of my sight. I need to find a way to get her into the same bed as me, not put her under a different roof.

I am almost 99.9% sure that I didn't misread Bella's reaction after the aquarium date debacle. And I'm almost equally as confident that when she made the crack about flirting with me being gross she was kidding. The way she blushes all the time, the way she looks away and smiles, our playful banter—I'm sure the attraction I feel is mutual.

Admittedly, I'm still a little nervous about the whole boyfriend thing. I know from experience how hard it is to break things off when a relationship has been in long standing. It's easy to take the path of least resistance, and from what it sounds like, it would be easy for her to fall back into her previous life with him. It's also not what she wants. I don't know Bella well, but she doesn't seem like the type to do something she doesn't want to do.

"Do you want to stop here for the night? We can stay at that Days Inn," I say as I point to the hotel.

"Okay," Bella agrees.

I glance over my shoulder before switching lanes to exit when something out of place in the backseat catches my eye.

"Why is—is that—what the fuck, Bella? Did you buckle Eddie into the back seat?" I ask in astonishment. The stuffed turtle I bought her yesterday, that she so

aptly named after me because apparently she thinks I'm grouchy, is propped up in the backseat with the seat belt around its belly.

Without missing a beat, Bella turns her entire body around to look behind her as if she has no idea what I'm talking about. "Yes," she answers with finality.

"He hasn't been there the entire day, has he?"

"Yes, he's been there all day. I got bored while I was waiting for you this morning. You're not very observant."

"Yes I am," I say petulantly. "I've just been distracted today."

"Whatever, Gramps. Was the eye sight the first to go? Or are you just getting forgetful in your old age?"

We arrive at the hotel, and I get a room with two beds. I was really hoping they would tell me there weren't any double rooms available, because this time neither one of us would be sleeping in the car or on a couch, but unfortunately that wasn't the case.

Bella and I head to the room immediately after checking in. The need I feel to be close to her starts to become overwhelming. I offer to carry her backpack. I'd like to think I offer my services to be gentlemanly, but honestly I just want to run my hand along her body as I pull the strap from her shoulder. Once inside the room I'm constantly on the lookout for opportune times to touch her. I pass her closely so that I can lightly graze against her. I hand her the remote without looking so I can brush my forearm along her abdomen. I get her water so I can feel her fingers dance against mine as the bottle changes hands. It's an odd feeling, wanting to make the casual connection, but I'm instantly addicted to the high I get just from touching her.

The darkness offers comfort as we settle into our respective beds for the night. I want to expand our conversation from earlier in the day, but it doesn't feel appropriate to breach the subject right now. Somehow, the difficult subject matter seems acceptable when we're in the car; bringing it up now would be

awkward and forced. Part of me wants to ask Bella if she'd like to take a detour from the road trip and stay at my house awhile, but I'm not sure I will ever find my father if I go home now.

I feel as though finding my real father will bring a certain feeling of acceptance to my life. I'm not sure how, but Bella is already beginning to fill some of that void. A couple days ago I felt an urgency to get to Seattle because I didn't think I could do it without her. Now I feel as though, with her by my side, I don't need to go. As long as I find a way to keep her with me everything will turn out okay.

No. I need to go to Seattle. I need to find him.

I need Bella with me.

"Bella?" I address the darkness.

"Hmm?"

"If I decide to go to Seattle, will you come with me?"

"Um, I guess," she says cautiously.

"What's wrong?" I ask, immediately worried she's thinking of bailing on me before we could get all the way there. "I'll bring you to see your father if you'd like. Maybe you can visit him for a few days while I take care of some things."

"I'm not sure that's a good idea."

"Do you not get along?"

"Oh, we get along fine," she says, "but I don't want to risk running into Jake."

"Jake? Why would you run into him in Washington."

"Because he lives there, Edward. God, you really weren't listening were you?"

"I'm sorry," I tell her, and I am.

"Stop apologizing. Please. I think you have apologized no less than fifty times today," she gripes.

I stop myself before I can apologize for apologizing.

“My dad and Jake’s dad are best friends and it’s a small town. If I stay with my dad, Jake will find out. I’d rather just hang out in Seattle if it’s all the same.”

“But . . . but you’ll come with me, though? To Seattle?”

“Of course, Edward. I’ll go anywhere with you,” she assures me.

Anywhere like my home? I will bring it up tomorrow, maybe once we’re already on the road.

I shift uncomfortably in my bed trying to get into a position where I can make out Bella’s form in the dark. The t-shirt I’m wearing feels bulky under the blankets and my shorts keep bunching up annoyingly between my legs. Maybe tomorrow night I’ll ditch the t-shirt and hope she doesn’t have an adverse reaction to me being half naked. I’d rather ditch the shorts, but I’m not sure if I’m ready to walk around with just my boxer briefs on. Well, I’m ready, but I don’t think Bella is ready for something like that. I pull the blankets tightly around my body, the pressure offering me comfort.

“Bella?” I ask into the darkness again.

“Hmm?”

“Jane is my ex-girlfriend. I’m sorry I didn’t answer you earlier.”

“Edward?”

“Yes?”

“Stop apologizing.”

chapter seven

Bella

really, you don't need to worry about me. I'm fine." A muffled voice registers in my mind as I start to awake from a deep sleep.

"I am *not* an emotional wreck," the voice hisses. I realize it's Edward. I don't open my eyes, but I assume he's on the phone since long silent pauses fill the space where another voice should be.

"I'm sleeping plenty."

"No, I've been getting rooms."

"Kentucky."

"Shit, I don't know. It's only around five hours away, I might."

"No fucking way. I'm not going there."

"Oh, upset? You think I'm upset? You're goddamn right I'm upset. How the fuck would you fucking feel?" he barks out.

There's a long pause before he speaks again, this time slightly calmer.

"Yeah, well, talking to a giant fucking rock is not going to give me closure. It's a little fucking late for closure, wouldn't you say?"

"Honestly, you don't need to worry about me."

"Come on, you know I wouldn't do anything like that."

"I'm not . . . alone."

"It's not fucking like that." His voice is laced with irritation.

Okay, now I am wide awake. Edward is on the phone having a heated conversation with someone, and he is seemingly talking about me. It's the first time he's been on his phone since I've been with him, and it's 2:03 in the morning.

"Don't start acting like you know what I need. You don't fucking know me."

"Fuck you!" he hollers.

The room falls silent and for a moment I think his phone call is over.

"I'm sorry," he apologizes with a shaky voice after a minute. "I didn't mean it."

"I'm doing my best, I just . . . it feels like I'm losing my grip," his voice is quiet now.

"I know."

"I know."

"I won't."

"I will."

"I promise."

"Okay."

"Thanks, Jane." He flips his phone shut as he walks out of the bathroom.

My eyes focus in the darkness in time to see Edward fall face first onto his bed. I hear him take a shaky breath through his mouth before exhaling heavily. I want to say something, but I don't want to say anything that will intensify his already agitated mood. I'm not sure if he was in the bathroom for privacy or

because he didn't want to wake me, but I would rather avoid the awkwardness of him knowing I witnessed the one-sided exchange.

Of course, all of my concerns about awkwardness fly out the window as I hear a wet sounding snuffle followed by a ragged breath. My heart feels as though it's being torn in two by the sound of Edward breaking down in front of me. I can't just lie here while he suffers alone.

"Edward," I call tentatively.

All movements from his side of the room still as he realizes I'm awake. After a moment his breathing resumes.

"Sorry I woke you, Kiddo," he says in a slightly nasally voice an octave higher than normal.

I have no idea what to say to him. I don't know anything about his situation and I have absolutely no experience with comforting a crying man. Am I suppose to hug him? I would hug one of my girlfriends, but he's not a girl and we're not close like that. He's a guy, so I have a feeling the situation is probably pretty emasculating to him. Should I pretend this whole thing isn't happening and go back to sleep? That might have worked before, but now he knows I know, and I don't want him to think I'm cold hearted.

Deciding I have to do something, I slide off my bed and crawl onto his. He is still lying on his stomach, his face turned away from me. Assuming it would be best to say nothing, I place my palm between his shoulder blades. His body stiffens at first, but he slowly relaxes when I start rubbing circles on his back. He places one hand over his face but makes no other movement. After a few minutes he sighs contentedly. I lie down as far from his body as I can manage without breaking contact and continue rubbing his back gently until sleep consumes me.

I am alone in the room when I wake up again. It is still mostly dark inside from the heavy window shades. I squint to see the clock, but it's not where it was last night, or rather, I'm not where I was the last time I looked at it. I'm still in Edward's bed, on top of the comforter. The edge has been flipped over me, effectively turning me into a Bella Taco. For a moment I think Edward slept in my bed, but a quick glance at it tells me he didn't.

I get out of bed, and as I'm moving to the bathroom, Edward walks in the room. His eyes appear empty, his face expressionless. At first I am baffled by the way his mouth slightly hangs open when he sees me, but then I realize my lack of pants has me in a slightly compromising position.

Edward stalks toward me agonizingly slowly. I'm not sure exactly where he's looking but it isn't my face and it isn't my chest. When he reaches me he furrows his brows slightly before clearing his throat.

"Coffee," he states, holding one of the two cups he is carrying out to me.

"Thank you," I say as I take the cup.

He turns his head abruptly before walking away from me and taking a seat on the bed. Something about him is off this morning. His face is like a mask, void of emotion. His movements are listless, not the typical liveliness of his usual demeanor. This has to be related to whatever happened on the phone last night. He is so different from the carefree man in the car yesterday who was ecstatic to find out I wanted to stay with him. I've seen Edward go through a lot of different mood swings in the last four days but he's always put a lot of energy into however he was feeling.

I'm not sure if I should straight up ask him what's wrong or if I should try to distract him, but I have to do something to ease his anguish. Somehow I feel as though asking Edward if he's all right is not going to do any good. He's obviously not. I struggle to come up with some sort of nonverbal gesture.

I walk to my bed and pick up Eddie before moving to stand in front of Edward. His eyes look through me even as I position myself between his legs.

“Hey,” I say gently.

He is slow to meet my gaze. When he does, his eyes are filled with vulnerability. It reminds me of my first night with him when he was curled into a ball on the bed. I press Eddie into his chest and hold him there until Edward reaches up to take him. He looks away from me again, but I’m pretty sure a smile ghosts across his lips. I tightly squeeze his shoulder reassuringly before walking my half-naked ass into the bathroom.

Edward lies quietly on the bed all morning. He keeps Eddie on his chest with his hands clasped over the top of the plush toy. It’s a cute sight. If Edward were in better spirits, and if I had a camera, I would take a picture.

When he finishes his coffee I broach the topic of our day.

“Are we staying here another night or would you rather drive today?” I ask.

“Hmm.” he starts before taking a deep breath. “I was thinking about, maybe, stopping home for a few days. If it’s okay with you.”

His home? In Chicago? The thought of staying at his house is both exhilarating and unsettling. On one hand, the prospect of discovering more about Edward is exciting. Also, if he’s more comfortable at home maybe he won’t be so moody. On the other hand, we have been on neutral territory for our entire time together. I’m worried my presence in his home will be an intrusion.

“Sure,” I agree. “Is it far?”

Edward shrugs. “Five hours or so,” he says as he sits up to look at the clock. He sighs deeply before saying, “It’s almost check out time. We should go.”

For the first time, the silence between us is uncomfortable. Well, I’m uncomfortable. I don’t know how Edward is feeling because he is completely

stoic. I've been trying to think of something to talk about, but I fail to come up with anything that seems safe. Something tells me he's not in the mood for small talk.

"Tell me about your parents," he says emotionlessly.

"What?" I'm taken off guard by him initiating a conversation.

"Tell me about your parents."

"Um, what do you want to know?" It seems like an odd question to start a conversation with. Then I remember our conversation yesterday about him finding out his father wasn't really his father, and it fits.

"Everything. Anything," he says with a hint of desperation in his voice. "I just want you to talk. I'll listen."

"They're my . . . parents? I don't know. I don't know where to start." I wish his question isn't so vague.

"You said your father lives in Washington. Are your parents divorced?"

"Yes. They were married really young. My mom left with me when I was just a baby. We lived in Forks then."

"Forks?" Edward asks.

"Uh, yeah. Forks, Washington. It's where my dad lives now. Same house and everything."

"So, your mom brought you to Phoenix?" Edward asks after a few moments of silence, presumably to keep me talking.

"Yeah. Well, we went to California first but I don't remember anything before Phoenix," I explain.

"Did you see your father often?"

"Two weeks every summer and the occasional holiday, until I went to live with him my last two years of high school."

"Why did you move?"

“My mom got remarried, which is cool. Phil’s a nice guy but he travels a lot for work and my mom was torn between wanting to go with him and stay with me. No matter which one of us she was with, she always felt bad about leaving the other, so I decided to live with my dad.

“At first I didn’t want to go. Not because of him, I just didn’t want to live in Washington. But it turned out to be a good thing. My mom is very erratic. Very harebrained. Our mother/daughter roles always seemed reversed. I didn’t realize how stressful taking care of her was until I didn’t have to anymore. It was like a weight had been lifted from my shoulders.

“I also met my best friend Alice. I haven’t seen her since last summer though. She went off to school in New York to study art. I miss her a lot. And I miss my dad, too.”

I realize I’ve been rambling and quickly look to Edward. I hope I haven’t been boring him. Sure, he asked, but my life isn’t all that interesting. He is looking at the road, still not betraying his emotions. Maybe he stopped listening. He wasn’t really listening yesterday, and I think telling him about Jake proposing marriage and me running away like a Fraidy Cat is much more interesting than this.

“And you?” Edward asks, surprising me. “What are you going to college for?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I’m just getting my generals out of the way,” I tell him.

“Oh yeah? Where at?”

“Florida Community College,” I say quietly. I can feel the heat rising in my cheeks. Here I am, with a doctor, telling him about going to a mediocre community college while running away from problems that are probably stupid. No wonder he calls me Kiddo. “I just didn’t want to spend a ton of money on tuition at a university, because I don’t want my parents to have to pay for me, so I’m paying for everything myself, and I have no idea what I want to do or where I’m going to go once I have my associates degree, and— ”

“Bella,” Edward interrupts, “what’s wrong? Did I say something wrong?”

“No,” I dig my fingers into Eddie trying to relieve some tension. “It’s just that, Edward, you’re a *doctor*.”

His brows furrow in confusion momentarily until the realization dawns on him. “Bella, there’s nothing wrong with going to a community college,” he admonishes. “What’s important is finding something *you* want to do. Something that makes *you* happy. Not what someone else thinks you should do. The path you take to get there doesn’t matter as long as you do.”

Edward’s words, though stern, make me feel a lot better. So many of my friends, my parents, and even Jake seem to frown upon my educational decisions. This is the first time someone has supported my decision full out. And I’m pretty sure he means what he just said because he got pretty worked up about it, which says a lot with the way he’s been acting all day.

“Thanks,” I tell him. “I appreciate your words of wisdom, Gramps.”

“Bella.” He looks at me imploringly. “I’m serious.”

“So am I.”

I can see the corner of his lip twitching slightly as if he’s fighting off a smile. Maybe he just needed to be distracted from his own mind for a while.

“If you’re so undecided about your future, how did you end up in Florida?” he asks.

“My mom and Phil live in Jacksonville now. I didn’t want to stay in Washington, but I couldn’t afford to live on my own *and* pay for college so It worked out really well, though. They are gone a lot so mostly I’m by myself. Phil takes care of my mom, so I don’t have to worry about her anymore.

“It’s nice. For the first time in my life I’m not looking out for anyone but myself. Obviously my dad manages on his own, but when I lived there I was always making dinner for him and doing chores and his laundry. Not that I minded doing any of that. I don’t want to come across as a petulant child or anything. I just did it because, if I didn’t, no one else would.

“The past year has been really great as far as independence goes, but it’s nothing compared to these past few days. I mean, I am literally not responsible for anything. I don’t even have to look after someone’s house! All I do is sit here while you drive me around, which I am really appreciative of, by the way.

“I’m just so tired of being someone’s crutch. It’s not that I don’t want to help people, but I’ve done it my entire life, and for once I just want to do something for me.” I realize I’m rambling again. I didn’t mean to go off on such a rant like that. Edward is wearing an expression I can’t quite read but it disappears when he realizes I’m looking at him. He doesn’t comment on anything I’ve said.

As I’m trying to think of a light topic to start a new conversation, Edward starts scratching around his jaw where his beard is starting to fill in again. I take the opportunity to change the subject. “Time to shave again?” I ask.

“Yeah,” he answers. “After about three days it starts to get irritating. Better than having to shave every day though. Guess it’s the nice part about not working.”

“How long do you think we’ll stay at your house?” I ask. “Or do you not intend to go back on the road?”

Edward puffs out a breath of air before speaking. “A couple days I suppose. I just need to figure some shit out.”

“And then we’re going to Seattle?” I ask.

“Yeah. Then we’re going to Seattle,” he says. “If you still want to go with me. I understand if you don’t want to deal with my bullshit.”

“What do you mean?” I’m not sure if he’s referring to his bullshit in general or specifically to his bullshit related to Seattle.

“I don’t want you to feel obligated to go all the way with me.”

Oh, did he really just say that? This is just too perfect. “I’m pretty sure that’s illegal in most states, Gramps. You might have to drive us to Arkansas.”

I watch as Edward’s cheeks turn beet red. “That’s—that’s not—”

“Edward, I know.” I laugh raucously. “Oh my god, I can’t believe I made you blush!”

He smiles widely, probably the biggest smile I’ve seen on face since we met. He looks so happy. I wish I could somehow keep him in this moment forever. I quickly bring up a new topic before he reverts to being all emo about whatever it was in our conversation that made him all emo in the first place.

“Tell me about your house,” I request.

“My house? I don’t know. It’s smallish. Two bedrooms, two baths, living room, den, kitchen, dining room. It’s one level. Nothing too fancy. And it’s really fucking empty right now.”

“Why is it empty?”

“Because one-half of the occupants just moved out,” he cryptically answers.

Oh! The ex-girlfriend. Jane. Way to ruin what was supposed to be a light subject.

“Sorry,” I grimace.

“It’s fine, Kiddo.”

Edward’s house is just how he described it, other than the fact that it’s not actually in Chicago but one of its suburbs. He doesn’t give me a tour, instead opting to follow me as I walk through it on my own. The living room is wide open in the center of the house. The dining room and den are connected to the living room with the kitchen nestled in between. The two bedrooms are on the left side of the house. One bathroom is in the hallway and the other is in the master bedroom.

He is right about the emptiness. There is a king sized bed and a dresser in his bedroom. The living room has a overstuffed leather couch and a flat screen TV. In the kitchen is a wooden table with two chairs. There are some random pieces of

furniture and the like—a desk, bookshelf, pile of boxes—but for the most part the rest of the rooms are empty. I wonder briefly if the house looked this way when Jane lived here. I find it hard to imagine that a set-up like this would exist outside of a bachelor pad. I will put it on my ever expanding list of things to ask him when he’s in a good mood.

I excuse myself to the bathroom. As I sit down to pee, I am shocked by the streak of red on my underwear. My first thought is that my period came early, but as I count the dates in my head, I realize it’s right on time, as usual. It never even crossed my mind that it would be coming. I quietly rummage around in the bathroom cabinets in hopes of finding forgotten feminine products. No such luck.

Edward is sprawled out on the couch looking completely exhausted. I feel terrible asking him to get back in the car, but my options are limited.

“Edward, can we go to the store real quick?” I ask.

“Ah, Kiddo, we just got here. Can we go tomorrow? Or in a few hours at least?” he whines.

“There’s something I . . . *need*.” I try conveying with my voice and by using unspecified hand gestures that I really need him to comply.

“What is it?” he asks. “Maybe I already have it.”

“Please, Edward?” Don’t make me say it, please don’t make me say it.

“I’ve been driving for the past ten days,” he says relentlessly. “Seriously, if I get in that goddamned car again I’m going to flip the fuck out. I’m not driving to the store so you can get something that’s already here. What is it that you need?”

Shoot.

“A tampon, Edward,” I say loudly, my irritation for having to have this conversation with him apparent in my voice. “I need a tampon. Do you have a couple laying around?”

“Fuuuuuuuuck,” he groans and presses his palms into his eyes as if he can somehow rub away the situation. He reaches in his pocket, pulling out his car

keys and offering them to me. “Go out to the road we came in on and take a right. The store is on the left hand side about five miles down.” He keeps his eyes covered during the entire exchange, and I’m not sure which one of us is more embarrassed.

I drive his car cautiously. Overly cautiously. I’m not sure whether he really was too exhausted to drive or if he was just too squicked out to accompany me with my purchase of feminine products. However, I am positive he didn’t give me the keys because he trusts me with his baby. I return as quickly as possible so not to cause him unnecessary worry.

I can’t help but laugh at the entire situation as I walk through the door, but my face quickly falls when I see Edward. He is perched on the edge of the couch looking angrily at his cell phone. He turns the same gaze on me as I walk in. No, he’s not angry; he is livid.

“It’s fine! The car is fine!” I manage to get out as I hold the keys out to him. He walks to me quickly and pulls them roughly out of my hand.

I can honestly say, until this exact moment, I have never been afraid of Edward. Even when I thought he might be a serial killer, I was never actually concerned for my safety. But right now, as he’s towering over me by almost a foot, shaking slightly with his face flushed red with anger, I am about two seconds away from bolting toward the door. He looks absolutely terrifying.

“Edward, what’s wrong?” My voice quivers.

“What’s wrong?” he growls through clenched teeth. “What’s wrong is your friend called.” His hand holding the cell phone flies up to within inches of my face, and I involuntarily finch away from him. For a split second I think he is referring to Jake, because why else would he be so upset? Then I remember the call I made from his phone on Friday night.

“Alice?”

He nods sharply. “Apparently your *father*,” he spits the word, “you know, Chief of Police in Forks, is a little upset that you’ve gone MIA.”

Charlie? How does Charlie know I’m not at home. Ugh, of course, Jake must have told him. Crap, it’s Tuesday night and I never called him.

“Fuck, Bella!” Edward yells when I don’t respond. “He fucking filed a Missing Person Report on you! It’s officially being listed as a kidnapping!”

I gasp audibly as my brain processes the information. No wonder Edward is fuming. Why hadn’t I realized something like this could happen?

“Call him,” he demands. He pushes the phone into my hand before resuming his spot on the couch with his head in his hands.

My hands are shaking so badly I can barely dial Charlie’s number. He picks up before the phone completes its first ring.

“Swan,” he answers agitatedly.

“Dad?”

“Oh my god, Bella.” He breathes in relief. *“Are you okay?”*

“I’m fine, Dad. I’m sorry I didn’t call sooner.”

“My god, Bella, I’ve been worried sick about you. Where are you? Jake told me you left the house Friday night and never came back.”

“I’m sorry. Things got uncomfortable between us and I had to get away.”

“Where are you? I don’t recognize this area code,” he says suspiciously.

“I’m in Chicago.”

“In Chicago? Bella, how the hell did you get to Chicago?”

“I got a ride . . . with a friend.” It’s not a total lie.

“Does this friend have a name?” Oh, no. Please, not Cop Dad.

“Edward,” I mumble. I’ve learned not to lie to Charlie. He always knows. Not to mention I completely suck at it.

“Edward? How did you meet this Edward?” he demands.

“Uh—” I stall. As horrible as I am at lying, there’s no way I’m telling him the truth. Charlie probably would try to arrest him for kidnapping. “At school?”

“Uh-huh. Well tell him to bring you home.”

“What? Dad, no!”

“Bells, it’s either that or I’m flying you out to live with me for the summer.”

“No, Dad. I’m not going anywhere,” I argue. “I’m an adult; I can make my own decisions.”

“Obviously you can’t!” he snaps. *“I have been worried sick about you. Your mother has been worried sick about you. Jake has been worried sick about you. Now, Jake told me what happened Friday night but part of being an adult is being responsible and not running away from your problems. And for crying out loud, Bella, if you weren’t comfortable talking with Jake you should have picked up the damn phone and called someone else!”*

I consider telling him I called Alice, but I know that’s not what he means, and I don’t think it’s going to help my case right now.

“I’m disappointed in you, Bells,” he says as his voice falls.

Charlie can yell at me all he’d like and I wouldn’t blink an eye, but his disappointment in me pushes me over the edge. I feel the wet pricking my eyes. “I’m sorry Dad,” I weep into the phone as tears run down my face.

Charlie sighs on the other end. *“I’m glad you’re safe, Bells,”* he says once my crying tapers off. *“Now let me talk to that boy you’re with.”*

“Please, Dad, no,” I whisper. The thought of Charlie talking to the loose cannon that is Edward is enough to make my stomach churn. God only knows how that conversation will end. And how Edward will react to it.

“Isabella,” he warns.

A fresh batch of tears rolls down my face as I walk over to Edward and hold his phone out to him. He looks at the phone, then at me before slowly shaking his head.

“Please,” I mouth wordlessly.

Edward begrudgingly takes the phone. “This is Edward,” he says calmly. The silence is deafening as I wait for Edward to speak again. “Yes, sir,” is all he says before holding the phone out to me.

“Dad?”

“Bells, I want you to keep in touch with me until you’re back home. And if he does anything to hurt you, you call me. Immediately.”

“Okay, Dad.”

“Love you kid,” he says. I can’t help but notice the similarity between his and Edward’s nicknames for me. *“I’m glad you’re safe.”*

“Love you too, Dad,” I tell him before he hangs up.

My thoughts are all over the place. I try to gather them all together to make sense of what just happened, but Edward interrupts. “You lied,” he states coolly.

“About what?” I can’t think of anything I lied about, unless he’s referring to lying by omission.

“You told your father we met at school, didn’t you?” he accuses.

“Yes, but I couldn’t tell him the truth,” I try to explain.

“So what am I supposed to say when I meet him, huh? What happens when he realizes I’m too old to be in college with you? You don’t think he’s going to ask me what I do? I’m a fucking doctor, Bella! How do I explain that I went through eight years of school, completed my residency, live in Chicago, and yet somehow managed to meet you at your school?”

My blood starts to boil as all my emotions quickly turn to anger. I lied to protect him. I was protecting us. Didn’t he understand that? Did he honestly expect me to tell the truth? Okay, maybe it wasn’t the best lie, but I was put on the spot.

“Maybe you can tell him you’re unemployed since it isn’t that far from the truth,” I hiss. The words are out of my mouth before I can fully comprehend what I’m saying. I instantly regret them.

Hurt flashes across Edward’s face for only an instant before he collects his composure.

“Jesus fucking Christ, Bella,” he shouts. “I’m twenty-fucking-seven years old! I’m past dealing with all this parental bullshit. I don’t need this shit. Grow the fuck up!”

He storms past me in the direction of the bedrooms. A door slams loudly. I sink onto the couch as I start to cry again. This is so stupid. This is so, so stupid. What the heck are we even fighting about? I told my dad a white lie because I was afraid of him getting upset with me. And he would have had every right to. Accepting a ride from Edward was idiotic and rash and it could have turned out very badly. Instead of owning up to the truth I tried to cover it up, proving to both of them how immature I am and insulting Edward in the process.

It occurs to me too late that Edward’s only reason for being upset is if he intends on meeting my dad one day.

I sit on the couch by myself for the rest of the evening. Edward never comes out of his room nor does he make any noise. I try turning on the TV, but I can’t figure the stupid contraption out. Edward has a lot of books, but I don’t have the concentration to get past the first page of any of them. The kitchen is empty, so I can’t bide my time by cooking. Maybe I can go to the store in the morning so I can surprise him by making breakfast—a thank you for being so accommodating to me these past few days. His car keys are still in the living room. It’s not like he could possibly be any more upset with me.

Sick of thinking, I decide the only thing left to do is go to sleep. That, of course, poses its own problem, because the only horizontal sleeping surfaces are the couch, the floor, and Edward’s bed. Unlike every other living room I’ve been

in, there are no throw blankets on the couch. Why he assumed he might have had whatever I needed earlier, I'll never know. I search everywhere for an extra blanket or a pillow—the bathroom cabinets, the hallway closet, the empty guest room, even the kitchen cupboards. Nothing.

There's only one place left to look, and I'm not snooping around Edward's room. Especially if he's in it. I hope he's not still upset with me when I wake him up. Maybe I'll get lucky and there will be an extra blanket on his bed.

The bedroom door is open which strikes me as odd, because I'm sure I heard a door slam earlier.

“Hm . . . mm.”

Edward is moaning in his sleep again. As I approach his bed I notice his body twitching restlessly. His face is tense and he's frowning.

“Hhm.”

I glance around the room, but there are no extra blankets. I suppose I can just grab a pillow from his bed and be done with it. I can handle no blanket, but I'm not sleeping with the leather couch pillows.

“Mm.”

Nope, not waking him up. Not in the mood for more of his wrath. I carefully climb onto the bed to grab a pillow from the middle.

“No,” he mumbles as I'm reaching over him. I freeze.

“No,” he says louder, and his legs start kicking violently under the covers.

Is he having a nightmare? Am I supposed to wake him up? “Edward,” I whisper loudly as I shake his shoulder.

“No!” he screams this time, abruptly sitting up as he gasps for air. He begins to rock back and forth and seems disoriented, even as we make eye contact. His eyes are wide, and his expression appears to be somewhere between confusion and terror.

“Bella?” he breathes before bursting into tears.

Once again my heart breaks for Edward. I throw my arms around him at the same time he falls into me. I squeeze him to me tightly as sobs rip through his chest. He snakes his arms around my waist and rests his forehead on my neck. He continues rocking as he sobs, effectively moving me with him. He tightens his hold on me further and presses his cheek into my chest as if he's trying to get as close as possible. He is still sobbing.

After a few minutes the rocking stops. I'm thrown off balance as he pulls us onto our sides, but he never breaks his hold on me. Edward is quiet now. The way his body occasionally shudders and the pattern of his warm breath fanning across my chest are the only indicators he is still crying. His top hand flexes methodically as he grips my waist repeatedly. It is slightly uncomfortable but I'm not going to say anything about it.

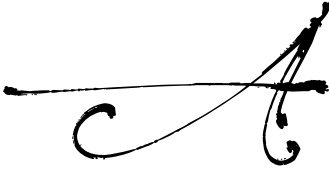
I whisper words of assurance as I caress his back and massage his scalp. Edward finally stills after about 30 minutes. His breathing is labored, but it eventually evens out as he falls into a deep sleep. We don't move the entire night, and when I wake up in the morning he is still holding on to me just as tightly.

chapter eight

Edward

Glub, glub, glub, glub. Clink.

Glub, glub, glub, glub. Clink.

 glass of orange juice slides into my peripheral vision. I slowly peel my head from the kitchen counter. The cool surface of the marble feels soothing on my swollen face, so I've been alternating laying my cheeks on it. Bella requested my company in the kitchen, but she hasn't spoken since I sat down here over 10 minutes ago.

When I first woke up this morning, Bella was in the process of quietly extracting herself from the death grip I had on her while we were sleeping. I couldn't open my eyes to look at her. Literally, I could not open my fucking eyes because they were too puffed up from all the crying I did last night. I reluctantly let her go, but not without a wave of rejection washing over me as she was

leaving. I'm pretty sure I even fucking whimpered as her weight lifted from the bed.

"Shhh, shhh, it's okay," she whispered as she threaded her fingers into my hair. "Sleep."

And I did. I'm not sure how much time passed between then and the second time she woke me, asking me to come to the kitchen. I slid onto a stool silently, immediately putting my head on the counter. Whether she didn't know I was there or was ignoring me, I don't know. The orange juice was the first time she acknowledged my presence.

I don't realize the extent of how dehydrated and shitty I feel until I take a sip. Before I know it, I've chugged the whole glass. I've never really been fond of orange juice, but I'm convinced it somehow tastes better because Bella poured it. I can't even remember the last time I bought some. Where the hell did this orange juice come from anyway?

For the first time this morning, I look at Bella. I haven't really given much thought to what she's doing or why she asked me into the kitchen. She's standing at the stove making . . . eggs? There's a dirty cutting board and knife on the other side of the counter. Vegetables?

Pop.

My head snaps in the direction of the noise. Toast? Where the hell did all this come from?

"Bel—" My voice comes out in a high pitched croak at my first attempt at speaking. I clear my throat and try again. "Bella, where did all this food come from?"

She looks over her shoulder at me like a deer caught in the headlights. Her creamy cheeks flush the delectable shade of pink I'm growing to love. She sets down the spatula and turns to face me.

“You, um,” she says timidly. “You didn’t have any food and I, uh, wanted to do something nice for you, because you are always going out of your way for me. I got enough to make breakfast today and tomorrow. I didn’t know what else you might like to eat, but I can cook while we’re here. I really don’t mind. Oh! And I made coffee, too.”

Did she walk to the store? It’s at least five miles away.

“How did you get to the store,” I ask with an edge of panic. I can’t even comprehend how horrible I would feel if something happened to her.

She hesitates before answering. “I took your car.”

I exhale loudly in relief, not realizing I had been holding my breath.

“I am so sorry, Edward. Nothing happened to it, I swear,” she says nervously as she holds her hands out in front of her. “I should have asked but you were sleeping so soundly this morning and after yesterday . . . I didn’t want to wake you up right away.”

Fuck, she thinks I’m upset with her.

“It’s okay,” I assure her. “You can use my car whenever you want.” Surprisingly, I find I actually mean it.

Bella looks at me like I’ve sprouted a second head, but she drops her arms and relaxes. “You’re not mad?” she asks.

“God, no. I thought you walked to the store. It damn near gave me a heart attack.”

“But, after what you said about people driving your car—”

“You mean more to me than the fucking car.”

Bella’s mouth drops open. It looks like my declaration surprises her as much as it does me. Obviously she’s more important than a pile of metal, I just didn’t expect to tell her in so many words. She’s about to say something, but before she does, the sizzling from the stove captures her attention. She quickly spins away from me to tend to the eggs.

If I didn't feel like enough of an asshole when I woke up, I do now. I'm ashamed of the way I reacted yesterday after getting the phone call from her friend, Alice. I was such a dick to Bella. For how hard I've tried not to frighten her since we've met, I really blew it last night. I knew she was afraid. I knew it by the way she recoiled away from me as I approached her, but for the life of me I could not get my temper under control. I insulted her and stormed off, essentially leaving her alone in my house all night. Hopefully she was all right by herself.

Still, after everything I did she was there to comfort me last night, and now she's making me breakfast. She even took my car, which she was clearly uncomfortable with, so I could sleep longer. I adore her for taking care of me. It's something I'm not used to; I've learned to live without it. In a way it makes me slightly uncomfortable, but I enjoy it because it's her.

At the same time I hate that she's doing it. It's the exact thing she told me yesterday that she didn't want to do anymore—take care of people. It's probably what she likes most about being away from home and I'm ruining it.

How am I supposed to take her to Seattle with me knowing her support is one of the things she's tired of giving? Maybe I am jumping to conclusions assuming she still wants to go, seeing what a prick I've been the last couple of days. I don't want to go there without her, but now I feel guilty bringing her with me. I know she said yes, because that's the type of caring, beautiful, perfect person she is, but I'm afraid deep inside she doesn't really want to go. If I bring her with now, not only will I feel like a prick, I'll feel like a guilty prick. Fuck.

I guess the only other option is to stay here. Fuck it. I don't need him. Not while I have Bella.

But my time with Bella is fleeting, and it would be a lie to say it doesn't make me sad.

I watch as she walks to the fridge and pulls out the orange juice before refilling my glass. She looks at me, her face colored with concern, and gives me a compassionate smile as she sets the juice back down in front me.

“Are you okay?” she asks.

“No,” I answer honestly. My evasion methods, along with Bella’s presence, were working well for my sanity, but after the late night phone call with Jane, the situation with Bella’s father, watching her cry, falling to pieces myself, three times, and that goddamned nightmare, I was anything but fucking okay.

“Bella, you probably don’t want me to, but I need to apologize for last night.”

“For what?” She looks at me curiously as she butters the toast.

“I am . . . an ass. I shouldn’t have blown up at you about the thing with your dad. I kept having these visions of police knocking down the door and arresting me.” I chuckle darkly at my stupidity. “It was stupid. I shouldn’t have screamed at you like a mad man either. Or told you to grow up. I didn’t mean it. And I’m sorry for abandoning you all night. You must have been uncomfortable and bored out of your mind.”

“Edward, you’re too hard on yourself. You didn’t abandon me, you went in the other room. I understand why it was upsetting to you, and yes, I do need to grow up,” she says matter-of-factly, almost as if she had anticipated what I was going to say. She takes a deep breath before asking her next question. “Was last night okay? What I did, I mean.”

“Well,” I begin after taking an exaggerated breath, “I have to admit it was kind of creepy that you were lurking around my room like that. Sitting on my bed, watching me sleep.”

Bella’s eyes widen so far it looks like they might pop out of head. I struggle to keep a straight face.

“It wasn’t like that! I was looking for something. A blanket—”

“You were going to steal my blanket?” I feigned disbelief.

“No! A pillow—”

“My pillow!”

“Er, I mean, I—” She stops stammering when I start laughing at her. “You jerk!” she reprimands while taking a playful swing at me over the countertop.

I laugh and duck out of the way but the lightened atmosphere doesn't linger for long.

“Yes. What you did was great.” I let out a sigh, struggling with what to say. “I'm not used to being . . . comforted? It was nice.” So fucking nice.

Bella smiles shyly at me. I watch as she serves the food on two plates. She slides one to me before taking a seat next to me at the breakfast bar.

“Thank you, Bella. I appreciate everything you've done for me,” I tell her sincerely. “I don't deserve it.”

“You're welcome,” she says as she quickly runs her hand across my back. “And you do.”

I'm playing with my television, trying to figure out what Bella did to fuck it up last night while she was fiddling with it. I get it back to normal as she walks in the front door.

“Thanks,” Bella says as she sets my cell phone on the small table next to the couch. When her hands are free she wraps her arms around her waist. Her stance is defeated and it is apparent by the red rims of her eyes that she has been crying.

I instinctively take a step forward and extend my arms to embrace her. I want to hold her and comfort her the way she has done for me these past two nights. As her body hunches further in on itself I stop, diverting the path my arms are taking and pulling my hands through my hair instead. It is obvious she doesn't want physical comfort from me, and it sends a pain through my chest. I can't help but

wonder if she's upset because she broke up with her boyfriend or because she didn't.

"Sorry to waste so many of your minutes. I tried to keep it short, but . . ."

"No worries," I assure her. "I don't care when or how often or how long. It's not like I use the damn thing." Bella nods but doesn't say anything else. "So how'd the, uh, phone call to the boyfriend go?" I ask shamelessly. I begin to feel bad as her face crinkles up, but I need to know.

"You mean the *ex*-boyfriend?" she retorts sarcastically. "It was excellent. Fantastic. Thanks for asking."

"I'm sorry." I put my best sympathetic face on. Inside I breathe a sigh of relief. I'm already going to feel guilty enough when I drag her into my bed tonight. I don't need the added stress of knowing it's someone else's girl in my arms. Honestly, it's not about her being a pretty girl who turns me on and is currently kind of living with me. I need that feeling back from last night. The feeling I got when her arms were around me; the feeling of being cared for. More importantly, of being cared for by Bella. Of course, my plans are contingent upon her level of comfort with that scenario. I really fucking hope she's up for it. "How can I make you feel better, Kiddo?"

Bella shrugs.

"Come on. What do you want? Anything."

"Well," she frowns, "I wanted a milkshake, and shockingly enough you have all the ingredients to make one, but I couldn't find a blender."

Fucking blender. Fucking Jane.

"Yeah, the blender is gone. Let's go get you a milkshake," I offer.

"That's okay. I don't really feel like going out right now," she sighs.

"How 'bout a drink?" I tease, because it looks like she could use one. Of course the minute her eyes light up I'm internally berating myself.

"What do you have?" she asks hopefully.

Fuck.

“I’m not sure if that’s a good idea,” I caution. Visions of an angry Chief of Police assault my mind and I’m reminded of the all too clear warning I was given last night.

Have you ever seen the damage a shot gun can do to a human body?

My body shivers involuntarily. He would definitely kill me for getting his underage daughter drunk in my home.

“What? Why?” She is baffled. “You just offered it.”

“Bella, you’re a minor.”

“So what?” she asks disgustedly. “Did you drink while you were underage?”

Fuck. She has a point.

“Yeah, but, Bella, your dad—”

“How is my dad gonna find out?” she scoffs.

I have no comeback. She’s right, of course. I drank at a much younger age than she is now, and her dad isn’t going to find out if she drinks under my roof. There is a slight difference though. I never drank alone with a member of the opposite sex who was old enough to supply me with alcohol. By default, I’m supposed to be the more responsible of the two of us. Obviously I’m not acting that way by entertaining this idea.

The aggravated look on Bella’s face is enough for me not to express my opinion further. She’ll do fine with a few drinks. I’ll cut her off before she consumes too much. Maybe it will be easier to get her in my bed tonight.

Wow, that sounds horrible out of context.

“Edward, what did my dad say to you?”

“He told me to take care of you,” I tell her honestly.

“Is that all?” she asks suspiciously.

“Yes.”

“Oh, come on. You expect me to believe that’s all he said? It felt like you were on the phone forever!”

“Among other things,” I confess.

“Did he threaten you?”

“No, nothing like that.” Yes, exactly like that.

Bella glares at me questioningly but drops the subject. I concede to her request for a drink and motion for her to follow me into the kitchen. She takes a seat at the counter as I retrieve the three bottles of booze I own from the cupboard above the fridge. I line them up in front of her before grabbing a can of Coke and filling a glass full of ice. When I set them down Bella looks at me apprehensively.

“What?” I ask.

“Spiced rum, whiskey, and brandy?” she asks warily.

“You can read,” I razz, still a little bit uncomfortable with this scenario. “Glad they’re still teaching that in school.”

“Don’t you have anything else?” she asks, completely ignoring my jab.

“Bella, I’m a man. I don’t have schnapps or wine coolers or whatever the hell else you girls drink.”

“You don’t even have vodka?” She looks completely deflated over the selection of liquor. I don’t bother hiding my smirk as I laugh softly at her.

“So you’ve done this before?” I ask amused. “No. I don’t even have vodka.”

Bella weighs her options carefully and begins to chew on her bottom lip. The vision of her teeth plunging into her plump lip, combined with the knowledge that she really isn’t as innocent as she originally seemed, causes my dick to stir. She looks up at me through her lashes with those big brown eyes and I am completely gone.

Her body felt so good against mine last night. She was so warm and soft. I clearly remember the curve of her hip as I ran my hand over it before clutching

her thin waist. My face had been right at the base of her neck and it would have been so easy to press my lips to her. It would have taken but a second for me to open my mouth and make a mark on her fair skin.

Goddamnit.

I slyly adjust myself, thankful I'm on the opposite side of the counter so Bella can't see the effect she is having on me. God, this is a horrible idea.

I watch as she slides one of the bottles toward her.

"Whisky? You sure about that, Kiddo?" I honestly didn't expect that to be her first choice. Bella nods firmly. "I think rum might go better with Coke," I offer.

"Oh, I don't want the Coke," she waves her hand dismissively.

No fucking way. She can't be serious, can she? Maybe she hasn't had whisky before. Images of her filling the cup up to the rim and asking for a straw flood my mind.

"Catching flies, Edward?" she asks smugly.

I snap my jaw closed, not realizing I let it drop open.

"Do you have a shot glass?"

"Uh . . . yeah." I shake off my shock and rummage through a drawer until I find one. I blow the dust out of it, but one dirty look from Bella has me washing it with soap. I hand her the clean shot glass and watch as she fills it with whisky. She takes a deep breath and shoots it in the most pathetic excuse for taking a shot I have ever seen. Her face wrinkles in disgust, and she sticks her tongue out and shakes her head as if it will somehow lessen the flavor.

"Ugh, that is awful, blagh!"

"Quit being fussy, Miss Can't-Be-Bothered-With-A-Mixer," I tease.

Bella eyes me in irritation. "What about you?" she asks accusingly.

"What about me?" She gestures toward the three bottles between us. "You want me to have a drink?" I ask in disbelief.

"No, I want you to take a shot."

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

“Come on,” she goads when I hesitate. “Quit being a pussy and put the Coke away.”

“A pussy?” Anything remotely dirty coming out of Bella’s mouth is a complete shock to me. And a complete turn on. My pride is telling me to take the shot. My practical side is telling me I’m an idiot. Getting Bella drunk is a bad idea. Getting drunk *with* Bella is a really, really bad idea.

My pride wins. I fill the shot glass. Bella wears a shit eating grin on her face.

“Just one,” I tell her.

“Just one,” she confirms.

I sigh and give her a pointed look before throwing back the shot.

“You stupid... cheating... liar!” Bella screams. In one fluidly drunken movement she sweeps the board game off the couch and onto the floor.

I’m laughing at her so hard my abs hurt. I keep clutching at my stomach, trying to offer support to my aching muscles. “Bella, I swear I didn’t cheat. Not unless you count slipping you extra money as cheating.”

She completely disregards my comment and points at me exaggeratedly. “You cheated! You snuck those hotels on the board when I wasn’t looking,” she accuses.

“Bella, I paid for every single one of my buildings.” Trying to reason with drunk people usually irritates the piss out of me, but the way Bella is acting all upset and tough only strikes me as entertaining. She makes such a cute angry drunk.

Cute, Masen? What the fuck?

“Bullshit! You’re the banker. The banker always cheats.” She tries standing up but sways and lands back on the couch. “Maybe you should put your . . . reading glasses on, Gramps. You know, the money is color coded. Orange equals . . . big!”

Bella grabs the stack of orange \$500 bills from the couch in front of me and tosses them on the floor as well. I try to stop laughing but I can’t. I should probably remind her that she “didn’t feel comfortable” taking my money every time I landed on one of her properties, but at the moment I can barely breathe let alone speak.

“You just don’t remember cheating because you’re drunk,” she says.

“*I’m* drunk? Oh my god, Kiddo, you are fucking killing me here! I need to go smoke.” I roll off the couch, still laughing, and grab my pack of cigarettes before stumbling out back. I light up and lean against the house for added support as my laughter slowly dies down.

I’m not sure how one shot turned into two, then three, then four, and then more—I think—but somehow it did. I’m sure I had a good reason for wanting to stop at one, but I can’t remember what that was anymore.

“Smoking’s bad for you, you know?” Bella pokes her head out of the door and calls to me. “It can kill you.” She starts to walk toward me, tripping and almost falling twice. I grab her elbow when she’s close enough and push her up against the house next to me.

Bella’s warning takes me by surprise. It’s not the first time someone has chided me for smoking, but it’s usually more along the lines of how disgusting of a habit it is or not liking the way I smell.

“Thanks for the lecture, Kiddo, but I don’t think anyone gives a shit about me.”

“I give a shit,” she states.

My fuzzy brain isn’t quite sure how to process her comment, but I think I like it.

“You honestly give a shit about my health? Or do you give a shit because you think I reek?”

Bella pushes herself off the wall. She grabs my arm and leans into me for what I assume is support. “I think you smell good.” Her voice comes out muffled because she’s talking into my chest. She inhales deeply, and I realize she’s attached herself to me so she can smell me.

Fuck, I really need to adjust again. Or maybe, if I turn to the side Bella’s standing at just a little—

“Can I try one?” she asks innocently.

“What? Bella, you just chastised me for smoking. You’re a walking contradiction.”

“Come on, I just wanna try,” she pleads with her innocent doe eyes.

“No,” I say with finality. “I’m not going to be responsible for you getting addicted to nicotine.”

“*You’re* a walking contradiction,” she slurs. “You’re already corrupting today’s youth with alcohol, now gimme!”

Before I know what’s happening, Bella snatches the cigarette out of my hands. “Bella, wait!”

Holding it up to her lips, she inhales deeply as she glares at me in defiance. A split second later she is doubled over and hacking loudly. I reach out and grab her waist so she doesn’t completely topple over. The cigarette falls forgotten onto the patio.

“Aw, Kiddo, you should really learn to respect your elders.”

I stand Bella up and walk her back into the house. She plops back onto the couch, and I get her a glass of water. It takes awhile for her to stop coughing. I sit silently next to her until she’s done. She guzzles the glass of water and trains her bloodshot gaze on me.

“You didn’t shave,” she says.

Well, hello, drunken ADD.

“Hasn’t really been on my mind.” Between being exhausted from driving, the kidnapping scare, my perpetual breakdowns, and Bella demanding my company this morning it really hasn’t been a top priority.

“But, you’ve been scratching your face all evening.”

“Huh, I guess I didn’t notice.”

“Can I touch it?” she breathes, sounding so fucking hot.

“What?” I laugh.

“I wanna touch it,” she repeats.

Oh my fucking god. Those words coming out of Bella’s mouth cause my dick to spring to full attention. The fact that she has no idea what she’s saying doesn’t hinder my arousal in the least. “You want to touch *it?*” I ask seductively while trying to stifle my laughter.

“Yes. It looks soft even though I know it’s not.”

Oh fuck yes! This is getting good.

“Mmm, Bella, *it’s* not soft. Trust me.” This is so much better than my “all the way” comment yesterday. Any minute now Bella is going to catch on to what she’s saying. I can’t wait for that moment. I bet I’ve never seen her face as red as it’s going to turn when she figures it out.

As Bella starts to crawl toward my end of the couch, I lie back and position myself in a way that would give her easy access if she actually were to go for my dick. I watch her come closer and my smile is so big it is physically painful. It’s not the only large, physically painful thing about me at the moment.

Bella places one hand on the inside of my upper thigh, and although I know her intended destination, my muscles still clench in anticipation. Her other hand lands clumsily in the center of my chest. When her first hand leaves my thigh I close my eyes and wait eagerly for her to touch my face. It’s not where I’d prefer her hands to be, but I’ll take whatever she is willing to give.

Unfortunately, Karma rears its ugly head again. Instead of feeling her delicate fingers caressing my face, I feel her knee meet my groin as she loses her balance and falls onto me. I groan loudly in pain as Bella quickly scrambles off me. I grab my crotch as my body instinctually curls forward into a protective ball.

“Oh my god, Edward, I’m so, so sorry!”

“It’s fine.” It is so not fucking fine.

“I’m sorry, I lost my balance. Oh no, I didn’t—not there—no, did I?” she rambles as her hands flutter helplessly over me.

“Yes, you did,” I wheeze. “It’s soft now.”

“Huh?”

I groan in displeasure once again before lying back on the couch. Bella is on top of me almost immediately. She apologizes once again before cupping my cheeks and planting a big wet kiss on my forehead. It probably would be a turn on if I wasn’t in so much goddamned pain right now.

She starts out tentatively, smoothing my five day outgrowth down lightly with her fingertips. She starts with my sideburns and slowly works across my cheeks, my upper lip, my chin, and down my neck, always going in the direction the hair grows. It feels fantastic and distracts me from the ache her knee left behind.

I’m still protectively cupping myself. Bella is straddling me, and she lets her full weight fall on my arms. It is uncomfortable, so I slowly pull my arms out from between us. She gasps quietly and sits up slightly as I do so. My hard on starts to return when I realize exactly which part of her body I made contact with.

“Woops,” I whisper.

Bella doesn’t move off of me. Not knowing what to do with my hands, I rest them on her thighs and wait for her next move. She slowly sits back down on top of me. I’m afraid to move in fear of her noticing the reaction I’m having to her proximity.

She moves her hands back to my face and her fingers retrace the circuit she previously made. She travels the path a few more times. Again it feels fucking fantastic and I allow my eyes to close. Soon she starts going against the hair, using her thumbs and palms.

Our bodies are lined up perfectly and obscene thoughts start forming in my mind. What I wouldn't give to be naked like this with her. To squeeze her hips and control the pace as she rides on top of me. To feel her hands all over me. There is so much heat radiating between us right now it's almost uncomfortable. Or maybe the discomfort is from my dick pointing at an awkward angle. I want to reach between us and adjust, maybe give myself a couple hard strokes while I'm down there, but there's no way I can do either of those things without alerting Bella to the situation.

Bella stops slowly massaging my face and starts to scratch with her nails. I hum in pleasure as she works the spot right under my jaw on each side and I tip my head back to allow her better access. The more aggressive way she's moving causes her body to shift on me ever so slightly; it feels fucking fantastic.

"Does this feel good?" she asks.

"You have no idea," I murmur.

"This is the spot you always scratch when your beard starts bothering you."

"Hmm," I muse, surprised she has paid enough attention to me to notice something so mundane. That's good, it shows she's a quick learner. I bet it wouldn't take long to teach her other ways I like to be touched.

Stop!

"Are you gonna shave soon?" she asks.

"Probably when I'm sober. Why, do I look bad?" I ask, only half joking. I would shave twice a day if Bella wanted me to.

“No, you always look really good,” she says. “I just really want to touch your face after you shave. Ever since our first night together I’ve been thinking about what it would feel like.”

Oh my god.

“I’ll shave whenever you want, just don’t stop what you’re doing.”

I begin to feel rather selfish for all the attention she’s doling out on me. Not to mention the pleasure I’m deriving from the way her body occasionally shifts on top of me and rubs against my hard on. Keeping my palms firmly planted on her thighs, I start tracing patterns on her leg with my fingertips. Hopefully it feels good without me being overtly forward about touching her.

Bella moves her hands to the back of my neck and into my hair. She scratches my scalp, similar to what she did last night but rougher this time.

“Mmmm.”

“Do you like the way this feels?” she asks uncertainly.

“Bella, everything you do feels amazing,” I praise.

“I like making you feel good,” she says innocently.

I can’t take it anymore.

“God, Bella, do you have any idea what you’re doing to me right now?” My voice comes out strained.

“Me?” she asks in confusion.

“Yes, you. The things you’re saying, the way you’re touching me, your body on top of me.” I have to make a conscious effort to keep my fingers from digging into her thighs. “I wish I could show you the effect you have on my body.”

“Show me,” she encourages seductively. I’m sure she’s not trying to be sexy, but damn, my drunken, horny mind wants to interpret it that way.

“I shouldn’t,” I moan.

“Why not?”

“Mmm, I don’t think you want me to, Kiddo,” I tell her seriously.

She sits up abruptly, pulling her hands from my hair. The sudden shift of her body amplifies the throbbing pulse of my hard on. “I do want you to,” she challenges.

I slowly drag my hands down to her knees and back up to her hips repeatedly. “I want to show you.” This is a bad idea. I know this is a bad idea. I just can’t stop when she’s looking at me like that.

“Do it.”

“Are you sure?” I ask, one last chance to stop before the damage is done.

“Please, Edward?”

I run my hands up and down her legs a few more times before getting a firm hold on her hips. I slide Bella farther up my body, positioning her right on top of the hard bulge in my pants, and press her down onto me.

She gasps, and her eyes widen as she stares into my eyes. I hold her to me tightly for a moment. When she makes no move to stop me I shift her body again, hitting just the right spot. I moan deeply, and Bella lets out a sharp breath.

I repeat the movement, this time bringing my hips up to meet her body. Her eyes flutter closed, and her mouth pops open. I begin to lift my hips in a moderate rhythm while moving her on top of me. I worry I’m being too rough, being separated by two layers of denim and numbed by alcohol, but Bella doesn’t appear uncomfortable.

The practical voice in my head is screaming for me to stop. It tells me I am being irresponsible and abusing Bella’s trust in me, not to mention she’s drunk.

But I’m drunk, too, and I don’t want to stop.

I reach my arm behind Bella and pull her so her body is flush with mine. In one swift movement I flip us over and lay us onto the floor gently. The freedom of being on top allows me a larger range of motion, and I thrust my hips against her, crying out her name without consciously deciding to. My lips meet the soft skin of her neck as I move against her again.

“Edward,” Bella says with distress. “Edward, stop!”

I immediately cease all movements. As I look into her eyes I realize she’s about to panic. Shit, I took it too far. I quickly lift onto all fours and bring my hand to cup her cheek.

“Are you okay?” I ask in alarm. Fuck, what the hell am I thinking?

“No, Edward, I’m gonna puke.”

I stand up at what seems like super-human speed and pull Bella to her feet. She takes off at a wobble toward the bathroom. I really, really hope she makes it in time.

Fuck.

chapter nine

Bella

"Hello?"
"Jake?"
"Bella!"

"Hi, Jake. How are you?" My voice shakes as I speak into the phone.

"I've been worried about you. Are you okay?" The worry is evident in his voice.

I feel awful for not calling him sooner.

"I'm fine."

"Don't say that. You always say that. I know you're not fine."

"I am, Jake. Really." I manage to steady my voice, so I sound convincing. After all, I really am fine.

"I'm so sorry for how things went down on Friday, Bella, but," Jake pauses to sigh loudly, *"where did you go?"*

"I shouldn't have left you like that. I feel horrible about it. I should have stayed and talked to you, but I just—"

“I wish you would have stayed,” he interrupts. *“I was worried about you all weekend. Look, I’m sorry for the way I acted. I miss you so much, Bella. You can go to school wherever you want; I promise not to harass you about it anymore. And I know we’re too young and not ready to get married. And I know how you feel about marriage in general. It was wrong of me to throw it at you like I did, but it doesn’t mean I don’t want to some day. When you think it’s something you’re ready for, let me know. We can talk about it and go from there. This is something we can get through. I know it is.”*

“Jake,” I sigh. Again, I struggle with how to let him off gently but decide against candy coating it. I know it will be easier and better in the long run if I just tell him the truth. There’s no sense in beating around the bush. “What I’m trying to tell you is I should have stayed that night and ended this.

“Jake, you are my best friend, but it never should have went further than that. I love you, but I’m not *in love* with you. I should have stopped our relationship from progressing a long time ago, but I was afraid of losing you. It was selfish and immature of me, and I regret stringing you along for so long.”

I take a deep breath before continuing.

“It’s over, Jake.”

There it is. Blunt and to the point. There is nothing but silence on the other end of the phone. I know he is hurting, and it’s my fault. Tears begin to spill from my eyes, leaving warm wet trails on my cheeks.

“Is there someone else?” His voice hardens as he asks.

“No,” I answer honestly, although a vision of Edward briefly flashes in my mind.

“It’s him, isn’t it?”

“Who?” I ask in confusion. Jake doesn’t know I’m with anyone.

“Charlie told me you’re with some boy from school,” he says harshly. *“How long have you two been together?”*

“It’s not like that,” I attempt to explain.

“Yeah, right. Why didn’t you just tell me about him?”

“I didn’t cheat on you.” My voice is heated. “Edward and I are just friends.”

“Edward?” Jake laughs without humor. *“I don’t buy it, Bella. We have a fight and you go running off to a guy. What am I supposed to think?”*

I don’t want Jake to believe I was unfaithful. He deserves to know the truth just as Edward deserves not to be my dirty little secret. I’m not sure if telling Jake will make things better or worse, but the saying “the truth will set you free” comes to mind. Hopefully there’s some validity behind the statement.

“Look, I don’t know Edward from school,” I sigh. “We met on Friday.” My admission is met with silence. “Jake, are you still there?”

“Friday? You mean, after”

“Yes. I met him after I left the house. We’ve been on the road. We just got to Chicago yester—”

“Chicago?” Jake bellows. *“You’re in Chicago with a guy you met,”* he pauses, *“five days ago?”*

“I—I thought Charlie told you,” I say completely dumbfounded. I assumed because Charlie told Jake I was with a “boy from school” he would have told him I was in Chicago as well. Charlie was giving me privacy. My heart warms with the realization.

“He didn’t tell me where you were! I assumed you were somewhere near Jacksonville. With someone you actually knew. Bella, how could you do something so stupid?” he yells.

“Because I wanted to, okay?” I retort just as angrily.

“He could hurt you. Or take advantage of you.”

“Yeah well, he hasn’t.”

“I don’t like this, Bella. I’m worried about your safety.”

“I don’t need you to protect me, Jake,” I tell him softly.

“No, you don’t need me,” he says solemnly. I hear him sniff through the phone.

Damn it. Can I go 24 hours without dealing with a crying man? Is it really too much to ask for?

“Friends?” I ask hoping to offer him solace.

“I can’t, Bella. I can’t be your friend after everything.”

So this is it. This is what our years of friendship come down to. I'm not naïve enough to think we could have stayed close friends and everything would have gone back to the way it was before. But the fact that he would rather not have me in his life at all hurts.

"If that's how you really feel, Jacob."

"It is."

I take a deep, shaky breath as fresh tears fall.

"I should probably go," he says. *"My dad needs some help out back."*

"Okay."

"I'm sorry I wasn't enough for you, Bella," he says with a bitterly undertone to his voice.

I struggle to find something else to say as I weep into the phone, but it's too late; he already hung up.

I wake up in confusion. Where am I? My head is on something soft, but my body is on something cold and hard. As my eyes flutter open I focus on the form in front of me. It's a toilet. Oh, I'm on the bathroom floor. That explains the cold, hard surface. I'm covered in a blanket, and there's a pillow here. Edward must have left them with me.

I sit up slowly. My head is pounding. There is a soft glow from a nightlight. I squint my eyes and look around the bathroom. Edward's bathroom. I rack my brain trying to remember how I got here. I vaguely remember making it to a toilet before puking my guts out, but in my foggy memory I envision the guest bathroom.

I remember Edward picking me up at one point and me demanding he put me back down, because I wasn't done purging the alcohol from my system. I vaguely recall his presence in the room. He was wiping the hair off my face and kept touching my shoulders and back. The room was spinning, and his touch, soft as it felt, was too much for my senses. I shooed him away even though I felt horrible doing it, knowing he just wanted to help.

The room isn't spinning anymore, but I am slightly dizzy as I stand up. My toothbrush is next to the sink along with a black, ribbed men's tank top, a glass of water, and a bag with the feminine products I bought. Edward must have brought these in here for me as well.

The first thing I do is brush the fuzzy sweaters off my teeth. Then I brush again because the first round didn't quite get the crappy taste out of my mouth. I pull off my jeans—I am *not* sleeping in them two nights in a row—and remove my shirt. My fingers numbly fumble with my bra for a few seconds before getting it unclasped. It falls to the floor among my other discarded clothes.

I really want to take a shower, but the longer I stand, the harder my head starts to pound. All I want to do is lie down again. I pull on Edward's shirt and walk out of the bathroom, leaving everything else to deal with later. I don't care about any of it right now. I don't even care that I'm not wearing bottoms.

"How are you feeling?" Edwards voice softly cuts through the silence.

"Still a little drunk," I slur.

"Come here," he beckons. I can see his outstretched arm as my vision adjusts to the darkness. I make my way to the side of his bed. "Drink this," he says, handing me a glass of water from the nightstand.

"You already left water for me in the bathroom."

"Did you drink it?"

"No," I admit.

"Then drink this," he demands.

I do as I'm told even though I'm not thirsty. When I drink as much as I can stomach, I set the glass down. Edward's fingers gently trail down my arm until they wrap lightly around my hand.

"Come here," he whispers and gently tugs my arm.

Even though Edward is being careful, I fall ungracefully onto the bed before rolling myself onto my back. He pulls the fluffy comforter over me. His arm snakes around my waist, and he slides me tightly along side of him. The pressure of his arm causes my stomach to flip, and a wave of nausea rolls over me.

“Edward, please don’t touch me.” Before I can finish the sentence his arm is off me, and he moves to put space between us. I close my eyes and take deep breathes in an attempt to ward off the feeling of impending sickness.

“Should I leave?” he asks quietly.

“Ugh, no. I’m not kicking you out of your own bed,” I groan. If anything, I’m going to leave. The floor doesn’t bounce or wiggle around.

“I don’t want to make you uncomfortable,” he says.

Something about the tone of his voice is off. I slowly turn my head to the side and attempt to focus on him through the darkness. His expression is guarded, but I don’t miss the pain that briefly flashes in his eyes.

“What’s wrong?” I ask him.

He smiles at me, but it is sad. It’s the same smile I’ve seen on and off since we’ve been together. “I’m worried I’ve made things awkward,” he says.

“Why would things be awkward?” I ask curtly. I don’t want to have to be thinking right now. My head hurts, my brain is in slow motion, and now I have to figure out what the heck Edward is talking about. All I want to do is pass out again.

“Because of tonight,” he answers and shifts uncomfortably. “On the couch.” He says it like a question and looks at me expectantly.

The couch? Oh, the couch!

The heat rises in my face as I blush at the memory, but the sudden increase in blood flow only causes my head to pound harder. I throw my hands over my face. Party out of embarrassment, but mostly in hopes that the pressure on the outside of my head will stop the throbbing going on inside.

It doesn’t.

“I’ll keep my hands to myself,” he says, barely audible.

“No, Edward, that’s not it,” I assure him. “It’s just . . . my head hurts and I’m dizzy and my stomach is still upset. It’s not you.”

“We’re okay then?” he questions after a moment.

“Yes, we’re fine,” I reply.

Edward exhales loudly, sounding like something between a laugh and a sigh. “And what happened tonight, that was okay, too?”

Argh!

“Edward, please, I can’t talk right now. Will you please let me go to sleep?” I whine while reaching down and giving his hand a squeeze. Hopefully it assures him that everything is fine, because I’m getting really sick of the way my voice is echoing in my head.

“Of course,” he whispers as he sandwiches my hand between his.

Edward’s words swirl in my head as I try to fall asleep. I realize he kept using the word “tonight.”

“Edward?”

“Yes?”

“What time is it?”

“I can’t see the clock without squishing you but I’m sure it’s after midnight by now.”

“Is that it? I thought it was later. It feels like I was passed out forever.”

“You were.” He chuckles. “We just had an early start.”

“Yeah, I guess we did.”

“Edward?” I ask again after a few minutes.

“Hmm?”

“You’re not planning on leaving tomorrow, are you?” I know I’ve got a good chunk of time to sleep this off. Still, waking up and hopping in a car first thing in the morning doesn’t sound appealing.

“Mmm, no. Go to sleep, Kiddo,” he says as he starts tracing light circles on the inside of my arm.

Edward’s touch is soothing. I sigh gratefully and tilt my head toward him, finding comfort in being closer to him even if it is only by a couple of inches. As if he can read my mind, he slowly shifts closer to me and lays his head on my pillow, careful to not make contact with anything other than his fingertips. I concentrate on the way his breath tickles my hair as I fall asleep.

I wake up to a feather light touch against my shoulder. My eyes open, and I squint from the morning light filtering into the room. Edward is lying next to me

in the same position we fell asleep in. His hair is tickling me as he brushes his lips and nose back and forth across my upper arm. I can't help but crack a smile at the blissful expression on his face.

"What are you doing?" I laugh quietly.

Edward looks up at me and smiles sheepishly at being caught. He doesn't say anything but begins sweeping his chin in a circle around my bare shoulder.

"Edward, what are you doing?" I ask again, this time more baffled than entertained.

Again he doesn't answer, instead rubbing his face exaggeratedly up and down my arm. His skin feels soft and smooth against mine, and after a few more passes, I figure out why.

"You shaved!"

He wiggles his eyebrows expectantly as he closes the small gap between our faces. For a moment I think he's going to kiss me, and I internally cringe at what my mouth tastes like right now. My fears are in vain, because Edward stops shy of meeting my lips and looks at me expectantly. I suddenly remember what I admitted last night and bring my hand up to his cheek.

Once my fingers make contact with him, he rests his head on my shoulder and presses his face into my neck. I trace his jaw and caress his smooth cheek before running my fingers over his sideburns and into his hair.

"When did you shave?" I ask.

"Last night while you were passed out on the floor," he replies. I can hear the smile in his voice.

"Oh."

Images from last night begin to filter through my head. I remember sitting on Edward, his arm brushing between my legs, and the way he gripped my hips as he pushed and pulled my body against his. I have perfect recollection of the way he felt beneath me as he rocked his hips into me. I liked it, it felt good. I'm pretty sure I even moaned a few times. The memory makes me blush, and I'm thankful Edward isn't in a position to notice. My memory starts to get fuzzy after that. I think he ended up on top of me, but the memory is choppy just like my time in the bathroom. Of which—

“Did I really pass out in your bathroom? I could have sworn I was in the other one.”

“You were.” He hesitates before continuing. “I tried to carry you to bed, but you put up a fuss and threatened to puke on me. I brought you in here so I could keep an eye on you.”

“Thanks,” I tell him.

“Anytime,” he replies.

It doesn't seem like Edward is in any hurry to get out of bed, but I'm not going to lie here next to him and talk without brushing my teeth again. Besides, my body has processed the water he forced me to drink, and now I have to pee really bad. I excuse myself from the bed. Edward reluctantly moves from my shoulder after I assure him I'll come right back.

My clothes are still in a heap on the bathroom floor, and I kick them into the corner. I blush as I take in my appearance in the mirror. The top I'm wearing hugs my curves and doesn't leave much to the imagination. It is also bunched up above my hips, giving a full view of the bikini underwear I have on. Did Edward leave this out for me because he wanted to see me like this?

All week, I've been trying not to think about the crush I have on Edward because I assumed it was one-sided. Now, I'm not so sure. It was exciting to be able to elicit that reaction from him last night. At the time I was shocked. I honestly didn't think anything I ever did would have that effect on him. I feel a smile grace my lips. Maybe I'm more than just a kid to him after all.

Just as quickly my smile fades. Edward's a man. Most likely an experienced man. We had been drinking. Maybe he doesn't care who he's with. Maybe he took advantage of the convenience of the situation. I was a female in the right place at the right time. What if his reaction was simply instinctual?

He has to care about me. I refuse to believe he was just using me for pleasure yesterday. Besides, if he didn't care, he would have just left me in the other bathroom. Instead he carried me into his bathroom to watch over me, made sure I was comfortable even after I passed out, and forced me to drink water. He even set out my toothbrush and tampons for crying out loud!

Oh my gosh, my tampons. It didn't even cross my mind last night that I had my period. I had no intentions of stopping him, and it would have been *so* embarrassing if things had gone further. He obviously knows it's that time of the month for me. I wonder if he thought about it last night. How far would he have gone if I hadn't gotten sick?

I wonder if he wants to do it again.

I assume he does. It's the only explanation for why Edward has been so touchy feely all night. Other than the two times I comforted him and the drunken . . . Couchgate, we have never had much physical contact.

Suddenly, I'm anxious to get back into bed with him. I want to see if he is acting the same way and how I really feel about it now that my mind is clear. I quickly brush my teeth, twice again, and down the glass of water still in the bathroom. It tastes stale, but at this point I'm too parched to care.

Edward pulls back the covers and pats the spot next to him as I exit the bathroom. I feel myself blush again as his eyes travel over my body, knowing exactly what he's seeing. I slide in the bed quickly, and he pulls the covers up to my neck.

"How are you feeling this morning?" he asks.

"Fine," I assure him. "I'm a little tired still, and I don't really feel like moving, but I think I'm done being sick."

"Good." He smiles. "Do you want me to make breakfast?"

"Ick, no. I'm not ready for food yet."

"You should probably drink something."

"I drank some water already," I say as I roll my eyes at him. I almost follow it up with a crack about him acting like my dad, but I don't feel like starting our normal banter this morning. Mainly because I don't want to provoke him to call me Kiddo right now.

Edward doesn't press the issue further. He sidles up next to me, nuzzling his face into the crook of my neck and slinking his arm across my body. He hums against me. The vibrations send a tremble down my spine.

"You okay?" he asks.

"Mm-hm."

“Good.”

Okay is an understatement. The way Edward’s body is wrapped around me sends butterflies through my stomach. I am engulfed by the weight of his body and the smell of his hair. His skin is hot on my bare shoulder and neck. It’s intimate in a way I’ve never experienced before.

“Do you want to get out of bed?” he asks.

“No,” I protest.

“Do you want me to get out of bed?”

“No.”

“Good,” he replies smugly.

Edward’s lips pucker against my top of my shoulder. I stop breathing at the same time his entire body tenses up. He completes the kiss and laughs under his breath while shaking his head against me. I’m pretty sure the kiss was impromptu and not premeditated. The pounding of my heart is echoed by the thumping of Edward’s against my arm. It feels nice. All of it.

Minutes pass as we lie wrapped up in each other. Bravely, I pull out my arm that has been awkwardly smashed between us and wrap it around him. He sighs as his body melts further into mine.

“Is there something specific you needed to come home for?” I ask.

Edward exhales heavily against my skin, sending another shiver through me. “Just some unfinished business I need to attend to.”

“Oh.” Well *that* explains everything. “Then we’re going to Seattle?”

“Actually,” he begins cautiously, “about that, I don’t think I really want to go to Seattle anymore.”

“Really? How come?” I can tell going there is something Edward is apprehensive about, but finding long lost family seems important.

“I don’t want to anymore. I don’t think it’s a good idea.” His tone is clipped.

“Oh.”

“I’d like you to stay here with me,” he gushes quickly. “I mean, I can bring you home, too, if you’d like, but I think, maybe, we could have a lot of fun here for the summer. Or at least for a little while. You can have the other bedroom, then you’ll

have some privacy. I'll get you a bed and a dresser for in there and a TV if you want one."

My heart swells with the knowledge that Edward doesn't want our time together to come to an end, but staying here with him doesn't seem right. I can't help but feel my presence is keeping him from what he originally set out to do. And I really, really don't want him to spend money because of me.

"You can't buy me a bed," I tell him. "Or anything else. It's not right."

"Then don't think of it as yours. It's a pathetic excuse for a guest room. It needs a bed. You can help me pick some stuff out for it." As much as I'd love to stay with Edward for the summer, something about the situation is off. I have the nagging feeling there is something he's not telling me. "What do you say?" he asks nervously as his arm tightens around me infinitesimally.

"Can I think about it?"

"Of course," he says, giving me a tight squeeze this time.

The way Edward is clinging to me strikes me as odd. It seems so out of character. I'm not sure how to pinpoint exactly what made him instigate our sudden closeness.

"Edward, are you all right?"

"Yes, why?"

"This is just," I gently tap his back so he knows what I'm referring to, "different for us."

Edward raises himself up on his elbow and looks at me. His green eyes burn into mine, hypnotizing me, disarming me. His expression is insecure and childlike. I watch his throat bob as he swallows. He takes a ragged breath before speaking. "Is this not okay?"

"It's fine, it's great, it's better than great." I trip over my words.

Edward exhales and his face becomes unreadable. "But?"

"But?" I repeat. "There's no but."

"Oh," he whispers and furrows his brow. He presses his palm to my cheek and leans his head in until our foreheads are touching. I brace myself for a kiss, but once again, it doesn't come.

Edward nestles his face back into my neck and slides his hand down until his long fingers wrap delicately around my throat. He gently caresses the column of my neck with his thumb. I drag my fingers into his hair and massage his scalp as an attempt to lessen the tension that has returned to his body. He whimpers softly, so softly I wouldn't have noticed if his lips weren't so close to my ear.

Suddenly I recall something he mentioned yesterday. "Edward, yesterday you said something about not being used to being comforted."

"You remember that, huh?" he mumbles into my neck.

"What did you mean by that?"

"I don't know." He evades the question.

"Is there something you want to talk about?" He shakes his head in response. "Come on, Edward. We've been together almost a week. I know something's bothering you, now spill the beans."

He sighs. "Are you sure?" he asks skeptically.

"I wouldn't have asked if I wasn't."

"I want to tell you, but I feel bad."

"About what?"

"I don't want to burden you with my bullshit."

"It's not a burden. I want to know," I reassure him.

"I'll tell you if you keep doing that."

"What, this?" I ask as I scratch his head exaggeratedly.

"Mm-hm."

"Deal. Talk."

Edward slides his hand from my neck down to my waist and starts kneading absentmindedly. He takes a deep breath and moans loudly. "I don't know where to begin," he admits.

"Tell me about not being comforted."

"Uhh," he groans. "I don't want to start there."

"Okay, tell me about why we're in Chicago," I suggest.

"I don't want to start there either," he complains.

"Edward, you have to start somewhere." I giggle. His only response is a couple of fake cries into my neck. "Tell me who's in Seattle," I urge.

“My father,” he sighs.

He must be referring to his birth father since he already told me his adoptive father passed away. “Have you met him before?”

“No.”

“Does he know about you?”

“I don’t know.”

“How did you find him?”

“I haven’t.”

Getting answers from Edward is like squeezing blood out of a turnip. I keep prompting him with questions, desperately hoping he’ll take control of the conversation, but he doesn’t. I try not to be frustrated with him, but it’s proving difficult. “If you don’t want to talk it’s okay. I won’t force you.”

“I want to talk,” he says quickly. “I have his name, and I know he lived in Seattle twenty-seven years ago, but I haven’t been able to find him. I thought I’d have better luck if I went there and checked out local resources.”

“But now you’re not going?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Okay, this is going to sound sort of creepy, so please don’t take it the wrong way.” If my curiosity wasn’t piqued before, it is now. I don’t say anything as I wait for him to continue. “My only reason for wanting to find him was because I wanted to feel like I belonged. I wanted to feel accepted and cared for, but I don’t need him for that anymore, because you make me feel that way,” he timidly finishes.

Edward’s confession takes me completely by surprise. It was exactly what I feared. I am getting in the way of him finding his birth father.

“Edward, you can’t rely on me like that.” He struggles to sit up again, but I hold him firmly against me. I don’t think I can bear to look into his eyes right now. He doesn’t fight against me, and his body quickly relaxes. I can feel his face scrunch up and he swallows thickly. “You have to go,” I implore. “I can’t fill that void for you.”

“Bella, please,” he begs.

“Edward, I have to leave—”

“No,” he panics, gripping me tighter.

“Ouch!” He loosens his grip with a quick apology. I don’t want to think about being separated from him either, but it’s the reality of our situation. “I’m not leaving right now, but eventually I will. You’re just going to need the validation all over again.”

“Then I’ll go later. After you’re gone.”

“I don’t think you should wait,” I warn him cautiously. “You’re already home. I’m worried you won’t go.”

“I’m terrified, Bella,” he confides. “What if I can’t find him? What if he doesn’t want anything to do with me?”

“At least you’ll know. Isn’t it better to know?” I ask. “If things don’t work out you can move on. It won’t be constantly eating away at you.”

“What do I do if he turns me away?”

“You hold your head high and you leave. I won’t let you stay here because of me, Edward. Besides, if you do it now instead of waiting, I will be there for you.”

“I’d like that,” he admits.

“Me too.”

We lie in silence for a while. Edward is so still I would think he is sleeping if it weren’t for his eyelashes feathering across my neck every time he blinks. I laugh when a loud growl comes from his stomach.

“Do you want to get up and eat something?” I ask him.

“Not yet.”

“Will you tell me more?”

“What do you want to know?” he asks apprehensively.

“Tell me about your adoptive family.”

Edward tightens his grasp on me. I squeal as he unexpectedly flips me on the other side of him. He positions us so we are facing each other. I miss having half my body covered by his, but being able to see his face is a nice alternative.

“I was getting sore.” He shrugs.

“Arthritis setting in, Gramps?” I can’t resist and internally shrug.

A smile is Edward's only reply. He reaches his hand up and quickly brushes the backs of his fingers across my cheek. He tugs my bottom lip with his thumb before trailing his hand down my arm, finding my hand, and threading our fingers together.

"My *parents*," Edward scoffs, "were in their forties when I was . . . adopted. I don't have many fond memories of my childhood other than the brief amount of time I spent with my sister when I was younger." His lips start to curve up, but his smile falters and he frowns.

"Tell me about your sister," I request.

"We were separated by sixteen years. I always assumed I was an 'oops' baby because of the age difference. That and because my parents never seemed to want me. They had gone to college, worked hard to establish their careers, raised a biological daughter, in that order, and wanted to retire early. They didn't want me." His eyes sadden when he says it.

"Of course they wanted you. They adopted you," I attempt to comfort him.

"Yeah, well . . . They never acted like they wanted me. My sister would babysit me all the time when I was little. She would always make time for me, play with me. When I was six she graduated from college and moved out of the house. I never saw her much after that. When I did, it was weird. It was like . . . she didn't know how to act around me anymore.

"My father was always cold toward me. My mother was kind but distant. They were pretty well off, so there was usually a nanny around to take care of me. No one ever really hugged me or cuddled me. After my sister left, no one even tucked me into bed. I had nightmares all the time. I would wake up in the dark, terrified and screaming. It happened so often they eventually stopped coming when I cried out at night. All I wanted was for someone to come hold me and stay with me, but it was apparently too much for a kid to ask for.

"Sometimes, when I'm stressed out, I have nightmares. That's what happened the other night. Usually it's not a big deal. I just go back to sleep like I always do. But you were there. I can't remember the last time someone was there for me. I just cracked."

"What was it about? The nightmare."

“They’re always the same,” he says, his eyes unfocused and empty. “I’m alone in a vast nothingness. That’s not the worst part, though. The worst part is watching the people I love walking away from me. My parents, my sister, Jane, my biological father. I can’t see their faces, just their backs. Always walking away. Always out of my reach.

“The other night, it was you.” His eyes suddenly focus on me in trepidation. “Please, Bella, please don’t forsake me like everyone else in my life.”

“I won’t,” I promise in a shaky whisper. I realize my eyes are clouded with tears from his story, but I am flattered he subconsciously groups me in with the people he loves.

“I mean it, Bella,” he says frantically. “I know you need to go home, but please don’t turn your back on me.”

“I couldn’t do that to you, Edward. I know it sounds crazy, because we’ve known each other less than a week, but you mean a lot to me.”

“It’s not crazy,” he assures me. “It’s not crazy.”

He brings our joined hands to his lips and places a kiss on my knuckles. He releases my hand and pulls me into a tight hug. I wrap my arms around him firmly. He is shaking slightly. I want him to tell me more, but I can tell he has a hard time talking about his past. A little break couldn’t hurt anything.

“Can I still take you up on that breakfast offer?” I ask in a playful tone.

“Anything for you, Kiddo.” The smile in his voice is evident.

We crawl off the bed. I put on my jeans before Edward slips in the bathroom. As I walk into the living room I am confronted by our game of Monopoly scattered across the floor. Blood immediately pools in my face as I’m assaulted with memories of yesterday afternoon.

I turn as Edward walks into the room. He regards me curiously for a moment before looking down at the mess. His smirks as he walks up to me and pinches my cheek gently.

“I love that about you,” he says before turning and walking into the kitchen.

chapter ten

Edward

I want to make Bella breakfast. Well, brunch actually, but I have no idea what I'm doing. I take out all the ingredients she was using yesterday and stare at it all. I scratch my head and ponder what to do with it. Then I stare some more.

It doesn't take long for her to figure out my game. She all but shoves me out of the way. I pout, and she grants me permission to make the toast.

I burn the first batch.

I have never possessed much talent in the kitchen, but I've never been interested in learning until now. No one taught me how to cook while I was growing up. Once I was on my own I relied on takeout and boxed or frozen foods. It's not the healthiest, and I know better, but it's quick and easy. Fortunately I've been blessed with a fast metabolism.

“Will you teach me how to cook?” I ask Bella as we sit down to eat at the table.

“That’s kind of broad, don’t you think? I’m not sure you have that much time left, Gramps,” she quips.

I attempt to give her the stink eye but end up laughing instead. “I want to make you dinner before we have to leave.” I look at Bella just in time to watch the color creep into her cheeks.

“An entire dinner? You’re setting the bar pretty high,” she teases.

“Well, I was thinking, maybe, you could supervise and tell me what to do?”

“Like, boss you around? I think I’d like that.” She smiles. “But only if there’s a backup plan. After seeing what you did to the toast I’m not sure I trust eating something you made.”

“No way! Where’s the fun in planning ahead? Just think of where we’d be if we actually had a game plan,” I tell her with a wink just to see if I can get her to blush some more.

She does.

“I wouldn’t be here,” she says and suddenly stares at something invisible on the table.

“Well, I’m glad you are.” I grin.

“Do you mean that?” Bella asks uncertainly.

I don’t understand her sudden change in mood. “Of course I do. Why wouldn’t I?”

“I kind of barged in on your life,” she explains, “and I ask a lot of intrusive questions.”

“Nonsense.” I wave my hand dismissively. “You can ask as many questions as you want.”

“Thanks for talking to me this morning.” She peeks shyly at me through the corner of her eye. “I could tell it was hard for you.”

“It was,” I agree, “but I want you to know me.” There’s still so much I want to tell her. We haven’t even scratched the surface yet.

“Will you tell me more?” she asks hopefully.

“Later, okay?”

“Okay,” she agrees.

Bella decides she wants me to prepare steak and potatoes for dinner. I don’t think she necessarily wants to eat steak. I think she wants me to learn because “every guy needs to know how to cook a good steak.”

Even though she still has a hangover I manage to drag her with me to the grocery store. She doesn’t put up too much of a fuss since she has a fair idea of how inefficient I am based on the contents of my kitchen.

Bella assigns me the duty of pushing the cart as she peruses the aisles. I watch her as she glides through the store effortlessly. It’s obvious this is something she’s quite comfortable doing.

I could get used to having Bella in my life. I would gladly follow her around with a grocery cart every week. I’d learn to make all of her favorite foods. I’d laugh when she cracks jokes at my expense. I would hold her every night.

Hell, I *am* used to having Bella in my life.

I dread the day she leaves me even more than the uncertainty that comes with tracking down my father. I push it to the back of my mind; I can’t think about it right now. I am going to make the most of the time we have together.

Last night was fun. I didn’t want to stop, but it’s probably a good thing Bella got sick when she did. I don’t want her to think I’m only interested in her body. I mean, I want her body, but I want the rest of her, too.

While I was sobering up I had decided to hold off on getting physical with her. I think it’s best to wait for Bella to make the next move. I’m sure she’s not as

naïve and innocent as I make her out to be in my head, but I still don't want to pressure her into anything. I want to make sure she's ready before we take our relationship to the next level.

If you can even call what we have a relationship.

I want her—all of her—but I'll take whatever she's comfortable giving me. I want to leave her with happy memories of our time together. I don't want her to regret anything or feel like she wasted her time with me.

After finishing in the grocery store Bella asks if I'll bring her to a mall. She's not pleased at the thought of shopping with a hangover, but she insists going another day without a better selection of clothing will drive her crazy. I tag along behind her and offer to hold her purse while she shops. Her eyes are alight with curiosity, but she doesn't ask why. I'm glad she doesn't because I wouldn't tell her the truth if she did.

Yes, carrying a purse makes me feel like a fucking pussy.

I act as her pack mule, not only holding her purse but everything else she thinks she's going to buy. She chucks the items at me as she picks them out and laughs as I fumble around trying to hold everything—khaki shorts, jeans, sandals, and more shirts. She blushes when we enter the lingerie department.

“Um, don't feel obligated to follow me around,” she says as she turns to me.

“I don't mind.” I smirk.

“Isn't there anything you want to look at while we're here?” she asks hopefully.

“Nah. I don't want to neglect my duties.” I hold up the pile of clothes in my arms.

Bella looks away uneasily and chews on her lip. Right now there's nothing I want to do more than watch her browse in this department, but I don't want my presence to make her uncomfortable. It's probably a good idea to leave her alone

here anyway. If I know what Bella has on under her clothes it will only turn me on. There's only one thing I like doing when I get hard, and it isn't shopping.

“Actually, there is something I need,” I tell her. “Meet me at the register?”

She nods and we part ways. I walk around aimlessly until I find the pajama section or sleepwear or lounge clothes or whatever the hell they name these departments. As much as I've enjoyed Bella sleeping in my shirts, I think she'd be more comfortable if she had something of her own to lie around in. Not to mention she would look sexy as hell in something that actually fit her. She was a vision of innocence in my too large t-shirt and downright hot wearing the tank top last night. I left it in the bathroom for her hoping I would get to see more of her body, but even though I loved looking at her curves and it afforded me a nice view of her legs and cotton panties, I could tell she was uncomfortable being that exposed.

I bypass the really risqué stuff and even shy away from the night gowns. I don't want to give Bella the wrong impression. Well, it would be the right impression, but I don't want her to interpret it the wrong way.

I select a couple different tank top and shorts sets. They are a bit on the expensive side, but once I touch them I can't resist. Although now I probably won't be able to refrain from touching her. The price doesn't matter; Bella's not paying anyway. There are bathrobes in the same material, so I grab one of those too. I don't want her to be cold if she wears the skimpy excuse for pajamas I picked out. Not to mention it would be hot as fuck if she surprises me by coming to bed wearing nothing underneath.

I shake my head to clear the visual and pull my mind out of the gutter.

As I navigate through the racks I find pajama pants with goofy looking cartoon turtles on them. I chuckle as I think about how much she likes Eddie. I find a pair in her size and hope she sees the humor in them too.

Bella is waiting by the register by the time I meet up with her. “What are those?” she asks apprehensively as she eyeballs the new additions to the pile I’m carrying.

“Just a few more things I thought you might like.” I shrug.

“Edward, I can’t afford all that,” she says in a hushed voice.

“You don’t have to. I’m paying,” I state.

“Edward, no!”

“Hey, who says these are for you?” I tease. “Maybe I’m buying these for guests. You don’t have to wear them if you’re not comfortable with it.” I toss the items onto the counter knowing she won’t argue.

“Fine. Can I have my purse, please?” she asks in irritation.

“Nope.”

Her mouth pops open as I tug the bra and pile of panties out of her hands and throw them on top of the mountain of clothing. It is extremely hard not to snoop through what she picked out, but somehow I manage.

“Wait, you’re paying for all of it? Edward, you can’t!”

“Sure I can.” I hand over my credit card to the cashier before giving Bella her purse back.

“You are not buying my . . . underwear,” she hisses.

“Sign here please, sir.” The cashier hands me a pen.

“I think I just did,” I whisper into Bella’s ear before signing the receipt.

She abruptly turns and storms away from me.

“Wait, Bella,” I call after her, trying not to laugh at the way she stomps out of the store. I quickly shove my wallet back into my pocket and gather the bags before heading after her. Her pace quickens as I start to catch up. “Bella, stop,” I plead.

She marches all the way to the car without acknowledging me but is forced to standing there since I didn’t unlock the door.

“Bella,” I sigh.

“You can’t spend money on me like that,” she says, still facing away from me. “You can’t buy me stuff.”

“I want to spend it on you. Why do you have an issue with it?” I ask softly. If she tells me why she thinks it’s bad I’ll find a way to make her okay with it. I want to spoil her while she’s with me.

“Because . . .” she responds. “Because I can’t return the favor.”

I drop the bags to the pavement and turn Bella toward me. She doesn’t look at me, but I can see her eyes swimming with tears. I cup her cheeks and press my forehead into hers as I close my eyes. “Do you honestly think I want to buy you things to get something in return?”

Bella hesitates before shaking her head.

“I swear to you I don’t expect anything in return. Monetary or otherwise,” I stress. “I only want to make you happy which, apparently, is not working.” I laugh humorlessly and open my eyes. Bella is looking up at me with a troubled expression. It takes every ounce of self control I have not to lean in and kiss the worry right off her face. “Do you believe me?” I ask.

“Yes,” she answers quietly.

“Then, what is it, really? Please tell me.”

“I feel bad,” she admits.

“Why?” I don’t understand why she feels bad about receiving a gift.

“Because you’re not working, and you have important things to pay for like a house and a car, and you probably still have student loans. I don’t want you to endure a hardship because of me.”

I could tell Bella the truth but I don’t feel like talking about it right here. Not only that, but there’s really no tactful way to come out and explain it.

Well, Bella, the only family I’ve ever known is dead. They didn’t give me the time of day while they were alive, because their social status and careers were too

important. They never got the chance to spend their money before they died and now it's all mine. Joke's on them. Care to help me burn through it?

"Bella, do you trust me?" I ask sincerely.

"Yes," she answers, this time without hesitation.

"Then please believe me when I tell you there's nothing to worry about."

"But—"

"No buts. I own my home. I paid cash for my car. I don't have any student loans. The only thing I struggle with is buying groceries, and it has *nothing* to do with money. I just want to make you happy," I tell her honestly.

"You already do," she says. "You don't have to buy me stuff in order to do that."

"Then consider it an added benefit." In an attempt to lighten the mood I lean in and place a wet kiss on the forehead much like she did to me in her drunken state last night. She giggles in response. "Besides, it makes me happy," I tell her as I open the passenger door. "Are we okay?" Bella nods and gives me a demure smile. "Good. Now get in. I believe you have some bossing around to do."

"Quit whining like a little girl," Bella chastises me.

"I just don't understand why you won't help me," I gripe. She literally has not lifted a finger since I started my attempt at making dinner. I couldn't even get her to help chop vegetables or wash potatoes.

"I'm a supervisor not a doer. You didn't ask me to help you this morning; you asked me to teach you. This is me teaching. Now suck it up, Masen!"

I glare at her angrily, causing her to giggle. She thinks I'm kidding, but honestly I am a little frustrated. I know for a fact that a microwave can cook a potato a hell of a lot faster than an oven. We would be eating already if she didn't

insist on an “authentic” baked potato. We haven’t eaten since our late breakfast this morning, and I’m fucking hungry.

“Why the hell am I steaming this shit on the stove anyway?” I nod toward the broccoli. “They have these bagged vegetables in the frozen section that you can stick right in the microwave. Someone at my work always had them. You don’t have to chop the shit or clean a pan or anything.”

“Because I’m *teaching* you,” she draws the word out slowly. “What would you do if your microwave broke?”

“Buy another one,” I mutter.

“Just be glad I let you get the refrigerated dough,” she retorts.

I turn the stupid tube of bread around ten times before figuring out how to open it. I jump about a foot into the air when it pops open. The tube flies out of my hand and lands in the sink. I stare at it in shock while my heart pounds out of control.

Bella bursts into laughter. It doesn’t take long before tears are streaming down her cheeks. She slowly leans sideways until she disappears beneath the counter. There’s a loud thump as she rolls onto the floor.

“That’s not fucking funny,” I pant. “Is it supposed to do that?” I lean over the sink and scowl at the offending item.

“You can’t be serious!” Bella stands up and catches her breath. “You’ve never opened a tube like that before?”

“No!”

“You’ve never made Pillsbury breadsticks or biscuits or cinnamon rolls?” she asks in astonishment.

“I said ‘no’ the first time. My answer isn’t going to change based on the content of the goddamned exploding tube!” I fire at her. I know I’m overreacting, but I can’t help it. That dough shocked the shit out of me, and this whole cooking fiasco is frustrating in general.

“Oh, Edward,” Bella patronizes as she moves to stand in front of me. “Relax. You’re doing a great job.”

She slides her arms around my waist and hugs me tightly. I wrap my arms around her in return, pressing my lips against the top of her head and breathing her in. Bella seems to always have a soothing effect on me. My frustration vanishes as we stand in each other’s arms.

But, like everything associated with Bella, it ends too soon.

“Flip the steaks before they start to char,” she says, releasing her hold on me. “And grease the baking sheet before you put the bread on it or you’ll never get it off in one piece.”

I groan in complaint but do as I’m told.

By the time we actually sit down to eat my stomach hurts from the hunger pangs.

“It looks delicious,” she says approvingly.

It does look pretty damn good especially because Bella feels presentation is as important as the preparation. She had me arrange the food aesthetically on our plates and even showed me where to squeeze the potato to make the insides pop out on the top all picture perfect like. I was glad she did hers first because I had reached my limit of surprise exploding food for the day.

“I think it will be delicious thanks to your help.”

I look at Bella. She’s grinning widely. I’m taken aback by the proud way she’s looking at me. It would be a lie to say making the entire meal on my own wasn’t gratifying, but the way I feel about it pales in comparison to seeing Bella’s approval of me.

“You did it on your own, Edward,” she praises. “I didn’t offer you any more assistance than a recipe would.”

I don't argue even though I can't bring myself to agree with her. Besides, if I ever manage to follow a written recipe, it will be because Bella isn't here to tell me what to do. That is something I don't want to think about. Ever.

She's right, it is delicious, and although I would probably opt for the frozen vegetables next time, I have to admit the damned baked potato was worth the wait.

I wait in bed while Bella is in the shower. I put the rest of her things in my bedroom during the day in a silent request for her to share my space. I even tossed Eddie on the bed. She didn't comment on the mysterious move, but since she didn't argue I left it alone.

She enters the bedroom wearing the turtle pajama pants and one of the tank tops I bought her. It fits tightly and doesn't leave much to the imagination. I watch as she approaches the bed. Actually, I watch her nipples as she approaches the bed. I know I'm staring, but she doesn't make any movement to cover up, so I can't bring myself to feel bad about it. Besides, the deal I made with myself was not to put the moves on her. I didn't put any restrictions on looking.

I sit up and lean toward Bella. Reaching out, I wrap my hands around her tiny waist before pulling her onto the bed with me. I lay us down side-by-side and pull the blankets over us. She scoots closer and wraps her arm around me. I do the same. I am dying to kiss her or squeeze her ass or pull her leg over me, but I don't. It's hard.

So is my dick.

Instead, I settle for running my fingers through Bella's hair. She presses her face against my chest and takes a deep breath before speaking. "Can I ask you some more questions now?"

"Of course," I tell her.

“Do you have a lot of money?” she asks timidly.

“Yes.” No sense in lying.

“Where did it come from?”

Sometimes I think Bella is too perceptive for her own good. “Inheritance.”

“From your adoptive father?”

“And mother,” I add.

“I’m sorry. When did they die?”

I take a deep breath and sigh loudly. “My father died about five years ago. Prostate cancer, ironically.”

“Why is that ironic?” she questions.

“He was an oncologist,” I say dryly.

“Oh.”

“My mother died right before Christmas. Car accident.”

“Oh, Edward, I’m so sorry,” she quickly apologizes. “I didn’t know it was so recent.”

“It’s okay. I’m over it,” I say coldly.

For the record, my erection is officially gone.

“What were their names, if you don’t mind me asking?” Bella sounds uncertain.

“Bethany and . . . and Edward,” I sigh.

“Was your name always Edward or did they name you after him?”

“I was named after him,” I answer vaguely.

“So . . . when did you find out you were adopted?” she asks curiously.

“Almost a month ago.” My voice comes out in a whisper.

“Really?” she gasps. “That recently? How did you find out?”

“My sis—” the word gets stuck in my throat. “My sister told me.”

“Oh,” Bella says. “Of course she would know. She was so much older than you.”

Yes, she would know better than anyone.

As much as I hate to admit it, I think Jane was right. When we spoke on the phone three nights ago she told me I needed closure. She told me I should visit the cemetery. At the time, it pissed me off—it still does—but after being back home and reflecting on the situation, I think it might help me. I don't think it will make the guilt go away, but I don't think it will make me feel worse either.

My mind is made up. I'm going there to say goodbye once and for all before we leave here. A sigh escapes my lips.

Bella moves away and looks up at me. She pulls her arm off of my side and starts to play with my hair. It feels wonderful. I crave her touch so much. I wanted more after I first touched her arm outside the Hyatt. The last two nights only confirmed how much I want her with me. Always.

"I love it when you touch me," I confess, tangling my fingers further into Bella's hair and mimicking what she's doing to me.

She grins in return. "Really?"

"Yes. You're the first person whose touch has been soothing to me," I admit.

"Do you mean that?" she asks dubiously.

"Bella," I say, trying to find the right words to explain. "I've never really been close to anyone. Physically, I mean. But, I don't know, with you I like it. It feels good."

"But," Bella hesitates and confusion clouds her face. "You've been with . . . women. Right?" she asks warily.

"Yes, but not like this," I confide as I pull my fingers out of her hair and stroke her cheek with my thumb. "I want to touch you, and I want you to touch me. I don't mean in a sexual way. I mean . . . not that I wouldn't like it, that's not what I meant. Because I would like it. I mean . . . aw, fuck."

I squeeze my eyes shut wishing I could retract my word vomit and answer her question without sounding like an idiot.

“Sex is one thing.” I pause as I pop one eye open to look at her. She doesn’t seem offended, only curious. “But outside of that I’ve never had the desire to be close to anyone. The intimacy of it has always been odd for me. After going so long without it . . . I don’t know.” I shrug. I’m really not sure how to continue. After years of craving affection from a family who was indifferent to me I can’t explain why I shy away from it as an adult.

Bella is still observing me curiously. When the silence becomes too much I go on. “I shouldn’t say I’ve never desired it. That’s not true. It’s just always felt unnatural and forced to have close contact with people. And I think, in the cases of the women I’ve been with, they could tell I was reluctant about it. I think I came across as cold, and it’s hard to maintain a romantic relationship when the other person thinks you don’t give a shit.”

Fuck! Shut up about sex and other women already!

“I’ve never thought you were cold.” Bella is quick to defend me.

My eyes widen at her response. First, I can’t believe that out of all the things that came out of my mouth just now, she reacts to that one. Second, she must be crazy if she honestly never thought that about me. I haven’t exactly been warm and fuzzy since we met. I think back to the incident with the M&M’s and our fight the other night and internally cringe.

“Maybe, before I met you, I was.”

“No,” she argues, removing her hand from my hair and wrapping her arm around me again. “I don’t think you have it in you to be cold. Not after everything you’ve done for me.”

“It’s different with you,” I challenge, pulling her against me tightly. I don’t know what makes her different, but she is. I’ve never felt the need to be this close to someone before, physically or mentally, not even when I was a child.

I hold on to her as if my life depends on it. It feels like I am desperately trying to make up for lost time. Maybe I am, but it's better than thinking of what I may lose in the future.

chapter eleven

Bella

I lounge on Edward's couch on Friday morning and read one of his books. I'm still wearing the pajamas he bought me yesterday. They are so soft that I can't bring myself to put real clothes on yet. Wearing them brings a smile to my face even if I do feel a little guilty about accepting them. Besides, I'm sick and tired of wearing jeans. I haven't worn lounge clothes in over a week, and it feels good to wake up in the morning and not have to get dressed right away.

I'm also glad he picked out a bathrobe for me. It's super cozy, and I would be chilly in the tank top alone. Not to mention I'm not wearing a bra right now, and the robe gives me a little more coverage than the thin cotton.

The matching shorts are another story. They are very . . . short. I tried them on last night but opted to wear the pants instead. I think I'll be okay under the

covers, but I'm not ready to prance around wearing them in front of Edward. I might as well just show him my underwear which I kind of already did, twice, but those times weren't really on purpose.

Edward moseys into the living room after taking a shower. His hair is still damp, and as he sits down, I catch a whiff of him. He smells clean and manly. The scent is just strong enough to reach me at the opposite end of the couch. It makes me want to lean closer and breath him in.

My eyes catch a droplet of water running down the back of his neck. I am overwhelmed with the urge to wipe it away. His hair is temporarily tamed from the weight of the water, and my fingers twitch to ruffle it up so it sticks out in every direction the way it normally does when it's dry.

Actually, I just want to touch him. It doesn't matter where.

"How do you feel about leaving tomorrow morning?" Edward breaks the silence with a question.

"I'm ready if you are," I tell him.

"I think I am," he replies. "I looked at the map this morning. I think we should aim for five days, four nights. It's roughly eight hours of driving per day, so nothing too intense. Of course, if you want to be on the road more or less, let me know."

I appreciate him giving me a say in the matter, but I don't want to dictate how long he drives. Five days sounds good; it's long enough so it won't wear him down but hopefully short enough so he doesn't have extra time to convince himself not to go. "Whatever you want to do is fine. I don't want you to get worn out. I can drive, too, if you'd like."

"Be careful," he cautions playfully with a smirk. "I might just take you up on that offer."

It's mid-afternoon by the time I peel myself from the couch. It felt good to do nothing all morning. Not that I've done much of anything in the past week, but it was nice not to be in a car, go shopping, or have an awkward phone conversation. After thinking about phone conversations I decide to call Alice, because technically, I haven't spoken to her since I left. At least I know she won't spaz out on me, be angry, or cry. I bring Edward's cell phone outside so I can have some privacy before dialing Alice's number.

"Bella?" she answers.

"How'd you know?" I ask in confusion.

"*Ever hear of Caller ID?*" Her voice is laced with sarcasm. "*This isn't the first time I've received a call from this number you know.*"

"Oh, right." Yep, I feel dumb.

"*Soooooo, you're still with Mr. Knight-in-Shining-Armor, obviously. How is that going? By the way, I'm extremely pissed off 'cause you didn't call me back once in the past week, not even after I talked to your little boyfriend.*"

Alice doesn't sound pissed off, but if she were, I wouldn't be able to tell from her voice alone. She always sounds cheerful. I wish I could see her face to know if she's serious.

"He's not my boyfriend, Alice," I say in exasperation. The visual of it makes me blush regardless. It's not the first time the thought of dating Edward has crossed my mind. Now that I know he views me as more than just *some kid*, I wonder what it would be like to have him as my boyfriend.

"*Uh-huh. Spill it, Swan. What's his name? Where'd you meet him? What does he look like? What happened with Jake? Where the hell are you?*"

She continues bombarding me with questions until she runs out of breath. I give her a quick summary of everything I've been through with Edward in the past week. I tell her about where we've been and what we've done but leave out the personal things he's told me. We talk about my fight with Jake and the

subsequent breakup. I go into great detail telling her about my feelings for Edward as well as Couchgate and how he nursed my hangover throughout the next day. It's nice being able to have a heart-to-heart with someone who understands me and knows just what to say to make me feel better.

"I really think you should do something about it, Bella," she tells me. "Boys are dumb. If you wait for him to make the next move you'll be waiting till you're old and grey. You are young, beautiful, loving, smart... what's not to love? Gather some courage and seduce him!"

I contemplate what she says. I've never considered trying to initiate something with Edward. I'm not sure I have it in me. I don't even have a clue of what to do first. He would probably just laugh at my juvenile attempt at seduction. If he rejects me, I'm not sure how I will get over it, especially if I have to look at his beautiful face every day *knowing* he doesn't want me.

The conversation goes well until Alice starts talking about fate. She rambles on about how Edward and I must be meant to be together because of the circumstances that lead us to one another – moving to Washington instead Florida, dating Jake, going to college in Jacksonville, Jake's proposal last weekend, leaving my cell phone behind, walking to the gas station while Edward was there . . .

I want to tell Alice that her theory about fate is ridiculous, but the irrational part of my brain is telling me to zip it and take what she's saying to heart. I'm grasping for anything that might give me hope concerning this doomed relationship.

"Enough about me," I say when I can't deal with talking about it any longer. "How are you? Are your classes out yet?"

"Yes!" she exclaims. "I took my last final this week. Thank God."

"I might be in Forks for a while this summer. Any plans on coming home?" I ask hopefully.

“Actually, I was going to fly back this weekend, but there’s an art festival here I want to attend. Hopefully I’ll be home sometime in the next two weeks. I can’t wait to see the new house!”

“You haven’t seen it yet?” Alice’s parents sold their house right after we graduated from high school last spring. They moved after Thanksgiving. I knew Alice hadn’t gone home for Christmas, but I assumed she had seen it at some point during the buying process.

“Nope. I’ve seen pictures, but I’ve never been inside. You’ll have to stay with me for a few days. That is . . . if you can kick Edward out of your pants,” she giggles.

“Very funny, Alice.”

“It’s just a matter of time, Bella.”

“Shut up.”

“You loooooove him, you want to kiiiiiss him,” she sings.

“Stop it! How are your parents doing, anyway? I haven’t seen them in forever.” When it comes to Alice it’s all about distracting and deflecting.

“They are doing well,” she bubbles. *“My mom asks about you all the time. She’ll be so excited if you decide to visit.”*

“Of course I will,” I assure her. “Give me your new address. Maybe Edward will drop me off.”

“Oh, Edward!” she moans in exaggeration.

“Alice!”

Alice’s laughter fills the phone. *“Believe it or not, I don’t know the address. I wrote it down somewhere . . .”* Her voice fades and I hear papers shuffling around. *“I have no idea where I put it. I’ll have to call you back when I get back home.”*

“That’s fine,” I tell her. “How are things with you and Jasper?”

“Oh, I miss him so much,” she says sadly. “He’s back in Forks for the summer, but he said he’ll come with me to New York if I go back early!”

“Cool. And Emmett and Rose, how are they?”

“Yuck,” Alice complains. “I hope they get all that kissy, touchy, feely bullshit out of their systems before I get home. You remember what they were like last summer, don’t you? I do not want to deal with that again.”

I laugh at the memory. When Emmett and Rose came home last summer, after being separated during their first year of college, they didn’t leave his bedroom for what felt like weeks. Then, when they started socializing again, every time we looked away they would start groping each other. We couldn’t even go out in public without them taking joint trips to the bathroom, disappearing behind a building, or going back to the car because they “forgot something.”

“Maybe it’s good that you’re not flying back this weekend,” I tell her.

“No. Kidding.”

I shower before putting on a new set of clothes. I like having something different to wear even if everything is stiff from being new. I’ll throw a load of laundry in the washer tonight. Maybe Edward will let me do his as well. It can be my way of saying thanks.

And a way to secretly steal a shirt that still smells like him.

I am startled by a knock on the bathroom door. I crack it open slowly. My heart speeds up in my chest when Edward smiles at me.

“Do you have any more of the lotion you bought?” he asks bashfully.

“Sure, come in.” I open the door only wide enough for him enter. He hesitates before slipping inside. I quickly shut the door behind him and he looks at me questioningly. “I don’t like to let the heat out,” I explain.

He chuckles at me. I dig the lotion out of my bag and hand it to him. He flips the cap open and smells it cautiously.

“It’s unscented,” I tell him.

“Good. I don’t want to smell all girly,” he jokes.

“You know, you’re lucky I’m even letting you use it.” I can’t pass up the opportunity to give Edward a hard time.

“Oh? And why is that?”

“Because you teased me for needing it in the first place,” I chide.

“That’s different,” he argues. “We practically swam our way through Florida. They shouldn’t even sell lotion there.”

“Doesn’t matter.” I frown up at him. “It was mean of you. Now I have a complex. I’ll never be able to use lotion again.”

Edward pouts, looking adorable as he exaggeratedly puffs out his bottom lip. He offers the lotion back to me, but before I can take it he snatches it out of my reach. “Ha!” he exclaims and squirts an excessive amount of lotion up the length of both his arms.

I swing at him playfully, but he evades me by leaning back. I pull the towel from my head and start to roll it up. “Oh, you’re gonna get it,” I threaten.

Edward cocks an eyebrow and looks at me in amusement while he rubs the lotion into his arms. “*You* are going to towel whip *me*?” he asks arrogantly.

I slink toward him slowly. Getting in striking position, I twist up the towel tightly. Edward smirks at me, taunting me. I softly whip it backhand at him and yank back as hard as I can before it makes contact with him.

A loud crack echoes through the bathroom.

“Oh, shit!” he shouts.

Edward bolts toward the door as I re-twist the towel. He paws frantically at the handle but his hands are too coated with lotion to get a grip on it. I back up to get enough space between us and pull my arm back to strike again.

He turns his head in time to see me wind up. A high-pitched, girlish scream escapes him, and I giggle as I whip the towel a second time. The bathroom door

pops open and he scrambles out through it, but not before the towel snaps loudly as it makes contact with his behind. He hollers loudly as he stumbles into the bedroom.

I fall down in an uncontrollable fit of hysterics and crawl out of the bathroom. Edward is pacing in his bedroom as he applies pressure to the point of contact with his fingertips.

“Fuck, that’s stingy,” he says through his teeth, his face contorted into a grimace.

“Are you going to live?” I giggle.

“You’d better fucking hope so. Fuck, that was through denim and everything!”

“You should see what I can do to bare skin. Just don’t piss me off when you’re *not* wearing pants,” I advise him.

“*Hmph*,” he groans. “I’ll keep that in mind. Fuck, that’s going to leave a mark.”

“Let me see,” I request as I stand up and approach him, still giggling.

“No way! I’m not taking my pants off anywhere near you, devil woman,” he says while backing away.

“Oh, come on, Edward. I want to see if I’ve marked you,” I tease.

His eyes shift quickly around the room. “Where’s the towel?” he asks accusingly.

“In the bathroom. Now come on, lemme see.”

I honestly don’t expect him to show me, so it takes me completely by surprise when Edward reaches down and pops the top button of his jeans open. He saunters toward me as he slowly unbuttons the rest of his fly. My eyes are glued to his crotch, and I blush furiously when the black material of his briefs comes into view. He stops in front of me and turns around. He pulls his pants down slightly on the side where the towel hit him. I gingerly pinch the hem of his shirt, too flustered to make any sort of bold move, and peak underneath.

There is a little pink welt forming right below where the waistband of his pants normally falls. Without thinking, I reach out and run my thumb across it, feeling the circular ridge of his inflamed skin. When I realize I am touching Edward's butt I quickly pull my hand away as my head snaps up to look at him.

"I'm sorry," I quickly apologize—for hurting him, for leaving a mark, for demanding he show it to me, for assuming it was okay to touch him.

"I like it," he breathes. His response is as vague as my apology. Edward is looking down at me with a peculiar expression on his face. His eyes are heavy, and his lips are parted slightly. My breath catches as he slowly licks his lips. I imagine what they would feel like pressed against mine. I bet they are soft and warm and delicious.

The hope of Edward kissing me quickly fades as he regains his composure. He squints and shakes his head slightly before rebuttoning his pants. I thought we had a connection, but I guess it was just wishful thinking. Maybe Alice is right about needing to seduce him.

"We should probably go soon." He quickly composes himself. "I want to show you some of the city before dinner."

Edward drives us downtown. He wants to take me to Giordano's for dinner because their Chicago style pizza is supposedly famous. There's actually a restaurant down the street from his house, but he insists on showing me the city even if it's only for a little while.

"I want to show you a little bit of everything Chicago has to offer just in case, you know, you want to come back someday," he says with uncertainty as he quickly peeks at me before returning his eyes to the road. Does he doubt I want to come back? If anything, I worry Edward will tire of having me around.

He shows me Navy Pier, Soldier Field, and points out all the famous skyscrapers. He attempts to tell me about The Great Chicago Fire and the history of the buildings but keeps backtracking and getting his facts all mixed up.

“If you come back while it’s still nice I’ll take you on a boat tour. It’s really informative. They give you a lot of facts, but it’s really cool because, you know, you’re on a boat.” Edward’s face lights up as he tells me about one of the few times his sister looked after him for a day. They did a boat tour and went to the Field Museum before spending the evening at Navy Pier. He is excited as he talks about the memory and I wonder what their relationship is like now.

We park in a lot a few blocks away from Giordano’s. The late-afternoon sun is still shining, and there’s not a cloud in the sky. The warmth of the brings a smile to my face.

“What the fuck?” Edward shouts from his side of the car.

My head turns in his direction. He is looking down with a horrified expression on his face. “What’s wrong?” I ask worriedly.

“What—what’s—I’m . . . what the fuck, Bella?”

I dash to his side of the car. Edward is holding his arms out and frowning, but I have no idea what’s wrong with him.

“Why the fuck . . .” he trails off.

“What?” I ask in frustration.

“I’m fucking sparkling!” he bellows angrily.

I take a closer look at his arms. Sure enough, in the direct sunlight he is, in fact, sparkling. I giggle, and he gives me a dirty look. I try unsuccessfully to choke back my laughter.

“Why didn’t you tell me it was sparkly lotion? I look like a fucking pansy!”

“It’s not sparkly, Edward, it’s shimmery.” I snicker. “Honestly, I didn’t even think about it at the time. Maybe you should have read the bottle.”

“Oh, *you’re* gonna get it now,” he warns as he stalks toward me in a predatory manner.

Squealing loudly, I turn to run away from him, but his arms wrap around my waist, and he lifts me off the ground before I can even take two steps. He swings me around and pushes me against the side of his car. I laugh as he wipes his arms on me in an attempt to remove the remnants of the lotion, and he overpowers me as I try to squirm away.

Soon, we are both laughing hysterically. I swat at him, trying to make him stop. Edward grabs my wrists and pins them back on the roof of the car. I bring my knee up to him threateningly.

“Oh, no you don’t,” he mutters. He presses his body flush against mine, rendering me completely immobile.

The pressure and heat from his body causes excitement to stir in my stomach. We are both breathing heavily from the struggle. His face is close to mine, and I can feel his breath on my cheek. His smile falters, and if I didn’t know better, I’d say his eyes are filled with lust. It’s probably more wishful thinking on my part, but I’m fairly certain I’m not imagining the way Edward is slowly leaning in toward me.

For the briefest of moments I am under the impression he is going to kiss me. Again.

Edward swallows thickly and releases my arms before pushing away from the car. He clears his throat and looks away. “We should go eat,” he murmurs. I nod. Edward turns away from me and walks in the direction of the restaurant. I follow behind him feeling slightly rejected.

Things start out awkward at dinner, but it doesn’t take long before we slip back into our usual selves. The pizza is good. I had doubts when I first saw it, but Edward was right when he told me it would be the best pizza I’d ever eat. However, it doesn’t taste as good as being with Edward feels.

Once we leave the restaurant we aren't ready to go home. I ask Edward if he wants to walk me around the city. He happily obliges. He even wraps his arm around me when an exceptionally chilly wind whips down the street. My heart soars and I feel like I'm in heaven.

The sun is setting when we arrive back at the car. I blush at the memory of our faux altercation before dinner. Edward smirks at me as he gets in the car, and I wonder if he is thinking about it as well.

As we leave the city I sigh quietly. I don't know if I'll come back soon, but if I do, I hope I'll be here with Edward. There's no way of knowing where the next leg of our journey will lead us. What I do know is, wherever I end up, I want to be with him at the end.

Edward seems nervous on the drive back to his house. His knuckles are white from gripping the steering wheel. His head appears to bob to music which would be perfectly acceptable if we weren't sitting in complete silence. Cracking the window open, he leans into the breeze. I can hear his breathing quicken. He removes one hand from the steering wheel and tugs it roughly through his hair.

I'm not sure why he is acting so strange. I thought everything went well today. Aside from . . . Cargate anyway, but we got past that. He seemed all right during dinner and after when we walked.

"Are you all right?" I ask in concern.

"I'm fine," he answers sternly.

I don't believe him for a moment. I feel slightly hypocritical right now. I always tell people I'm fine and in return they always tell me I'm not. It really bugs the crap out of me. But if I weren't fine, I would probably say I was, which I'm convinced is what Edward is doing right now.

He pulls over to the side of the road and stops the car. I watch him curiously as he stares intently out the windshield with a frown on his face. His jaw is clenched, and his hand flexes on the steering wheel. I notice he does that a lot

with his hands, but I'm not entirely sure why. My best guess is that he's uncomfortable or nervous about something. I want to wrap my arms around him and let him squeeze me so he can take his worry out on my body instead of using the wheel—just like he's done in bed for the past two nights.

If I've learned anything about Edward this past week, it's that he doesn't talk until he's ready. Instead of asking him what's wrong, I reach over and pull his hand off the wheel. He immediately entwines his fingers with mine, and after a few moments he starts rhythmically squeezing my hand. I really like holding hands with him. I wish I had the courage to take his hand out of the blue instead of only when he's stressing out.

"There's somewhere I have to go," he finally says. "Will you come with me?" His voice is confident, but as he looks at me, his expression is anything but. His eyes are pleading as if he actually thinks I would turn him down.

"I could never say no to you, Edward," I say reassuringly.

"That's what I'm afraid of," he says under his breath.

Edward drops my hand and puts the car in gear. Instead of continuing in the direction we were heading, he makes a U-turn and heads back toward the city. I watch him carefully as he drives. He looks just as unsettled as he did before. I'm dying to ask him where we're going, but I assume I'll find out soon enough. It's not long before we pull up to a cemetery. I look at Edward, expecting him to still look anxious, but he doesn't. He is completely still. His gaze is fixed in my direction, almost as if he's looking through me. He looks empty, hollow, like he has completely shut down. It reminds me of the morning after his talk with Jane, and my body shivers unintentionally.

"You don't have to come with me." His voice is flat.

"I want to," I insist.

"I missed the funeral."

"Your mother's?"

He frowns and nods once, still not focusing on me. “I need to say goodbye.” We sit there in silence for a few moments. Edward makes no move to exit the car. He appears to be deeply in thought.

“Are you ready?” I ask.

Edward finally focuses on me, and I give him an encouraging smile. He says nothing as he opens the door and slowly climbs out. I hop out quickly and meet him on the driver’s side. I want to take his hand again, but before I can make a move for it, he shoves them both in his pockets and starts walking. We walk side-by-side in silence, winding through the cemetery paths, until Edward stops before a cluster of three plots.

Confusion sets in as I look at the three headstones. I recognize the names on the first two—one reads “Edward Masen,” the other “Bethany Masen”—but I am thrown by the third. It’s obvious by the fresh patch of sod that it’s a recent addition. Very recent. I don’t recognize the name, but the headstone is engraved with “Beloved Daughter & Sister.”

“Edward.” My voice comes out quiet and shaky. “Who is this?”

He doesn’t answer, and by the sound of his breathing, I can tell he’s trying to hold himself together. I don’t press him further. He doesn’t need to tell me anyway.

“Your sister,” I whisper knowingly.

We stand in silence for what feels like an eternity. The light from the setting sun slowly fades, and I shiver from the cool night breeze. Edward is deep in thought, but I don’t want to interrupt him. I will stand here with him all night if it’s what he needs.

I can’t imagine what Edward is feeling right now. It hadn’t sounded like he was close to his adoptive parents, but other than his sister, he hadn’t mentioned any other family. His father has been gone for a while, but for him to lose both his mother and sister within a matter of months must have been hard. His hands are

still shoved in his pockets. I pull on one of his wrists, and he allows me to wrap both of my hands around his.

Edward clears his throat. “She wasn’t really my sister,” he states.

“Of course not,” I acknowledge. “You were adopted; she wasn’t.”

A bitter laugh erupts from his chest. “No, you don’t understand. She wasn’t my *sister*.”

I look at him expectantly and wait for him to continue.

“She was my mother.”

chapter twelve

Edward

*E*he sun sets as we stand before my family's graves. Bella hasn't said anything since I revealed my fucked-up secret, and for that I'm thankful. The wind whips through the cemetery causing Bella to shiver. I give her my keys and ask her to wait in the car. She takes them without protest and gives my hand a final squeeze before leaving me. I stare down at my mother's headstone and frown as I read it once again. The lie lives on even after her death.

ELIZABETH MASEN
1966 - 2010
BELOVED DAUGHTER & SISTER

I sink to my knees. For the next hour, I spill my heart out to them, telling them everything I wish I could have said to their faces—all the things I wish they were alive to hear.

“I tried so hard to please you. I behaved as a child, and I never asked for anything. I studied diligently and went to college early . . . I became a doctor for Christ’s sake! I did everything in my power to earn your acceptance, but I never got it. You always made me feel inadequate. I always felt like a burden to all of you. I never felt loved or wanted. Was I? Did any of you actually want me? Did any of you care that I was there? Because, if you did, you sure had a fucked-up way of showing it. Perhaps it was better that I was raised by nannies. Perhaps all of you did me a favor by being absent for most of my childhood.

“Why did you lie to me throughout my entire life? I feel so . . . betrayed. None of you told me the truth. I don’t understand why. Were you protecting me or something? It’s not like any of you ever gave a shit about me before. Would telling the truth *sometime* during the past twenty-seven years have done any harm?

“And Elizabeth . . . Mom.” My voice breaks on the word. It’s the first time I’ve referred to her as Mom directly. “Why didn’t you tell me sooner? How could you wait until the last possible moment in your life to tell me the truth? I have so many questions. Questions I’ll never learn the answers to.

“Why didn’t you just give me up for adoption? Why did your parents want to raise me? They had no interest in me whatsoever. They never gave me the time of day. *Ever*. You did, but then you left. You left after college. How could you leave and never look back? I can count the number of times I saw you on one hand. Your rejection of me hurts more than anything.”

After getting everything out of my system, I stand up, brushing the dirt from my knees and wiping the tears from my eyes. This will be the last time I set foot in this cemetery. This will be the last time I dwell on my childhood. I refuse to let

the decisions of my past—the ones I had no control over—affect my life any longer. I am moving on. With Bella by my side, I'm going to find my biological father and even if one or both of those things fall through, this chapter of my life is over.

I say a final goodbye and return to the car where Bella is waiting. We don't speak for the drive home, but Bella pries my hand from the wheel and holds it tightly. The silence is beginning to concern me. I can't help but wonder why she isn't inundating me with questions.

Maybe she doesn't care.

That can't be true. Bella cares. She's just giving me space to clear my head. She wants me. She wouldn't be with me holding my hand if she didn't. She's not the type of girl to pretend about shit like that.

Right?

I end up in bed before Bella who, for once, takes *forever* in the bathroom. My brain starts working overtime while I lie here by myself. My insecurities bubble to the surface, and I feel guilty for relying on her as my support system again.

Obviously I want her to stay with me, but she needs to decide for herself if this is in her best interest. She should be using this time away from home and parents and school and ex-boyfriends to relax and do things for herself. She shouldn't feel obligated to hold my hand and lead me through my fucked-up life.

If anything, I should be taking care of her.

The only thing I want more than Bella at my side is for her to do what's right for herself. She can't make that decision if I'm constantly being needy. I need to muster up some strength so she doesn't stay with me out of pity. Maybe it will be easier for her to make an unbiased decision if I put some distance between us.

Oh god, what if that's why she was so quiet earlier? What if she wasn't giving me space for my well-being but emotionally distancing herself from me? The thought of her leaving causes a burning deep in my chest. I don't want to

influence Bella's decision, but if she were about to leave, I'm not sure I could stop myself from dropping to my knees and begging her to stay.

When the shower shuts off I flip on my side and face the wall. I squeeze my eyes shut tightly, willing myself to fall asleep instead of worrying whether keeping Bella with me is the right decision. The bathroom door opens, and I listen as Bella pads across the bedroom. "Edward?" she whispers.

I keep my eyes closed and pretend to sleep. If I turn and look at her I won't be able to resist pulling her into bed and holding her all night. I know her well enough to know she won't deny me, but I have no way of knowing if it's something she wants or if she would just go along with it for my sake.

The bed dips under Bella's weight as she crawls onto it. The lamp clicks off, and I feel the covers shift. I fight with all the willpower I have not to roll over and lose myself in her. Before my resolve can waiver, Bella presses her body against my back and wraps her arm around my waist. I place my hand over hers and sigh in relief as her fingers weave through mine.

She wants me.

"Goodnight, Edward." Her warm breath washes over the back of my neck. It causes goose bumps to form on my arms and a flutter in the pit of my stomach. I smile to myself and respond by squeezing her hand.

For the first time in my life I know everything will be okay.

In the morning I pack for Seattle. I am bringing more than I did the first time. Now that Bella's with me I actually care about how I look. I want to leave a good impression if I meet her father—Chief of Police who believed I kidnapped his daughter and threatened me with his shotgun—and it wouldn't hurt to show up on my father's doorstep looking respectable. The prospect of meeting *two* fathers for the first time is definitely not helping my nerves.

I grab Bella a pillow from the bed for the car ride and carry it into the foyer along with my bag. Bella is on the couch watching Saturday morning cartoons. I stand in the doorway watching her. She is beautiful, sexy, and innocent all wrapped up in one perfect package. Right now there's nothing I want to do more than run to her, pull her into my arms, and kiss her. I don't, though. The confidence I had last night, when Bella crawled into bed and held me, was gone by morning. She offered me comfort when it was obvious I needed it. She held me as a friend—nothing more—and in the morning I woke up to an empty bed.

Bella catches me staring at her. She smiles, and it's enough to send my heart into overdrive. She is like an angel. *My angel*. I return her smile without even thinking about it. I will never cease to be amazed by how she effortlessly turns my mood around. "Ready to hit the road?"

She nods and turns off the TV before making her way over to me. I manage to juggle both of our bags, the pillow, Eddie, and a small box of books as I walk to the car. The books are for Bella to read. She was admiring my collection last night, and I insisted she bring along as many as she wanted.

"I can carry something," she offers.

"Nah, I got it," I reply. "Open the trunk?"

Bella grabs the keys from my hand and pops the trunk open. I set the books and bags inside before I make my way to the passenger side of the car and toss the pillow and Eddie onto Bella's seat. When I realize she isn't beside me I look up to find her staring into my trunk. Her jaw is hanging down, and her eyes are wide as saucers.

"Bella, what's wrong?"

"You have . . . there's a shovel in your trunk," she half states, half asks.

"Yes." I always keep a shovel in my trunk. It's fun to drive a little crazy when it's icy, and I've ended up digging myself out of a ditch more than once.

Bella laughs almost maniacally. “Garbage bags?” She pulls out a handful of black, heavy duty trash bags and eyes me curiously.

I shrug. “Never know when I’m going to have to haul something dirty,” I explain. “Why? What’s the big deal?”

Bella smiles and shakes her head. I can’t help but feel I’m missing out on a joke. “Nothing,” she says and climbs into the front seat.

“So,” Bella begins once we’re on the freeway, “where to first?”

“Minneapolis,” I answer.

“Mall of America,” she states.

“Do you want to go?” I’d love to take Bella shopping again. I bet there are lots of lingerie stores in that fucker. I wonder if she would model for me. Fuck, I can’t think about that right now.

“Um, no,” she says sternly. “That sounds like my worst nightmare.”

“I’m sure it wouldn’t be that bad,” I argue. Bella eyes me skeptically. My mind wanders as I envision another shopping expedition with her.

We go to Victoria’s Secret, and I pick out a little bit of everything for her to try on. Bella puts on the innocent things first—a little white nightgown to play up her angelic side—before moving on to the naughty items. After she changes, she steps out of the dressing room to show off for me, and I tell her how beautiful she is. When I motion for her to twirl in a circle, she looks shy and blushes, but she complies, and I see every angle of her glorious body. When she comes out wearing a black silk corset, thong, and matching garter belt I can’t control myself any longer. I push her into the little room, my hands on her body, my mouth on hers. I press her against the wall with my body, and she wraps a leg around me. My lips attach to her neck, and I suck on the thin skin there, marking her as mine. Reaching around, I grab her ass and pull her closer, grinding against her as

I dig my fingers into her soft flesh. She moans my name, and I watch in the mirror as I—

Fuck.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

Being hard while driving is not comfortable. Hell, being hard while not having any sort of release in the immediate future is not comfortable in general. I curse myself for not wearing looser pants as I reach down and adjust myself. Maybe it's because of dry humping Bella on the couch or from spending four nights in the same bed, but I'm not worried about her seeing the reaction my body has in her presence.

If Bella notices she doesn't let on.

The hours pass quickly. We talk casually, keeping the topics light. We discuss our favorite books, music, and movies. There are a few movies that are in theaters now that we both want to see.

"That preview looked fucking hilarious!"

"Yeah, we should see it before . . ." Bella trails off. Her smile falters as she looks down and picks at her fingernails. She doesn't need to finish. I know what she's thinking.

Before I leave you.

"When we get to Seattle," she pauses, "do you want me to come with you? I understand if you want to be alone. Maybe my dad will let me stay with him."

Wait, what?

"He would probably love to see me," she continues. "It's been almost a year since I moved out, and he was pretty upset with me when I talked to him the other day. It will probably be good for me to go smooth things over..."

I thought we decided to go to Seattle together. I thought she was going to stay with me the entire time. My heart lurches at the thought of her leaving. I don't

want to be without her and it has absolutely nothing to do with meeting my father on my own. For the first time I realize I never want to be away from her.

Ever.

“. . . to ask him first but I'm sure it will be okay. What do you think?" she asks delicately.

No! No, no, no, no, no!

"Whatever you think is best," I manage to choke out. I want to tell her "no fucking way." I want to grab her and never let go. I want to turn the car around and drive us back to Chicago or Florida or wherever it takes in order for us to stay together, but I know in my heart the decision has to be hers. Dissuading her from seeing her father is something I refuse to do, and I won't stand in the way of Bella making her own decisions. If I end up alone, so be it. I can't make her feel the same way about us as I do, and although begging doesn't sound like too bad of an idea right now, I can't force her to stay. For a moment I hope her father tells her she can't stay with him, but it only makes me feel shittier than I already do.

Bella senses the sudden change in my mood. "It will be okay, you know." I shake my head violently; it won't be okay. "What are you most worried about? When you meet your father, I mean."

It's a good thing Bella qualified her question because I was about to answer "losing you." I exhale heavily. I had hoped to avoid any difficult conversations today. "Most worried about? That's a tough question, Kiddo." The defeated tone of my voice causes me to shudder.

"Maybe if you pinpoint it you can learn to look at it in a different light. Maybe your worst fear isn't really all that bad."

"There are a lot of things I worry about, Bella. If I had to pick one thing, it's that he won't even hear me out. He'll turn me away without a second thought. I won't even make it past the front door."

"Why is that the worst?" she asks.

I look at her in disbelief. It seems like a pretty shitty deal to me. One look at her face tells me she's serious. "Be-because it is!" I sputter.

"That's a crappy reason, Edward. Come on, be serious."

"I am serious!" I exclaim.

"But why? Edward, I'm trying to help you!" Bella frowns.

I groan under my breath. Thinking about all the things that could go wrong is definitely not helping. "I don't want to feel the rejection. I don't want another person in my life walking away from me." The words catch in my throat and are almost inaudible.

"Edward, what if you get to know him only to find out he's a bad person?"

Great, another thing to add to the list of concerns. "I don't know," I answer honestly.

Bella sighs and rolls her eyes at me. "Would you want him in your life?"

"I suppose not." I've had a lot of shitty people in my life. I don't want to replace them with someone else who is equally as shitty.

"Well, I think anyone who would turn away his own child, who is an adult, who wants nothing more than to meet his birth father is a pretty crappy person. Wouldn't you agree?"

"I guess," I answer, not really sure where she's going with this.

"So if he doesn't give you a chance he's not someone you want in your life. At least you won't waste time getting to know him only to have his true colors shine through later," she states simply.

I understand the point Bella is trying to make, but it doesn't make me feel any more confident. She's looking at me expectantly, and I don't have it in me to burst her bubble. She only wants to help. "Thanks, Bella," is the only thing I can bring myself to say.

She reaches over the center console and takes my hand. My stomach clenches at the gesture. I notice Bella only makes contact with me when I'm upset or

hurting, never just for the hell of it. It seems as though she only does it to comfort me and not because she wants to be close to me. It doesn't give me much hope for any type of relationship with her outside of this . . . whatever the hell we have going on right now.

"I thought you said you were adopted," Bella accuses quietly.

"Your words, not mine." I cringe at the harshness of my voice. I need to control my emotions better when I'm around her.

If she notices my sudden change of attitude, she doesn't let it bother her. "I don't understand." Her voice is barely audible.

"My mother was fifteen when she got pregnant. My parents . . . I mean my *grandparents* . . . god, that's weird to say." I look at Bella and try to guess what she's thinking. Her face gives nothing away so I continue. "My grandparents were worried about what people would think of them or how it would affect their social status or some bullshit like that. I don't exactly understand. They moved from Seattle to Chicago. I was born there and raised as their own child." It's the simplified version but hopefully it's enough to appease Bella for now. "What are you thinking?"

"You just found all this out last month?" she asks as her brows knit together in a frown.

"Yes."

"And your mom told you?"

"My mother, sister, whatever . . . yeah. I didn't want to believe her. I was so angry that I walked out on her. It was the last time I saw her. I didn't even go to the funeral." I chance a look at Bella. Her expression is still unreadable. "You must think I'm a horrible person."

"No. I don't," she assures me with a soft squeeze of her hand. "Why didn't you want to believe her?"

This time I squeeze Bella's hand. "She suffered from a traumatic brain injury last winter and was never quite the same. Uh, she was in the car accident with our mother. Er, my grandmother. Fuck, am I confusing you? Because I'm confusing the fuck out of myself."

Bella shakes her head. "I'm keeping up." She gives me a small smile. "What made you believe her?"

"I think part of me knew she was telling the truth. A lot of the things she spoke about never made sense but this . . . she gave me too many details. Everything just . . . clicked. That and, after she died, I found a letter she wrote to my father."

"Really?" Bella asks in surprise. "Can I read it?"

Her question takes me off-guard. The situation is so morbid—I can't imagine her having any interest in reading it. The look on her face tells me she's sincere. "If you want."

We arrive in Minneapolis a little after five o'clock. I find a nice hotel to stay at for the night; Bella doesn't complain. Things are looking up so far.

The room has two beds.

Fuck.

I place both our bags in the center of one bed and toss Eddie onto the other. Hopefully the setup will send Bella a subliminal message—one bed is for us, one bed is for our shit. If our time together has an expiration date, I want to make the most out of it, even if my feelings are one-sided.

We order room service and eat on the bed I hope to share with Bella tonight. She has been quiet for most of the evening but eyes me curiously as she picks apart her sandwich. It looks as if she's itching to say something.

"What?" I chuckle.

"Hmm? Oh, nothing." Bella looks away from me.

Considering everything we've talked about over the past week, I'm concerned at what is going through her head to make her zip her lips now. "Come on, Kiddo. Tell me what you're thinking." My stomach drops as I realize that maybe this is it—the part where she tells me that she's sick of my bullshit.

"Um . . . well, I was just wondering how your, uh . . ." Bella glances at me before she looks away again. I am confused and have no idea what she's talking about, but by the look on her face, it can't be anything bad. She's so damn cute that I have to fight the urge to giggle.

"Spill it, Bella."

"I mean, um," she continues to stammer as she blushes bright pink. I think that's my new favorite color. Bella is adorable when she's flustered, and I can't help but laugh. I wait patiently to find out what she's so embarrassed about. "How is the, uh . . . you know, on, um . . . your, uh . . . behind?"

Huh?

Oh!

"Are you referring to the dark purple welt you left on my ass?" I tease.

Bella's face pales and her demeanor changes from flustered to remorseful. "I'm so sorry, Edward. I didn't think—"

"Don't," I interrupt. "I told you I like it. If I could keep it forever, I would." I raise my hand to caress her cheek but stop myself before making contact. Keeping my desire to touch her in check is proving to be difficult. If she makes one move—*one move*—my control is going to fly out the window. I'm giving in to every urge I've ever had the first time she does *anything* that isn't deemed as platonic. I will hold her tight and never let go. I will lay my heart on the line and do everything in my power to show her how I feel about her, to let her know what she means to me.

As vulnerable as it makes me feel, I want to give my heart to Bella. My desire to be with her outweighs my fear of being hurt. The sudden flood of emotions

overwhelms me, and I feel the need to escape and be alone with my thoughts. “I’m going to jump in the shower before we go to bed, okay?”

“Okay.”

The lights are off when I exit the bathroom, but the room is illuminated by the glow of the television. My heart sinks as I make out Bella’s sleeping form in the bed that previously held our bags. She’s not quite in the middle, not quite committed to one side, and I can’t tell by her position whether she wants to sleep alone or not. I don’t understand why she isn’t in the bed where we sat all night. If Bella wanted to share a bed, I doubt she would have gone out of her way to clear off the bed she’s in.

I stand between the two beds, alternating between looking longingly at hers and glaring angrily at the empty one. My head reels as I try to decide where to sleep. I consider waking Bella up to ask if I can crawl in bed with her, but she looks so peaceful I can’t bear to disturb her.

With a heavy heart, I pull back the covers and slide into the other bed, alone with the exception of the fucking plush turtle. It looks like she didn’t want either of us tonight. I squeeze the stupid thing to my chest in an attempt to fill the void left behind after spending four nights with Bella. Four nights in heaven. I lie awake for what feels like forever, watching Bella sleep and wishing I could be close to her. I am exhausted but can’t silence my mind long enough to fall asleep.

Bella stirs as the early morning light filters into the room. Her hand slides out from underneath her chin and makes a pass across the sheets. She sits halfway up, squinting as her eyes adjust to the dim light, and looks around the room. “Edward?” she calls out groggily. “Are you in here?”

“I’m here,” I answer.

Bella frowns as her head snaps in my direction. “What are you doing?”

Lie. Lie. Lie. “Watching you sleep.” *Damn it.* My admission is met with momentary silence, and I hope she doesn’t feel uneasy because of it.

“Why . . . why are you all the way over there?” Bella’s voice drops to a whisper and is filled with so much sadness that I am off my bed and crawling into her arms before the words are completely out of her mouth. Her fingers twist into my hair as I bury my face into her neck. I wrap my arm around her tiny body and sling my leg over her so I can pull her closer. Bella’s body is welcoming, familiar, and comforting. There are so many things I want to tell her. Instead I let my eyes drift closed, just enjoying the way it feels to lie in her arms. Her fingers trace a soothing pattern along my scalp, and within minutes I slip into a deep slumber.

chapter thirteen

Bella

Edward,” I whisper. “Hey.” We are in the same position we fell asleep in—side-by-side with Edward’s head tucked under my chin and his right leg flung over me. The only difference is that his hand has somehow made its way up the leg of my shorts and is cupping my butt. Edward’s steady breathing indicates he is still sleeping. “Wake up, sleepy head.” He groans in displeasure and pulls my body closer. “Come on. It’s time to get up.”

“I don’t want to,” he mumbles. It takes me by surprise when he kisses the center of my chest and I gasp. Edward pulls his head back and studies me intently for a moment. He smiles shyly and lays his head back down before placing more kisses on my throat. The heat creeps into my cheeks when I realize Edward is actually kissing me. My heart pumps furiously, and my stomach feels as though it’s filled with butterflies. He stops too soon, but I can still feel the warmth left

behind by his soft lips and the phantom tingling from his facial hair. He removes his hand from my shorts and wraps his arm around my waist, whispering something that sounds like, “I’m so tired, Bella.”

“We should get up. It’s almost check-out time.”

“Just a few more minutes,” he whines. “I want to stay like this for a few more minutes.”

I don’t want to get out of bed either, but since I still need to shower and shave my legs, a few minutes is all he’s getting. The time passes quickly as I run my fingers through his silky locks. I want to touch more of him, but in this position his head is the only thing I can reach without contorting my arm. Just as I’m about to remind him of the time, he swallows audibly and says, “I’m sorry if you didn’t want to share a bed last night. I didn’t mean to invade your space.”

“I did.” I feel my face flush at the admission. “I wanted to share a bed with you.”

Edward presses his lips to my neck one more time. “Then why were you sleeping in this one?”

“You put Eddie on the other bed so I assumed it was mine. I—I thought you were sleeping here.”

“Bella,” he sighs as he holds me tighter. “I put our bags on this bed with the intentions of sleeping over there. When I saw you here Talk to me next time, okay?”

“I was going to ask you. I guess I didn’t realize how tired I was. I didn’t mean to fall asleep.”

“Can we just agree to share a bed from now on, please?”

“Yes.”

Edward sits up and kisses my shoulder before extracting himself from my arms to roll off of the bed.

Edward gets in the car but doesn't start it. He vigorously rubs his eyes with the palms of his hands. "You look exhausted," I tell him. "Did you sleep well last night?"

He pulls his hands away from his face. The area around his eyes is red and blotchy from the pressure. "I *am* exhausted. I really didn't sleep at all. Not until I got in bed with you," he admits as he looks at me uncertainly. I reach out and his eyes flutter shut as I rub my thumb over one of the dark circles underneath. He visibly relaxes and leans against the headrest. In the nine days we've been together, he's never looked this worn down.

"I can drive," I offer.

Edward slowly opens his eyes. "Do you mind?" he asks sleepily.

"Not at all." I move my hand lower and cup his cheek. He closes his eyes again as I run my thumb along his cheekbone. The skin there is so soft—such a contrast from the roughness of his beard. My fingertips trace the line where the outgrowth starts. Edward's lips part slightly as I drag my fingers through the stubble on his cheek, his jaw, his neck. I press my hand flat and trail it down his chest. He is so still that I wonder if he fell asleep.

"Keys?"

Edward rouses with a start. "Hmm? Oh." He fumbles around, trying to insert the key in the ignition, before climbing out of the car. There's plenty of room for me to slide across the center console and into the driver's seat. I turn the key and adjust the seat and mirrors while Edward circles the car and gets in next to me. "Thank you."

"No problem," I assure him. "Are you sure you'll be okay sitting there while I drive the Yuppiemobile?"

"I'll survive," he says jokingly as his lips curl into a smirk.

“I’m serious, Gramps. If I see you over there using the ‘passenger brake,’ I’m gonna make you sit in the back seat.”

“Oh, no,” Edward intones. “Please don’t make me sit in the back while you chauffer me around.” I swing at him playfully, but he is quicker than I am and snatches my hand. Bringing it up to his face, he sweeps his nose back and forth across my knuckles before placing a quick, gentle kiss there. The butterflies return to the pit of my stomach, and I smile like an idiot. “On second thought,” Edward places my hand on the steering wheel, “you should probably use both of these.”

“Ha, ha, Edward,” I deadpan as I pull the car onto the road.

“It’s a good thing I bought this *Yuppiemobile*.” He says the word as though it pains him. “You probably wouldn’t have been able to drive my last car.”

“Why do you say that?”

“It was a stick,” he says matter-of-factly.

“Hey! I know how to drive a manual,” I say sharply.

“Seriously?” His voice is filled with surprise. “That’s really fucking sexy.”

I blush at the thought of Edward finding *anything* about me sexy. I risk a quick glance at him. His smile makes me weak in the knees. It’s a good thing I’m driving because I need an excuse to look away from his hypnotizing stare. “What kind of car was it?”

“An Audi TTS Roadster—265 horsepower, convertible, two-seater. I would have loved to see you behind the wheel of that car.” His voice is animated as he talks about it.

“Sounds cute. What color was it?”

“Cute,” he repeats in disbelief. “Cute is hardly the word I would use to describe it.” He laughs. “And it was red.”

“I’m sure it was a nice car.” I don’t know much about cars, but it does sound pretty kick-ass. “If you liked it so much why’d you get rid of it?”

Edward's smile falters. "It wasn't as . . . *practical* as this one." He gives a small shrug. It definitely sounds like there's more to the story. My mind conjures up images of Jane, and I wonder if she somehow influenced his decision. I briefly entertain the idea of asking him, but because of the change in his demeanor, I don't press for more information.

The car falls silent, and it's not long before Edward is sleeping. My mind starts to wander back to this morning—Edward holding me close, his lips on my neck, his hand lightly squeezing my bottom. It felt good but it was all so innocent. I wonder if he was holding back or if he wasn't interested in going further. I want that feeling back from Couchgate. I want to know I turn him on. I want to experience the tingling between my legs again as he pushes himself against me. Most of all, I want to feel his lips against mine.

I'm nervous about where our physical relationship is headed. I'm not naïve. Guys are interested in sex. I don't have much experience in that field, but I know it's pleasurable for them. I want Edward to have that pleasure, and I know, without a doubt, that I would give myself to him without a second thought.

"Gather some courage and seduce him!" Alice's voice rings in my head.

The problem is that I'm not sure if he's interested in me in that way. Other than when we were drinking and this morning, he hasn't made any moves on me. It always seems like he's flirting, but then he stops like there's some invisible line that he refuses to cross. It's like he wants to be close to me but doesn't want to be *close* to me.

I really want to go with Edward when he meets his dad for the first time, but I'm not sure whether or not he wants me there. I worry that I pressured him into going to Seattle before he was ready. He wants me along for the ride, but I don't know if he actually wants me present when the initial meeting unfolds. Yesterday, in the car, I intended on asking him in plain English if he wanted me to go with him to his dad's. I wanted to give him an out if he wasn't comfortable with my

presence. Instead, I got nervous and word-vomited all over the place, and before I knew it, I was offering to stay with Charlie. Of course Edward didn't state his opinion, only giving a cryptic, "*Whatever you think is best.*"

What *do* I think is best?

If things work out between Edward and his dad—and I honestly hope they do—they will probably spend some time getting to know one another. Will I be the third wheel if I'm there? It would be unfair to intrude on their time together. Seattle is only a few hours away from Forks, though, so if he went by himself it's not like we'd be terribly far apart if he needed me.

I would feel guilty pulling Edward away from his dad if all goes well, so it's probably a good idea to visit Charlie first. I *want* to see Charlie, but I don't necessarily want to *stay* with him, mostly because there's a better chance of Hell freezing over than him allowing Edward to spend the night. However, that means showing up on his doorstep with a man I basically ran away with, who is much older than I've led my dad to believe, only to run off with him again. I don't think he'll be pleased by the circumstances, and I don't want him to think I'm rubbing my relationship—if it can be called that—with Edward into his face. I'm also positive Edward would be less than thrilled by the prospect of having to find somewhere else to stay. He has already expressed displeasure of dealing with my "parental bullshit" once. Even though he was angry at the time and apologized for it later, it's still in the forefront of my mind.

Frankly, I'm worried about Edward meeting my dad, especially if we go there first. I get the feeling Edward doesn't deal with things very well, and I don't want my dad to say or do anything that will cause him to lose his confidence before having to find his own father. Maybe if I can spend some time alone with Charlie, I can butter him up a bit before he meets Edward.

Staying with Charlie for a few days might work best after all. That way I can talk some sense into him while Edward spends some quality time with his dad, and when Edward is ready, he can come back to me.

Of course, if Edward asks me to go to Seattle with him, I'll be there with bells on. All he has to do is ask.

Edward takes over driving halfway through the afternoon. We stop at a motel in Bismarck for the night.

In the bathroom, I change into my pajamas. The shorts bring back memories of this morning when Edward's hand was on me. I start to pull the robe on but decide against wearing it. It falls to the floor in a heap, but I'm too nervous to bother picking it up. Taking a deep breath, I open the door and step out of the bathroom.

Edward glances at me from the bed. I watch as his wide eyes scan my body. After making a couple of passes over me, his eyes meet mine and he smiles shyly. He turns off the television as I crawl into bed and the room is encased in darkness. Edward slides his arm around my shoulders as I lie down. My heart pounds furiously.

In a moment of extreme courage, I lean toward him, find his face with my hand, and gently touch my lips to his. Edward is completely unresponsive, save for his sharp intake of breath and the hardening of his lips. I pull away quickly, trying to brush off his rejection. I wish I could see his face, but in the darkness of the room I can barely make out his form.

I should have known better. I should have known he didn't want me like this. If he did, he would have kissed me already. He would have kissed me during Couchgate or when we went to dinner in Chicago or one of the nights we spent in his bed together. I hope it's not me. Maybe Edward just isn't a kisser.

My worries cut off abruptly as he sits up and presses his lips onto mine. I gasp in surprise as he gently pushes me onto my back and situates himself between my legs. His movements are slow and deliberate while his lips never break contact.

I may have been the instigator of the first kiss, but now, I relinquish control to Edward. After placing multiple closed-mouth kisses on me, he delicately sucks on my bottom lip. His tongue traces along it slowly before he releases it and repeats the gesture on the top, this time sliding his tongue along the inside. I'm fairly confident I would be happy with kissing Edward all night long. What he's doing right now isn't even kissing; it's a form of art. If I had known kissing him would be this good I would have initiated it a long time ago. He is so gentle—not aggressively plunging his tongue in my mouth, not slobbering, not clinking our teeth together. It's sensual and I never thought a simple kiss could turn me on so much. It makes me want more.

Edward runs his tongue lightly between my lips before deepening the kiss. I feel him shift his weight onto one of his arms and his hand comes up to my face. His fingers lightly trace my cheek and jaw. I snake my arms around him and slowly rub up and down his back. He sits up quickly, and I hear the rustling of fabric. He is shirtless when he returns to me. As I run my fingertips along his warm skin, he shivers and chuckles into my mouth.

Edward is ticklish. Good to remember.

I press my hands against him firmly, feeling the way the muscles of his back flex from supporting the weight of his upper body. Wanting more of his weight on me, I hug him tightly. He concedes to my nonverbal request. His hand falls away from my face, and he lies down on me with his elbows propped on either side of my head.

When his body shifts, I feel something hard press against my thigh. Feeling bold, I push my hips into him. Edward moans quietly into my mouth. I do it again, and he pushes back against me slightly. Craving more friction, I slide my

hands down and push on his backside in encouragement. Edward breaks the kiss and groans loudly as he thrusts against me roughly.

Placing warm, wet kisses down my neck, Edward follows the curve of my collar bone to the center of my chest. He continues to kiss lower, over the neckline of my tank top, stopping when his lips are centered between my breasts. He slowly moves to the side until he reaches my nipple. When he does, he wraps his lips around the fabric covering it. My nipples harden in response to the attention. There is a tingling between my legs, and I can feel the wetness forming there. Edward makes his way to my other nipple, this time taking it in his teeth and tugging gently. It feels better than anything I've experienced, and in this moment, I know I will give myself to him in whatever way he wants me.

Edward slides down my body and his lips meet the skin right above the waistline of my shorts. He slowly kisses up my abdomen, sliding my tank top up as he continues upward. He uncovers one of my breasts and brushes his lips and nose against it a few times before sucking my nipple into his mouth. His tongue is hot and the way he swirls it around me causes a gasp to escape. He moans and the vibrations send a shiver through my body. He kisses a line across my chest and uncovers my other breast. This time he flicks his tongue out and teases me before biting down lightly.

"Mmm," I moan. Edward palms the breast he's not currently working over with his mouth, exploring playfully with feather light touches. "Edward," I whimper.

Before I can take another breath he is tugging off my shirt. The second it is over my head his mouth is back on mine. He trails his right hand down my body and slips it inside my shorts. He pauses, but when I don't object, he lightly runs his fingertips between my legs. My breath catches when he grazes my clit. Edward removes his lips from mine and rests his head against my neck.

"Do you want me to stop?" he asks as he presses his fingers against me harder.

“No,” I breathe.

“Good.” He slips a finger under the side of my underwear and I can tell how wet I am by the way he slides it against me. “Oh, fuck,” he groans.

Now that he knows how aroused I am, he’ll want to have sex. The thought both excites and terrifies me. I hope he’ll like being with me and not be disappointed.

“Tell me if you want to stop, okay?” he whispers as he sits up and begins to slide my remaining clothing off. I take a deep breath. Is this it? I wonder if he has a condom. Hopefully he’s gentle.

Edward lies down alongside me. He plants kisses on my neck and shoulder and places his hand between my legs again, slowly caressing and exploring my body. I quiver under his touch and attempt to relax so I can fully enjoy the pleasure he’s giving me. He’ll most likely stop soon, but I’m too anxious about having sex with him for the first time to care.

“Tell me what you like,” he whispers in my ear.

“Wh- what?” His question catches me off guard.

“What do you like?” he repeats.

“I don’t know,” I say timidly. “Anything?”

“Anything?” he asks suggestively. “Come on, Bella. Don’t be shy. How do you like to get off?”

He wants to get me off? “I . . . I don’t know. I’ve never . . .”

Edward’s head springs up from my shoulder and his body goes rigid. “You’ve never?” he asks in alarm. “Bella, are you—”

“No! No,” I answer quickly and his body relaxes immediately. “I’ve never . . . had . . . um,” I stammer.

“An orgasm?” he asks. I shake my head. “Never?” The amusement is apparent in his voice. It’s silly, but I’m too embarrassed to answer verbally. “Well,” he says

before kissing me quickly and continuing, “you won’t be able to say that after tonight.”

“Oh, you don’t have to,” I insist. It’s better if we just have sex and not worry about it. I don’t want him to put in the effort just to be disappointed when it doesn’t happen. The last thing I want is for him to be frustrated with himself or me.

“What if I want to?” he challenges.

“It doesn’t matter. I can’t,” I tell him. “I think there’s something wrong with me.”

My admission is met with silence. Edward rolls on top of me, and I mentally prepare for what’s coming next. I expect him to pull his shorts off so we can have sex, but instead he stretches his body over me more and turns on the lamp. Even though it’s dim, I squint from the sudden change in brightness. When I peek at Edward, he is looking at me with a worried expression on his face.

“Why would you say that?” he asks softly. I shrug, not in the mood to talk about something that was an ongoing frustration in my prior relationship—something I couldn’t help. “Did someone tell you that?” he asks in disbelief. I look away from him, not wanting to say yes, but giving away the answer with my reaction. “Bella, there’s nothing wrong with you, I promise.” He places a tender kiss on my lips. “It’s not your fault if the man you’re with doesn’t take the time to learn your body. I’d like to try, please?” Edward smiles at me suggestively and I blush. “No pressure, okay? If it doesn’t happen tonight we’ll try again.” I nod, granting him permission. His smile widens. “Close your eyes,” he whispers, “and relax.”

I do as he says, and we resume the position we were in before with him lying next to me. His fingers gently circle my clit. He slowly adds pressure and increases his speed. It takes a while but eventually my body is writhing from his touch and my breathing quickens. Edward pauses to slip a finger inside me,

followed immediately by a second. He begins massaging me with his thumb while he pumps in and out. I moan quietly as he sucks one of my nipples into his mouth roughly. The stimulation borders on overwhelming. There is an unfamiliar feeling of tension building in my abdomen. A tingling sensation starts to form where Edward is touching me. It begins to feel hot, like it's burning. It borders on uncomfortable, but at the same time, feels incredible.

Before I fully understand what's happening, the heat spreads throughout my body and a strong wave of pleasure rushes over me. My legs shake and I can feel my body pulsing around Edward's fingers. I realize I've been moaning for the duration of my climax. At some point I must have sat up and opened my eyes, because I'm propped up on my elbows with my eyes glued to Edward's hand between my legs as I ride out the end of my first orgasm. Exhaling heavily, I slump back onto the bed. My muscles feel like Jell-O, and I am completely relaxed. "That was amazing," I whimper.

"That was sexy as fuck," Edward replies in a strained voice as he hovers over me.

With the light on, I notice the bulge in his shorts. I want him to have a release as well, but I am feeling shy about touching him. I timidly trace my finger up his length and am rewarded when he shudders. I do it again, this time with my entire hand.

He moans into my ear.

Pushing my uncertainty aside, I dip my fingers into his waistband and run them across his abdomen. I don't expect my fingers to brush his erection, but they do, earning me another moan of encouragement. I bravely work my hand inside his boxers and wrap my fingers around him before sliding my fist slowly up and down his length. I pause uncertainly.

"Please," he begs in a whisper.

I continue to stroke him as he pushes his clothing past his hips to fully free himself. It would be a lie to say I'm not intimidated by Edward's size. He's larger than what I'm used to, but I don't think that's a bad thing. Edward thrusts himself into my hand, setting the pace. He is panting heavily. His eyes are shut so tightly it looks like he's frowning.

"Fuck, Bella," he moans, dropping his forehead to my chest. He picks up the pace of his thrusting. I imagine what it might feel like if he were pushing into my body instead of my hand. A quiet moan escapes my lips at the thought. Edward's head snaps up, and he looks into my eyes in wonder.

"God, what you do to me," he grunts as he captures my lips in a searing kiss. I can tell he is distracted. After a couple of seconds he gives up on the kiss completely but leaves his mouth pressed against mine.

"Oh, fuck," he breathes. "Tighter." I squeeze my fingers around his cock as tight as I can. He twitches and grows harder in my hand.

"Oh, god . . . oh, god."

Edward's entire body convulses and his thrusting becomes erratic. I still my hand, letting him take over. I watch his beautiful face as he comes, feeling the warmth splatter across my stomach. I never thought I'd find something like this sexy, but it's a turn on knowing I did this to him, that it's *his* cum on my body. He bows his head while he catches his breath. A drop of sweat falls onto my chest as he gazes down to where my hand is still wrapped around him. He balances on one elbow and I feel his arm shake from supporting his weight for so long. Edward dips his thumb into one of the puddles on my belly and drags a line through it.

"Let's get you cleaned up," he says before placing a passionate kiss on my lips and pulling me out of the bed. I squeal as my feet abruptly leave the floor. Edward chuckles and places another kiss on my lips before he carries me to the bathroom.

chapter fourteen

Edward

"B

ella, what are you doing?" I mumble through my sleep induced haze as she lightly traces my face with her fingers.

"I wanted to touch you. You look so peaceful when you're sleeping."

"Hmm. Yet you're always waking me up." I wrap my arm around her to pull her against me. She lays her head on my shoulder, and her fingers trail down my face onto my bare chest. "I was having the best dream."

"Really? About what?"

"You," I tell her, unable to keep the smirk off my face.

Bella lifts her head and looks me in the eyes. "What about me?" she asks with a quirked brow.

“You were naked,” I answer honestly, leaving out the part where she was underneath me and crying out my name.

Bella giggles.

“Oh, you think that’s funny, do you?” In one swift move, I flip Bella onto her back and straddle her. “You won’t be laughing once this comes off,” I threaten mockingly as I grasp the hem of her tank top. She struggles against me and grips my wrists in an attempt to pry my hands off of her top. She’s laughing so I assume what I’m doing is okay. Still, I don’t want to do anything to make her uncomfortable. It would be easy for me to overpower her but I let her continue to fight me off—just to be on the safe side. After a few moments she surrenders and releases my wrists, letting her arms fall limply to her sides. I smile, knowing I have won this round, and hope this is her way of giving me permission to undress her.

I begin to slide the fabric up her body. My breath catches as the creamy expanse of her belly is exposed. Bella has a fantastic body. The possibility of seeing her nude figure illuminated by the soft morning light makes me hard. There’s no hiding my erection from her this time since I’m sitting on her wearing only underwear. Before I uncover her chest, I stop and look at Bella’s face for permission to continue. She is smiling but something about her expression is off, almost mischievous. She places her hands flat on my stomach as if she’s going to push me away. I open my mouth to ask if she’s okay, only I never get the chance.

Bella digs her fingers into my ribcage causing me to laugh involuntarily. She renders me helpless almost immediately. I squirm away, and within a matter of seconds, the tables turn. Bella hovers over me as she continues her relentless attack. I try pushing her off of me, but I can’t find the strength. My eyes sting with tears from the way she is playfully tormenting me. My abdominal muscles hurt. My laugh becomes hoarse. I can’t string more than two words together at a time so my attempts at begging her to stop are in vain.

“Bella, sst-sssst—” My protest gets cut off when she moves one hand to my neck, causing me to laugh even harder. I can’t decide if this situation is frustrating or fun. Even though I don’t mind Bella having the upper hand—or straddling me—the ache in my sides borders on uncomfortable. “Bella—please stop—it hurts!” After three attempts, I’m finally able to force out enough words to form a complete thought.

Bella complies but doesn’t remove her hands from my body. I lie there, panting and exhausted, and catch my breath. “Admit defeat,” she demands.

“Never.” Her fingers immediately assault my neck again. I try to retreat from the invasion, but unless I can find a way to sink further into the bed, there is no escaping. “Okay! Okay, okay, okay!”

“Okay, what?”

“I give up! I surrender! You win! You win!” I shout through my laughter.

With my verbal admission of defeat, Bella pushes away from me and climbs off the bed, leaving me slightly disappointed and very, very aroused. Having her take control and completely dominate me like that was a turn-on, and although the physical evidence tapered off during the exchange, it’s back in full force now. I palm myself through my boxers, giving my dick a mental, “*Hang in there, buddy,*” pep talk before rolling myself off the bed.

“So,” I begin as we once again drive through the middle of nowhere. The little voice in my head has been nagging me to make sure Bella is all right with everything that happened last night, especially after she evaded my advances this morning. “Last night.”

“Last night,” she repeats quietly. I peek at her out of the corner of my eye, hoping to catch a glimpse of the delicious shade of pink that always colors her

cheeks, but her hair cascades around her face like a curtain, effectively hiding whatever emotions she's feeling.

The silence that falls inside the car causes a slight panic to settle over me. "Yeah, last night. Are you—I mean was that . . . Fuck, Ki-Bella, if I did something to . . . I don't want you to—"

"Edward, stop." She places her hand on my arm. The feel of her soft skin on mine is calming and effectively cuts off my rambling. "Last night was wonderful."

"Wonderful?" The air leaves my lungs in a giant *whoosh*. Bella doesn't sound apprehensive at all. If anything, she sounds content, even a little amazed. "You enjoyed it?"

"Yes, very much," she answers without hesitation. "Thank you."

"I want to make you feel good again." And again and again and again. "Was that really your first? Orgasm, I mean." I watch Bella nod out of the corner of my eye. Her hair creates a veil as she looks down, blocking my view once more. "Like, your first *ever* or your first with someone else?"

"Ever," she mumbles.

My pride swells a little at her confirmation. Okay, it swells a lot, not that I ever doubted my ability to bring her to climax. I'm just glad I could be her first *something*. I find it astonishing that anyone can be sexually active without experiencing one. I suppose that's one of the benefits of being a guy—getting off is relatively straight-forward. Hell, what guy doesn't beat off just for the release? "Haven't you ever, uh, touched yourself?"

Bella doesn't say anything. She sits there quietly while she picks at Eddie's tag. I hope my question didn't cross a line. My brain-to-mouth filter stopped working the moment I started thinking about making Bella come again. I contemplate retracting my question and apologizing, but she takes a deep breath and answers, "Well, yeah, but . . ."

Just like that, any hope I have of going the entire drive without getting hard flies out the window. After yesterday, it's impossible to be within any sort of close proximity to Bella without sporting major wood the entire time. Now that I've seen her naked, my mind paints a much better visual, and my fantasies are more realistic. "But?" I press her to continue.

"But . . . I don't know. It just never happened." Bella takes a deep breath and sighs in frustration.

"Hey. It's okay, you know." I take her hand and pull it up to my lips so I can kiss each of her knuckles. "I already told you that there is nothing wrong with you."

"I'm sorry it took so long."

"Bella," I say gently, "you have *nothing* to apologize for. I enjoyed every minute of it. *Believe me.*"

"Did you enjoy yours?" she asks uncertainly. "Did I do okay?"

"You were perfect," I assure her before kissing her hand repeatedly.

"*Pfft.* Right."

"You were. Bella, look at me." She does, and I do my best to make eye contact with her between glances at the road. "I have been dreaming about a night like that ever since I first saw you standing beside my car."

"Really?" Her eyes light up and her voice is hopeful.

"Really. As a matter of fact, I've spent all day working up a plan to get into your pants again," I tease.

"You liar." Bella pulls her hand out of mine and swats at me playfully.

"I'm serious. Any suggestions?"

"Yeah. Say you'll do whatever you did last night again." Her words become progressively quieter, and I strain to catch the end of her sentence.

"I plan on doing much more." With that promise, I take her hand again and tease between her knuckles suggestively with my tongue. Her cheeks burn a

brilliant shade of red when the realization of what I want to do sinks in. She looks away quickly but can't keep the broad grin from stretching across her face.

I intend to keep that smile there for as long as she will let me.

We arrive at the motel before sunset. It feels like every nerve ending in my body is frazzled. The last six hours were filled with pure sexual tension. I can't go another minute without relieving it somehow.

Upon entering the room, I drop our bags to the floor before pushing Bella against the closed door and pressing my lips to hers. She gasps as I grab her hips tightly and rub myself against her. This kiss isn't soft and slow like last night; it's frenzied and needy with a longing that causes an ache in my chest. I want to be closer—need to be closer—so I press the entire length of my body against hers. Even with our bodies as close as possible, it does nothing to dull the raw desire I am feeling.

From the way she responds to my advances, she must feel the same way. Bella returns every ounce of passion I put forth. She clutches the back of my neck with one hand while the other grips a handful of my hair. I moan and break the kiss. Without missing a beat, Bella works her lips down my neck, sucking and nibbling on my skin. My forehead falls to rest on the door in front of me as I close my eyes, enjoying what she's doing and thrusting my hips into her every now and again to get some friction. Her teeth scrape down my jaw, the sensation against my facial hair causing a whimper to escape, but I don't fucking care. I make all sorts of pathetic, needy noises in Bella's ear. She brings her hands down and strokes me through my jeans before she begins to unbutton my fly. That's all it takes to pull me out of my Bella-induced trance. I'm way too wound up to have any sort of longevity right now. I need to take care of her first.

“Not yet,” I whisper as I grab her hands and hook them behind my neck. “I want you to come first.” Leaning down, I wrap my arms under Bella’s ass and lift her up. She wraps her legs around my waist and tightens the hold on my neck.

“Edward.” In my entire life, I have never heard anything as sexy as the way Bella breathes my name. It causes my entire body to hum with anticipation. Our lips crash together again as I walk backwards toward the bed. When the backs of my legs make contact with it I fall back, bringing Bella down on top of me. I push on her shoulders until she sits up, and I hastily remove her shirt and bra before gently fondling her breasts.

Bella has perfect tits—soft, perky, and sized as if they were made for my hand. Her nipples are a rosy shade of pink that is bright against the creamy pallor of her skin and so responsive to my touch. I sit up, propping myself on one arm while my free hand works her jeans open, and flick one nipple with my tongue before sucking it into my mouth. Bella begins breathing heavily, but I want a more dramatic reaction out of her. Using my teeth, I tease her gently and slowly increase the pressure, stopping when she cries out my name. The sound goes straight to my dick, and I swear I can almost *hear* it throbbing away in my pants. Satisfied with her response, I flip her over and pull her pants off in one smooth motion.

“I can’t wait to taste you,” I whisper in her ear before kissing my way down her body.

Bella tenses, from anticipation or apprehension, I’m not sure. “Wait,” she requests in a near panic. I pause, my lips near her belly button. “A-are you sure?”

My anger flares as scenarios run through my mind of why she is uncomfortable with me going down on her. I’m fairly positive her ex told her something was wrong with her because she never had an orgasm with him. Maybe he told her something in regards to this, too. Did he tell her he didn’t like it? That she tasted bad? Maybe he never even did it at all. Selfish prick. I have the

sudden urge to hunt the kid down and kick his ass once we get to Forks. “I’m positive,” I murmur against her stomach while I try to hide my irritation.

“Edward?” This time I sit back on my knees. I allow my eyes to wander over her body before finally meeting her gaze. Bella’s expression is guarded. I would give anything to know what she is thinking right now. I smile reassuringly as I wait for her to continue. “Will you take your clothes off, too? I don’t want to be naked by myself.”

Not what I was expecting. At all. No complaints here.

“Of course.” I pull off my shirt before standing and removing the rest of my clothing. Bella’s eyes travel slowly down my body, lingering on my dick for a couple seconds before snapping up to meet mine. Even in the dim light of the room I can see her blush at getting caught. “Like what you see?” I tease her as I crawl back onto the bed. Hooking my thumbs into the waistband of her panties, I slowly slide them off before settling between her legs.

Bella’s breathing becomes ragged when my lips make contact with the slick skin between her legs. It’s difficult not to think about having sex with her when she is this wet and we’re both completely naked. If it weren’t for the lack of condoms and my strong desire to get her off again, I would definitely be inside her right now.

I take my time massaging her gently with my tongue. She moans softly when I start to focus my efforts on her clit. “Good girl,” I murmur against her heated skin. She is more vocal after that, making it easier for me to tune in on what she enjoys the most. Originally, I had planned on using only my mouth, but I can’t resist sliding my fingers into her and imagining the way it would feel to be buried deep inside her. Wet. Warm. Soft. Tight.

She begins to writhe underneath me, and I use my free arm to hold her hips on the bed. Her breathing quickens and her fingers dig into my shoulders. I increase the pressure, hoping it’s what she needs to send her over the edge. Bella

cries out as she comes. She tugs on my hair roughly with one hand, but the pain barely registers. I am far too distracted by the way her body clenches around my fingers. I can't wait to feel that on another more sensitive part of my body.

I continue to gently caress her until she completely comes down from the high. When she stops trembling and her breathing returns to normal, I know she's finished. I discreetly wipe my face off before crawling next to her and lying alongside her. She plants a chaste kiss on my lips before sliding down my body.

"What are you doing?" I ask dumbly. It's obvious what her intentions are. My brain has apparently lost all blood flow to my dick.

"Returning the favor," she says quietly as she wraps a warm hand around me.

"Fuck," I breathe. I almost ask her if she's ever given head before but refrain. Besides, I don't really want to hear the answer. Thinking about Bella's head over some other guy's crotch is not a visual I want stuck in my head right now.

Or ever.

Bella licks up my length before she takes me in her mouth, causing me to lose all train of thought. The only thing I can concentrate on is the feeling of her hot, wet, little mouth around me. This is definitely *not* going to last long. I can tell by the way she keeps hesitating that she isn't quite confident in what she's doing. Weaving my fingers into her hair, I place my hand on her head and gently guide her, setting the pace that feels best. The view of Bella with her lips wrapped around my dick is hotter than I could have ever imagined. I wish I could burn the image into the backs of my eyelids for future reference like when I'm beating off in the shower or just for the hell of it.

My focus settles on the area Bella's mouth doesn't reach and I start to obsess over feeling her lips traveling all the way down to the base. I press on the back of her head gently, encouraging her to take me farther into her mouth. She catches on and takes me deeper with each downward stroke. I try not to get carried away,

but when there is only a sliver of skin showing, I get overly excited and press a little too hard.

Bella makes a choking noise. It sounds hot as fuck but I feel bad knowing it's my fault. I release her head immediately, but she doesn't stop. "Shit, baby. I'm sorry," I apologize huskily. "You okay?"

"Mm-hmm," she hums around me.

"Oh, fuck," I moan. "Do that again." She complies and the vibration almost pushes me over the edge. "I'm so close," I whimper. "Don't stop. Please don't stop."

My hand hovers over Bella's head as she picks up the pace. I want to guide her again, but I'm afraid of repeating my mistake. Instead my hand falls to the bed as I let her have complete control. The pressure continues to build. I won't last much longer.

God, please fucking swallow.

The thought causes me to come undone. My body shudders as I release into Bella's mouth. She adds her hand to the mix and continues to work me until I'm completely finished. I watch her throat constrict as she swallows the entire load.

"You are fucking amazing," I praise as I stroke my finger across her swollen lips. "I can't believe you just did that."

Bella frowns slightly at my admission. "You asked me to," she says in confusion.

Fuck. I said that out loud?

I open my mouth to apologize, to explain—something, anything—but I honestly don't know what to say. Instead I pull her to my chest and roll us onto our sides. In a moment of vulnerability, I whisper, "I adore you," before capturing her lips in a kiss.

We lie on the bed for a while, sharing kisses and soft caresses. I ask Bella if she is okay with what we did and if her second orgasm lived up to her

expectations. As much as I want to make sure she's all right, I also want to validate myself. I've never been good at interpersonal relationships; it's important that I don't jeopardize this one.

She says yes to both questions. After a moment she reluctantly adds, "I think it helped that it was you."

Fuck yeah it was me.

"I gave you the time you needed." Unlike the impatient kid you dated before. "And I know what I'm doing." Great, Masen, way to sound like a manwhore.

"No. I mean, like, I thought about you and it helped to . . . you know."

Oh my fucking god.

"Are you saying that you fantasized about me and it helped you get off?" I ask in awe. She nods as her dark brown eyes meet mine—wide and innocent, but apparently not *that* innocent. It's impossible to tell if she's blushing since her face is still glowing from our recent bedroom romp. "I think I need a cigarette," I say as I roll off the bed. I need to extract myself from this situation before I'm tempted to ask Bella to get me off again. I need some fresh air. Fresh, nicotine enriched air. Bella did a good job keeping me clean so I forgo the underwear and put on my jeans and t-shirt.

"You've been smoking a lot less," she comments.

"Huh." I do a mental count of how many packs I've gone through since meeting Bella. "I guess I have." Bella stands up from the bed. I wrap my arms around her and lean down to give her a kiss. "Can I get you anything while I'm out?"

"Water," she answers.

"Okay." I place another kiss on her lips while I lower my hands to her naked ass. Bella squeals as I give her a smack. The sound resonates in the small room and my dick has an automatic reaction to it.

Must get out. *Now*.

“I’ll be back soon. Leave the door locked, okay? I’m bringing a key.”

She nods and stands on the tips of her toes to kiss me again. My heart warms whenever Bella takes the initiative to make physical contact. “Hurry back.”

I struggle to enjoy my cigarette as I pace in the parking lot. The buzz is fantastic, and the weather outside is perfect, but the only thing I can think about is getting back to Bella. I don’t want to be away from her. By the sound of it, she doesn’t want to be away from me either. Bella is like a drug to me. The more of her I have, the more I want. It’s almost painful to be separated.

Tonight—the taste of her skin, the way her lips stretched around me—is not doing anything to lessen my excitement. I try *not* to think about it, but that only makes me dwell on it more. I make a mental note to buy condoms, not because what we’ve already done isn’t enough, but because I want to be as close to Bella as possible. In every way. I feel as though our time together has a permanent expiration date, and I want to experience everything with her before our current arrangement comes crashing down around us.

I still feel guilty about dragging Bella this whole way. I don’t have much faith that things will go well with my father. As much as I want her by my side when it happens, I don’t want her to see me being turned away. I’m afraid she will look at me differently when she sees I’m not worth his time. Maybe she’ll start to think I’m not worth *her* time either. It doesn’t matter anyway. She’s planning on staying at her father’s home while I find him. I’m not going to tell her how I feel, because I don’t want to influence her decision. It’s a lose-lose situation for me. I just want her to do whatever makes her happy.

Irritated with the path my train of thought takes, I snub out the half-smoked cigarette and head back to the room. Stopping by the vending machine, I buy two

waters and an orange juice for Bella. There's a fridge in the room if she wants to save it for the morning.

When I re-enter the room, I sense the change in atmosphere almost immediately. Bella is sitting on the edge of the bed hunched over Eddie. She looks upset, as though someone just delivered bad news. I notice my phone sitting next to her.

"Bella?" I rush to the bed and drop to the floor at her feet. "What's wrong? What happened?" I pull Eddie out of her grasp and take both of her hands in mine.

Bella shakes her head. Tears brim in her eyes. "Your phone rang while you were out," she says weakly.

"Who was it?" I can't image who could have called my phone or what they could have said to upset her so much.

"He said his name was Alec." Her voice wavers. "He told me to tell you that . . . that Jane had the baby."

chapter fifteen

Bella

Idward closes the motel room door behind him as I collapse onto the bed. For two nights in a row now, my body has responded to his touch in ways I hadn't thought possible—not only physically but mentally too. He makes me feel sexy and cared for and wanted. Really, really wanted. I can honestly say I never thought I was capable of the level of desire I have for him. Everything about him is perfect. Being with him feels so right.

In a sudden rush of excitement I stand up on the bed and jump around, giggling and smiling so wide my cheeks hurt. The blankets bunch up under my feet, and one of the pillows bounces to the floor. The springs groan in protest each time I land, and I hop off when I realize what it might sound like to the neighbors.

As I'm slipping on my pajamas, Edward's cell phone rings. I dig through his duffle bag until I find it, secretly hoping it's Alice, since Edward doesn't seem to get many calls. The caller ID only shows a number, and I flip the phone open without thinking about whether I should.

"Hello?"

"Hi." To my relief, the voice on the other end is male. "*I'm looking for Edward Masen. Do I have the right number?*"

"Yes. He's not here right now. May I take a message?" I try my best to sound professional in case the call is work-related.

"*Er, sure that's fine. This is Alec. I'm just letting him know that Jane had the baby this evening.*"

"Baby?" I mouth. Baby. What does he mean *baby*? Jane had the baby. Jane was pregnant? Edward would have said something if she was pregnant, wouldn't he? *The* baby, not *her* baby. He can't mean . . .

"*She wanted to call, but she's too overwhelmed right now. Everything's okay, though. You can let him know that both of them are doing great.*" Alec continues.

Edward's baby?

"*Oh! It's a boy. Lucas Edward . . .*"

No. Please, no.

"*. . . I think. She hasn't filled out the birth certificate yet, but that was the name she picked out for a boy. I believe Edward knew that already.*" He continues talking, the excitement apparent in his voice. It's not right. This whole situation isn't right. He's still speaking—weight, length, delivery time—but my brain isn't retaining any of it.

"*So, yeah. If you could pass the message along that would be great. If he wants, he can call me or Jane tomorrow.*"

"Okay, thanks," I squeak before flipping the phone closed.

Quiet. The room is so quiet. My head is foggy. My thoughts are fleeting. I try to concentrate on what just happened, but I can't wrap my mind around it. It's as though my brain is shutting down in some sort of self-preservation mode. Somehow, I end up on the floor. Pushing myself back up, I stand on wobbly legs and turn slowly, taking in the room. It looks the same as it did ten minutes ago, but it feels so different now.

That's when I see it.

On the bed.

The plush turtle.

Eddie.

My mind conjures up images of Edward leaning against the door of the gift shop, disheveled and deep in thought, with a sad smile that morphs into something happier when I accept his gift. I grab Eddie and fling him across the room as angry tears begin to fall. For a moment, I feel better, but it doesn't last for long. I cry harder as I retrieve the toy and slump onto the bed.

Not once. Not *once* did he mention Jane being pregnant. We talked about so much. He told me so much about himself—his unusual family situation, his feelings of inadequacy, his insecurities about meeting his father. How could he leave this out? He told me that he never felt close to anyone the way he feels toward me. He said that I comforted him in a way no one else ever had, in a way no one else ever could. He said he wanted to be close to me but how can any of that be true if he left out this major detail of his life? How could he not tell me something like this? Does he not think it's a big deal? Maybe it's not his. Maybe she cheated on him and that's why they broke up.

Then why is the baby's name Lucas Edward?

I don't understand how, after everything he went through, he could turn his back on his child. How could Edward not want to be a part of his life after *knowing* what it feels like to have indifferent parents? Even if Jane left him, why

isn't he fighting for his child? Edward is setting his kid up to be in the same position he's in now—not knowing his father, trying to find him, hoping for acceptance.

And what about *me*?

Did he ever plan on telling me? He had to know I'd find out eventually. Was he keeping it from me on purpose? Why? Why lie when the truth was bound to come out?

Because he knew I wouldn't give it up to him if I knew the truth. Because he didn't intend on keeping me around long enough to find out.

What felt so perfect and right only a few minutes ago is now ugly and tainted. I feel dirty, used. To think I was more than ready to give all of myself to that man. *Jerk*. I would have done anything he asked of me.

I think I'm going to be sick.

I want to leave, but where the heck am I going to go? We are in the Montana—out in the middle of nowhere—and I don't even have enough money to get my own room for the night. Sighing, I wipe the tears from my eyes. I can be mature about this. After tomorrow night, I'll be in Forks and I can pretend the last ten days never happened.

I should have known better. Edward was too good to be true.

I sit on the bed and wait for him to return. I wonder if he'll even bother with an explanation. My anger fades slowly, leaving behind feelings of hurt and betrayal.

After what feels like an eternity, the door opens. Edward's worried voice echoes through the room. "Bella? What's wrong? What happened?" He kneels in front of me and removes Eddie from my arms before he grabs my hands.

My eyes sting as I try desperately to hold back the tears. "Your phone rang while you were out."

"Who was it?" Edward asks with a frown.

I take a deep breath and choke down a sob. I don't want him to know how much this is affecting me. "He said his name was Alec. He told me to tell you that . . . that Jane had the baby." I expect him to apologize for not telling me sooner. I expect an explanation or a denial. Nothing could have prepared me for his reaction.

Edward's face lights up. A smile stretches across his face. "Really?" The excited tone of his voice makes my stomach flip. The sudden urge to get away is overwhelming, and I bolt from the bed. "Bella, wait."

Knowing it wouldn't be wise to leave the room wearing the pathetic excuse for pajamas that Edward bought me, I make a beeline for the bathroom. His fingers wrap around my elbow as I reach the doorway, preventing me from my makeshift escape. "Don't touch me, Edward," I hiss.

His face is concerned. He doesn't release his grip. "Please let me explain."

Taking a deep breath, I steel myself to give him a piece of my mind. Instead, tears of frustration pour down my cheeks. His arms envelope me and I instinctually push on his chest, trying to make him release me, but praying that he doesn't. "Let go of me," I demand half-heartedly.

"Don't do this," he whispers. He hugs me tighter and his body molds to mine. Although I'm still upset, I find comfort in his embrace. I have the urge to kick him in the balls, though. My knee twitches at the thought.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I mumble into his chest.

"I didn't think it was important."

"Not important?" I sob against him. "In what . . . *universe* . . . is you being a father . . . not *important?*"

"Bella," he says my name in the heart-melting way he always does. "I'm not the father."

I pull away from him, just enough to look into his eyes. "You . . . you're not?"

"No," he states firmly.

His eyes burn with intensity, and I believe him without a doubt. My heart floods with relief. Edward isn't hiding some big, life altering secret from me after all. I feel horrible for so readily doubting his character. "I'm sorry, Edward." I tuck my head under his chin and bury my face back in his chest.

"For what?" he asks. I shrug, not wanting to admit everything that ran through my mind while he was gone. "Don't apologize. I should have told you. It was stupid of me not to."

"I just don't understand..." I trail off. There are a billion questions swimming through my mind, but I struggle forming any of them into words. "If you're not the father then who is?"

"I don't know." He shrugs. "Jane was always friendly with the boys." My eyes widen at what I assume is his way of telling me she cheated on him. I'm about to pummel him with questions but he speaks before I can ask anything else. "Can we talk about it tomorrow?" Edward asks. "I'm tired. I just want to hold you." He pulls back slightly and looks into my eyes. An uneasy expression colors his face and he swallows thickly. "If it's still okay?"

I don't hesitate to answer. "Always."

"Jane and I have been friends for over ten years," Edward begins as we continue the drive to Washington. Our goal is to make it to Spokane for the night. As promised, Edward is filling me in on all the details about his relationship with Jane. "We met when I started my freshman year of college back in . . . ninety-seven."

"Ninety-seven?" I interrupt, mentally doing the math in my head. "But that would have made you—"

"I was sixteen," he interjects. "Jane was nineteen."

"Why did you start college so young?"

“I graduated two years early,” he explains simply. “Anyway, Jane was studying something in the medical field at the time so we had a lot of the same classes. She was from Los Angeles and didn’t know anyone. I never really made any friends in high school because, well, because I wasn’t allowed to have a life.” There is no missing the bitterness in Edward’s voice. “I was awkward and young. I didn’t fit in anywhere, not that I tried. I had no idea how to act around girls because I went to a private boys’ school.

“Jane was outgoing and for some reason liked me. She would sit by me in class and talk to me as if she never noticed how socially inept I was. It didn’t take her long to have a network of friends, but she never cast me aside. Even when she turned twenty-one, and her friends would go to the bar, she would stay in with me. She never took ‘no’ for an answer and constantly put me in social situations that were outside of my comfort zone, tried to pull me out of my shell.

“By the time I finished my bachelor’s degree, we no longer had any of the same classes. She always went out of her way to see me, though. I had a heavy course load, but whenever I had downtime, she was there. I was still living with my parents at the time. Jane knew how I was treated there and insisted I stay with her on the weekends. She said I changed whenever I spent an extended amount of time at home and that it was harder for her to keep me from regressing back to my former self.” Edward chuckles.

“She was my best friend. She was the only person who really knew me—the only one who took the time to find out what I thought, what I liked . . .” He pauses as he gazes pensively out of the windshield. “Or maybe she was just the only person I let in.”

It’s difficult to wrap my head around *this* Edward—a young adult transitioning between the neglected child he told me about and the caring, broken man sitting beside me. “So—” I hesitate. “Were you two dating that entire

time?” I can’t help the jealousy that spikes through me even if the rational side of me acknowledges that she probably was good for him.

“Oh, no,” he quickly denies. “Our relationship was purely platonic. We didn’t think of each other like that. I’m not sure we ever did.”

“But, you *were* together, right?” I am positive he referred to her as his ex-girlfriend at least once.

“Yeah.” Edward sighs and pulls his hand through his hair, leaving it slightly messier than usual. “We started dating last summer. Jane wasn’t having any relationship luck and I was tired of being alone. We always understood each other and got along well so we figured . . . why not give it a try?”

“Last summer? But if you’re not the father then how—” I stop myself from asking “how did she get pregnant?” I don’t want to sound like a fool, but I don’t know how to ask if she cheated without sounding insensitive.

“Jane was already pregnant when we started dating. She didn’t know it at the time and didn’t tell me until she was eight weeks along. I told her I wanted to help her raise the baby, that I wanted to be the dad.”

I shift uncomfortably in the passenger seat as I’m overwhelmed with guilt. Last night I was quick to think Edward was running from his fatherly duties when he was, in fact, doing the opposite.

Edward misreads my body language and tries to console me. “Bella, please understand that Jane and I were friends for so long that I was going to love that baby regardless of my role in Jane’s life. She helped me out so many times, and for once, I wanted to be there for her. I wanted her kid to grow up in a home with two loving parents—something *I* never had.

“I tried. God knows I tried. I never had a lot of stuff, but I sold everything I didn’t need to make room for them. I traded in my dream car for something with four doors and a backseat. For this.” He taps on the wheel. “We even set up the second bedroom as a nursery. Unfortunately, I was so wrapped up in doing what

I deemed the ‘right thing,’ I failed to realize Jane and I weren’t compatible as a couple.

“Things first started going downhill in December when my mom died—well, grandmother, whatever. I still thought of her as my mom back then—but everything got progressively worse as time went on. We never fought; we just didn’t get along like we did when we were friends. We tried to go back to the way things were but it was too late.

“Then one day she told me she was moving home to Los Angeles to be near her mother. Apparently Alec, her brother, had offered to let her move into his house. This all happened around the same time I discovered the truth about my family. I *begged* her not to go but . . . she did.

“My mother died the next day. I had never felt so utterly alone in my entire life.”

Every time Edward shares a new part of his past my heart breaks a little more. Things begin to make more sense now that I have this piece of the puzzle—the motivation behind the search for his father, the pain he carries with him, the mood swings, the uncertainty. I wish I knew what to do to take his pain away.

I mentally note the similarities between our most recent relationships. Edward was friends with Jane just as Jake and I had been. Now, both long-term friendships are lost in the wake of our failed relationships.

“And then you came along,” he continues softly. “Now you know everything. You probably know me better than anyone at this point.”

That may be true. I’m flattered that he regards me highly on the friendship scale, but there is still one thing we haven’t talked about, one thing that has been eating away at me for the past few days. “You said Jane was friendly with the boys. What about you?” I ask bravely. “Were you . . . *friendly*, too?”

“Uh . . .” As he stalls, he drags his hand down his smooth face and nervously grasps for the hair that’s no longer there. “I wasn’t into boys.”

“Wasn’t? But you are now?” I ask in an attempt to turn his joke back on him. Edward cracks a genuine smile for the first time today. He opens his mouth to retort but ends up only shaking his head. “What’s wrong, Gramps? Cat got your tongue?”

“So disrespectful,” he chides under his breath. “What am I going to do with you?”

Our playful banter is followed by awkward silence. Edward doesn’t address my inquiry about his sexual history. His avoidance of the subject makes me nervous. Can his number really be that high? I’m not naïve. I’ve enjoyed enough of his bedroom skills to know he has to be somewhat experienced. I wish he would just tell me already! I’m getting concerned.

“It’s okay,” I say finally. “You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to.”

Translation: if you know what’s good for you, you’ll tell me right now.

Edward sighs. “I wasn’t *that* friendly,” he says cryptically.

“What does ‘I wasn’t *that* friendly’ translate to in numbers?” Maybe it’s out of line for me to be so blunt, but seeing as we’ve become *closer*, I believe I have the right to know.

“Do you really want to know?”

Do I? Is it going to make a difference whether he says five or fifty? Probably not. “Yes,” I answer anyway.

“Less than ten,” he says after a moment.

What the hell kind of a copout is that? “So nine then.” It’s not a question.

“Why do you assume that?” he asks, clearly confused by my conclusion.

“Well, if you say less than ten I am going to assume the worst case scenario, which is nine, unless you say otherwise.”

“Eight,” he specifies with a sigh.

“Okay then.” I don’t hide my smugness.

“Is that too many?” he asks uncertainly.

“No.” Single digits are better than I originally hoped. “I don’t think so.”

“Good. I’m glad I have your approval.” He says it jokingly, but I know him well enough to decipher his underlying relief.

We stop at a Target after arriving in Spokane. Edward is out of shampoo which, by extension, means I’m out of shampoo.

“Why don’t you pick out a bottle,” he suggests. “I’ve got to get some things. I’ll be right back.”

Edward wraps his arm around my waist and pulls me against him. He places a kiss on my temple before releasing his hold and quickly walking out of the aisle. “Okay,” I murmur to no one. Apparently Edward doesn’t know me as well as I thought he did. If I was picky enough about hair care to spend any measurable amount of time in this aisle, I probably wouldn’t have been using his shampoo for the past 11 days. I select the same type he had before and then stand there for about 30 seconds, feigning interest in the other products, before getting bored and walking away. I assume Edward is running all over the store—collecting items quickly without me holding him back—so I’m surprised when I round the corner and practically run into him.

“Edward, what—” I stop when I take in his shocked expression. He is frozen in place. My eyes follow the line of his body, down his outstretched arm as he reaches for—

Oh!

My eyes widen as the heat licks up my cheeks. Edward smiles nervously; at least he has the decency to look sheepish. “Uh . . .,” he begins, clearly flustered. “Would it be presumptuous of me to buy condoms?”

It takes me a few moments to gather my composure. “It’s . . . I, um . . . you should,” I manage to say.

Edward picks a box from the shelf while I avert my eyes, suddenly feeling shy. After the past two nights I expected us to get to this point, but there's something about actually buying condoms that makes it feel *real*, like it's really going to happen. My stomach flutters in anticipation.

Edward drops me off at the hotel before leaving to get us dinner. I curl up on the bed. Sitting in a car doing nothing all day is exhausting. The next thing I know, I'm being woken up with kisses.

"Hey, sleepyhead," Edward coos. "You hungry?" I sit up and start to get out of bed but he stops me. "Stay there," he says as he sits next to me. He turns on the television and we eat in companionable silence.

When we're finished I stifle a yawn. Edward slides us down the bed until we are lying down and pulls the covers over us. He cuddles next to me and lays his head on my shoulder. I play with his hair while he holds me and plants occasional kisses on my neck.

I fight to stave off sleep. Being here with Edward feels so perfect. I don't want to miss a minute of it, especially since it's our last night together for a while. I'm not concerned about our separation tomorrow. I don't *want* to be apart from him, but I just *know* we'll be together again. "Edward?" I address in a whisper, not sure if he's asleep.

"Hmm?" he answers.

"Do you believe in fate?"

"Fate? I don't know. I've never really thought about it. Why?"

I shrug, momentarily dislodging his head from its cozy spot on my shoulder. Edward groans in displeasure. "It just seems like there was a very small window of opportunity for us to meet. We both dealt with some weird crap, we both reached our breaking point, and somehow ended up in the same place at the same time. It just seems like, I don't know, like we were meant to be." I hold my breath after the words are out. I have my suspicions that Edward feels the same

way I do, but I can't be sure since we've never actually talked about our relationship. My heart pounds violently as I wait for him to speak.

“Well,” he says finally, “if fate dealt me this shit-storm of a life in order to lead me to you, it was worth it.”

chapter sixteen

Edward

I wake up suddenly and immediately know that I am alone in the bed. The door opens, the light from the hallway casting an eerie red glow across the hotel room. Bella stands in the threshold with a duffle bag slung across her shoulder.

“Where are you going?” I call to her as I sit up.

She turns and stares back coldly. “Nowhere in particular.”

“What? Why?” I begin to panic.

“You’re not good for me, Edward.” Her voice is empty, hollow.

“What are you talking about?” I ask, confused.

“I’m sick of your bullshit.” She shrugs nonchalantly. “I’ve let this go on much too long, and I’m sorry for that.”

She turns to leave. I attempt to call out, “Bella, wait!” but nothing comes out. I want to chase after her, but my body doesn’t cooperate. My limbs are heavy and won’t move. It’s as if there is an invisible force pinning me to the bed.

“Edward,” I hear her say. Again, I try to speak, and again, there’s nothing but silence. “Edward,” she says more forcefully. She spins to face me once more. “Edward!” she yells, her voice echoing the panic in her eyes. “Edward, wake up!”

My eyes snap open and I sit up abruptly. Someone is screaming. It’s not until I’m gasping for breath that I realize it’s me. I shiver from the cool air hitting my exposed, sweat-dampened skin. A warm hand unexpectedly touches my back, causing me to jump.

“Hey,” a quiet voice says. “You okay?”

My mind is foggy from sleep. It takes me a moment to recognize the voice as Bella’s. She’s still here; she didn’t leave. “You’re here,” I say in disbelief.

“Where else would I be?” she asks softly.

“I’m not sure.”

Bella brushes her fingers across my cheeks to wipe away tears I didn’t know had fallen. “You were yelling.” She kisses my lips gently. “Bad dream?”

“Yes,” I answer. I try unsuccessfully to forget the sight of her walking out of the door. Bella looks at me expectantly. “You were leaving.”

“Edward,” she whispers, “I’m not going anywhere.”

In the morning, while Bella takes a shower, I call Jane to congratulate her and find out how she’s doing. She doesn’t answer, and to my surprise, I’m relieved. Things have been awkward since we broke up. The harder we try to act *normal*, the more uncomfortable our interactions become. It’s like the way a person inexplicably makes more noise when trying to be quiet or how when someone tries to rush through something it inevitably takes longer.

I leave Jane a message, letting her know I'm happy for her and hope she's doing well. I tell her things are good with me but nothing else. She's a natural worrier so I wanted to tell her *something*, but not details. She has enough on her plate right now with a newborn. Besides, how many states does the poor girl have to cross to escape my issues?

I don't think we'll ever be close friends and confidants again. It's hard to believe that, if things had gone differently, I'd be in Chicago right now playing daddy to Lucas. I honestly hadn't thought about it like that until right now. For the first time, I feel like Jane's departure was a blessing in disguise.

Bella adamantly apologized for not remembering more details, only recalling the baby's name and that he was born at seven-something. I assured her that it was okay, that I wouldn't have expected her to retain anything under the circumstances.

I have never felt like more of an ass than when I watched Bella battle with hurt and anger toward me, because of me. It would have saved us both a lot of heartache had I just told her about Jane being pregnant beforehand. It probably wouldn't have even been an issue. Of course, it hadn't happened that way because the universe fucking hates me. It's not like I withheld the information on purpose. It never seemed relevant and there hadn't been a time where it felt appropriate to bring it up.

Truth be told, with all the other bullshit I'm dealing with right now, I pushed everything about Jane to the back of my mind. That wound was raw—it still is. Jane hurt me in a way that no one else did. I knew what to expect with my family. They didn't want me, and eventually, I stopped expecting otherwise. It was different with Jane because *I* fucked up. *I* failed. Not only could I not make a relationship work with my best friend, but she felt the need to move 2,000 miles away when it was all said and done. I know I shouldn't have taken it personally,

but it was hard not to, especially because of the timing. She left when I needed her most and she didn't seem to care.

Part of me believes she was fed up with my neediness and insecurities—another reason I can't ask Bella to come with me. I don't want her to get sick of me, too, and she shouldn't have to take care of a grown-ass man. Besides, if she leaves me—no, *when* she leaves me—it will be easier if I'm not accustomed to depending on her.

The drive from Spokane to Forks is quiet. And long. I suppose it's not any longer than the other drives during this trip, but it feels that way. We arrive in the small city just after seven o'clock and eat dinner at the local diner.

"Everything is going to turn out okay. You know that, right?" Bella takes my hand from across the table.

No, I don't fucking know that. I'll probably have to say goodbye to her within the hour. Then I'll be off to find my father, who probably has no idea I even exist, and most likely has a family of his own. Then what? Bella won't be ready to leave Forks yet, and I'll end up driving home by myself. Alone. "I know." I give her my most convincing smile which, at this point, isn't saying much.

When we arrive at her father's, the house is dark. "Is no one home?" I ask.

"Charlie's probably working second shift," she explains. "He'll be home soon."

"You're going to be here alone?"

Bella frowns at me. "I can take care of myself, Edward." Her words are gentle, but the implication stings nonetheless. I remove Bella's bag from the backseat and follow her to the front door. She reaches under the eave and produces a key. Once inside, I set down her bag in the small entryway and we stand there facing each other awkwardly. Bella fists her hands in my shirt and pulls me into an embrace. She tucks her head under my chin as I wrap my arms around her

shoulders. I hold her tightly and concentrate on her body in my arms so I can memorize the way she feels, memorize her scent. I nudge her cheek with my nose. When she tips her head back to look at me, I press my lips to hers. The kiss is needy and Bella senses my trepidation.

“This isn’t goodbye,” she says decisively after pulling away.

“I know.” My voice isn’t as confident as hers. Bella eyes me skeptically. “It feels like it is,” I admit.

“Edward,” she says sternly, “this is *not* goodbye. We agreed that this is something you need to do, right?” I reluctantly nod. “Okay then. Take as long as you need. I will be here when you get things sorted out.” I nod again, not trusting my voice. Bella releases her hold on my shirt and cups my face in her palms. “Go,” she says gently. A smile graces her lips but it doesn’t reach her eyes. Instead, they shine with unshed tears. Her sadness causes a burn in my chest. I don’t want to be the source of Bella’s pain; I want to make her happy. “Let’s not make a big deal out of this.”

Her words are like a punch to the gut. She wants me to leave now—to do this on my own, to not make a big deal out of it—as if somehow my world isn’t going to fall apart when I walk out the door. Our lips meet again. She won’t say “goodbye” out loud. She doesn’t need to; it’s in her kiss.

She’s not coming with me. She doesn’t *want* to come with me.

Does she want me at all?

I start to move away but stop. I steal one last kiss before turning for the door.

She doesn’t fucking stop me.

I don’t know if she’s watching, but I refuse to look back. If she’s not there, my heart will break; if she is, I might break down and beg her to come with me. A spot of green on the passenger seat catches my eye as I open the car door. My eyes immediately dart to the porch where Bella is standing, slumped over, with

her arms wrapped around her torso. Big mistake. It takes everything I have not to run to her.

“You forgot Eddie,” I call out numbly. My voice sounds detached if not slightly cold. She wants me to leave. She doesn’t want me. She doesn’t even want the goddamn turtle.

“I thought you might want him.” Her voice is weak and unconvincing. Whether she’s upset that I’m leaving or making an excuse to get rid of the thing, I don’t know.

“He was a gift.” The hurt I feel is reflected in my voice. Bella smiles a genuine smile and I am torn. I should be glad to see her happy, but I’m not. It causes my chest to tighten. How can she smile like that right now?

“Come on, Edward. Don’t act like you don’t cuddle with Eddie when I’m not there.” I didn’t think she ever noticed. “I’ve caught you, more than once, putting him aside when I came back in the room.” Bella giggles. The sound both lightens my heart and weighs it down if that is even possible. “He’ll be good for you. Like your own support system.”

I don’t want a fucking toy as a support system, I want you!

I refuse to say what my mind is screaming right now. I promised myself I wouldn’t pressure Bella to come with me. “Thanks,” I mutter. I don’t know what else to say. I wait; for what, I don’t know. For her to ask to come with me? For her to tell me not to leave? It doesn’t matter. She doesn’t say anything else. She’s done talking to me.

I climb in my car and leave without looking back.

It’s late—past nine o’clock now—so I stop at a seedy, little motel for the night. Seattle is over three hours away, and I am in no condition to drive right now. I unpack only what I’ll need for the night. No sense in getting too comfortable or I may never leave.

The box of condoms mocks me from its cozy spot between my t-shirts and underwear. I can almost hear it chanting, “Ha ha, she doesn’t fucking want you!” I don’t know why I even bothered purchasing it. Was it a pipe dream that Bella and I would stay together? Truth be told, I never expected to utilize any right away. She looked so tired last night and I was happy to let her sleep, grateful for an excuse not to have sex. I didn’t want her to know I was buying condoms because I didn’t want her to feel like I expected her to put out. Besides, she deserves so much more than a goodbye fuck.

I pull the small bag of bathroom shit out of my bag and take a quick shower before getting in bed. “It looks like she didn’t want either of us tonight . . . again,” I say out loud to Eddie.

Great. Now I’m talking to inanimate objects.

I toss and turn as I lie there. I can’t keep my mind off of Bella. The logical part of my brain is telling me not to worry, that Bella is right—tonight wasn’t goodbye and we’ll be together soon. Another small and insecure—but very loud—part is telling me that we are over. We’ll never see each other again. She used me going to Seattle as her out. She left Eddie with me, making it as if I never even existed. I realize suddenly that I have no way to get a hold of her other than driving back to her father’s house. She never gave me her number. Damn it. The more I think about it, the worse the situation seems.

It takes forever for sleep to consume me. When it finally does, it’s restless and plagued with bad dreams. In the morning I wake up with a migraine. I don’t want to be in this podunk town, alone, at a major turning point in my life—my future unknown. My sanity is teetering precariously on the proverbial edge, and if I make any quick movements, it’s going to fall the fuck off.

Packing my belongings, I throw my bag into the car and check out. It doesn’t take long to track down an address for my father. At least, I assume it’s the same man. Finding the courage to go to his house, however, is a different story.

I put it off for as long as possible, all the while pretending I'm not. Instead I drive. I can't deny that Washington is a beautiful state. Everything is so green—the trees, the moss, the ferns. It's nothing like any of the other states I drove through—flat, brown, dull. Although, Bella was with me for most of the drive, and I can't say I paid much attention to my surroundings.

I miss Bella.

Time passes slowly without her. Thinking about her distracts me, and I find that I'm no longer anxious about meeting my father. Perhaps it's a false sense of security. Perhaps the outcome just doesn't matter to me anymore. For the first time in my life, I have priorities. Well, *a* priority.

But she's in Forks.

I get as far as Sequim before turning the car around. I can go to Seattle without her, I just don't want to. Maybe I'm selfish. Maybe I should be stronger. Right now I don't fucking care.

By the time I get back to Forks, my confidence is completely shot. I feel like such a pussy. An ugly, fucking pussy. The thought of going to her door causes me to bust out in a cold sweat. What if she says no? She can't say no. If she does . . . No. I refuse to think about it.

I slow the car down as I approach the house. My chest starts to tighten in anxiety and my mouth becomes dry. "You can do this," I say to myself. "Just go up there and knock on the door. Tell her you want her by your side. No beating around the bush. Worst case scenario she says no and you move on with your life. No sense in dragging this out further."

Despite my pep talk, the little voice in my head still tells me Bella doesn't want me and that I shouldn't burden her with my issues any longer. Taking a deep breath, I depress the accelerator and speed away. I never imagined this would be so hard. Tomorrow will be better. I'll come back tomorrow.

Damn, I really miss Bella.

chapter seventeen

Bella

he tears don't fall until Edward races down the street. I couldn't quite get a read on his mood. He was reserved during the drive and seemed sad once we got to town, which I expected. I was sad too. I didn't want to make a big production out of our separation since it's only temporary. He seemed angry right before he left, but I didn't understand why. He couldn't have been mad that I wasn't going with him. After all, if he wanted me with to go with him, he would have just asked me. Right?

Maybe he was embarrassed about being caught snuggling with Eddie, though it doesn't seem like something he would get upset over. I only left Eddie behind with him because I thought it would be helpful for Edward to have a reminder of us. Something happy and good to comfort him while we are apart.

I decide to wait until I go to bed to call him and *then* I realize I don't have his cell phone number. Aw, crap. He doesn't have Charlie's number either. Wow, this was poorly planned.

I sigh as I flop down at the small kitchen table, wishing I had someone to talk to about Edward. I bet Alice would give me good advice. It just isn't a conversation I want to have over the phone. I wonder if she's home from New York yet. She would spend the night here if I asked.

That's it! Alice has Edward's number. I call her from the outdated, corded phone in Charlie's kitchen. It immediately goes to voicemail.

Hi, you've reached Alice! Sorry I'm not available right now. You know what to do!

"Alice, it's Bella. Call me at Charlie's as soon as you can. Bye."

Next, I call the non-emergency number for the police station and leave a message for Charlie letting him know I'm here. I never actually got around to calling him about staying here. The last thing I need is for him to come home and shoot me because he thinks I'm some sort of crazy home invader.

I don't want to go to bed before Charlie arrives home so I attempt to watch a movie to keep myself occupied. It doesn't work. I'm too antsy and I need to do something physical to keep my mind from wandering to Edward. I start a load of laundry so I can wear clean clothes tomorrow, then I take a quick inventory of the kitchen. Things don't look good. In the fridge is a carton of eggs, some microwavable bacon, expired milk, a package of Kraft Singles, and beer. Lots of beer. The freezer is stocked with TV dinners. At least Charlie is eating *something*.

I make a small grocery list and cringe at the thought of going to the store. The old, red truck that Charlie bought me as a homecoming gift sputtered out for good just weeks after graduation last year. That means I have to ride shotgun in the Chief's cruiser since calling Jake is out of the question.

With a sigh, I trudge up the stairs to get ready for bed. There should be something left in my room to sleep in. As I walk in the tiny bedroom, I groan. Everything is exactly the way I left it. Ordinarily, I would prefer my belongings be left untouched, but in this case, I think I would have preferred it if Charlie purged everything inside.

Or lit a match.

At first glance, there is nothing offensive about the room. The twin bed is made. The rocking chair in the corner is piled with an extra blanket and pillow. On the wall by the window is a small bookshelf filled with books and old school work, all arranged in an aesthetically pleasing fashion. The desk holds an ancient computer and for the most part is cleared off. It must be the only thing in the room that Charlie actually touched. When he started sending me emails after I moved out, I never once envisioned him hunched over the little desk in this room. The thought puts a smile on my face.

But it doesn't last for long.

On the bookshelf is also a shoebox filled with love letters, loose photos, and birthday and holiday cards from Jake. There are framed photos throughout the room. Among them are ones of Jake and me holding hands and jumping off one of the small cliffs down at La Push, Jake behind the wheel of his Rabbit on the day he passed his driver's test, and the two of us at my senior prom standing under a trellis of blue and white flowers, looking like the happiest couple in the world.

Making my way around the room, I gather the photos and other mementos of Jake—movie ticket stubs, a dried rose from the first bouquet of flowers he gave me, a caricature of us from the Clallum County Fair, a handmade wolf carving—and shove them in the shoebox. I push the lid down, irrationally expecting it to close over the heaping pile of memories, before shoving the box into the back of

my closet. Nodding in satisfaction, I find something to sleep in and get ready for bed.

“Bella?” Charlie calls up the stairs as I leave the bathroom.

“Hey, Dad. I didn’t hear you come in.” I enter the kitchen as he cracks open a beer. He takes a long swig before giving me an ungraceful, one-armed hug. “I hope you don’t mind if I stay for a while.”

“Of course not, Bells. You’re always welcome here. I wish I knew you were coming, though. I would have gone shopping.” He peers around me then, into the darkened house. I can tell he’s trying to be sly about it, but he isn’t.

“I’m here alone, Dad,” I answer his unspoken question.

Charlie is clearly taken aback by my forwardness. “What? Oh, um . . . is everything okay?”

“Yep. Everything is fine.”

We stand together awkwardly for a few moments before speaking at the same time.

“I’m just gonna—”

“Well, I’ll be—”

“I’m gonna go to bed,” I finish. Charlie motions to the living room with his beer, indicating he’s going to watch the news.

As I climb the stairs to my room, I can only hope Alice calls first thing in the morning. Otherwise, tomorrow is going to be a *long* day.

I always thought Forks was boring, but I don’t realize how humdrum of a place it actually is until now. Probably because I have no one here to do anything with. I contemplate calling some of my old high school friends but decide against it. Actually, I don’t *really* consider it. It is more of an errant thought. Helping

around the house and reading some books I borrowed from Edward prove to be sufficient alternatives.

Much to my dismay, I haven't heard from Edward for three days. I cross my fingers that no news is good news. Hopefully he didn't have trouble finding his father and everything went smoothly with his introduction. Maybe they are having a great time and getting to know one another. It's the only thing I can assume at this point.

Alice hasn't called me either, despite the escalating desperation of my messages.

"Alice, it's Bella again. Will you call me, please? It's really important."

"Alice, me again. I'm at Charlie's. If you're in town call me. I really want to talk to you."

"Alice, where are you? Please, please, please call me. I need to get a hold of Edward and I don't have his number. I'm still at Charlie's."

"Alice, I really need to call Edward. I don't have his number. Please call me. It's important."

When Charlie leaves to go fishing, like he does every Saturday, I turn on the television and sprawl on the couch. It's nearly impossible to mope around with him in the house. He starts asking questions, initiating awkward conversations that neither of us want to have. With him gone, I can lie here and stare blankly at whatever paid programming is showing, since nothing good airs on Saturday mornings after the cartoons are over.

Charlie's number is unlisted, and I highly doubt Edward is going to call the station and ask him for it. Unless he comes back, there is no other way for him to get a hold of me. The first two days I was here, I perked up every time a car drove down the otherwise quiet street, hoping it was Edward. Today, I've made it a point not to pay attention. I don't like getting my hopes up only to be continually disappointed.

I'm kicking myself for not asking him to bring me along. Screw feeling guilty for pressuring him to go! Screw worrying about whether or not he'd be comfortable with me there! Maybe I'm being selfish, but sitting here alone feels awful. I don't even care if he changes his mind about finding his dad. I just want to be with him. Wherever he goes, that's where I want to be. I worry that I didn't make it clear enough to Edward just how much he means to me. I would do anything to be able to tell him that right now.

A knock on the door startles me. "Edward!" I say under my breath as I hop off of the couch. Every nerve ending of my body suddenly sparks to life. I bound across the room excitedly, grinning so brightly it hurts, but the somber face that meets me when I throw open the door immediately kills my high.

"Jake," I say hotly, my euphoric mood immediately replaced by anger. It surprises me that I feel this much fury seeing him again. It's probably because he acted like a jerk when we last spoke.

"Hey, Bella. Can I come in?"

I reluctantly step to the side, permitting him to enter. "What are you doing here?"

"I thought, maybe, we could talk," he says passively.

"You could have just called." I scowl at him.

"I thought you might hang up on me," he admits timidly.

"Yeah." I nod in agreement. "You're probably right." Leaving the inside door open—hopefully sending the message he's not welcome for long—I walk into the kitchen and gesture at the table. If he wants to talk, he can do it uncomfortably on a hard, wooden chair. I don't want him thinking we're going to get all cozy on the couch. Jake sits and I seat myself in the chair farthest from him. "Well?" I ask coldly. Before he can respond, I add, "How did you know I was here, anyway?"

"Your dad told my dad."

"Go figure," I mutter. So much for Charlie respecting my privacy.

Jake takes a deep breath. “I’m really sorry about the way I acted over the—”

“Wait! Just . . . wait,” I interrupt. “I don’t want you thinking you can just apologize and everything will go back to the way it was. This is over between us, Jake,” I say angrily as I motion between us with my hands. “If you’re only apologizing because you think I’ll take you back then just . . . don’t.”

He shakes his head solemnly. “That’s not why I’m here. I feel really bad about everything, Bells. I was an asshole the last time we spoke. I really am sorry.”

He looks sincere enough. I contemplate for a moment before answering. “You’re forgiven. Now leave.” I stand up dismissively and begin to walk out of the kitchen. I want to go back to wallowing in sorrow on the couch and my pity party has a maximum capacity of one.

Jake stands up to block my path. His chair slides back roughly and I flinch from the sound. “No, hear me out.” He doesn’t wait for my approval to continue speaking, but something in my face has him walking backwards toward the door. “I made a mistake when I said we couldn’t be friends. I was worried sick about you and when you broke up with me . . . It hurt so bad, Bella, and I just wasn’t thinking straight. I’ve done a lot of thinking these past few weeks. I thought about everything you said and I understand where you’re coming from. I can live without us being together. I know I’ll get over you one day. But I can’t, *can’t* lose you, Bella. Your friendship means too much to me.”

I stop walking and look away, suddenly feeling guilty for being rude to Jake. I assumed he was going to try sweet talking his way to being my boyfriend again, not give a genuine apology and ask to be friends. It still doesn’t make me feel any better about our breakup. Something about the situation makes me apprehensive, but I don’t understand why. This what I wanted, wasn’t it? For us to remain friends?

“It won’t be the same.” My voice falters.

“I know,” he says. “But I’d rather have you in my life, even if it’s kind of weird at first, than to have you hate me.”

“Jake,” I sigh. “I never hated you.” He gives me a skeptical look. I smile. “Really. I was just down to my last nerve and you were on it.”

He smiles and opens his arms for a hug. I hesitate briefly before stepping closer and placing my arms gingerly around his neck. It should feel nice, after three days, to have some sort of normal physical contact with someone, but it doesn’t. I close my eyes. Jake’s body is familiar, which I thought would be comforting but instead has the opposite effect. His embrace isn’t the one I desire. It’s too bulky, too wide, too short. I miss the vertical stretch of my body when I hugged Edward like this. And I miss the way I could fit my head under his chin when I wrapped my arms around his narrow waist. I miss holding him at night. I miss scratching his neck when he needed to shave and caressing his smooth skin once he did. I miss his scent, his laugh, his voice. I would do anything to hear his voice right now.

“Hello?”

My heart pounds, instantly putting a name to the voice that echoes into the small house.

Edward.

I gasp and push away from Jake’s embrace. Edward is standing on the other side of the screen door, his shoulders rounded, his hands in his pockets. When I step around Jake, Edward quickly looks down. The realization of what this situation must look like slams into me. How long was he standing there?

“Edward!” I reach the door in three strides. He moves to the side enough for me to open the door but makes no move to enter the house. I take a step back and immediately run into Jake who was apparently hot on my trail. This is awkward. I want to throw myself into Edward’s arms, kiss him, and tell him how much I need

him. At the same time, I want to be sensitive to Jake's feelings. I try to collect my thoughts. Before I can say anything or invite Edward in, Jake speaks.

"I'm Jacob," he says icily. "The boyfriend."

I whip my head around and eye him in disbelief. After the heart-to-heart we just had, I can't believe he's pulling this possessive crap. "Jake," I hiss through clenched teeth. I turn back to Edward, hoping I have time to explain before he walks away from the situation, but a smile threatening at the corner of his mouth stops me short.

"Hello, Jacob-the-boyfriend. I'm Edward," he says, completely unfazed by Jake's introduction, before turning to me. "Bella, I need to speak with you."

His expression is guarded. My heart hammers away in my chest. "Is everything okay?" He gives me a small smile, the sad smile, the smile I hate, and slowly shakes his head. It's apparent that Jake isn't going to back off. I step outside and close the screen door on his face. Edward walks backwards to the corner of the porch and I move with him. "Edward?" He holds out his hand. I waste no time taking it in both of mine. "Your father?" Edward shakes his head again. My eyes pool with tears and there's a painful, twisting ache in my chest. His father turned him away after all. "What did he say to you?"

Edward's face clouds with confusion before he looks down, frowning. "Oh! No, no. I haven't gone."

"What?" Now I'm confused.

"I didn't go to my father's. I've been here."

"You didn't leave Forks? But it's been three days!" He's been in town this whole time while I've been here, alone, missing him? What has he been doing? Didn't he want to be with me?

"I know." Edward sighs heavily and looks at me again. "I got half way to Seattle and came back. Bella," he takes a deep breath before continuing, "I'm strong enough to do this on my own, but I don't want to be without you. If you

don't want to go to my father's I understand, but please, *please* come to Seattle with me."

chapter eighteen

Edward

B

ella is in my arms before the sentence is completely out of my mouth. “Anywhere, Edward. I’ll go anywhere with you,” she murmurs against my chest. I breathe a sigh of relief and hold her close, thrilled that she wants to come with me, ecstatic that she seems to have missed me as much as I missed her. Abruptly, Bella pulls away from me. Anxiety surges through me when I take in her angry expression. “Three days!” she seethes and punches my chest with her fists.

The shift in her mood leaves me completely inarticulate. “Ow, Bella—”

“You were here for three days.” She cuts me off while continuing her assault. “I was so worried about you! Why didn’t you come back sooner?”

“I don’t know. I’m sorry.”

“Sorry’s not good enough!” A single tear rolls down her cheek as she pounds on me. I don’t stop her. It’s uncomfortable, but if it makes her feel better, I’m more than willing to endure it.

“I wanted to come back sooner. I tried every day but I couldn’t. I was afraid you didn’t want me anymore.” My confession causes Bella to freeze. She looks up at me. Her mouth falls open and her fingers curl into my shirt.

“Why would you think that?” she asks softly.

I brush the backs of my fingers across her cheek as I shrug. “It never made sense for you to want me.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Bella, you are young and beautiful. I’m—” I take a deep breath. I don’t want to highlight my flaws, but I need to air my insecurities. “I’m closer to thirty than twenty. I don’t think eight years is a lot but maybe you do. The things you’re going to experience in the next few years . . . I’ve already been there, and I don’t want you to forfeit those experiences for me. And it’s summer. You should be off having fun with your friends right now. You shouldn’t have responsibilities or commitments and I’m . . . I’m a fucking needy bastard. Literally,” I finish dryly.

“Edward,” she whispers. “I want *you*.” Her hands gently cup my face and she pulls me down until our lips meet. There is no hesitation in her kiss. No uncertainty. My heart soars. I lose myself in the moment. Clasp my hands behind her back, I carefully lift her from the ground, using the porch railing as leverage to hold us up. Bella locks her arms around my neck while I move one hand down to cup her ass. It feels like I’m in heaven; I want to stay like this forever.

We are rudely interrupted by the sound of a throat clearing from inside the house. Begrudgingly, I break away from Bella’s lips. Jacob is glaring at us from behind the door. His arms are crossed over his chest, and if looks could kill, I’d be

dead right now. Bella throws him an exasperated look over her shoulder. I slowly set her back on her feet and she looks at me with wide eyes.

“Edward, he’s not . . .”

“I know.” She doesn’t need to explain. I’m not concerned about Jacob. Oddly enough, I don’t feel intimidated by him at all. He’s just a kid. If Bella chooses not to be with me, it won’t be because of him. “It’s okay.”

“I thought it wasn’t like that,” Jacob bellows as he throws the door open and stomps onto the porch. “You told me it wasn’t like that.”

“It *wasn’t*,” Bella retorts angrily. She whips around to face him.

“Sure,” he says sarcastically. “What, is he your *boyfriend* now?” His question makes my heart skip a beat. I hold my breath, anxious to see how Bella will respond, wondering if she regards me like that. The term seems so insignificant for our relationship, and the way Jacob sneers when he says the word only trivializes it more.

“That’s none of your business, Jake,” she scoffs.

Damn.

“Does Charlie know?” Bella opens her mouth to reply but doesn’t say anything. Her hesitation makes it clear to both of us that she didn’t talk to her father about me. Jacob chuckles before taking his next stab. “He’s not going to approve, you know. That guy is too old for you.”

Bella makes an angry noise under her breath and steps toward Jacob. I reach out to stop her. Jacob frowns when he sees my hands mold around Bella’s hips. “I’m an adult Jake,” she spits. “I don’t need his permission to see Edward and you know what? Charlie *will* approve because Edward is a great man and he makes me happy!”

I move closer to Bella while she’s talking. Our bodies brush together slightly as I lean down and place my lips next to her ear. “We can leave whenever you’re

ready,” I say only loud enough for her to hear. I don’t want this stupid kid to upset her anymore. If she wants to leave, I am more than happy to take her away.

“I want to leave now,” she replies curtly.

Jacob’s angry mask falters. His expression immediately softens, turning into one of concern. “You’re leaving? Now?” He doesn’t want her to leave. The sincerity is evident in his voice. I can’t blame him. I would feel the same way if I were in his place.

“Edward and I are going to Seattle,” she says calmly, sensitive to his sudden turn of mood.

“But you just got here,” he says dismally.

“I know. I never intended on staying for long, Jake.”

“What about Charlie?”

“I’ll leave him a note.”

I don’t like the idea of Bella disappearing and leaving her father a note. Charlie doesn’t need another reason not to like me. “We should wait for him,” I whisper against her ear.

“No,” Bella replies firmly.

“Bella, I think I should meet your father.”

“Another time, Edward. I don’t want to wait.”

I worry that Bella doesn’t want to introduce us. “Is it me?”

Jacob speaks at the same time. “I’m sorry, Bells. I don’t want to keep hurting you. Honest. I’ll leave. You two can wait for Charlie.”

“Will both of you just stop!” Bella says in annoyance. “I don’t want to wait. Charlie is fishing and probably won’t be home until after dark. Edward, I want him to meet you so don’t worry. We’ll come back, okay?” She glances at me over her shoulder and I nod. Bella looks back at Jacob. “Jake.” The way she sighs his name pisses me off. “I know this is hard for you. I’m sorry too. I want us to be friends, I really do.”

“Will I see you before you go back to Florida?”

“Of course,” she assures him. “We’ll be back, right?” I nod again. I don’t like the idea of Bella going back to Florida, and I *definitely* don’t want to forfeit any more time with her so she can be with this asshole.

“And we can hang out then? Just us?” Jacob’s eyes shift to me, daring me to speak up, to become the bad guy. I don’t like it. Just because I’m not threatened by him doesn’t mean I’m not concerned about the game he’s playing. I definitely don’t trust him.

“Sure, Jake,” she says before looking up at me again. “I bet Charlie will want to get to know you better. Maybe you guys can go fishing or something.”

“Sounds fun.” Or not.

We all fall silent as we stand on the porch. The atmosphere is filled with tension. I’m sure I’m not the only one who feels it. Jacob refuses to look at us. He digs at a hole in the porch with his shoe. My hands are still on Bella and I scratch her back softly with my thumbs. “Do you have a lot to pack?” I ask her. Bella sighs and shakes her head. Jacob’s mouth twitches into a smirk. Asshole. He’s trying to make me look like the bad guy again. I need to extract myself from this situation before I give that fucker a piece of my mind. “I’ll be in the car.”

I’m slightly disappointed when Bella lets me walk away, instead following Jacob into the house. I have to remind myself that I don’t want to be in there with them. They are inside for about ten minutes. When they come out, Jacob removes Bella’s backpack from her shoulder and walks toward my car while she locks the door. Tossing her bag on the backseat, he slams the door before leaning down next to the open driver’s side window. “You’d better not hurt her,” he threatens.

When I don’t satisfy him with a reply, he stands up straight and walks away. He meets Bella at the front of the car and pulls her into an embrace that is too friendly for my liking. I can tell he’s saying something to her, and she nods a few times before extracting herself from his arms. Once her back is turned he gives

me a pointed look. I want to flip him off but Bella is facing me, so I smile and wave instead.

“Ready?” she asks cheerily.

“More than ready. Did you leave a note for your father?” I ask before backing onto the street. “I don’t want a repeat of last time.”

“Yes.” Bella reaches into the backseat and grabs Eddie from the top of my bag. “I can’t even begin to tell you how happy I am to be back in the Yuppiemobile.” Bella’s smile is radiant as she hugs Eddie to her chest.

“I think I have a fair idea.” I never used to like the Volvo. It never seemed like it was mine. It was just something that got me from Point A to Point B. That changed once Bella came along and made new memories in it. It’s too lame to say out loud but it feels like we belong in this car. People probably say that about homes, not vehicles, but it’s true. With her gone, this car went back to meaning nothing more to me than a two ton heap of metal.

“Are you sure this is what you want? I mean, you want me to be there with you when— ”

“Yes,” I state certainly. “I want you by my side the entire time. I don’t ever want to let you go.” I shoot her my best carefree smile, hoping to diffuse the seriousness of my statement.

“If you change your mind—”

“I won’t,” I interrupt a second time. “Bella, I’ve never been as happy in my entire life as I am when I’m with you.” Out of the corner of my eye I see Bella smile. “I want you there for the good and the bad. Hopefully this won’t turn out bad.”

“I’m telling you, Edward, it will turn out fine,” she assures me once again. From the tone of her voice, I’m pretty sure she rolled her eyes at me.

“Yeah, well, it doesn’t matter as long as I still have you at the end of the day.” Bella tosses Eddie into the back. Leaning over the center console, she hugs my

right arm and nuzzles her face into my shoulder. “My offer still stands. If at any time you want to go home—”

“Edward,” she reprimands. “Why on Earth would I want to go home?”

“You wanted to go to your father’s,” I point out.

“No I didn’t.”

“What?” I look at her in shock. She reprimands me as the car drifts into another lane. “Why the fuck did we go to Forks then?” I ask in disbelief.

“I didn’t want to intrude on your time with your father. That’s why I offered to stay with Charlie. You didn’t protest so . . .”

“You won’t be intruding.” Maybe having Bella with me will score some brownie points with dear old Dad. It’ll prove I’m not completely worthless. “And I didn’t *protest* because I thought that was what you wanted. I felt bad—I still do—having you come with me.”

“What? Why?”

“Like I said before, you should be out having fun.”

“I am out having fun,” she counters.

“That’s not what I mean,” I say seriously.

“Then what do you mean? Because I don’t understand.”

“Bella, you told me that you were fed up with taking care of people—your mom, your dad. We met because you were running .” I want to add “from your immature, douche bag of a boyfriend” but refrain. “I don’t want you to end up running from me.”

“I won’t,” she says. I sigh, both in relief and frustration. I appreciate her devotion, but I don’t know how she can be so certain. “I mean, it will be a fast paced walk at the very most. I don’t imagine that you have the stamina to keep up with me, Gramps.”

I laugh, probably the hardest I’ve laughed in a long time. “You’re sure not afraid to give me a hard time, are you?”

“Nope.”

“That’s why I love you, Kiddo.” My voice falters on the last word as the realization of what I said sinks in.

Did I just say that?

Holy fuck.

Do I mean it?

The word flowed from my lips so effortlessly. It’s not a sentiment that I have *ever* thrown around loosely, but it felt so right to say. So right and yet . . . so wrong. We’ve only known each other for two weeks. Can someone fall in love in such a short period of time? We haven’t even defined our relationship. In fact, we haven’t really talked about it at all. I glance down at Bella, hoping she didn’t notice my slip. She did; I can tell by the way her body stiffens. She must not share my newly discovered revelation. “Bella, I’m sorry,” I apologize quietly. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

Liar.

“What? Oh, no. Yeah, it’s okay,” she stammers as she sits up. My arm feels cold without her leaning against me.

God, I’m a fucking idiot. “I *do* care about you. A lot,” I confess. Bella nods and wraps her arms around her stomach. She doesn’t say anything else, opting to look out the side window instead. Fuck, that wasn’t what she wanted to hear either. “Or . . . maybe . . . I don’t know. It’s just . . . fuck.” I don’t know what to say to make this better. My mind conjures up visions of her bolting from the car the minute it slows down.

“It’s fine, Edward. It was just a slip. I know you didn’t mean it. I’m not gonna go all psycho girlfriend on you or anything.”

The part of me that wants to argue that I *do* mean it is distracted by her use of the word girlfriend. “Are you?”

“I’m not psycho!” she scoffs.

I chuckle nervously. "I know you aren't psycho, Bella. I meant do you consider yourself my girlfriend?"

"No, of course not." It's not so much her words but the way she says them that feels like a punch to the gut. Like the mere thought of being in a relationship with me is objectionable. "I wouldn't expect you to make a commitment like that."

Wait, what?

"You don't think I can commit?" I ask in surprise. She was listening when I told her about Jane, wasn't she?

"Yes, I do, but I would never ask that of you."

Christ, she makes it sound like I'm some sort of fickle commitment phobe. "Why not?"

"You've got a lot going on right now, Edward. I don't want you to have to worry about me, too. Besides, I wouldn't ask you to do the long distance thing. It's unfair."

After three days without Bella in my life, my mind is made up. I am going to ask her to stay in Chicago with me. If she wants to continue going to school in Jacksonville, that's fine as well. I'll move there instead. I'll bring it up some other time, though. If her reaction to my accidental "I love you" is any indication, she probably isn't ready to talk about moving halfway across the country. "What if I want to commit to you?"

"Do you?" she asks in surprise.

"Yes," I answer honestly. I hold my hand out and Bella takes it. Bringing our joined hands to my lips, I plant a kiss on the back of her hand. "I want you to be mine." I continue kissing her between words. "So I can take care of you. And I want to be yours. If you'll have me."

"You want me like that?"

"Very much."

"But, Edward, we live—"

“I don’t care where we live.” I cut her off. “We’ll figure something out. You don’t need to worry about that right now.”

Bella remains quiet for an agonizingly long minute. At least she doesn’t seem upset anymore. Finally, she asks, “So you want me to be your, like, girlfriend?”

“Yes. That’s exactly what I want you to be.” When Bella doesn’t say anything else, I get nervous and start rambling. “But you don’t have to be that. I mean, if you don’t like the title that’s fine. I don’t really care what we label it. It’s not like it’s going to change anything between us. Well, not for me, anyway. I’m committed to you. I mean . . . I want things to work out between us, and I don’t have any desire to see anyone else. So I already think of you like that, I just don’t . . . fuck.”

“Edward?” I look at Bella, trying to decipher the expression on her face. She yells at me to keep my eyes on the road again before continuing. “I want to be your girlfriend.”

“But?” I prompt, picking up on her hesitation.

Bella takes a deep breath. “Is this in reaction to Jake? Because if it is, there’s nothing to worry about. Jake and I are through.”

“This has nothing to do with him,” I say truthfully. “I thought about you nonstop over the last three days. You mean the world to me, Bella. I don’t want to look back on this years from now and regret not doing everything I could to make you mine. I don’t want you to be the one who got away because I was too much of a pussy to do anything about it.”

“I’m no good for you, Edward,” she says sadly after a moment of silence.

I laugh. “What are you talking about?” If she honestly believes that, then she is utterly absurd.

“You worry that you’re too old for me, and well, I think I’m too young for you.”

“I fail to see the difference, Bella. You’ll have to elaborate.”

“Well, for starters, I’m still going to college and I have absolutely no idea what I want to do with my life or where I’ll go once I figure it out. I live with my mom. I have less than fifty dollars in my bank account. I don’t have a job. I don’t have a vehicle. I can’t even go with you to a bar.”

“Bella, stop. Don’t be ridiculous. None of that matters to me.”

“Maybe I think your reasons for being too old are ridiculous!” she retorts. Her defensiveness makes me smile.

“Perhaps they are. Can we at least agree to be ridiculous together?” My question makes Bella laugh. She nods her head and shifts her body so she can lean against my arm again. I place a quick kiss on the top of her head, not wanting to get reprimanded again for not watching the road. “Mmm, my girl,” I murmur against her hair.

Neither of us speak again until we reach Seattle.

I don’t need to look at the map to find my father’s home; I studied it enough to know the way by heart. The house is modest sized—brick, two-story, attached garage. The lush, green grass of the lawn is immaculate. There are flower gardens set into tiers of retaining walls and a fish pond, complete with waterfall. I park on the street, not wanting to take up space in the driveway.

“Do you think anyone is home?” I ask Bella.

“There’s only one way to find out.”

“It’s perfect. Too perfect.” I would have felt so much more comfortable if this place was a dump. My heartbeat radiates throughout my entire body. I can feel it in my head, my arms, my legs. A tight knot forms in my stomach. “I don’t know if I can do this,” I admit.

“Of course you can.” Bella squeezes my hand.

“Look at this place.”

“They’re just people, Edward.”

“Perfect people,” I mumble. “I don’t belong here.”

“Quit being an idiot.” She drops my hand and opens the car door.

“Where are you going?”

“To meet your father,” she says as she climbs out.

“Bella, wait!” I chase after her as she walks fearlessly to the front door.

“Are you ready? Do you know what you’re going to say?”

“Kind of. Yeah.”

Bella takes my hand and motions to the door. “I know you can do this,” she says confidently. “And no matter what happens, at the end of the day, I’ll be here for you.”

Her words give me strength, even though it feels like I may vomit at any moment. My arm seems to move in slow motion as I reach out to ring the doorbell. When I push the button, time seems to stop. My heart pounds faster and my ears hum with white noise. Bella squeezes my hand as she whispers words of assurance.

Just when I come to the conclusion that no one is home, I hear footsteps bounding toward the door at a fast past. Could I have a kid brother? A sister? It was something that had crossed my mind, but it didn’t seem real until right now. I tighten the grip on Bella’s hand while I wait for the child to open the door.

For a long moment, all noise on the other side ceases. When the door finally opens, it’s a young girl, not a child, who appears on the other side. She is tiny, much smaller than Bella, with a head full of spiky black hair and a smile so big that it lights up her entire face.

I could never have prepared myself for the first thing that comes out of her mouth.

“Bella!”

“Alice?”

chapter nineteen

Bella

//



h my gosh, I can't believe it's you!" Alice gushes.

I stand there in shock and confusion as I stare at my best friend. My brain is slow to register what is happening. If we are supposed to be at Edward's father's house, then why is Alice here? Is this some sort of elaborate surprise?

A quick glance at Edward tells me that it's not. By the look on his face, he is obviously not in on the impromptu reunion. His jaw hangs open as he stares blankly at Alice.

"What are you doing here?" she asks before wrapping her arms around me. I'm at a loss for what to say, and honestly, I have no idea what I'm doing here. Over her shoulder, I see Edward shake his head imperceptibly. "I'm sorry," she continues before I can think of an answer. "I forgot to text the address to Edward.

Oh!” Alice releases me and whips her head around to take a quick look at Edward. Turning back to me, she grips both of my shoulders firmly. “Is that him?” she whispers even though he’s within earshot. “Oh my gosh, he’s so cute.”

Without warning, Alice turns around and throws herself at Edward. He remains frozen in place. His stare seems glassy as if he can’t see anymore. “I’m so happy to meet you, Edward! Any friend of Bella’s is a friend of mine.” He doesn’t say anything. He doesn’t even move. She lets go of him and steps away awkwardly, most likely picking up on his rigid, unfriendly mood. It’s not enough to discourage her, though. She grabs both of our hands and backs into the house, dragging us along.

“Come in, come in. My mom will be so happy to see you. I swear I wasn’t even all the way off the plane before she was asking when you were coming to visit. And I really am sorry that I didn’t text you guys. I completely forgot. You found it okay, right?”

“Yeah, it’s fine. Alice, didn’t you get my messages? I’ve been calling you all week long.”

She grimaces. “Oh, no, really? I hope it wasn’t important. Emmett dropped my phone in the toilet. Don’t ask.” Her expression immediately becomes one of irritation.

“It doesn’t matter. I was just . . . never mind.” I can’t concentrate. This situation is too confusing. My mind isn’t making sense of why Alice is here. “Alice, what are you doing here?”

“I told you I was staying with my parents for the summer.” Alice looks at me like I’ve lost my mind. As the pieces begin to fall into place, it dawns on me. I finally make the connection that my brain didn’t register, that I never even entertained as an option. Edward’s father lives here. Alice’s parents live here. Edward and Alice—

“Is that Bella?” Alice’s mom calls out as she rounds the corner, drying her hands on a dish towel.

“Hi, Esme.” My voice is uncertain. This situation can’t be real. I must be dreaming. What are the odds that my boyfriend and my best friend share a father? That they are siblings? No, there must be a misunderstanding. There is no way we are at the right house. It must be a coincidence, a really, really big coincidence, but I can’t come up with another explanation that seems plausible. I glance at Edward and can only assume he has reached the same conclusion. His mouth is still hanging open. All the blood has drained from his face. He is so pale, it looks like he’s seen a ghost.

Esme hugs me and kisses my forehead. “Has your summer been going well so far?” I nod. “Good! Who’s your friend?” she asks curiously.

“Edward.” I sound like such an idiot. I can’t even properly introduce my boyfriend.

Esme introduces herself. Edward looks absolutely terrified as she hugs him with the same amount of affection she showed me. She stands on her toes and kisses his cheek as well. I wish I’d had the chance to warn him about how touchy-feely the family is.

“Will you two be around for a while? Dinner will be ready in a few hours. You are more than welcome to join us,” Esme says with a warm smile.

“Um . . .” I throw a cautious glance at Edward. He doesn’t seem opposed. He doesn’t give any reaction at all. “Yeah, that sounds good.”

“Great! Carlisle and Emmett are out running errands. They should be back any minute.”

If I have any doubts about being at the right house, they disappear the moment she mentions Carlisle’s name. Edward’s breath catches and he looks at me with wide eyes. He is about to panic and I don’t know what to do. There’s nothing that I’m comfortable saying to him while the other two are in the room,

but I need to do something. I rub my hand up and down his arm and try to tell him with my eyes to trust me, that everything will be okay. Esme and Alice wear matching masks of curiosity but neither of them comments on the exchange.

As I breathe a sigh of relief, the front door opens.

“Well, speak of the devils,” says Esme.

“Smelly!” I turn around just as Emmett locks his arms around me in a bear hug. My feet leave the floor, and he spins me around once before setting me back down. “I wanted to exchange Alice for you this summer,” he whispers conspiratorially. “But she wasn’t having it.”

“Oh, hush, you!” Alice retorts.

Emmett laughs. He always enjoys picking on his little sister. “It’s good to see you again. You gonna be in town for a while?”

“Um, I . . .” I turn toward Edward. His expression is still unreadable, but his body language has changed. It looks like he’s battling not to close the distance between him and Emmett. Crap. That’s twice in one day. I’ll have to explain that Emmett is like a big brother to me. “Yes, we are.”

“Sweet.” Emmett drops his arms from around me. He picks up some grocery bags from the floor and follows Esme and Alice into the kitchen. Edward watches him walk away and relaxes his stance slightly.

“Bella, it’s nice to see you again,” Carlisle says pleasantly. I realize that he, Edward, and I are alone now. This is weird. My nerves are frazzled. I can only imagine what Edward is feeling. “We’ve all really missed you. I think I speak for both Esme and I when I say that it felt like we lost two daughters last fall.”

“I’ve missed all of you, too. You guys are like a second family to me.”

Carlisle wraps his arm around my shoulder and gives me a fatherly hug. Well, I assume it’s what a fatherly hug is like. It lacks the awkwardness that always comes with hugs from Charlie. “So, Bella, are you going to introduce me to your friend?”

Ugh, I suck.

“Sure, of course, sorry,” I babble. “Carlisle, this is Edward, my boyfriend. Edward, this is Carlisle Cullen.” I take a deep breath and hold it. Edward is rigid and his focus is on the floor, but when Carlisle offers his hand, he takes it.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Edward.” I wish Edward would look up and see the smile on Carlisle’s face. He’s being sincere; he really is happy to meet him. If he is Edward’s father—and at this point I’m 99.9% certain he is—then Edward has nothing to worry about. Carlisle is, by far, the most compassionate person I’ve ever met. He will welcome Edward into the family with open arms.

“It’s nice to meet you, too, Mr. Cullen,” Edward says softly.

“Oh, no. Call me Carlisle. We don’t do anything formally in this house; isn’t that right, Bella?”

“That’s right.”

“You see? That’s why you two are still standing in the entryway. Please, come in. Make yourselves at home.” We enter the kitchen as Alice and Emmett finish putting groceries away. Esme pulls out cookware and sets ingredients aside for dinner. Carlisle drapes his arm over Edward’s shoulders and walks him to the refrigerator. “How old are you, son?”

Edward blanches at the term of endearment. His eyes snap up to Carlisle’s face for the first time. He looks so sad, like a lost puppy. “Twenty-seven.”

Carlisle smirks, and this time, it’s my turn to be surprised. The mischievous grin on his face is the same one I’ve gotten to know so well over the past two weeks. “I thought as much,” he says. “Want to have a beer with me?” Edward nods and takes the brown bottle Carlisle offers him.

“Hey, you never drink beer with me,” Emmett complains from across the room. He sits at the kitchen counter with a tattered paperback in his hands. Esme *tsks* at him. Alice is nowhere to be seen.

“In eleven more months I will be more than happy to offer you a beer.”

Emmett grumbles something under his breath and shoots Edward a nasty look before burying his nose back in the book.

“Emmett, honey, why don’t you show Bella and Edward around the house before dinner,” Esme suggests.

“Fine.” He slaps the book on the counter with a sigh. I frown at his irritation. It’s not like Emmett to act hostile.

“I’ll do it!” Alice exclaims as she breezes into the kitchen. “My room was a mess. I wanted to pick it up before anyone saw it. I didn’t think Edward would appreciate seeing my dirty underwear.”

“Gross.”

“Whatever, Emmett. At least there aren’t stains in mine.”

“That was once and I was five!”

“Kids!” Esme scolds.

Edward and I follow Alice through the house as she plays tour guide. Carlisle tags along behind us, beer in hand, and occasionally comments on specific details of the house. Apparently, Esme designed the floor plan on her own. Edward doesn’t say anything as we walk through the house. He keeps one hand in his pocket and the other wrapped tightly around the beer. Occasionally, I rub his arm or back. He remains tense, and I hope the others can’t sense his discomfort. Alice saves her room for last. It is huge and the closet is at least half its size. There’s a giant heap of dirty clothes in the corner. The bed is unmade. School books are thrown around the floor haphazardly. The room screams *Alice*.

“What’s with all the dirty clothes, Alice? How long have you been home?”

“Only a few days, but I haven’t done laundry in, like, a month, so I brought everything home with me.”

“Wow. I can’t believe you have such a big room when you don’t even *live* here.” This room is probably the same size as the master bedroom. Emmett’s room could probably fit inside Alice’s closet.

“Oh, once I graduate and get a place of my own, Mom is turning this into a playroom.”

“Esme is crossing her fingers for lots of grandchildren,” Carlisle says. “But not anytime soon.” He gives Alice a pointed look. She rolls her eyes.

Once we finish the tour, the four of us sit in the living room. Carlisle asks me and Alice about our first year of college. Judging by the questions he asks her, it’s clear that they didn’t talk much over the last nine months. It makes me sad. Their family is very close, and I can tell her absence was hard on them both. Carlisle tries to engage Edward in the conversation as well, but it’s like pulling teeth to get him to talk.

“So, Edward, what is it that you do?”

“Uh, nothing really.”

“Nothing? You don’t work?” The way he asks isn’t condescending. He is genuinely curious about the man he thinks I dragged to their house.

“No.”

Carlisle looks at me, his face full of concern. All I can do is shrug. I want to scream. I want to tell him why we’re really here, but it’s not my place. With Alice in the room I am limited to what I’m comfortable saying as well. Carlisle doesn’t press Edward for more answers, and the conversation continues to flow between the three of us. Alice keeps giving me worried looks. She knows something is going on, and I have no doubt that she will ask me about it the minute we’re alone.

“Dinner’s ready,” Esme calls. We join her and Emmett in the dining room.

“The house is beautiful,” I tell her.

“Thank you, dear.”

“It smells delicious, sweetheart,” Carlisle says before placing a kiss on her lips. “Edward, another beer?”

“Please.”

Carlisle disappears into the kitchen and returns a moment later with two beers. He sets one down at his place at the head of the table and the other at the spot next to him. “Why is everyone still standing?” he asks. “Sit. Let’s eat!”

Edward reluctantly slides into the chair to Carlisle’s left and I sit next to him. Emmett plops on the chair at the other end of the table, next to me, and says, “Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, who eats the fastest eats the most. Amen,” before digging into the mashed potatoes.

“Emmett!”

“Sorry, Mom.”

Esme says a quick prayer. Edward shifts uncomfortably in his seat. I grab his hand under the table and he squeezes mine tightly in return. Conversation flows steadily throughout the meal. Edward remains quiet. He inclines his head toward whoever’s talking, so I know he’s listening, but he has yet to look at everyone. Carlisle, Esme, and Alice continue to look on with concern.

“Bella,” Esme begins. “Have you visited your father yet?”

“Yes. I stayed with him for a few nights.”

“Good. How is he doing?”

“Oh, you know. Fishing, beer, work. Same old, same old.”

“You *stayed* with him?” Alice asks. “As in you’re not staying with him anymore?”

“Um, no. I guess not.”

“Great! So you’ll stay here?”

“Uh . . .” I try to get a read off Edward. I’m unsuccessful. I might as well be sitting next to a pet rock. “We don’t want to impose.”

“Nonsense! You two are more than welcome to stay here,” Esme says. “We missed you so much this winter.”

Emmett leans toward me. “See?” he asks in an exaggerated whisper. “We only wanted Alice to come home so you would visit us.” Alice smacks him on the arm.

“I’m sure Alice wouldn’t mind if you stayed in her room, Bella. Edward, feel free to put your things in the guest room after dinner. And please, make yourself at home!”

Right, like *that’s* gonna happen. “Thank you, Esme.”

Out of her mother’s view, Alice rolls her eyes at me from across the table. Carlisle chuckles and winks. He is still a child at heart. It seems to have amplified since Alice and Emmett have grown up.

Everything goes smoothly until Emmett starts opening his big mouth. “So, Smelly, what have you been up to this summer?”

“Not too much. Edward and I have just been driving around.”

“You drove here from Florida?” he asks in surprise.

“Yeah. We stayed at his place in Chicago for a few days, but other than that, we’ve been on the road.”

“Oh.” The wheels are turning in Emmett’s head. It’s as though he wants answers, but he’s not sure which questions to ask. I get nervous when he narrows his eyes toward Edward. “How long have you known her?”

“Uh . . .” Edward looks at me, searching my face for something. I want to be the one to answer, but since Emmett directed the question toward him, I refrain. “Two weeks,” he says with a shrug as if he’s not really sure.

“Huh,” Emmett replies. “And you’ve been on the road for . . .” he prompts.

“Two weeks,” Edward answers quietly.

“I see. Bella,” Emmett directs his attention back to me. It’s not the first time I’ve dealt with his big brother act, but this time, it’s getting old real fast. “When did you break up with Jake? I assume you guys broke up, because I heard you introduce him to Dad as your boyfriend.” He gestures toward Edward.

“Emmett, that’s enough.” Esme lets her kids get away with murder most days, but when she goes into Mom-mode, everyone listens. This is one of those times. Even Carlisle sits up a little straighter.

“Sorry,” Emmett quietly apologizes to no one in particular.

The atmosphere is awkward until Alice saves the day. She starts prattling on about the classes she’s excited to take in the fall and the projects she’s going to do over the summer in order to prepare for them. Emmett frowns at his empty plate, looking completely disinterested. Edward’s eyes are closed. He appears to be concentrating on something very hard. Even though everyone has already finished eating, some even helping themselves to seconds, Edward’s food remains almost untouched.

Carlisle notices as well. “Are you all right, son?” He puts his hand on Edward’s shoulder. The unexpected contact causes Edward to flinch.

“I . . . No, I’m sorry. I’m not feeling well.”

“Why don’t you go lie down in the guest room, dear. Can I bring you anything?” Esme offers.

“No, thank you.” Edward exits the room like it’s on fire.

“Is he okay?” Carlisle directs the question at me.

I certainly hope so. “He’ll be fine.”

“I don’t like him,” Emmett states under his breath.

“What the hell is your problem?” Alice snaps.

“Kids, please.” Esme frowns.

“I’m sorry, Esme,” I apologize.

“You have nothing to apologize for,” she tells me.

“He’s not good enough for you,” Emmett continues.

“Excuse me?”

“Bella, you are a social butterfly. That guy can’t even carry on a conversation. He’s way too old, and I heard him tell Dad he doesn’t have a job. Did you even know that about him? Do you know anything about who he really is?”

“That’s none of your business, Emmett.”

“Yes, it is my business. You’re like a little sister to me. I would do the same thing if Alice brought that worthless scumbag home with her.”

“If you’re a dick to him now, you’re gonna regret it later,” I say with clenched teeth.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” Crap! I said too much. “Oh my god, are you pregnant?”

“What? No!”

“Emmett!” Carlisle’s voice is low but heated. I can count the number of times I’ve seen him upset on one hand. “Edward is a guest in our home. You don’t have to like him, but you *will* treat him with respect while he’s here. I don’t want you giving Bella a hard time either. She is a mature, young lady who is perfectly capable of making her own decisions. That includes who she chooses to date. If you have a concern, you may discuss it with her, *in private*, like an adult.”

“Fine.” Emmett pushes away from the table violently and storms into the kitchen, taking his dishes with him.

I feel horrible. “I’m sorry,” I whisper again. I’m not even sure what I’m apologizing for. I can’t apologize for not calling in advance to ask if I can bring Edward. He brought me! I didn’t even know we were coming here for crying out loud.

“No, dear, we’re sorry. I am ashamed of the way Emmett is acting. I don’t know what’s gotten into him. We raised him better than this.”

“You should check on Edward,” Carlisle says.

I stand up and begin to collect our dishes.

“I’ll get those,” Alice offers. “You should go.”

I make my way to the guest room, but Edward’s not there. I watched him walk in this direction. Where else could he be? “Edward?” I call quietly as I walk out of the room. A door in the hallway opens. Edward reaches out and quickly pulls me

into the small bathroom with him. He looks exhausted. It reminds me of the day he had the breakdown—after the phone calls with Jane and Charlie, and our fight.

“I can’t do this,” he says.

“What?”

“We have to go.”

“Edward, we can’t leave!”

“Yes, Bella. Look at what’s happening. Look at what my presence is doing to this family.”

“What are you talking about?”

“They are fighting because of *me*.” He jabs his finger into his chest for emphasis.

“No, Edward, they—”

“Emmett hates me,” he interrupts. “I heard everything he said after I left.”

I sigh. “Emmett doesn’t *know* you.”

“He has no reason to want to know me. *I don’t have a job. I’m a worthless scumbag*,” he mocks. “And apparently an unsocial one at that. Remember?”

“Emmett is just looking out for me. He doesn’t want me to get hurt.”

“I hurt you all the time.” His whisper is pained.

“You’re being stupid.”

“Bella.” Edward matches my irritation. “I can’t do this,” he says slowly, punctuating each word. “We came here. I met him. He seems like a great man, a great father. He’ll be in my life . . . through you because apparently you know these people. What the fuck is up with that, anyway? I’m confused as fuck and you are going to have to explain a lot of shit to me later, but, Bella, I am not going to force my way into his life as his son.”

“Edward—”

“No. He accepts me *this way*. I’m not ruining his life *this way*.”

“Carlisle is a good person. He will accept you as his son. And you will not be *ruining* his life, Edward. Quit being so dramatic.”

“You don’t understand. If he doesn’t accept me, it will put a strain on your relationship with them. If he does, the strain will be within his real family. Trust me, Bella, it’s better this way.”

He’s not trying to be dramatic; he actually believes he is a burden. “You *are* his real family.” My eyes well up with tears. “He would want to know. I’m certain of it.” My voice begins to break as I hold back the tears.

“Baby, don’t cry, not over me.” He pulls me into a hug. I wrap my arms around his waist, but we’re not close enough. I work my hands under his shirt so I can feel the skin on his back. With my face buried in his shirt, the tears fall freely.

“I know Carlisle,” I say through sobs. “He’ll love you; they all will. You deserve a family, Edward. You deserve a family who loves you. I can help . . . I can help you tell him. I’ll tell him myself if you want.”

“*Shh*, baby, *shh*.” Edward sways us from side to side while he gets me to calm down. “I’ll tell him, okay? I’ll do it for you.”

“Everything will turn out fine, you’ll see,” I assure him.

“Promise me something?”

“Anything.”

“If I can’t do it, if I choke, you have to tell him, okay?”

I nod my head against his chest before looking up at him. Everything is fuzzy, but I can tell he’s smiling. I blink away the tears from my eyes and stand on my toes. Edward knows what I want and leans down to kiss me. It’s chaste and doesn’t last nearly long enough.

“Carlisle likes you.”

“You think?” he asks.

“Uh-huh.”

“Why do you say that?”

“I can just tell,” I answer confidently.

“Hmm.”

“He’s a doctor, too. Did you know that?”

“No shit, really?”

I nod. “At least you have something in common. Maybe it will help you look at your career choice differently.”

“Maybe,” he agrees reluctantly.

“You look tired,” I tell him, noticing the deep circles under his eyes for the first time.

“I am. I didn’t sleep well without you. I barely slept at all.”

“You should go lie down.”

“Hm-mm. I don’t want to let you go.”

“No one said you had to.” I take Edward’s hand and lead him to the bedroom. Once inside, he pulls back the covers from the bed and waits for me to slip between them before sliding in next to me. He kisses me again, deeper this time, and hitches my leg over his hip. Again, he breaks away from the kiss too soon, and I moan in protest.

“What?” he asks playfully. “You want to make out in my parents’ house?” His joke takes me by surprise and I laugh loudly. Edward quiets me with his lips. He rolls over me slightly, just enough to pin me half-way beneath him. “Mmm. You’re mine now.” His voice is low with seduction. “You can’t go anywhere.”

My stomach flips in excitement at his words. “I don’t want be anywhere else,” I whisper.

“Good.” He kisses me once more before resting his head on the pillow. “Touch me?”

I don't know where he wants me to touch, but by the way his eyes flutter closed, I assume he doesn't mean sexually. I run my fingers up his body, thread them into his hair, and massage his scalp. "Like this?"

"Perfect," he whispers almost inaudibly.

Eventually his breathing slows and his body relaxes. I continue to play with his hair. The last three days were difficult without being able to see and touch him. I don't want to stop now. It's hard to hold in my laughter when he starts making little noises in his sleep. I'm worried that my slight shaking will wake him, but it doesn't. He looks peaceful while he's sleeping. Calm and relaxed. I rarely see him this way when he's awake.

I drift to sleep for a little bit and wake up shortly after nine. Somehow, I ended up on my back with Edward draped completely over me. I nudge him awake with my shoulder.

"Bella, what are you doing?"

"We should get up. Go talk to Carlisle."

"Tonight?" he groans.

"Yes. I think it would be easier for you to just get it over with. That way, you won't have to worry about it tomorrow."

"If you say so."

The house is dark and silent. We find Esme by herself in the living room watching television. "Hey, Esme. Where is everyone?"

"Emmett went for a run. He needed some fresh air after Alice chewed him out. Alice is in her room drawing."

"Where's Carlisle? We'd like to speak with him."

Esme looks surprised. "He's in the study."

"Thanks, Esme."

As I turn to leave, I'm shocked to hear Edward speak. "Esme?"

"Yes, dear?" She smiles up at him, looking thrilled that he is finally talking.

“Thank you for dinner and for letting us stay here. I’m sorry for any trouble my presence has caused,” he says sincerely.

“Nonsense, Edward. I apologize for my son’s behavior. Both my children are a little overdramatic at times. And stubborn! They get it from their father.” I laugh and even Edward cracks a smile at her remark.

The door to the study is open a crack. I knock and poke my head in. “Hi, Carlisle.”

“Bella, come in.” I step inside the room, pulling Edward by the hand. Carlisle looks at us curiously. “What can I do for you two?”

“We’d like to talk to you about something if you have time.”

“Certainly. Have a seat.” He motions to the leather couch sitting across from his desk. “Is something wrong? Are you in trouble?” He directs the questions to me, but his eyes briefly dart to Edward.

“Um, no. Everything’s fine. There’s something Edward would like to talk to you about, actually.” I look at Edward, who would be sitting on top of me if he were any closer, and wait for him to say something. He doesn’t. At least his demeanor has changed from earlier. He still looks nervous, but at least he is looking directly at Carlisle instead of the floor. “Edward?”

“I, uh . . .” He starts and stops. Carlisle waits patiently for him to continue.

I look between the two men sitting before me—father and son—and the resemblance is so striking I’m surprised I never noticed it before. Both have the same shade of brown hair, the same strong jaw line, the same light skin tone. Their eyes, although different shades, have the same vivid jewel-like quality.

“Tell him your name,” I whisper encouragingly. Edward frowns for a moment before my suggestion sinks in.

He takes a deep breath. “Masen. My name is Edward Masen.”

Carlisle gasps as the name hangs in the air. I watch as a dozen different emotions play across his face—recollection, confusion, astonishment, disbelief, and finally, recognition.

“You’re my son.” He says definitively. Edward opens his mouth, but nothing comes out. Instead, he nods slowly. “I looked . . . *everywhere* for you.”

I silently excuse myself from the study. Carlisle seems accepting, like I was sure he would be, and Edward seems okay as well. Without knowing what else to do, I find myself knocking on Alice’s door.

“Come in.” She sounds agitated.

“Hey, it’s me.”

“Oh! I thought you were Emmett. What’s up? Where is Edward?” She clears a pile of sketches off her bed and pats the spot beside her.

“He’s with your dad,” I say after sitting down.

“Really? Why?”

“I can’t really talk about it right now. Sorry, Alice. But soon, okay?”

“Oh, okay. I’m here for you when you’re ready. You know that, right?”

This is what I love about Alice. She’s always respectful when people need space. “I know. Thanks.”

“Wanna watch a movie or something?”

“That sounds great, actually.”

Alice pops in a comedy, because according to her, laughing will be good for me, and we settle in under the covers. It reminds me of high school, of a time when my life was less complicated. Even though it wasn’t that long ago, it feels like it was light-years away.

Complicated or not, I have loved every minute of my time with Edward. I wouldn’t trade it for the world.

chapter twenty

Edward

"You're my son," Carlisle says. It isn't a question. His eyes are fierce with determination. It makes me nervous. I want to speak, but I can't. My mouth is too dry, and I don't know what to say. "I looked . . . *everywhere* for you."

I can't believe what I am hearing. "You knew about me?"

"Yes," he says without hesitation. "When I was in college I decided to look for you. I looked for years. I searched through public records and contacted all the adoption agencies in the Chicago area."

This is overwhelming. He knew about me. He looked for me. He wanted me. "You were looking in the wrong place," I say under my breath, more to myself than to him.

"Pardon?" He leans across the desk.

“I wasn’t adopted.” It comes out sounding harsher than I intend. Carlisle sits up straight as a look of shock crosses his face. I instantly feel bad. This man welcomed me into his home. He just confessed to searching for me, for wanting to be a part of my life. I shouldn’t take my anger out on him. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be rude. I just—”

“What do you mean, you weren’t adopted?” There is an edge to his voice. For a moment, I worry that he is upset with me.

“I was never given up for adoption,” I explain. “I was raised as, uh . . . I always thought Elizabeth was my sister.”

Understanding washes over Carlisle’s face, and he shakes his head. “Edward Masen,” he whispers. “I was so close.”

“I don’t understand how . . . how did you know? About me? I didn’t even know the truth until quite recently.”

Carlisle smiles and slowly stands. He makes his way to the couch and sits next to me. It is then that I realize Bella is no longer in the room with us. “How is she?” he asks. “How is Elizabeth?”

“Dead.”

“Oh.” He is taken aback by my blunt answer. “I’m sorry, Edward.”

I shrug. “I have a lot of questions.”

“That makes two of us.” In a very fatherly manner, Carlisle pats my back before laying his arm over my shoulders. I tense at the unfamiliarity of the gesture. He squeezes my shoulder before dropping his arm. “What do you know?”

“Not much,” I admit.

“Again, that makes two of us.” We laugh, making an identical *hmph* sound, and if wasn’t so strange to hear, I would probably think that it’s cool. “How about I tell you what I know, and you fill in the blanks.”

“That sounds fair.”

Carlisle takes a deep breath and sighs before he begins. “Elizabeth and I started dating in high school. Everything was perfect at the time; first loves always are. Then, one day, she told me that her father took a job in Chicago, and they were moving. I wanted to do the long distance thing, but she said no. I thought I had time to change her mind. I thought, once we were done with high school, we could run off to college together. I didn’t have time; she was gone the next day. It broke my heart.

“Eventually, I found their new phone number. It wasn’t as easy to find people back then. I called the house and Elizabeth answered. She cried the minute she heard my voice. She told me she was pregnant, about seven months along, and that’s why they moved. When I asked what I could do, she said, ‘You don’t need to do anything, Carlisle. I’m giving the baby up for adoption.’

“To be perfectly honest, I was relieved when she told me her decision. We were only sixteen. We were too young to be parents, but even so, I would have been there for her. I would have taken responsibility. If I knew,” he added. “Still, I wanted to do *something* for her. I asked if I could be there for her emotionally. It was the least I could do. It was really the only thing I could do. She agreed.

“The next time I called the house, her father answered. He told me never to call again and to stay away from his daughter. He never did like me very much.” Carlisle chuckles. It’s apparent that time has healed his wounds. “I didn’t listen, of course. I called back, but I was never allowed to speak with her. Eventually, their number was disconnected. They were unlisted after that. Elizabeth never contacted me.

“When I was about twenty, I decided to look for you. The only solid information I had was your mother’s name. I only had what I approximated your birth date to be, and I had no idea whether my name was on your birth certificate or if you were a boy or a girl. I even went to Chicago and found the Masens’ home. I spoke to Edward. I begged him to tell me something, *anything* about you, but he

offered nothing other than a threat to get off his property. To think I was so close to you that day.

“It didn’t deter me; I kept searching. I wanted to know you. I wanted to be a part of your life.”

“You did?” I ask in disbelief. This entire situation is surreal. So far, it is going better than I ever could have anticipated.

“Yes. I still do.”

I can feel tears pricking my eyes. My father wants to be involved in my life even after all this time. I laugh. It’s either that or cry.

“I always wondered if you would look for me one day, if you even knew who I was. I’ve thought about you a lot over the past twenty-seven years. When Emmett and Alice were born, on each and every one of their birthdays, you were never far from my mind. I always thought of how old you would be, what you might look like, if you ever played with Matchbox cars like Emmett or begged for a pony like Alice.”

I can’t hold the tears back any longer. They fall freely as I listen to Carlisle talk. For the first time, I find myself asking *why* over an entirely different set of questions: Why couldn’t Carlisle have been part of my life? Why did they keep him away? Why didn’t anyone tell him the truth so we didn’t waste all that time?

“I’ve only known about you for a month,” I say once I calm down, “but I’ve thought about you a lot, too. I was afraid,” I confess.

“What were you afraid of?”

“I was afraid you wouldn’t want anything to do with me. I was afraid you would have a family and they wouldn’t want me around. I didn’t want to cause problems but most of all . . . most of all, I didn’t want to find you only to lose you. You are the only family I have left. You and Bella.” I pause as my thoughts return to Bella. I think back on our journey together and how she was right. About

everything. I could have saved us both a lot of time and heartache if I had listened to her in the first place.

There is one thing that's bothering me about this situation. Bella knows these people and seems very close to all of them. I'm positive this Alice is Bella's best friend, the one I spoke to on the phone, but I can't seem to wrap my head around it all. Bella knows my father; she's known him all along. "How do you know Bella?" I ask.

Carlisle smiles warmly. "Bella is like a daughter to me. She moved to Forks a few years back. We used to live there as well. She and Alice became best friends. Bella's father worked long hours and she would spend weekends with us. Summers, too. She's such a sweet girl." Carlisle looks at me pensively. "But you didn't know that," he states. "What brings you two here together?"

I dive into the full account of how Bella and I met and ended up on his doorstep. Well, most of it, anyway. I leave out some of the more colorful parts—the drinking, the threatening phone call from Chief Swan, our fight, the two nights we spent learning each other's bodies. I don't elaborate on Bella's situation either. It's not my place.

We talk for hours. I tell him about what it was like growing up and the struggles I faced. Having met the Masens, Carlisle sympathizes with me in a way no one else can. He asks a lot of questions about Elizabeth. I can tell, even though he moved on from his first love a long time ago, that he needs closure. He tells me how he met Esme and how they fell in love. We discuss college and our careers. Carlisle is a surgeon at Northwest Hospital. It's very motivating, knowing that I can change the way I look at my chosen career. From now on, instead of working in the medical field to impress someone whose approval I'll never earn, I am going to continue because I want to be like Carlisle. He's a good man who wants to help people.

And he's my father.

“Hold on, I have something for you,” I say as I stand up. “I’ll be right back.”

I hurry into the bedroom. It feels like, if I’m gone too long, he’s going to disappear. Bella’s not in the room even though it’s well after two o’clock in the morning. I wonder if she took Esme seriously when she told her to sleep in Alice’s room. I hope not. Digging to the bottom of my duffle bag, I pull out the letter I found when I cleaned out my mother’s belongings. I rush back to the study and sit down beside Carlisle before handing it to him.

“What is this?” He eyes the envelope curiously before pulling out the letter. He looks stunned once he unfolds the yellowed notebook paper and realizes what it is. I know exactly how he feels; I felt the same way.

July 9, 1984

Dear Carlisle,

I’m sorry I haven’t been able to keep in touch. I miss you a lot.

Guess what? I had a beautiful baby boy. Your son! His name is Edward and he just turned 2 last month. My parents are making me pretend he’s their child so I can finish school and go to college. He’s thinks I’m his sister and it’s totally weird especially when he calls my parents Mom and Dad.

My parents wanted to name him after Dad so it would be more believable. I don’t think they’re happy about having another child to raise but they insisted on me doing the right thing for my future. I think they were embarrassed that I got pregnant. You know how they

always wanted me to be perfect and how they were really involved in the community. I guess they thought I would tarnish their stupid reputations or something. It's totally lame but I don't have a choice.

Mom stayed home with me while I was pregnant and she didn't go back to work right away so people would actually believe she had a kid. I'm going to summer school now because I was missing credits and couldn't graduate on time. There's a nanny who takes care of Edward during the day. I feel bad because my parents work long hours and I go to school and have piano lessons and he never gets to see any of us. But Ms. Cope is a nice lady and it's probably way better than Mom or Dad raising him.

I miss you and I hope you're happy. I wish we didn't have to move. I wish we were still together and you were a part of Edward's life. Maybe someday when he's older I'll tell him the truth. Dad won't let me tell him and he probably wouldn't understand it right now anyway. Maybe after college I can take him away and we can come find you. I hope you get to meet him one day. He's a great kid. I can already tell he's going to be smart, just like you.

I don't know if I'll send this letter. I just wanted to pretend for a moment that you're still in my life. I love you and I miss you and I'm sorry.

Love always,
Elizabeth (& Edward)

Carlisle folds the letter and places it carefully back inside the envelope. He stares at it for a long moment without saying anything.

“I found it while I was cleaning out her apartment. I’m surprised I even noticed it; I threw almost everything out.” He still doesn’t say anything, and I worry that showing him the letter was a mistake. “That’s pretty much all I know. Other than she had me at home and her parents put their names on my birth certificate.” Carlisle remains quiet. The silence is uncomfortable. “I didn’t believe her when she told me but then I found the letter. I brought it along in case you didn’t believe me. I’m sorry if you would rather not have seen it. I don’t want—”

Carlisle cuts me off with the last thing I expect—a hug. He clears his throat and says, “I love you, Son.”

Hearing him refer to me as his son and tell me he loves me is more than I can handle. I choke back a sob as I attempt to hold myself together. “How can you love me?” I ask honestly. “You don’t know me.”

“It doesn’t matter,” he says quickly. “You are my son. I have always loved you.”

I honestly don’t know what to say. This is beyond overwhelming. “I don’t . . . I mean, I can’t . . .”

“It’s okay,” he says sincerely. “You are here. That’s what matters right now. We should tell the rest of the family soon. I’m not scheduled to work tomorrow.” Carlisle pauses and looks at me expectantly.

“Oh, uh . . . if you’re sure it’s a good idea.”

“Of course, Edward. You’re a part of this family now.”

Damn it. Is he trying to get me all choked up on purpose? “They won’t be upset? Your wife won’t be upset?”

“Esme knows I had a child; she has always known. She’ll be thrilled that you’re finally here. I’ll tell her tonight. We can tell the kids tomorrow. Bella is more than welcome to be present as well.”

“I don’t think your son likes me,” I confess warily.

Carlisle frowns. “Emmett? He was acting strange at dinner. He’s very protective of Bella. He thinks of her as his little sister. Don’t worry. He’ll come around.”

“If you’re sure,” I say skeptically.

“I am. I know my son. He’s one of the most loving people you’ll ever meet.”

I don’t agree but refrain from arguing. Time will tell. We decide to turn in for the night, but only after I promise to stick around for a while and not disappear without saying goodbye. I assure him that he’ll always be able to find me wherever Bella is.

I return to the bedroom and immediately notice a lump in the bed. I smile knowing Bella is sleeping with me after all. I crawl on top of her and wake her with a kiss. She mumbles in protest against my lips but gives in and kisses me back. When her fingers twine into my hair, I pull back. I don’t want us to get carried away. There’s something I need to tell her.

“Bella, I love you.” I hear her breath catch, but in the darkness, I can’t make out her expression. “It’s okay if you’re not there yet. I just need you to know how I feel. I love you. So much.” I kiss her again, quickly but gently. I don’t want her to feel like she has to return the sentiment. At the same time, I don’t want her to confirm that she *doesn’t* feel the same way.

She kisses me back but only for a moment. “Edward?”

I wait.

And then, she says the sweetest words I have ever heard.

“I am in love with you, Edward Masen.”

chapter twenty-one

Bella

I wake up wrapped in Edward's arms, my head resting on his chest. He caresses my shoulder with his thumb and smiles lazily when I tilt my head to look at him. "Good morning, sleepy head," he whispers as he holds me tighter. I giggle and bury my face into his arm pit. It smells faintly of his deodorant, and the hair tickles my nose, but I don't care. I want to be as close to him as possible. "How'd you sleep?"

"Much better once you came to bed," I say. He hums and kisses the top of my head. "I take it everything went well after I left last night?"

"Yes," he says slowly. "Better than I had expected." He shifts his body so we face each other. "Carlisle wants to tell everyone today."

"Really? When?"

Edward shrugs. "I don't know. Whenever everyone's awake I suppose," he says nervously.

"It will be okay," I assure him. He nods, for the first time not arguing. "Want to get up with me?"

"Nah, you go ahead. I'm not ready to face the world yet."

"Okay. Can I get you anything? Coffee or something?"

"Coffee would be fantastic."

I make my way downstairs and into the kitchen as soundlessly as possible. The house is so quiet that I doubt anyone is awake. To my surprise, Emmett is sitting at the table eating a bowl of cereal over the Sunday paper.

"Hey, Em."

"Morning, Smelly," he says with a smile. "Want some breakfast?"

"No thanks. I'm just getting Edward a cup of coffee. Is there any left?"

"Yeah, I made a full pot." He watches as I open cupboards in search of a mug. It takes a few tries before I find one. "Can't Edward get his own coffee?"

I frown at him. "He was up late," I defend.

"*Hmph.*"

"I offered." Emmett doesn't reply, suddenly becoming very interested in the last crumbs floating in his bowl. I sigh and sit down next to him. It's obvious that something is bothering him; I have a feeling it's Edward. "Emmett?"

"Bella?"

"What do you have against Edward?" I cut right to the chase. He groans and shakes his head. "Come on. Talk to me. Please?"

"Look, it's not that I have anything against him, it's just that—" Emmett stops talking and rubs his hands over his face. "He's so, I don't know, catatonic or something."

"Catatonic?" I ask flatly.

“Bella, the guy’s barely said ten words since he’s got here. He won’t even look at anyone. I don’t like the vibe I get from him. It’s like he has ulterior motives for being here or something, like he’s hiding something, and the way Mom and Dad dote over him . . . it’s just weird.”

“First impressions can be deceiving, you know?”

“I know and I want to trust your judgment.”

“But?”

Emmett sighs and drops his hands to the table. “You know how I felt about Jake. I’m glad you two aren’t together anymore, but at least he was normal. Bella, this guy? This guy is just strange. You’re a nice girl. It’s in your nature to be nurturing. I don’t want anyone taking advantage of you.”

“Edward is not taking advantage of me,” I say sternly.

“Yeah, well, he’s a guy, and I know how guy’s minds work. They only want one thing. You barely know him and he’s quite a bit older—”

“I know him better than you think,” I interrupt. “He’s going through a lot right now.”

“What the hell is his deal? Is he on drugs or something?”

“No! Edward is *not* on drugs.” I wish I could tell him the truth; he’ll find out soon enough. “Just give him a chance.”

Emmett contemplates for a few moments. “Fine. I’ll give him a chance. *For you*,” he stresses. “But if he turns out to be some serial killer I’m going to say ‘I told you so.’” His attempt to lighten the mood is successful, and I laugh. After all, it is something that had crossed my mind about Edward when we first met. “Seriously, though, whatever you two have going on, make sure you’re doing it for you.”

“I am.”

“Good. I don’t want you getting your heart broken.”

I want to tell him that it's not his concern and it doesn't matter anyway, because Edward won't break my heart. Before I get the chance to say anything else, Edward walks into the kitchen. "Bella?" He stops when he spots me at the table with Emmett.

"Hey, man," Emmett says. I can tell he's trying to be pleasant, but it still comes out sounding sour.

Edward nods and I hop out of the chair. "Here's your coffee," I say, handing it to him. "It's probably cold by now, sorry. I can get you a fresh cup."

"No, it's fine." His voice is quiet as he takes the mug. I struggle to think of something to say to alleviate the tension in the room. Before I can think of anything, Esme buzzes into the kitchen.

"Good morning!" Her voice rings out.

"Good morning," I answer.

"Morning, Mom."

"Edward, how did you sleep?" she asks warmly.

"Fine, thank you."

Emmett stands up and brings his dish to the sink. "Hate to cut this party short but I'm gonna drive to Forks and pick up Rose."

"Don't leave yet. Your father wants to talk to you first."

"Why? What did I do?" I can't help but giggle at Emmett's immediate defensiveness.

"Nothing, sweetie, he wants to talk to all of us."

"But I told Rose I'd be there when she got home from church," he argues.

"Rose will have to wait."

"Fine." Emmett quickly walks out of the kitchen, brushing against Edward as he passes through the doorway. The minute he is gone, Esme wraps her arms around Edward and whispers something in his ear. He smiles and visibly relaxes

even with her still squeezing him tightly. When Esme leaves the kitchen, I ask him what she said.

A grin stretches across his face. “Welcome to the family.”

“Are you going to be okay?” Carlisle asks Edward while we wait in the living room for the rest of the Cullens. “I don’t want to do this if you’re not ready.”

“I’m fine. I’m ready.”

Carlisle sits in a chair and motions toward the loveseat. Once Edward and I are seated, I take his hand and thread our fingers together. He lets out a shaky breath and leans in to kiss my forehead.

Esme walks in the room followed by Alice and Emmett. The three of them take a seat on the couch across from us. Alice looks concerned when she spots Edward here. Even Emmett looks anxious.

“Dad,” Alice’s voice wavers, “is something wrong?”

“No, sweetheart.” Carlisle smiles at her reassuringly. “There is something I’d like to tell you and Emmett.”

Carlisle squeezes his eyes closed momentarily. He takes a deep breath, and when he finally speaks, his words are slow and deliberate. It doesn’t come across as rehearsed but as genuine. It’s apparent that he’s speaking from the heart.

“As parents, we don’t always know what to tell our children about certain aspects of our lives. We have to decide which parts of our past to disclose and which parts to keep private. There’s no handbook; there’s no one to tell us what is right or wrong. I have so much pride in this family. We are very close. We’re always open with one another, always supportive, and we all get along. For the most part, anyway,” he adds with a chuckle. “That’s how I have faith that everything will work out now.”

“I love you both, very much,” he says, pausing to look purposefully at both Alice and Emmett. “Nothing will ever change that. I am very fortunate to have all of you in my life.” This time, he spares Edward a quick glance. Beside me, Edward takes a shaky breath and tightens his grip on my hand. “I’m not sure if I made the right decision by not telling you this sooner, but when I was a teenager, my girlfriend got pregnant.” Alice gasps and Emmett snaps his head up to look at his father. If Carlisle didn’t have their full attention before, he does now. “I’d like for you both to know that,” he takes a deep breath before continuing, “Edward is my son.”

For a few brief moments, the room is completely silent. My heart pounds so hard that I can feel it in my head. I look at Edward; his expression is unreadable. I really hope he’s keeping it together.

Alice is the first to break the silence. “Oh my gosh.” Her eyes are wide and quickly fill with tears. She covers her face with her hands. “Oh my gosh,” she repeats.

“I am *so* sorry,” Edward says quietly.

“What?” Alice asks through her tears as she drops her hands to her sides.

“I’m sorry.” He abruptly stands up, letting go of my hand in the process. “I shouldn’t be . . . I mean, I—”

“You’re my brother? I have another big brother?” she asks in astonishment, looking toward Carlisle for confirmation. He nods, and Alice’s expression turns from shock to elation. “Oh my gosh!” She runs across the small living room and throws her arms around Edward’s neck. He has to bend down to accommodate her, laughing uncomfortably as he does. When Alice finally releases him, she turns to me and asks, “Is this what you couldn’t talk about last night?”

“Yes. I wanted to tell you but . . .”

She sits down and hugs me as well. “I understand,” she says before dropping her voice to a whisper. “Does this mean we’re going to be sisters one day?”

“Alice!” I hiss. She giggles and winks quickly so only I can see.

“I’m so happy that you found us, Edward,” says Esme. “I know the toll that searching for you has taken on my husband, and I’m glad you two can finally begin a relationship. You are welcome to stay here as long as you’d like.”

“Thank you, Esme,” he says shyly. A hint of pink colors his cheek. For once, I’m glad that I’m not the one blushing. Edward looks down suddenly, and I realize everyone else has turned to look at Emmett. He hasn’t said anything since the big reveal, and by the look on his face, I don’t think he is going to. His eyes are wide, gaze fixed on the floor, and his mouth hangs open. No one presses him to say or do anything. Edward sits down slowly. Our eyes meet briefly before he gives me a sad smile.

“Well, that’s . . .” Emmett clears his throat. “Congrats, I guess,” he says to no one in particular. “Wow.” His voice is quiet, shaky, and it takes me by surprise. It’s very different from Emmett’s usual happy-go-lucky demeanor. Even when he’s in a bad mood, his personality always comes across strong. Esme looks between her son and husband with concern. “Can I go get Rose now?” Emmett doesn’t wait for an answer before vacating the room.

I have the overwhelming urge to follow him, but even if I did, I wouldn’t know what to say. The once happy atmosphere is overshadowed by Emmett’s hasty departure. Both Carlisle and Esme assure Edward that it’s not his fault, that Emmett will be fine. He doesn’t believe them, I can tell.

Alice does her best to save the day by grilling Edward and me for details of how we met. It’s the first time we tell the story together. I feel like we’ve shared a lifetime of memories; it’s hard to believe we have only known each other for two weeks. It feels strange, at first, talking about it with Carlisle and Esme in the room. What I did was irresponsible and potentially dangerous, but with Edward being family and all, I feel immune from parental lectures.

“You were so greasy!” I tell him. “I would have been thoroughly disgusted if I wasn’t so wrapped up in figuring out an escape plan in case you turned into some psycho killer.”

“Whatever, Bella.” Edward laughs. “And here I thought you liked my beard.” He gives me a mischievous smile, and I wonder what he’s thinking. I think about Couchgate, about the way his facial hair felt under my fingertips, the way he moved my body over his. I can feel my face heating up as I think of how much I missed being intimate with him the past five nights. Edward notices. His eyes dart to my cheeks, and he leans closer to place a kiss there. His cheek brushes mine, the roughness causing a shiver to run down my spine. He must have shaved yesterday morning, the smooth skin on his face having since been replaced by a five o’clock shadow. I make a mental note to tell him how much I like his beard the next time we’re alone. “I’m surprised you got in my car. A couple of times I thought for sure you were going to jump out while we were at highway speeds.”

“I thought you were going to toss me out when I lost that M&M.”

“It did cross my mind,” he muses. “I’m glad I didn’t. The constant pit stops were a pain in my ass, but I kind of liked having you around.” He cushions his teasing with a kiss on my lips. It is sweet and quick, completely family friendly.

“It *is* a good thing you kept me around,” I say, feigning indignation. “You might never have used your kitchen otherwise.”

“Hey, I use it all the time. I can make coffee *and* a mean PB and J.”

“Don’t worry. I will teach you to cook an entire meal *on your own* before the summer is over.” My mood falls as the weight of my words sinks in. Edward and I haven’t talked about our future. What if the summer is all we have? It feels like someone just stamped a giant expiration date on our relationship. I’m positive Edward wants to be with me as much as I want to be with him, but we live nowhere near each other. If we do the long distance thing, is it going to last?

Edward doesn't seem fazed by my comment. His lack of reaction is disconcerting. I cross my fingers that he just didn't catch what I said. Regardless, it's something we need to talk about.

Soon.

Emmett doesn't return with Rose until the following Friday. The rest of us are eating dinner when they arrive. We freeze, all conversation forgotten as they enter the dining room. Emmett gives a brief introduction that sounds forced but is a lot less awkward than what I expect from him.

"Rosie, this is Edward, Bella's boyfriend. Edward, this is my girlfriend, Rose." It doesn't go unnoticed that he introduces Edward as "Bella's boyfriend" and not "my brother" or even "my father's illegitimate child." At least he acknowledges Edward's relationship with me. It's progress.

Rose shoots a disbelieving look at Emmett before regaining her composure. "It's nice to finally put a face to the name," she says as she turns her icy stare on Edward. "I've heard a lot about you." Emmett grabs her arm, pulling her along as he retreats from the room.

"Let me guess. She's not going to like me either," Edward says quietly. His tone is playful, but it's a mask. I know him well enough to pick up on the underlying hurt. Over the past few days his spirits have been lifted. He and Carlisle spent a lot of time getting to know each other and have fallen into an easy relationship. He opened up a bit to Esme and Alice as well. In fact, things have gone so well for him and everyone else that I feel like I'm missing out. In a way I am. The only opportunities we've had to be alone together have been in bed. Even then, our time is filled with chaste kisses, innocent caresses, and whispered words of love. The two weeks I spent alone with Edward spoiled me, but as much

as I want to monopolize his time, I don't want to be selfish by keeping him all to myself now.

"Rose wasn't being mean," I assure him. "That's just her personality."

"It's true." Alice chimes in. "That's not her bitch face. She always looks like that."

"Alice." Esme frowns, but I think only because she's trying not to laugh.

"The three of us should do something tomorrow," Carlisle suggests. "You, me, and Emmett. Esme, maybe you can take the girls to the Space Needle or the zoo."

"The zoo, Dad?" Alice scoffs.

"I think it's a great idea." I don't care what we do. I just want Edward and Emmett to have an opportunity to know each other. I'm positive they will get along once they quit being stubborn.

The five of us agree. Tomorrow us girls will hang out downtown. Hopefully Carlisle will get the boys to get along and make some progress.

chapter twenty-two

Edward

I

have a bad feeling about this.”

“You’ll be fine. Carlisle will be there,” Bella assures me.

“I know but I just don’t think it’s going to do any good; he can’t force Emmett to like me. I don’t think he’s ready to accept me, and I don’t want to push him.”

“Fuck him.”

My head snaps up to look at Bella. I don’t think I’ve ever heard her swear before, and it takes me by surprise. She is standing across the room, folding the laundry she did this morning, and acting like the dirtiest word didn’t just come from her innocent lips.

“Bella,” I scold as I slowly walk toward her.

“What?”

“What did you just say?”

She frowns, but when she realizes what she said, her eyes get big and her cheeks turn pink. “Fuck him?”

“Yes, that.” I wrap my arms around her waist and pull her to me. “Where’d you learn such a dirty word, little girl?”

“Probably from spending too much time with you and your filthy mouth, old man.”

“You could never spend too much time with me,” I tease. “Or my filthy mouth.” We kiss, but Bella pulls away too quickly.

“Unfortunately, your filthy mouth will have to wait. Esme wants to leave by eleven, which is in,” Bella draws out the word as she checks her watch, “three minutes. Oh! Her car is in the shop. Do you mind if we take yours? I won’t let anyone else drive if you’re not okay with it. I promise.” Bella’s face crinkles up in a grimace as if it pains her to ask. Her reaction makes me feel bad. I should have never been such an anal prick about my car.

“Bella, you can use my car any time you want. Anything of mine. It’s all yours.” She opens her mouth, presumably to argue, but I cut her off before she can say anything. “I mean it. What’s mine is yours.” I retrieve my car keys from the dresser and place them in her palm before wrapping my arms around her again. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.” She kisses my neck and it feels amazing. Warm lips, soft tongue, teeth.

“Okay, you need to stop or I won’t let you go anywhere.” I kiss her lips once more.

“Ready, Bella?” Alice calls through the doorway.

“Go,” I whisper. I grab Bella’s hips, turn her body around, and give her a little push toward the door, swatting her ass as she goes. She yelps and scurries out the door, giggling on the way.

I begin to put away the laundry that Bella left on the bed when I hear the click of the door closing. “Back for more so soon?” My playful question is met with silence. When I turn around, I come face-to-face with a pair of steely blue eyes. “Rosalie?”

“I’m sorry to intrude,” she says quietly. “This will only take a second. Do you mind?” Something about being behind a closed door with Emmett’s girlfriend makes me uncomfortable. I can’t image what she wants, but it can’t be good if she sneaks in and doesn’t speak above a whisper. Curiosity gets the best of me, and I gesture for her to continue. “It really is nice to meet you,” she stresses. When I frown, she quickly adds, “I overheard what you said last night.”

“Oh,” I say dumbly. Now I feel like a dick for voicing my assumptions about how she felt about me while they were still within earshot.

“I know Emmett has been less than welcoming to you. He’s having a tough time with everything. He doesn’t hate you, even though he wants to. Give him some time. Bella likes you, and that’s the only stamp of approval I need. I don’t want you to think I’m siding with Emmett just because he’s my boyfriend.”

I don’t know what to say. I decide on something simple and sincere. “Thank you. It means a lot to me.”

She nods and backs up, slipping quietly through the door. That was interesting. Rosalie seems nice enough even if she masks it with an air of unfriendliness. I wonder what she means by Emmett not hating me “even though he wants to.” I brush it off. There’s plenty of time to worry about him later.

An hour later, I find myself in the living room with Emmett. We exchange pleasantries briefly, and then stand together in awkward silence. Carlisle enters the room with an apologetic expression on his face. I know immediately that the next words out of his mouth won’t be good.

“Boys, I’m sorry, but the hospital is short staffed. I need to go in for a few hours. Perhaps we can do dinner instead?”

Oh, no. No, no, no, no, no.

I glance at Emmett. He looks at me with a slight edge of panic before gathering his composure. At first I don't understand what causes him to look at me like that, but then I realize it mirrors my own expression. He doesn't want us to be stuck alone together either.

The exchange lasts only a second before Emmett speaks up. "Sure, Dad. That's cool."

"Dinner sounds great, Carlisle."

He breathes a sigh of relief. "Thank you for understanding. I'll see you both in awhile."

We watch Carlisle hurry out the door. I sigh and face Emmett. "Well, what should we do now?" He shrugs and without looking at me, turns and walks away. I stand there bewildered as I watch him exit the room. He just blew me off. I tried to reach out to him, and he fucking blew me off. My bewilderment quickly turns to anger. What is his problem anyway? I didn't do anything to him.

Without anything else to do, I retreat to the room Bella and I are sharing. After about an hour of fiddling around, I feel like I'm going insane. It's not that I don't enjoy being here, but I'm starting to get cabin fever, especially now that I'm by myself. This whole plan of Carlisle's is ridiculous anyway. I should be spending the day with Bella; we should be out doing something fun. It's been over a week since we've been able to spend time together. *Alone*. There are things I desperately want to talk about with her as well. I need to find out how adamant she is about going back to school in Florida this fall. Then I have to find out how she would feel about us living together. I know she loves me, but I'm still afraid that, if I say the wrong thing or put too much pressure on her, she'll run from me, too. One thing is for certain—we will be together. She is either moving to Chicago or I am relocating to Florida.

Not only do I have to wait to see Bella until this evening, but I'm stuck here alone with the asshole I'm fondly trying to think of as my brother. No Bella, no Esme, no Alice, nobody to diffuse the charged atmosphere between us. I have to get out of here. I walk to the dresser to grab my keys before it dawns on me that Bella has the car. Fuck, I really am stuck here. I want to scream. I can feel all the anxiety, anger, and uncertainty building in my chest. It feels like I'm going to explode. Before my brain makes a conscious decision, my legs move toward Emmett's bedroom. I knock loudly and throw the door open before he can finish asking, "What?"

My eyes scan the room twice before I find him. He is sitting on the floor, hidden behind the bed, playing a video game. The back of his head is the only part of him I can see. "Do you want to do something?" It comes out sounding harsh, and if I were him, I wouldn't want to do anything with me.

"I am doing something." His reply is monotone.

Prick.

"Fine, can I borrow your Jeep?"

I don't know if it is because of my question or because he sucks at whatever war game he's playing, but shots ring out and the TV screen is filled with splatters of blood. He throws the controller down angrily and stands up. "You want to borrow my Jeep?" he asks in disbelief.

I admit it does seem a little unbelievable that he'd be willing to loan me his wheels after I barge into his room and act like a jackass. Still, I can't bring myself to feel bad about the way I'm treating him. He hasn't even made an attempt to be friendly toward me. Nodding, I calmly say, "Look, I just need to get out of here for a bit."

"Fuck off."

My jaw drops in surprise. I tried to be nice, I really did. I've had enough of Emmett's piss poor attitude. If he's looking for a reason not to like me then I'll

give him one. “Look, my world isn’t going to come crashing down if you’re a dick to me, but for fuck’s sake pull your selfish head out of your ass and try! Just fucking *try* to get along with me. Think of how much it will mean to Carlisle if he comes home and we are actually getting along.”

Emmett digs in his pocket then tosses his keys at me. “Whatever, *Bro*,” he sneers.

“What the fuck is your problem?” I yell, finally snapping. “What did I ever do to you?”

He steps back, his eyes wide at my outburst. “I just gave you my goddamned keys, so what the hell else do you want from me?”

“Nothing,” I seethe. I step out of his room and slam the door behind me. Taking the stairs two at a time, I rush downstairs and out the front door.

Emmett’s Wrangler rumbles to life when I turn the key, but I can’t bring myself to leave. The week has been an emotional one. I’m tired, I’m stressed, and I don’t want to be alone. Not only that, but I have no clue where to go. My head falls into my hands as I try to imagine Bella beside me, imagine what she would be telling me if she were here right now. I know she wouldn’t approve of me storming off. She would be upset that I let Emmett get the best of me, that I didn’t try harder to get along with him. And what about Carlisle? There’s no way I could bring myself to tell him about what happened. I would be too ashamed of how I acted, and I wouldn’t want him disappointed in me or Emmett.

Reluctantly, I kill the engine. It feels as though I’m dragging my feet as I make my way back into the house. I stand outside of Emmett’s closed door. The room is completely quiet, and I wonder if he’s still inside. I knock gently and wait with bated breath.

“Yeah.” His voice is defeated as it filters through the door. I turn the handle slowly and enter his room once more. He is on the bed, staring up at the ceiling.

From his lack of reaction, I assume my presence is okay. I slowly walk over to the bed and drop his keys next to him.

“I’m sorry,” is all I can bring myself to say. He doesn’t look at me. I wait for him to say or do something, but he doesn’t until I turn to leave.

“Why are you here?” he asks timidly, seemingly apprehensive of the answer.

“What?” My question is rhetorical but he clarifies it anyway.

“Why did you come here? What do you want from my dad?”

His dad, as if he’s in denial that Carlisle is my dad as well. I guess I can’t blame him. “I don’t want anything from him. I just wanted to meet him.”

“So what, then? You just decided you’d stay? Be a part of the family?”

“Carlisle asked me to stay for a while,” I explain. “I don’t have any other family. This is it for me.” I don’t expect him to understand without knowing my past. It’s not something I care to go into detail about right now. That’s a conversation for another day when our emotions are in check and it won’t come across as a sob story.

“Oh.” Emmett sits up slowly. As he does, I take a seat on the edge of his bed. “So are you moving in or something?”

“No.” I chuckle awkwardly. “I have a home Chicago. I’ll go back there when Bella is ready to leave. She wants to be here; she missed all of you.”

Emmett frowns. “Alice told Rose about how you two met; Rose told me.”

“Small world,” I say with a nod.

“Very,” he agrees. He takes a deep breath, exhaling loudly. “You and Bella—you two seem close.”

“She is my life,” I answer simply.

“I don’t want her to get hurt.”

“I’m not going to hurt her, Emmett. I love her.”

“You barely know her,” he says in a clipped tone.

“I’m sure I don’t know as much *about* her as you do, but I know who she is,” I defend. “She’s beautiful—inside and out—and she is unlike anyone I’ve ever met before. I honestly don’t know how I made my way through life before knowing her, and now that I do, I can’t imagine her *not* being in my life.”

“She’s a special girl.”

“Yes, she is,” I agree.

“Bella doesn’t have any siblings,” Emmett continues. “She’s like a little sister to me. I’m protective of her, just like I am with Alice. I was the oldest sibling. I was the only brother. Now I’m neither.” He looks at me. He’s wearing a frown, but his eyes are uncertain, hurt.

“I’m not trying to take that away from you.”

Disregarding what I say, he continues in frustration. “Dad didn’t even tell us in private. He told us in front of you, in front of Bella.” He shakes his head. “I didn’t know what to say, what to do. Alice took it so well, and it just made me feel so awful.”

“Emmett, my being here isn’t going to change the way anyone feels about you. Alice . . .” I pause, struggling for the right words to say. “You’ll always be her big brother, her protector. You have to know she doesn’t think of me like that. I’ll never be able to take your place. I’ll never try.”

“I know,” he accedes. “Rose ripped me a new one when I told her what happened. She said, ‘Quit acting like an imbecile. Didn’t you always say you wanted a brother? Now you do.’ But it’s different, you know? It’s not like we grew up together or anything.”

“No, we didn’t, but we have to start somewhere.”

“Yep.”

“You know, when I found out about Carlisle being my father, I wondered if he already had a family. Never in a million years did I think he would welcome me into it. I understand why you’re apprehensive about me, especially since I showed

up with Bella, but this is one of the best things to ever have happened to me. I can't just walk away from it all."

"I know, man. Look, I'm sorry I was such a dick." His apology is sincere if not a bit resigned.

"Don't be," I sigh. "I'm sorry, too. I'm sure there was a better way to handle the situation than to show up here unannounced, but I can't change that now."

Emmett stands and walks around the bed. He pulls out a second controller from the small television stand and offers it to me in a silent challenge. I accept and we play in awkward silence. We have a long way to go before we're comfortable with each other, but for the first time, things with Emmett are looking up.

"I am so glad to see you," I tell Bella as she walks through the front door. Before she has a chance to put her purse down or remove her shoes, I sweep her off her feet in a bear hug. She lets out a little grunt as the air leaves her lungs, and I place her back on the ground. "You were gone too long."

"We didn't think you'd be back already. Where's Carlisle? His car is gone."

I quickly explain that he had to leave but Emmett and I entertained ourselves. Bella eyes me speculatively. "How—"

"Later," I interrupt. I don't want to discuss today's events in front of everyone.

Bella and Alice drag me into the living room and proceed to tell me all about their afternoon. I try to pay attention but the low-cut shirt Bella is wearing keeps distracting me. I'm almost positive it belongs to Alice since Bella never once picked out anything remotely as revealing when she shopped during our road trip. My attempt at keeping my gaze on her face instead of her tits is poor at best. Bella doesn't notice, but Alice does.

“Well!” She clears her throat and abruptly jumps to her feet. “I’m gonna go pack for our trip to Forks tomorrow. You lovebirds behave now.” She winks at me before practically running out of the room.

“What was that about?” I ask before registering what she actually said. “Wait, Forks?”

“Yeah,” Bella says guiltily. “About that. I kind of told Alice that we’d give her a ride to Forks when we went back to visit my dad, and then she kind of talked me into going tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” Tomorrow. Forks. Dad. Fuck!

“Is that okay? I can tell her no.”

“It’s fine,” I assure her. “Gotta go eventually, right?”

“Right! I feel bad because she misses Jasper so much, and he can’t leave Forks because he’s got a summer job and—”

My lips effectively shut her up; she doesn’t complain. I push Bella onto her back and slide her to the middle of the couch before positioning myself between her legs. “Well, I miss you,” I say while I plant kisses along her neck, slowly moving toward the cleavage that’s been teasing me for the past 15 minutes.

“How can you miss me? We’ve been together for—”

“No.” I cut her off again. “I *miss* you,” I repeat, this time accenting the words with a thrust of my hips. Bella gasps, and I cover her mouth with mine, kissing her deeply to muffle the sound. She weaves one of her hands into my hair. With the other, she pulls up the back of my shirt and slides her hand halfway into my jeans.

Breaking away from her lips, I continue the assault on her neck. I want to suck and bite, to mark her delicate flesh so the world knows she’s mine, but I refrain. In the back of my mind I know that I shouldn’t leave a visible mark while we’re around family. Although, if we’ll be in Forks tomorrow, there’s a certain someone I wouldn’t mind taking notice. I completely push those thoughts away when Bella

squeezes my ass. Hard. I retaliate by clamping my teeth down on her shoulder. She moans quietly. The sound goes straight to my dick.

“God, I can’t wait—” I stop myself from finishing the thought.

“Can’t wait for what?” she asks breathlessly.

“Nothing. It’s nothing.”

“Tell me.” When I ignore her, she tugs my hair hard enough for my lips to lose contact with her skin. “Edward?”

I hesitate before looking her in the eyes, silently pleading for her not to take it the wrong way. “I can’t wait to be inside you.”

The words hang in the air between us. Saying it out loud is enough to make my body hum with excitement. Bella’s eyes widen, but I can’t decipher whether it’s a good sign. I bury my face in her neck and squeeze my eyes closed, hoping my next question gets a positive reaction. “Is that something you’re ready for?”

“Right now?” Her voice shakes.

“Geez, no! Not now. Not *here*.” I laugh nervously. My lips find hers once again, only lingering long enough to nip at her plush bottom lip. “I meant in general.”

“Oh.” She sounds relieved.

The sound of a throat clearing makes us both jump. I glance over my shoulder to see Emmett standing in the room, averting his eyes.

“Oh, my god,” Bella groans in embarrassment and presses her face into the back of the couch. I try to sit up, but stop when her arms wrap tightly around my shoulders.

“Dad’s home, so uh . . . are you ready to go?” He asks, clearly uncomfortable from walking in on us.

I sigh quietly. I’m not excited about leaving Bella so soon. “Yeah, give me a couple of minutes.”

“I’m sure Dad will let the girls come with us if we ask,” he mentions offhandedly.

As tempting as it sounds to spend more time with Bella, I don’t think going to dinner with everyone is the best decision. Carlisle wants to spend time with us. Even though Emmett and I hung out for a few hours, he missed out on all of it. I’m sure he will be thrilled that we are on talking terms, but if everyone goes out with us, it won’t be the same for him.

I shake my head. “I think he’d like it if it were just the three of us.”

“Yeah. I’d like that, too.” As he walks out of the room, he calls out, “And get off of Smelly, you pervert.”

I laugh. Bella groans and covers her face with her hands. I laugh harder. “Are you okay?”

“Yes,” she sighs. “And yes.”

“And yes’ what?” I ask in confusion.

“I’m ready.”

chapter twenty-three

Bella

No,” Edward grumbles from the front seat. “We aren’t stopping again.”

“But I finished drinking the jumbo ICEE over an hour ago, and I have to pee.” Next to me, Alice crosses and uncrosses her legs.

“Maybe you should have thought of that before you bought it.” The words are harsh, but from where I’m sitting in the backseat, I can see the smile threatening the corner of Edward’s lips. “We’ve stopped twice already,” he continues. “What is it with you girls? Is there some unwritten rule about how often you have to make pit stops on road trips? And how is it that the more of you I get in my car, the more times I have to stop, when you accompany each other to the bathroom every time?”

“I don’t know, Edward. Just stop at the next gas station,” Alice demands.

“I’ll stop when we get to Forks.” Edward throws me a quick wink over his shoulder.

“I can’t hold it another half-hour.” She begins to kick the back of Edward’s seat, and it takes everything I have not to laugh. Alice seems to have slipped into her role as little sister quite well.

“Fine, but one of you needs to come sit up front afterwards. I’m not a chauffeur.”

“Fine.” Alice rolls her eyes. “Bella’s only sitting back here because it was easier to share snacks this way. Right, Bella?”

“Yeah, it was easier to share snacks,” I echo. Surprisingly, Edward was a good sport when Alice loaded up on chips and candy at the first convenience store where we stopped. He even managed a smile and a nod when she asked if we could eat in the car.

Edward takes the next exit and Alice chants, “Thank you, thank you, thank you.” She hops out of the car the minute it’s in park. I crawl into the front seat while we wait for her to return.

“You don’t need to go?” Edward asks.

“I’m fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“I’m not stopping again,” he says in a warning tone.

“Yeah right. You would totally stop if I asked you to. I have you wrapped around my little finger.” I wiggle my pinky in Edward’s face. He quickly grabs my wrist.

“Is that what you think?”

“Uh-huh.” I try to sound confident, but it comes across sounding needy and pathetic.

“Mmm.” Edward narrows his eyes and leans closer to me. My breath catches. He looks so sexy. I expect him to kiss me, but his devilish grin makes me uneasy, like he’s planning something. I try to pull my arm away, but his grip only tightens. “You aren’t going anywhere.”

Without thinking it through, I try to tickle him with my free hand. He snatches that wrist as well, rendering me defenseless. When he speaks, his voice is gravely and low. “Oh-oh. What are you gonna do now?”

His hands burn hot on my wrists. He pulls me closer, and I feel his breath fan across my neck, followed by his lips. The scruff on his chin leaves a tingling trail as he kisses up and down my neck and across my collar bone. I melt as he scrapes his teeth across my skin.

“I miss this,” he mumbles into my neck. “Being alone with you, here in this stupid car.”

“I miss it, too,” I whisper.

“Is it wrong that I want to take you away so I can have you all to myself?”

I struggle to articulate anything at this moment. I want to tell him that I want him to take me away as well. I would go anywhere with him as long as he continues doing what he’s doing. All I can manage is a shake of my head.

Edward pulls his face away, his expression serious. “Bella, how would you feel—”

The backdoor opens, cutting him off mid sentence. “I tried to be quick, but there was a line and . . . oh! Sorry.” Alice gives us an apologetic smile before averting her eyes.

I look at Edward questioningly. “What?”

“Nothing. Later,” he answers quietly. He smiles and kisses both of my hands before releasing my wrists. I’m left feeling flustered, excited, and very, very turned on.

The remaining drive to Forks is quiet. Edward touches me constantly, holding my hand or rubbing my leg. Once we arrive in town, Alice directs him to the local lumber yard where Jasper is working for the summer.

“Perfect timing,” she proclaims. “Jasper should be off work in ten minutes. Good thing we made all those stops along the way.” Alice winks at me. Edward attempts to glare at her but can’t keep the grin off his face.

We offer to wait with Alice until Jasper’s shift is done, but she insists that she’ll be fine by herself. Edward unloads her bags from the car and tosses them into the back of Jasper’s pickup truck. Before we go, Alice makes us promise to meet up with them before we leave town. We agree, and she blows us kisses as we pull out of the parking lot.

“She looks so excited,” I tell Edward. “It must be hard for them to be apart for so long.”

“I can’t even imagine,” he says quietly. “Hey, is there a liquor store around here?”

“Yes,” I answer slowly. “Drinking and fishing are the two biggest pastimes here. But I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to get me drunk right now. My dad is the Chief of Police, you know.”

Edward laughs and squeezes my leg. “Not for you, for your father. You told me that he’s a beer drinker. I figure I might as well use our age difference to my advantage. Show him the benefits of me being eight years older than you.”

“Yeah, I suppose. Smart thinking, Gramps.” I guess it sounds like a good idea. Charlie is going to find out how old Edward is sooner or later. He’s also going to find out that I lied to him, that Edward doesn’t go to school with me, that he doesn’t even live in Florida. It probably wouldn’t hurt to butter him up a little bit first. I have no idea what the proper protocol for introducing them is. I can’t even judge if this goes well or not because I have nothing to compare it to. I’ve never been in this situation before. Jake was my first and only boyfriend before

Edward, but that was different. Charlie already knew him and was more than excited when we started dating. To say I'm nervous is an understatement.

"Hey, can I ask you something?" Edward interrupts my thoughts. "Are you going to see Jacob while we're here?"

Great. This is the first time I've thought about Jake since I saw him last weekend. I forgot I promised him that we'd hang out. "I don't know. Why?"

"Just curious."

"Do you not want me to see him?"

Edward frowns and opens his mouth but doesn't say anything. It looks like he's concentrating really hard. "Look, I don't want you to take this the wrong way. I'm not going to tell you what to do, but if you do something with him, I'd like to be there."

"Don't you trust me?"

"I do trust you," he says quickly. "But I don't trust him."

"Edward, it's basically the same thing. I've known Jake my whole life. Nothing bad is going to happen. I'm not a helpless little girl."

"I know you're not. I didn't mean it like that."

"What are you so worried about?" He doesn't answer, but color starts to flood his cheeks. "Why are you blushing? Edward, are you jealous?" I tease.

"No," he states firmly. He glances at me and I raise an eyebrow questioningly. "Okay, maybe a little."

"Oh, my god. You have *nothing* to worry about!" I laugh.

"I know, it's just . . . I don't know."

"I won't be alone with him if you're not comfortable with it. In fact, I don't have to see him at all."

"Bella—"

"Seriously! I don't even really want to see him. Besides, I want to spend as much time with you as possible."

My chest aches when I think about summer ending. I don't to be away from Edward any more than absolutely necessary. Hopefully we'll have plenty of alone time while we're at Charlie's. As much fun as it was to stay with the Cullens again, I didn't like having to share Edward with everyone else.

We arrive at the liquor store. Edward parks at the far end of the lot in the back of the building, saying something about not wanting anyone to see me waiting in the car. I tell him what brand of beer Charlie prefers—Rainier—and to hurry back. While I wait, I can't help but think of what's going to happen to us. I try to push it to the back of my mind. We have three months before I have to be back in Florida.

Three months.

Then what?

Will Edward want to have a long distance relationship? Will he still want me after we're apart for nine months? What if he decides he doesn't want to wait for me to finish school? What if he gets tired of me before summer is over?

My breathing speeds up as I begin to panic. I've never felt this dependent on anyone in my entire life. For the first time, I need someone. I need Edward. Not to take care of me or do stuff for me. It's like I need him to exist. I need him like I need air, like I need food and water!

I watch as he walks toward the car carrying a case of beer. Suddenly, the need I feel for him turns into something different—the need to be close to him.

I assault him the moment he sits in the driver's seat. My hands grab his hair and squeeze the back of his neck. He moans as our lips meet. I manage to climb over the center console and straddle him. His hands roam over my body as our kissing becomes frenzied, desperate.

I move away only enough to break the kiss. "Did you bring the condoms?" My voice comes out breathy. It sounds sexy, even to me.

Edward freezes. "No."

“Let’s go get some.” I try to kiss him again, but he pushes me away.

“No,” he says in a strained voice. “We’re not having sex.”

“Why not?” It comes out whiney and I cringe.

“Because we’re parked behind a liquor store in my car.”

“Who cares, Edward? It’s not like anyone can see us back here in the trees. Let’s just do it.”

“No, Bella.” He pushes me farther away.

Rejection washes over me, but it’s quickly replaced with anger. “Is this about your car? Another rule?”

“No.” He frowns.

“Is it me?” Logically I know it’s not about me, but I can’t help the insecurity that bubbles under the surface. Yesterday he told me he wanted to and now—

Edward sighs exasperatedly. “Believe me, I would love to have sex with you in the back of my car, but not for our first time.”

“What’s the big deal? You want me. I want you. Please?” I beg.

“I want our first time to be special, to mean something. There’s nothing romantic about car sex when you’re six-foot-two.”

“When is it going to be the right time? At Carlisle and Esme’s, where there’s always someone home? Or in my twin bed with Charlie across the hallway snoring?” I know I’m being completely irrational. Edward is right—our first time should be special. Right now, I just want to be close to him, to know he wants me as much as I want him.

“Bella,” Edward says reverently, “we have plenty of time. There’s no rush. I want it to be perfect. Let me make it perfect for us.” He cups my cheeks with his hands and pulls me close again. He kisses me tenderly, slowly, and lovingly. I can’t argue with him anymore.

“I love you,” I whisper. His answering kiss tells me he loves me too.

Edward helps me back into my seat and waits for me to buckle my seatbelt before starting the car. As we pull onto the road he adjusts himself, and I notice he's still a little worked up from our make out session.

"Looks like you have a little problem there."

He shoots me a disbelieving glance. "Uh, it's more than a *little* problem," he jokes. I reach over and palm the bulge in his pants. "Bella," he groans. I can't tell if it's meant to encourage me or not. When he doesn't stop me, I grip him through his jeans. "Fuck, Bella."

I manage to undo two of his buttons before he catches on to what I want. He quickly unbuckles his seatbelt, finishes opening his fly, and shimmies his pants down his hips. I waste no time taking him in my hand. His breathing gets heavier as I stroke him, and his moan when I wrap my lips around the head of his cock is all the encouragement I need.

I feel much more confident this time. Edward had told me I did a good job before, and his ragged breathing tells me I'm doing okay now. I take my time, moving up and down his length slowly and taking as much of him in my mouth as I dare. I don't want to gag again; that can't be sexy.

My hair gets in my face, and I have to stop to tuck it behind my ear. After doing that a couple of times, Edward gathers it in his fist. He places his hand on the back of my head but doesn't push me down like last time. Instead, he moves with me, setting the pace. Each time he stops his hand a little lower, making me keep more of him in my mouth. I'm not sure if he's doing it on purpose, but before long I have to go deeper just so I can keep moving.

"Come on, baby, you can take more." His voice is filled with lust as he encourages me. I take him deeper, but my gag reflex kicks in, causing me to cough. "Fuck, that is so sexy." His admission surprises me but makes me a lot less self conscious about it. I try to relax my throat before continuing and am able to

get a few good strokes in before gagging again. Edward doesn't seem to mind the little interruptions and before long my lips press flush against his skin.

“Good girl,” he moans as his hand tightens in my hair. “Fuck, I’m coming.”

My mouth fills with warmth as he comes, and I swallow it down quickly. He didn't ask me to do it this time, but my options are limited. I sit up when Edward releases my hair. He pulls the car over so he can get his pants back on. “You are amazing,” he says. “And I . . . am completely lost.”

I look around the deserted, tree-lined road and laugh. I'm not even sure where we are.

“Hey,” Edward says, getting my attention again. “Kiss me.”

I hesitate, not sure whether I should kiss him after what we just did. He asked, so if he's not worried about it, neither am I. I kiss him softly, but he has other ideas. His tongue sweeps over my lips, and I open my mouth, allowing him to deepen the kiss. One of his hands cradles my head while the other roams my body.

“I'll give you whatever you want,” he whispers. Through my lust filled haze it takes a moment to realize what he's talking about. “The backseat, a hotel, it doesn't matter. I want to make you happy.”

Note to self: next time Edward tells me “no,” give him head.

“Wait, wait,” I say as I turn my head away from him. He moves his lips down to my neck, continuing his assault. There was a reason he was right the first time. I struggle to remember what it was, but it's hard to concentrate on anything once his hand moves between my legs. If I don't stop him now, we *will* end up in the backseat. “I don't want to do this now.”

“Don't you?” he asks. I can hear the smiling in his voice.

“Yes, but you were right.”

“Oh, Bella,” he murmurs teasingly.

“What?”

Edward chuckles. “I don’t know if I want to keep kissing you or hear you say that again.”

I push him away and slap him on the chest. “You’re not funny.”

“Yes, I am,” he disagrees.

“What I meant was that I agree with you. Our first time should be special. I don’t want to do it on the side of the road or get a room for the night. Besides, we have to go to my dad’s tonight. I don’t want you meeting him tomorrow when he’s carrying a gun.”

A flash of panic crosses Edward’s face before he realizes I’m joking. “That’s what I love about you, Kiddo.” He smiles and taps my nose. “You’re always keeping me on my toes.”

I help Edward navigate back to Charlie’s house. As he parks the car out front, I freeze. Parked in the driveway is Charlie’s police car.

“Shoot,” I mutter under my breath. I didn’t think he’d be there. I thought Edward and I would have time to be alone.

We see Charlie peek out the window as we stare toward the house. “Is that him?”

“Yes.”

“I thought you said he’d be gone fishing all day.”

“I did.”

I glance at the clock. It’s going to be a long afternoon. Edward removes our bags from the trunk and I drag my feet all the way to the door. Ready or not, this is happening now. Charlie meets us at the door which is strange; typically he greets me from the couch.

“Hey, Bells.” He gives me a hug. It’s awkward as usual.

“Hi, Dad.” I’m nervous, but I can’t help but smile when I see the huge grin on his face. Behind me, Edward sets our bags on the floor. “Um, Dad, this is my

boyfriend, Edward. Edward, this is my dad.” I introduce them quickly, managing not to fumble my words too badly.

Charlie holds out his hand and Edward shakes it. “Edward,” he acknowledges before crossing his arms over his chest.

“It’s nice to finally meet you, sir,” says Edward politely. He holds out the case of Rainier. “This is for you. Bella tells me it’s your favorite.”

Charlie’s eyebrows shoot toward the sky as he looks at the beer. He takes it from Edward’s hands as if he’s passing him precious, fragile cargo. “These are cold,” he observes aloud. His eyes roam over Edward, fully taking him in for the first time. I can tell he’s putting two and two together and coming to the only logical solution—Edward is old enough to buy alcohol. “I think I’ll enjoy one now. You want one?” he asks Edward cautiously.

“No, thank you, sir.”

“Don’t call me sir.”

Edward flinches at his tone. “I’m sorry,” he quickly apologizes. “Chief Swan.” Charlie frowns but remains silent. Edward looks at me questioningly, silently asking me for help, but I don’t know what to tell him. I realize I’ve stopped breathing and let out a shaky breath. “M-Mr. Swan?” Edward continues uncertainly.

“Edward,” my dad interrupts him in a disbelieving tone, “call me Charlie.”

Laughing nervously, Edward nods and tries out the name. “Charlie.”

My brain suddenly starts functioning again, and I quickly change the subject. “I thought you were fishing with Billy today.”

“I called Billy yesterday after we spoke. Told him you’d be in town, and I didn’t know how long you were staying.” This is Charlie’s way of telling me he wants to spend time with me without actually telling *me*. It also means that Jake knows I’m here, because Billy gossips like an old woman.

My face must give away what I'm feeling. Charlie is quick to reassure me that he had a little chat with Jake, and he won't be calling me unless I contact him first. "It's a good thing you two didn't show up sooner. I sent him away not more than ten minutes ago."

"Jake was here?" I ask in disbelief.

"He sure was. I tell you, that boy sure is stubborn. He was set on seeing you."

"How did you get him to leave?" Knowing how hardheaded Jake can be, I expect Charlie to say he had to assume his role as police chief in order to intimidate him into leaving. His answer, however, takes me by surprise.

"I told him I was looking forward to seeing my daughter and didn't want him being the third wheel." From the corner of my eye, I see Edward look away quickly and shift his weight, clearly uncomfortable with the direction the conversation is taking. It doesn't escape Charlie's notice, and he immediately tries to put Edward at ease. "I don't mean—I'm not saying that *you're* a third wheel, Edward. Bells told me you were coming. I just didn't think you two would be comfortable with him here, and I didn't know what else to say to get rid of him. I'm sure as hell not breaking the news to him if he doesn't know already," he says while gesturing between us.

This is a Charlie I don't see very often—the protective father. He likes Jake. A lot. He always has. But by telling Jake to leave, he did what he felt was best for me. It's times like this when I feel bad for ever doubting his fatherly instincts, because when I need him, he's there for me. Even when I don't know about it.

"Edward, will you give us a moment please?" Charlie asks, motioning toward the living room. Edward nods and walks away. I follow Charlie into the kitchen. "So," he begins once I sit at the table. "Tell me more about this Edward character."

I launch into the abridged, parental-friendly version of how Edward and I met, including his relation to Carlisle and enough of his history for the story to

make sense. Other than omitting certain details, I do my best not to lie to him, making sure he understands I didn't know Edward previous to the start of our road trip and that he is 27, lives in Chicago, and owns his own house. Charlie goes into interrogation mode, asking questions, his face carefully composed into a mask of indifference. He doesn't give much away, only the occasional *Uh-huh* or *Hmph*.

When all his curiosities have been satisfied he says, "Well, it seems like this Edward kid makes you happy." Charlie's use of the word "kid" surprises me. I thought for sure he would tell me Edward was too old for me. In fact, he seems to be taking everything about this situation in stride.

"He does dad. I love him." It's weird talking to my dad about a boy. I can tell he feels the same way, because he clears his throat and stands from the table once the "L" word leaves my mouth.

"All right, then. Good. I'm glad you're happy. But, Bells?"

"Yeah, Dad?"

"I will be having a little chat with Edward about how I expect him to treat my little girl." Although this would have upset me if he had said it last week, I can't help but smile now. My dad is looking out for me, but at the same he wants me to be happy. "Now, go get that boy of yours. He's probably bored to tears."

I am almost out of the kitchen when he calls to me one more time. "And one more thing, kid." I turn and wait patiently for him to continue. "He can sleep on the couch."

chapter twenty-four

Edward

The couch is much more comfortable than I expect, and I'm almost asleep when I feel something heavy on my chest. Once I am completely awake, I realize Bella is lying on top of me, her face buried in my neck.

"Baby, what are you doing?" I whisper groggily.

"I missed you. It's lonely upstairs."

"Are you sure this is a good idea? What if your father sees us?"

"I don't care. What's he gonna do to me?" she asks indignantly.

"Bella, if he catches us, it's going to be *me* he'll have a problem with, not you. I don't need to give him another reason to hate me."

"Charlie doesn't *hate* you, dummy," she chastises. "Quite the opposite, in fact."

“Yeah, well, it sure didn’t seem like it when he was interrogating me with questions earlier.” Charlie hadn’t wasted any time asking me a hundred questions tonight. Where did I grow up? What schools did I attend? What were my hobbies? Did I like to fish? Where did I work? Why wasn’t I working now? How long had I owned my house? Had I ever been married? Did I have any children? Did I have any pets? Did I have a motorcycle? Had I ever been in a fight? Had I ever been arrested? Had I ever done anything illegal? Had I ever done drugs? Did I smoke? Did I drink? And on, and on.

The only subjects he didn’t bring up were those regarding my sticky family situation, which Bella had previously informed him about, and my intentions toward Bella.

“He’s just trying to be a good dad. Intimidation is the only way he knows how to get answers.” Bella slips her hand under my shirt and lets her fingertips dance along my chest as she kisses my neck. I quickly forget whatever it is we were just talking about. “And the only things he catches are fish. We’ll be fine like this for a little bit.”

“Mmm, okay,” I concede. I wrap my arms around Bella and quickly fall asleep.

It feels as though I’ve barely closed my eyes when the sound of a throat clearing wakes me. I open my eyes to see Charlie hovering over the back of the couch looking down at me with a frown. It’s then that I realize Bella is still here, wedged between me and the back of the couch. Her leg is draped across my body, her hand still under my shirt.

“Bella.” I nudge her, but she only stirs and snuggles against me. “Bella,” I say a little louder, all the discomfort and awkwardness of the situation apparent in my voice.

“Huh? What?” she says sleepily before looking at me and following my gaze to where her father stands. “Crap,” she says under her breath.

“Going to the station.” Charlie’s irritated voice causes my heart to pound out of control. “I *will* see you both when I get home,” he says with finality. He doesn’t comment on us sleeping together on the couch.

“Fuck,” I say when the front door closes behind him.

“Fuck is right,” Bella agrees.

“Do you really think he’ll hate me less if we surprise him with a big, fancy dinner?”

Bella sighs and rolls her eyes. “He doesn’t hate you, Edward.”

“Mm-hmm,” I hum skeptically. “You realize he probably thinks I’m corrupting you, right, that his perfect little angel would never think to sneak out of her room on her own? That every night I probably coerce you into fucking like bun—”

I immediately stop talking as the front door opens and Bella’s father walks in. No, this isn’t Bella’s father; this is *Chief* Swan, fully outfitted in blue, with a shiny badge and an even shinier firearm. Now I understand why she wanted me to meet him for the first time when he wasn’t working. I’m fairly positive that if he walked in the door looking like this yesterday, I would have run out the house screaming. In fact, it’s a reaction I’m contemplating now.

“Hi, Dad!” Bella calls and waves at him with an oven mitt clad hand.

“Hey, kid. Edward.” He nods in acknowledgement.

I nod back.

“Hello, sir.”

“Charlie,” he corrects me sternly.

“Charlie,” I repeat nervously.

He nods again before exaggeratedly sniffing the air. “Smells good, Bells. What are you making?”

“Edward and I are making chicken cordon bleu with roasted red potatoes. Oh, and a chocolate cake for dessert.”

Charlie gives me a surprised look. I shrug. “Bella does the all the work,” I explain with a forced smile. “She just keeps me around to reach the top shelf and remove hot pans from the oven.” Charlie laughs and I breathe a sigh of relief.

“Chocolate cake, huh?” he asks, turning back to Bella. “Sounds like we need ice cream to go with that.”

“There *is* ice cream,” says Bella.

“What flavor?”

“Vanilla.”

“Hmm.” Charlie wears the face of a man who’s scheming something. It would be a lie to say it didn’t make me nervous. “Do we have strawberry?”

“Strawberry? Since when do you eat strawberry ice cream?”

“Since always,” he says unconvincingly. Bella’s confused expression doesn’t help calm my nerves. “Tell you what, why don’t I go pick some up? I’ll take Edward with me for company.”

Huh?

“No, Dad, you just got home. Edward and I will go. We have plenty of time before dinner’s ready. You don’t mind, do you?” she asks me.

“Of course not,” I answer. I’m still not quite certain I know what’s going on but I am missing *something*.

“Actually, Bells, why don’t you go? I could use Edward’s help with something.”

My help?

Bella frowns. I think she senses something is off, too, but she’s not intimidated by her father and calls him out on it. “Why do you need Edward?” she asks.

“I need to move something.”

“Something?”

“Some . . . furniture.”

Bella stops what she’s doing, faces her father, and puts her hands on her hips. “Dad,” she says in the same exasperated tone she’s used so often with me. “If you want to talk to Edward alone, just say so.”

Oh!

Charlie looks slightly sheepish. It must be true because he doesn’t argue.

“I’ll be upstairs. Let me know when you’re done.”

My brain doesn’t fully register that Charlie wants to have a little chat with me until Bella leaves the room. I don’t want to beat around the bush so I cut right to the point. “If this is about last night, I want you to know, I’m sorry. I never meant to disrespect you or your rules—”

“I’m slowly learning that my daughter is forming a bit of a rebellious streak,” Charlie interrupts. It’s more of an observation than an accusation, but I still feel like a little kid about to be reprimanded. “You know, Bella’s been acting like a responsible adult since she was twelve. She’s always been very independent, always made well thought out decisions. She’s had a part-time job since she moved here because she wanted to pay for her own college tuition. She looked at all her options and made a well-educated decision before deciding where to go, and I’m proud of her for not rushing into something she might regret later.” He looks at me pointedly when he says this last part, as if Bella is rushing into things with me and may regret it. Does Bella think we’re rushing things? Maybe we are, but . . . regret? I know I will *never* regret being with Bella. Will she?

I hope not.

“It was hard to watch her pack her bags and move down to Florida to stay with her mother,” he continues. “She knew she wouldn’t be able to afford living on her own. I always knew she wasn’t going to stay here; she loves the sun too much.”

There's a sadness in his voice as he speaks about Bella moving out. It must have been hard to only have her around for a few short years. I've only known her for a little over three weeks yet the thought of being without her kills me.

"Look, Edward, I like you. You seem like a nice guy. You've got your life together. You're a little older than I like, but in the grand scheme of things, I'm not too concerned about it. What I *am* concerned about is how fast your relationship with my daughter is moving. I don't know how serious you are about her, but I can tell she's head over heels about you. I've never questioned her choices before, and I don't want to start now. I don't know what future plans you two have made, but I won't sit back and watch her throw her life away to go running off with a boy."

"Si—Charlie, we aren't running off. I'll follow her wherever she goes." I realize a beat too late that I sound like a crazy stalker and quickly backtrack. "What I mean is . . . Bella is everything to me. I love her. I plan on spending the rest of my life with her. I would never stand in the way of her hopes and dreams. I won't let her sacrifice her future, not for me. I will support whatever decisions she makes. I'll even relocate to Florida while she's in school if that's what she wants."

"Really?" Charlie looks surprised. "But you own a house. You have a career."

"That's not what matters to me. I can find them anywhere. Bella is one-of-a-kind. She's more important to me than anything else."

"Huh." He rubs his chin while he contemplates what I've said. I feel like I should say something more, maybe that I only have "the best of intentions" or that Bella's happiness is my number one priority, but I decide not to elaborate on what I've already said. Charlie never asked me to explain myself and Bella and I are going to do what's right for us. Surely he's not going to write off her decision to be with me. "Well, then." Charlie says awkwardly before clearing his throat. "I'm glad we got that cleared up. That's all for now. Why don't you go tell Bella to come back down here?"

A wave of relief washes over me. “Sure thing.”

As I turn to leave, Charlie says, “Edward, one more thing. All those things I said on the phone?”

I nod, holding back a grimace as I recall his none too subtle shotgun threat. He seems to search for the right words. I wait patiently for him to continue.

“Let’s just say they still apply.”

At first I think he’s kidding, then I think he’s serious. But his mustache twitches, and he has the same mischievous look in his eyes that Bella often gets, so he probably just enjoys watching me squirm.

I hope.

The week we spend at Charlie’s flies by. He even takes a few days off from work to spend time with us. Well, to spend time with Bella, actually, but I get to tag along by default. More than once I suggest that the two of them should do something on their own, like go out to dinner, but Charlie insists on my company. He says it’s because he wants to get to know the man who has his daughter so smitten. I think it’s because he doesn’t trust me enough to leave me alone in his house.

It seems like Charlie is slowly warming up to me. He doesn’t mention anything about catching us on the couch. If he says something to Bella, she doesn’t tell me about it. The incident doesn’t stop her from doing it, though. Every night she lies with me until I fall asleep. I’m not sure what time she leaves or how she stays awake, but she’s never in my arms in the morning.

I’m itching to be alone with her. I miss the privacy that hotels afforded us.

Our physical relationship had only begun just before arriving in Washington, and ever since we’ve been here, we’ve constantly been surrounded by people. I want to make her blush by saying sexually suggestive things without people

overhearing. I want to be able to lie on a couch with her during the day or kiss her without worrying about who might walk in the room.

Oh, who am I kidding? I want to get her naked and fuck around. It's been a week since I've gotten off, or at least, since Bella got me off. Before that it had been two weeks. And I owe her one, too. I should owe her five for how awesome that road head was. Fuck that. I'm going to tip the orgasm scale so far in her favor it's going to be ridiculous. Besides, she needs to make up for lost time and I'm just the man to do it.

The box of condoms at the bottom of my duffle bag needs to be put to better use than collecting lint.

Bella feels the same way. Even though I assure her that we can stay as long as she wants, she tells me she's ready to go home—my home.

"You take care of my little girl," Charlie tells me once our bags are loaded in the car and we're saying goodbye. "I expect you to bring her back to visit her old man soon."

"Of course," I assure him.

Bella seems fine until we drive down the street, then the tears fall. "Are you sure you want to leave?" I ask. "We can turn back if you want to stay."

"No," she says through sobs. "I'm ready to go; I just need a minute."

I pull off to the side of the road so I can kiss her and wipe the hot tears from her cheeks. It's difficult for me to watch her cry; it hurts, even. If there's one thing I am happy about right now, it's that *I* get to be the one to whisper words of comfort and promise her that everything will be okay.

Although it's not terribly late, it's dark when we arrive at Carlisle's house. He knows we are spending the night. Without saying a proper goodbye before we left for Forks, neither of us wanted to go home without stopping by again. Inside, the lights are off, making it nearly impossible to see. Everything is eerily silent.

We stumble through the entryway, our palms against the wall looking for a light switch. I stumble over something—a shoe, perhaps—and nearly fall. Bella starts giggling until I accidentally step on her foot. The quieter we try to be, the louder we become. My eyes finally adjust to the darkness right before a light turns on overhead, blinding me. We both groan and cover our eyes.

“You’re in trouble now,” a stern voice says. I turn around, squinting, and see Carlisle behind me. The frown on his face confuses me. “It’s late.”

Bella looks as baffled as I feel. Apprehensively, I turn back to Carlisle. “Excuse me?”

His frown turns into a smile as he laughs, obviously getting quite the kick out of himself. “I couldn’t resist,” he explains. “You can’t imagine how many times I’ve said that to Emmett when he’s tried sneaking in during the middle of the night. Hearing you two floundering around in here brought back memories. Now I can say I’ve said that to both my sons.”

Hearing Carlisle refer to me as his son still catches me off guard. Even though he used the term multiple times the week we stayed here, I never got used to it. I’m not sure if it’s because the concept of having a different father is still new or because, when he says “son,” he says it with an air of pride which I’ve never heard directed toward me. Perhaps it’s a little of both.

“It’s so quiet,” Bella says, filling the silence when I don’t reply. “Where is everyone?”

“Esme is upstairs sleeping off a migraine. I turned off the lights in case she needs to get up; that’s why it’s dark in here. Emmett and Rose are at a party. I doubt they’ll be back tonight. Did you talk to Alice?”

“Yes,” Bella answers. “We called her but she didn’t want to come back with us.”

“I assumed as much. Come on. Let’s go sit in the living room.”

We get comfortable on the couch while Carlisle flips through television stations. Bella looks hopeful when he briefly stops on one of those crime shows that air every night but makes a face when he finally tunes to Discovery Health. During the first commercial break, he turns the volume down low enough so we can talk.

“Edward, I’m attending a healthcare convention in Chicago this fall. I thought that, if you weren’t busy that week, perhaps I could stay a few extra days. It would sure be nice to see you again and I’d love to see where you live.”

“Oh, uh . . .” How do I explain that I probably won’t be in Chicago this fall, that I’ll be in Florida with Bella, when I haven’t even told her yet? “This fall?”

“Yes, in October.” Carlisle looks at me expectantly. My tongue is tied as I struggle to think of something to say to buy time until I can speak with him alone. Unfortunately he misinterprets my silence. “I’m sorry, Edward. I thought it would be okay. I didn’t mean to assume—”

“No, no, no,” I interrupt. I can’t allow him to believe that I don’t want to see him, not after he welcomed me into his family with open arms. “It’s just, I, uh . . .” I drag my hands through my hair as I carefully form the words in my head. “I’m not sure if I’ll be in Chicago this fall.”

“What?” Bella asks, her voice filled with confusion. “Where are you going to be?”

“I . . . don’t know yet,” I say once I come up with a plan. “I’ve lived in Chicago my whole life, and after driving across the states, I think I’d like a change of scenery. There’s nothing but bad memories for me there.”

This is perfect. Foolproof, even. If Bella is under the impression that I don’t want to live in Chicago anymore, then she won’t feel guilty when I sell everything and move to Florida. All I need to do is plant the bug in her head that I need a change. Maybe she’ll even be the one to suggest I move closer to her.

“Have you given any thought to where you’re going to go?” Carlisle asks.

“No, not really.” I lie smoothly.

“Would you consider moving to Seattle?” There’s a lightness to his voice but I know under the surface he is serious.

“Seattle?” I repeat dumbly.

“Yes. If you’re looking for somewhere to move, why not here? I think I speak for the whole family when I say we’d like to see more of you. You’d be more than welcome to stay here until you find a place of your own. I could give referrals for you, as well. The U has a large orthopedic and sports medicine department and one of my old colleagues works with one of the sports teams in the area. In fact, chances are I know someone just about anywhere you would apply. ”

“Wow, that’s very generous of you, Carlisle, but . . .” I don’t know how to finish. But Bella won’t be here? But I can’t ask that of you? But I don’t want to live here?

It’s not that I don’t want to move here. I’ve never thought about it before but the idea is appealing. The only problem is that it puts me farther away from the girl I love.

“Why not?” Bella asks in surprise. “Living here would be great for you; you’d finally have the family you’ve always wanted. Don’t you see? This is the exact reason you came all the way here, isn’t it?”

So much for my foolproof idea. She’s supposed to encourage me to move closer to her, not to the opposite end of the country. And why would she encourage me to move *here* of all places? She *hates* Washington. Even Charlie said as much. Why would she want me to be somewhere she doesn’t want to live unless . . .

Unless she doesn’t want to live with me.

Both Carlisle and Bella regard me curiously as the thoughts filter through my head. I quickly choke back whatever emotions I am feeling. I’ll have to talk to Bella later because I can’t do it here. Not now, not in front of Carlisle. “Yes, it is

the reason,” I agree, because what else can I say? “Thank you for the offer, Carlisle. I’ll think about it.”

“Of course. That’s all I ask.”

“So . . . Seattle,” Bella says as I shut the door to our room. “What are you gonna do?”

“I don’t know.” There are a million questions I want to ask her but the words get stuck in my throat. I want to know if she really wants me to move here, why she would suggest for me to move to a place she dislikes, and how she would feel about us being separated by even more distance. And most importantly, I want to know what will become of us if I move across the county. If I don’t find out what she wants to happen, and soon, I am going to lose my fucking mind.

“What’s your problem?” she asks with a slight edge. “I thought this is what you wanted. Weren’t you looking for acceptance? Well, you got it, and now you’re going to just throw it away to wander all over the country?” Bella’s voice steadily rises until she’s almost shouting, taking me by surprise.

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“You told Carlisle you weren’t going to stay in Chicago, that you don’t know where you’re going to go. I thought—” She stops abruptly, biting her bottom lip as it begins to quiver. Her eyes fill with tears and she quickly looks away. I reach out and take a step toward her but stop when she turns away from me.

“Bella, you thought what?” She sniffles and wipes her eyes. My heart breaks because I know that something I said is making her feel shitty. “Please, talk to me.”

She shakes her head. “It’s stupid.”

“No, it’s not. Tell me,” I demand.

Bella takes a few moments to compose herself. When she finally speaks, anger is her dominant emotion. “I was worried, that once I went back to Florida, you’d forget about me. I thought if we could just make it another year, then maybe you’d be okay with me moving to Chicago. But now you’re not going to stay in Chicago. You never even told me you wanted to move. And you don’t know where you’re gonna go? I thought that, if anything, you’d want to be closer to me.”

I am such an idiot. I made her think I didn’t want to be with her. “I *do* want to be closer to you,” I retort. “I don’t want to move here; I want to be where you are!”

“But you told Carlisle—”

“I *lied* to Carlisle because I didn’t want to freak you out by saying I was moving to Florida.”

A heavy silence falls between us as Bella absorbs my words.

“Why would that freak me out?” she asks so quietly I have to strain to hear her.

“We’ve never talked about our future before. I don’t know how you feel about things like moving or living together or marriage or kids . . . or anything like that! I didn’t know how you’d react. I wanted to talk to you about it instead of discussing it during a casual conversation with someone else.”

“Really?” Her voice shakes.

“Really.” I watch as Bella slowly relaxes, dropping her guard. “Will you promise me one thing? Promise me you won’t run from me. I am so afraid that I’m going to do something that will send you running,” I admit. It feels like now is a good time to lay all my fears on the table so I continue. “Since the moment you ran into my life, I’ve been worried that you’re going to run out of it. You have to tell me if we’re moving too fast.” I take a long stride forward and wrap my arms tightly around her. “I won’t lose you, Bella. I won’t.”

“I’ll never run from you. I promise.” Standing on her toes, she wraps her arms around my neck, pulls my face down, and kisses me passionately. “I don’t want to be away from you ever, Edward, but you shouldn’t move to Florida. You should move here.”

“What? Why?” I ask. If she punctured a hole in my chest and ripped out my heart, it couldn’t have hurt worse. “I don’t understand how you can say that.”

“Edward, I’m not staying in Florida after I finish school. It would be stupid of you to move there for less than a year. You should be here where you have family!”

“But you hate Washington,” I argue.

“There are places I’d rather live,” she admits, “but I think it’s important for you to be here and I think deep down you want to be. It’s not like I’d be sacrificing anything by coming back. My dad lives here and the Cullens are like family, too.”

I think about the point she’s trying to make. Do I want to be here? Do I want the chance to know Carlisle better? To find out more about Emmett and have a real relationship with him? Esme and Alice both accepted me with no questions asked. How will they feel if I were to stay around?

If I knew Bella *wanted* to be here, those questions would be easy to answer. None of it matters if she’s not with me.

“I could still go to Florida with you. I don’t have to buy a house; I can rent—”

“No, Edward,” she says quietly. “Be here. Find a house and a job. It’s only for nine months.”

Nine months seems like a long fucking time. This decision would be a lot easier if she actually liked it here. I want to tell her no, that I’m moving to Florida while she’s there and we can live somewhere else once she graduates, but a different set of words comes out of my mouth. “After you’re done with school, you would move here?”

“Yes.”

“You would move here and live with me?”

She giggles. “Yes, Edward.”

“I need to think about it,” I tell her. This isn’t a decision I want to make lightly, but inside I know she’s right.

I want to be here.

chapter twenty-five

Bella

In the morning, after a quick breakfast with Carlisle and Esme, we leave Seattle. We aren't necessarily in a hurry to get back to Chicago, but we're both tired of driving constantly and living out of bags. We take turns driving and make it back in less than three days as opposed to the five it took us to get there. I'm tired and crabby from being cooped up in the car. The past few weeks were emotional for Edward, and coming down has taken its toll on him. The dark circles under his eyes are back, and he looks absolutely exhausted. He's snippy and short with me, especially when I ask him what his future plans are.

Our spirits are lifted when we cross the Illinois State line. We're both looking forward to spending time together—alone and not on the road—and our excitement at the prospect of almost being there practically buzzes inside the car.

When Edward's house finally comes into view, I feel warm and happy. I feel at home, like I belong here. Granted I only stayed here four short days and don't technically live here, but I've never lived anywhere long enough to really feel at home.

The first thing Edward does once we get inside is run to his bedroom and flop face first on the bed. "Oh, bed, how I've missed you," he mumbles into his pillow. I take the pillow I'm carrying, the one we brought with us, and hit him on the butt with it a few times before crawling onto the bed next to him. He flips on his side, facing me, and wraps his arm around my waist. "It feels good to be home."

"Yes, it does."

Edward looks at me curiously. "You feel like you're at home?" he asks while brushing the hair away from my eyes.

"I'm at home wherever you are, Edward. Here, a hotel room . . . it doesn't matter. As long as we're together, I'm happy."

He leans in and kisses me gently. His lips are warm and soft. I sigh, content to lie like this all night, but Edward pulls away. He wraps his arm around me again and hugs me against his body. "I've never been so happy for running away from my life that day. I felt like such a coward for doing it, so . . . unworthy of anyone, of anything. I still can't believe that by avoiding everything, I discovered exactly where I belong."

"Edward, don't you see?" I whisper. "It wouldn't have mattered where you went."

He furrows his brows and tightens his grip on me. "What do you mean?"

"Your dad is Carlisle. Alice is my best friend. We would have met sooner or later."

"No, don't say that," he says with such a sadness in his voice that a lump forms in my throat. "You can't start throwing out alternate scenarios and assume things would have turned out the same. I don't want to think of what my life

would be like if I had to wait any longer to find you. And maybe, if things could have turned out differently, I would have known Carlisle a long time ago, but then where would that leave us? If we had met even five years ago, there's no way we . . . I wouldn't have . . ." Edward takes a long shaky breath. He presses his lips to my forehead and leaves them there as he continues. "For a long time I hated my life, I hated myself. But for the first time, I've finally put all of that behind me. Every second of pain and self doubt was worth it, because it led me to you. I wouldn't change *anything* in my life if it meant risking being with you right here, right now."

Edward kisses me again. This time it isn't soft and gentle, it's desperate and needy. I return it with the same amount of passion, because I feel exactly the same way. I pour all the fear, all the uncertainty of our future into it, and for the first time in days, I feel the weight of it all leave my heart.

The only thing I can concentrate on is the feel of Edward. His lips, his tongue, and his teeth make a circuit along my neck and jaw, and when his mouth moves to my ear, he languidly rolls on top of me. I don't even notice that my shirt is coming off until his lips pull away from me with a loud *pop*. He drags the shirt over my head, along with my bra, and peels off his own shirt as well. His fingers trail down my torso, hook into the waistband of my pants and underwear, and pull them down roughly. He pushes my legs apart, planting kisses along the inside of my legs. I jump as his fingers dig into my thighs, and he whispers a quick apology before burying his face between them.

I get lost in the feeling of Edward's mouth and tongue moving against me. His hands roam my body, leaving no part neglected. I feel hot and tingly, and I cut short the moan that starts to slip out. He pauses only long enough to say, "Baby, let me hear you," and it's all the encouragement I need to let go of my inhibitions. In no time at all my legs are shaking, and I feel the familiar burn low in my abdomen. His teeth graze across my heated skin, pushing me over the edge.

Edward grips my hips, holding me in place, and when I come down from the high, I have to push his head away to make him stop.

He's quick to lie on top of me again. His mouth finds mine hesitantly, but once I part my lips for him, he kisses me deeply. I wrap my arms around him, feeling the smooth skin on his back. The hardness between his legs makes the rest of him feel even softer in contrast. When he shifts himself against me, the seam of his jeans rubs roughly on my overly sensitive skin, and I gasp. Edward releases my lips and kisses my neck. My body feels hypersensitive as he attacks the skin there, his three-day-old beard leaving a hot trail as he brushes his face across my neck and collar bone. He sucks and bites, the pinch from his teeth leaving a dull sting behind. He grinds into me again, and I moan once more because it all feels so, *so* good.

"I want you," he whispers unsteadily as his lips move back to my ear. The only thing I can do is nod.

He rolls off me, off the bed, and quickly rummages through the bag he had set on the floor, pulling out a box of condoms. Even though I'm completely naked and spread out on his bed, seeing that box makes me blush as much as I did the day he bought it. He returns to me quickly and sweeps his fingertips over my cheek, then down across my neck.

"Beautiful," he murmurs. I feel more heat rushing to my cheeks. "Perfect." Edward unbuttons his pants and removes them along with his boxers before pulling a condom from the box and kneeling between my legs. "Are you ready?" he asks.

"Uh-huh."

"Yeah?" He gently rubs his fingers against me before slipping them inside. "Fuck."

My eyes drift closed as he tears the wrapper open with his teeth. He takes a ragged breath as he slides the condom on. Once his fingers leave my body he is

instantly on top of me, his weight pressing me into the bed, and I feel the pressure as he pushes against me.

“Open your eyes,” he whispers, and I do. He’s looking at me intently. His eyes are filled with so much love, so much adoration, that it causes my heart to pound rapidly. He continues to gaze down at me and in one smooth movement, pushes himself into me. He stills when he’s all the way in. His head drops to rest on my shoulder, and his breath fans across my neck as he pants heavily. “You feel so good,” he whispers in my ear. His arms shake as he slides them underneath me and holds me close. “God, I love you so much.”

I try to say it back, but I can’t find my voice. He continues to whisper sweet words in my ear, continues to hold me against him, and I have never felt so safe and loved in my entire life. He begins to move his hips, filling me over and over again. The emotions I am experiencing are so powerful that the only thing I can do is wrap my arms around his shoulders and just *feel*.

Eventually he picks up the pace, moving his mouth back to the spot on my neck he seems to favor. He kisses softly at first but then sucks the flesh between his lips and teeth. My skin feels raw as his scruffy face continues to rub against me, and the sensations quickly become overwhelming.

“Edward,” I beg, though I don’t know what I’m begging for. He reaches around to the grab the back of my knee and pulls my leg up. The new angle causes him to slip in deeper and he thrusts harder.

“Bella, I love you.” I wrap my arms around his shoulders and hold on tightly, not trusting my voice, but it’s not enough for him. “Please, Bella, I need you to say it back.”

“I love you,” I manage to force out.

“Tell me I’m yours,” he whispers.

“You’re mine.”

“Fuck, I’m so close. Say it again.”

“You’re mine. Always. I love you, Edward.”

His rhythm falters, his hold on me tightens, fingers digging into flesh, and he sighs loudly as he comes. When he’s finished, his body relaxes and melts into mine. He is shaking and sweaty, and there is nowhere I’d rather be right now than pressed against him. Too soon he rolls off me and lies on his back while he catches his breath.

“That was intense,” he says. His eyes drop from my face, and he reaches out to gently trace his fingertips across my neck. “I think I got a little carried away.”

I place my hand on my neck, but I don’t feel anything aside from the sting of whisker burn he left behind. Then I remember the pull as his lips were against me and can only guess at how large of a mark he left behind.

“That bad, huh?” I ask playfully.

Edward shrugs and his lips curl into a smirk. “I didn’t plan on letting you leave my bedroom for a few days anyway.” He leans in and kisses the spot so lightly that nothing but a whisper of his lips makes contact. “At least I didn’t hit you with a towel,” he quips.

“*Pfft.* You’d never catch me, Gramps.”

“Ouch!” He laughs and we kiss, and I know without a doubt everything will work out in the end.

Because it has to.

“You’re sure this is what you want?” Edward asks as he holds a pen to the Purchase Agreement for his house. “Once I sign, I have to go through with it.”

It had taken a lot of coaxing, but Edward finally admitted he did want to live in Seattle. I think he was afraid to say the words out loud, because he knew that, once I knew, I wasn’t going to let him move anywhere else. The thing was, he didn’t have to admit it. I could see the conflict in his eyes when Carlisle suggested

it, and I knew how much he wanted to be part of a family. I couldn't let him follow me to Florida. Buying a house there would have been a poor decision, renting would have been a waste of money, and finding work only to quit right away would just be irresponsible. All of those efforts would be better spent by getting things squared away in Seattle.

We had spent a week getting the house ready to sell, and because Edward owns barely any furniture or other belongings, it was relatively easy. A fresh coat of paint and a little scrubbing was all it took to make the place look good as new, and we were both surprised when someone made an offer within the first week of it being on the market.

"I'm positive," I assure him. "They are actually willing to pay your asking price. Sign!"

Edward worries that I won't be happy in Seattle. I've made my distaste for the region well known on multiple occasions. What he doesn't understand is that his happiness is more important to me than living somewhere hot and dry. I don't care where we end up as long as we're together.

I can tell he wants us to go to Seattle together, but he won't ask me to go with him. He doesn't want to influence my decision. As much as I don't want us to be apart, I feel obligated to finish what I've started. I've taken over half the classes I need in order to complete my associate's degree, and a completed degree will be much easier to work with than transferring credits.

I watch Edward as he studies my face for a few long moments. After taking a deep breath, he looks down at the contract and signs his name.

I step out into the warm Chicago evening just as Edward pulls the Volvo into the driveway.

“Smelly!” Emmett jumps out of the passenger side as soon as the car comes to a complete stop. He runs to me, squeezes me into a giant bear hug, and spins me around. “It’s good to see you again. We never got to say goodbye. How’ve you been?”

“I’m fine,” I answer. I would be a lot better if I didn’t have to say goodbye to Edward in a few days.

Emmett gives me a stern look as if he knows what I’m thinking. “Don’t worry. It’ll be spring before you know it. You’ll barely even notice I’m not around.”

“Very funny, Em.” I laugh and punch him in the arm. “I don’t know how I managed to make it without you last year,” I say sarcastically. “How was your flight?”

“Too long,” he says with a grimace. “There was a baby in the row across from me and it cried the *whole way here*. So what’s the plan?”

“I close on the house tomorrow morning and we need to pick up the U-Haul after that,” Edward explains as he approaches us, carrying a pizza in one hand and a six-pack of beer in the other. “Bella’s flies out on Friday, so we can hit the road once we bring her to the airport.” He leans down to kiss my cheek and smiles sadly.

“Hey, none of that mushy stuff,” Emmett warns. “I’m here to offer my pure brute strength, not to get all weepy and have my man card revoked. Now, let’s tear this place up!” He runs back to the car to grab his suitcase.

Edward shakes his head as we make our way into the house and sets the pizza and beer on the table. If I thought his house looked barren the first time I came here, it’s nothing compared to now. The kitchen table, couch, bed, and television are the only large items he’s taking to Seattle; everything else has been sold. Anything we won’t need in the next two days has been boxed up and stacked in the living room.

We eat and spend the next few hours chatting. The more Edward and Emmett talk, the more naturally their conversations flow. I'm glad they are slowly warming up to each other.

Once the yawning starts, I shoo them off the couch so I can make it up with sheets and a blanket for Emmett.

"Thanks for flying out here, Emmett," says Edward. "I really appreciate the help."

"No problem. Hey, I still get to drive the truck, right?"

"Of course." Edward winks at me and I smile. I can't imagine him willingly handing his keys over to Emmett and opting to drive the U-Haul instead.

Originally, Edward wanted me to keep his car, but neither of us really liked the idea of me driving down to Florida by myself. We argued about it, though, because Edward wasn't thrilled that I didn't own a vehicle. After I assured him that my mom's car was typically available when she and Phil were away, and agreed to let him buy my plane ticket, he called Carlisle to ask for help moving. Carlisle wasn't home, however, and as Edward was explaining the situation to Emmett, he jumped at the chance to help us.

I'm pretty sure his eagerness had something to do with the promise of driving a large vehicle.

"So, Smelly, only a couple more weeks till classes start. You excited? 'Cause I am. I'm not looking forward to homework, but my dad is driving me up the wall." He turns to Edward and adds solemnly, "Good luck, man. I hope you find a place of your own sooner than later."

"Hey, why do you call her Smelly?" Edward asks, changing the subject. He always seems to bristle at the nickname.

Emmett snickers and grins wickedly. "The first time I met her, she and Alice had just come home from shopping in Port Angeles. They thought it would be a

good idea to get perfume. Anyway, she must have tried on every scent in the store because she absolutely reeked.” He laughs loudly at the memory.

“You can blame your stupid sister for that. She’s the one who sprayed them all directly on me because of some stupid body chemistry crap.”

“Which one did you decide on, all of them?” Edward teases.

“No, none of them,” I say sharply. “This jackass made me too self conscience, and I haven’t worn any since.”

“I’m not a jackass!” Emmett argues as he plops onto the makeshift bed.

Once Edward and I are in the bedroom, he grabs me, pressing his nose against my neck and inhaling deeply. “Mmm, I think you smell absolutely edible.”

The papers have all been signed. The U-Haul is loaded with everything Edward owns.

The drive to the airport is quiet. Edward holds my hand tightly. Every so often he brings our joined hands to his lips and places a kiss on my knuckles. Sometimes he squeezes my fingers so I’ll look at him, and when I do, he’ll smile or mouth “I love you.”

We promised not to make a big deal out of this—it isn’t goodbye.

I watch in the side mirror as Emmett, who’s been following us in the truck, takes the last exit before the airport where he’ll wait at a gas station while Edward drops me off.

Edward is the first to break the silence as we follow the airport signs. “You’ll call me when you land,” he states. I want to tell him that I will, but my jaw is trembling and my eyes are getting blurry and there’s a burning lump in my throat, and if I try to speak, I’m only going to start bawling.

“And I’m flying you home for Christmas,” he continues. His voice breaking on the word “home” causes a tear to slip from my eyes. “And Easter. Fuck, and Thanksgiving, too.”

I let the tears fall in earnest and sob as he pulls up to the curb, because *this* is the moment I’ve dreaded since we met over three months ago. This is the moment I’ve been trying not to visualize ever since I convinced Edward it was best for him to move to Seattle without me. I had always known it would be hard, but nothing could have prepared me for the raw ache in my chest.

I don’t even notice that he gets out of the car until my door opens and he pulls me out. He wraps his arms around me and buries his face in my neck. “This is not goodbye, remember?” he chokes out. His words make me cry harder. My entire body trembles, and I don’t know which one of us is shaking harder. “Baby, I’m going find a job and buy us a house, and when you come home, everything is going to be perfect.”

“Only if Charlie doesn’t shoot you first,” I try to joke through sobs.

He bends back so he can look at my face and wipe the tears away before cupping my cheeks. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

“I’m going to call you every single day,” he promises. “You programmed your number in my phone, right?”

“Yes.”

“And you have mine?”

“I know it by heart.” My words are broken and practically incoherent, but I know that he understands when he slides his hand from my cheek and places it over the left side of my chest.

“Keep me here, too,” he whispers.

“Always.”

With his arm wrapped around my waist, Edward pulls me around to the back of the car. He pops open the trunk and pulls my small suitcase out of the back, setting it up on the curb.

“Your mom will be there to pick you up?”

“Yes, I spoke to her this morning.”

“Okay.” He leans down to kiss me one last time before dropping his arm and walking back to the driver’s side. “I’ll talk to you soon.”

“Drive safe.”

“I will. I love you.”

“I love you, too. Good luck in Seattle,” I call to him as he opens the door.

His lips tremble as he attempts to smile. “Goodbye, Kiddo.”

I watch, frozen, as he ducks inside the car and drives away, not moving until the taillights completely disappear from my view. With a heavy heart, I grab my suitcase and wheel it into the airport. Even though I’m crying and shaking and sniffling, I manage to smile, because when I look down at my carry-on bag, I see Eddie’s head poking out. And although we are physically traveling in different directions, with every second that passes, I know I am that much closer to seeing Edward again.

And when I finally go home—our home—everything will be perfect.

epilogue

Edward



sign my name on the digital signature pad and thank the UPS driver as he hoists the large package marked “Next Day Air” on all sides into my arms.

“Last name?” he asks.

“Masen.”

“Thanks. Have a Merry Christmas.”

“You, too.”

I carry the large cardboard box into the living room and take a seat on the couch, smiling when I notice it was sent from Florida. The packing tape tears off easily, and I pull open the top of the box.

Eddie peeks up at me.

“What the hell?” I mumble.

I pull Eddie out of the box, wondering why Bella shipped him to me when she's arriving today. Underneath is a layer of books. *Wuthering Heights*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, and many more—all Bella's favorites. She can't possibly be planning on reading all of these while she's here for the next three weeks. If she does, she has another thing coming.

Literally.

She's not leaving my—*our*—bedroom.

Collecting all of her books, I bring them into the room that I call "Bella's." I don't like to think of it as an office or a study; it's more of a sanctuary. I want to surprise her with a little space to call her own. Hopefully it will help her to realize that I consider this house as *ours*.

Since the day I moved in, I have been perfecting this room for her. I purchased a small desk and a computer so she'd have something to use for homework once she arrives. A papasan chair is in the corner of the room in front of a special light that's supposed to be good for reading. I also bought a small stereo and a 32" flat panel television that I hung on the wall across from the chair. The thing I'm most excited for her to see, though, is the custom-made floor-to-ceiling bookshelf that covers the narrowest wall.

I stack her books next to mine on the shelves and smile when I think of what she'll fill the remaining space with. More books? Music? Movies? Photos of us?

Bella has a lot of decisions to make when she finally moves in. Other than the contents of this room, I haven't purchased anything else for the house. It didn't feel right picking out furniture or dishes or anything else without her. The place looks empty, just like in Chicago, just like my heart feels without her here.

I can't wait to see her tonight. The next three weeks are going to fly by, especially with the holidays and my new job at UW Medical Center chewing up so much of our time. It's hard not to think about the fact that, all too soon, we'll be

back at the airport for a replay of last August. My only hope is that saying goodbye will be easier the second time around.

There's one last thing in the box. It looks like a Christmas present, but it's not decorated in the classic seasonal colors. It's a deep, indigo blue and looks professionally wrapped. I flip open the tag and read the message.

Open me is scrawled in Bella's messy handwriting.

She doesn't need to tell me twice.

I tear off the paper and rip open the top of the small box. Inside are small pieces of fabric. I pull one out, recognizing it immediately as lingerie. It's black and lacey and see-through and my dick immediately begins to harden thinking of Bella wearing it. And the panties—the *matching* panties—are nothing more than a scrap of lace, and so help me God, they are crotchless!

As if on cue, my cell phone rings. I pull it out of my pocket and glance at the picture of Bella flashing on the screen along with the name "Kiddo." She programmed herself into it and I couldn't bring myself to change the name.

"Hey, lover," I answer and smile as her soft laughter filters through the line.

"Hey," she says quietly. *"I just boarded the plane and wanted to say hi before they make me turn off my phone."*

"Well, hello." My voice sounds heavy. I try to breathe normally as I rub the silky material of the nighty between my fingers, imagining what it will feel like when it's between my hands and her warm body.

"So . . . get any interesting packages lately?" she asks suggestively.

"Nope," I lie.

"Mm-hmm. I'll bet." I chuckle at her suspicious tone. *"Oh, I have to go. You'll be there to pick me up when my flight lands, right?"*

"Of course. I wouldn't miss it for the world."

"You won't forget?"

"Bella, how could I forget? I've been looking forward to this day since August."

“I just want to make sure. It is, like, eight hours from now. Maybe you should set an alarm in case you fall asleep or Alzheimer’s sets in.”

“Oh, yeah? Careful or you’ll be hailing a cab,” I tease.

Bella laughs loudly. *“Okay, I really have to go now. I love you.”*

“Love you. See you soon,” I tell her before hanging up the phone.

After being without Bella for four months, I would think a mere eight hours would fly by.

It’s the longest eight hours of my life.

I pace through the house, making sure everything is perfect, until it’s time to leave for the airport. I’m jittery for the entire drive. There is not enough caffeine in an entire pot of coffee to make me this wound up. I feel the familiar urge to light up a cigarette, but I’ve been trying to quit ever since I moved to Seattle. Bella doesn’t know yet; I want it to be a surprise. She has never said anything negative about my bad habit, but because she doesn’t smoke, it’s extra motivation for me to stop. The first month was the most difficult, especially because I was dealing with Bella’s absence, but it’s slowly getting easier. I’ve had a few slip-ups here and there, but for the most part, I’ve done well.

Traffic seems to crawl the entire way, and I don’t think I could find a parking spot farther away if I tried. The first thing I do once I finally get inside is check to make sure Bella’s flight is on time. It is.

I watch the arrival board as her flight slowly makes its way to the top. My heart pounds heavily in my chest when the display changes from “On Time” to “Arrived.” Time seems to slow once again. I wait as patiently as I can only because I have no other choice.

Finally, *finally*, I see her.

I notice her long, brown hair first and smile as I watch her eyes scan the crowd. When she sees me, she walks faster, struggling under the weight of a backpack that practically dwarfs her. My feet start travelling toward her, and we

quickly close the distance between us. I don't know if I want to kiss or hug her first. She makes the decision for me by dropping the bag at our feet and throwing herself into my arms.

Holding Bella feels like heaven, like love, like home. We stand embracing each other without any consideration of time. Finally, when I can't wait any longer, I firmly grab her cheeks and press our lips together. She sighs and twists her hands into my hair.

"I missed this," I whisper against the corner of her mouth.

"Me too." She starts playing with the hair at my temples and frowns.

"What?" I ask.

"Hmm . . ." she says pensively. "I thought for sure there'd be some gray—"

I shut her up with another kiss before she can continue. "You haven't seen me in months and *that's* your opening line?" I grumble.

Bella giggles and kisses me again.

After I pick the backpack off the floor, we work our way to the baggage claim. "Jesus, what do you have in this thing—lead?" She shrugs, and when she points out her suitcase, I give her a sideways glance. It's huge and I pull it off the belt with a grunt. "Okay, let's get out of here."

"Um—" She hesitates. "That one, too."

"You've got to be kidding me!" I say as she motions to another piece of luggage. "What's in this one—the kitchen sink?" It's not as heavy as the first but it's equally as big. "Honestly, Bella, you're only going to be here for three weeks. How much stuff can you possibly need?"

She smiles brightly, and I watch as the apples of her cheeks turn a rosy pink. "Well, I couldn't leave anything behind," she says shyly.

My brain feels foggy as details start clicking into place—two full sized suitcases, a backpack that weighs almost as much as she does, and an overnight delivery of Bella's book collection. I look at her in a silent question.

“One-way ticket,” she explains.

Both suitcases drop to the floor as I wrap my arms around Bella and hold her against me tightly. “You’re staying?” I ask in disbelief.

“Yes, I’m staying!”

I’m overwhelmed with joy. It’s too good to be true. Maybe I misunderstood. “What about school? You wanted to finish.”

“I have to take three more classes this spring but they’re all offered online.”

“I can’t believe it. You’re really staying?” I ask again.

“I wanted it to be a surprise.”

Any trace of anxiety I felt over Bella’s visit is entirely alleviated. She’s staying. For good. We don’t have to say goodbye after the holidays. From now on, we’ll always be together. Lazy weekend afternoons, evenings after stressful days at work or school, taking pleasure in each other night after night. It will all be ours to share.

I throw her backpack over my shoulder and grab the heavier of the two suitcases. My heart swells as I speak the words I’ve been dying to say since moving here.

“Come on. Let’s go home.”

Nodding eagerly, Bella grabs the other suitcase before linking our free hands together.

“Home.”

The End

Are We There Yet?

A collection of extras and outtakes from Running for Home.



outtake 1

Chapter 7: Edward & Alice

The minute Bella leaves I feel guilty. I should have just drove her to the store. It would have taken less than 15 minutes and I could have waited in the car. I hope she doesn't get lost.

Oh, well. There's nothing I can do about it now. Lying here on my couch does feel really fucking good. I'm almost asleep when my cell phone rings. I groan and dig it out of my pocket. The area code isn't familiar. My finger hovers over the power button briefly before deciding to answer it.

"Hello?" I say groggily.

"Um, hello. My name is Alice and I'm looking for Bella Swan. She called me from this number a few days ago."

This must have been who Bella called when she used my phone the first night.
"Yeah?"

“Is she there?” Alice asks hopefully.

“No.”

“Oh my gosh! When did you see her last?” She begins to panic.

“I mean, she’s with me, yeah,” I say quickly. I didn’t mean to freak her out. “She’s just not here at the moment.”

“Oh, thank God!”

“Is everything okay?”

“No! You have to tell her to call her dad. He’s filing a missing persons report on her.”

“What?” I shout. It comes out angrier than I intended. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Bella’s dad is the Forks Chief of Police. He think she’s been kidnapped because she disappeared on Friday and hasn’t contacted anybody. She has to call him right away.”

“Fucking . . . are you fucking serious?” I ask in disbelief. Motherfucking Chief of Police? Fuck me. This is the last thing I fucking need right now.

“Yes. Look, it’s important that she calls him, for the both of you. She asked me not to give anyone this number but I will if she doesn’t call him,” she threatens. Her attempt at intimidating me is almost funny. Almost.

“She’ll be back soon. I’ll let her know.” I try my best not to be short with her but, as hard as I try, my voice is still laced with irritation.

“Um.” I hear Alice taking a deep breath on the other end before continuing. “Is she really with you? I mean, she’s okay?” She sounds so concerned. Concerned and scared for her friend. I sigh and wait for some of my tension to dissipate before answering.

“Alice, Bella is fine,” I assure her. “She took my car to the store to get tampons. She should be back any minute.”

“And . . . you’ll tell her to call her dad?”

“Of course.”

“Okay.” She still sounds uncertain.

“If it makes you feel better you can give him this number. I don’t fucking care.”

“No, I believe you. Will you tell her to call me too?”

“Sure.”

“Okay, thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Bye.”

I flip my phone closed without saying anything else, wanting to be done with the call. What I really want is for this fucking situation to not be happening. Her father is a fucking cop—no, *chief*—for Christ’s sake! A fucking kidnapping charge is the last thing I need.

Rationally, I know that this isn’t a big deal; it’s a misunderstanding that will only take one phone call to fix. Still, I’m pissed at her for being so irresponsible. I’m pissed at myself too. I keep forgetting she’s only 19. Of course she can’t up and disappear for four days without someone flipping out. I’ve been on my own for so long that I didn’t even think about the repercussions she might face for running off. Not that anyone ever gave a shit about what I did once I became an adult. Regardless, I should have thought of it myself. I should have made sure she called one of her parents.

Her parents. Damn it. What the hell am I doing?

One thing is certain. I need to calm the fuck down before she gets back.

outtake 2

Chapter 7: Edward & Charlie

Bella tries to hand me the phone. Her father must have asked to speak with me. Tears pour down her cheeks and I can't find it in me to be upset at the moment. Fuck, he must have tore her a new one. I can't imagine what he wants to say to me. I'm not sure I can deal with an irate parent right now. What if he asks for details? I'm not going to lie; I won't fabricate a parent-friendly story. At the same time, I don't want to make things worse for Bella. If I tell the truth, he'll know that she lied. I shake my head. I can't talk to him right now.

"Please." Bella mouths.

Wincing, I take the phone from her hand. I can't say no to her, not when she stands before me looking this distressed, pleading with me, her cheeks stained with tears. I hold the phone to my ear and take a deep breath before speaking. "This is Edward."

“Edward, this is Chief Swan, Bella’s father. I understand you are temporarily responsible for my daughter.” He pauses. The unfriendly tone of his voice sends a chill down my spine. I’m not sure what to say so I remain quiet. “Have you ever seen the damage a shotgun can do to a human body? It’s not pretty. You’d be surprised how many shotgun related accidents are recorded every year. Now, I expect you to take good care of my daughter. If you don’t, well . . . we’ll be talking again real soon. Do you understand me, kid?”

“Yes, sir.” Loud and clear.

“Good, now give the phone back to Bella.”

I give her the phone but keep my gaze trained on the wall. My anger returns as I process the conversation I just had. Bella runs away from home and lies about how we met while *my* life gets threatened with a shotgun. It hardly seems fair. “You lied,” I say once she ends the call.

“About what?” She’s not being facetious. She honestly doesn’t know why I’m upset. It doesn’t make me feel any better.

“You told your father we met at school, didn’t you?”

“Yes, but . . . I couldn’t tell him the truth.” Her tone causes my anger to flare. She seriously believes lying was a better option. The consequences never even crossed her mind.

“So what am I supposed to say when I meet him, huh? What happens when he realizes I’m too old to be in college with you? You don’t think he’s going to ask me what I do? I’m a fucking doctor, Bella! How do I explain that I went through eight years of school, completed my residency, live in Chicago, and yet somehow managed to meet you at your school?”

I watch the emotions play across Bella’s face. She goes from hurt to shock to anger in a matter of seconds. “Maybe you can tell him you’re unemployed since it isn’t that far from the truth.” Her voice is laced with venom. The words cut deep

but, even worse, it's Bella who is saying them. I trusted her, I confided in her, and she threw it back in my face.

My anger flares again but this time it's fueled by hurt. Hurt and betrayal. Emotionally worn down and exhausted, I am at my breaking point. She is breaking me. "Jesus fucking Christ, Bella!" I lash out at her. It's the only way I know to protect myself. "I'm twenty-fucking-seven years old! I'm past dealing with all this parental bullshit. I don't need this shit. Grow the fuck up!"

I need to get away, to remove myself from this situation. As I storm out of the living room, I hear Bella begin to cry again. It makes me feel even worse. *Guilty*. I'm causing her to feel this way. I always hurt the people who are stupid enough to get close to me. I slam my bedroom door closed with so much force that it bounces back open. It only enrages me more. I want to scream or punch something. I would rather feel physical pain than emotional pain right now. I deserve to feel both. I deserve it for the way I treated Bella—the one person who I thought would be there for me. She'll leave now. She'll leave just like everybody else.

I would give anything to take this day back.

outtake 3

Chapter 22: Charlie

Dad,

*I'm going to Seattle with Edward. Sorry to leave
you this note instead of saying goodbye in person.*

Don't worry, everything is okay and I'll see you soon.

Thanks for letting me stay here.

Love,

Bella

I set the note back on the table where it has sat for the past week and glance around the room. It's funny how this old house felt like a home again for the three days Bella was here. Without anyone but me it feels empty. Somewhere to sleep and eat and store my fishing tackle during the weekdays, but not a home. I

feel very fortunate to have had Bella stay with me for a few years, but every time she leaves it brings back the memories from when Renee left with her so many years ago.

Bella is an adult now and is going to make her own decisions. Still, my initial reaction when I found out she was gone was to find her, drag her home, and ground her for the entire summer. I knew she was running around with this Edward fellow, and from what Jake told me last weekend, she's only known him for a few weeks. I don't like the idea of her driving across the country with some stranger, but at this point in her life there's really nothing I can do about it. Honestly, I assumed she was done with him when she showed up here alone, that she was having some sort of rebellious period after breaking it off with Jake and it finally ran its course. She didn't talk much about anything, and by the way she moped around . . . well, I wasn't sure which one of them she was sulking over.

Jake's a good kid—a bright boy with a good head on his shoulders—but he's not taking their breakup very well. I tried to talk to him about it. I told him that first loves aren't always meant to be, especially when one person doesn't feel as strongly as the other. I also told him that, although it hurts now, it will get easier. He's young. It's better to move on than to stick around for the wrong reasons and hope things improve, because when things fall apart later on it will only be worse. Especially if there are kids involved.

He wasn't too keen on taking my advice, even though I was speaking from personal experience. I can't really blame the kid, though. He's 18 and stubborn, and I didn't listen when people told me I was rushing into things with Renee, either.

Still, as much as I like Jake, I don't like it when he tells me that Bella is making a big mistake. *My daughter* is perfectly capable of making her own decisions. I'm sure if she called things off it wasn't without good reason, and I don't appreciate him thinking he knows what is best for her.

Not that I think this Edward character is best for her. Bella keeps running off with him and I'm worried about how it will affect her future. I'm not sure if he's to blame for her flightiness, but if he is, I don't like it. And I don't think very highly of a boy that comes to my house twice and doesn't stick around long enough to introduce himself. It makes me wonder what he's hiding. Drugs? Arrests? I damn well hope they are being *safe*.

It's late when Bella calls to say she and Edward are coming here tomorrow. She tells me not to cancel my weekend plans and asks if it's all right if they stay for a few days. I assure her that she's always welcome here and she makes me promise to be nice to Edward because "he's important."

What I want most for Bella is for her to be happy, and if this kid does that, then far be it from me to stand in their way. If he's important to Bella, the least I can do is give him a chance. If I don't approve of him, I'll let her know, but leave it at that. Anything more will drive her away. That's just the way teenage girls are. Of course, all this is a nonissue if he doesn't show up with her.

The first thing I do when I get off the phone is let Billy know I won't be fishing with him tomorrow. I may not be in control of this situation, but I can still make *something* go my way. If I am at home tomorrow, Edward won't be able to hide any longer, and I'll be able to see just what type of person my daughter is spending all her time with.

outtake 4

Chapter 6: Eddie

Edward is such a perv. I can't even believe it. Bella is clueless. He looks at her bewbs all the time. Seriously. Every time she's not watching, BAM! Eyes go south. I wish he'd just make a move already.

Coward.

Oh great. Now he's shifting around. Adjusting his peen, probs. Ugh. If he never uses me to cover up his boner again, it'll be too soon.

Look at him. Sitting there all googly eyed. He can't take his eyes off of her. He should be watching the road. Good thing I'm buckled in.

Wait.

Why am I wearing seat belt?