

The background of the entire image is a close-up, slightly blurred photograph of a book. The top half shows the dark, textured cover of the book, while the bottom half shows the light-colored, lined pages. A semi-transparent blue rectangular box is centered over the image, containing the title text in white.

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Bratty-Vamp

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Summary

Isabella was anxious to start a new life, in a new location. And she was eager to put a few more question marks in her rigid day-planner. But the guy down the hall might have presented a larger deviation from her organized life than she bargained for.

Playing Dead

A/N: Twilight belongs to S. Meyer. I'm just running her characters through a few chord progressions.

-EPOV-

I tried to keep my facial features relaxed, and counted the seconds between breaths so that I would appear to be in deep sleep. I felt her pointy fingernails drag down my side, and heard her whisper my name. I just mumbled unintelligibly and turned to press my face into my pillow. The bed gave as she stood.

I kept my eyes closed while she used my bathroom, and wondered briefly if I even had a clean towel for Sharon to use. *Or was it Sheila? Shannon? Eh. No matter.* She called my name once more, softly, when she came back into the room. I didn't budge. I had gotten good at playing dead. I heard the staccato rhythm of her heels on my hard wood floors. God I loved that sound. It was the sound of my freedom. And then I heard the door to my loft open and close again behind her.

Finally I allowed myself to roll over onto my back, and waited for a twinge of guilt or something to make itself known. I mean, I should have at least felt somewhat ashamed for sending the girl away without so much as a "Thanks, er... *you.*" She'd let me put my cock just about anywhere I felt like sticking it. That should have been worth a pat on the head or cab fare or something.

I put one hand behind my head and blinked up at the ceiling. I ran my other hand up over my face, pushed back my hair, and eventually used it to scratch my stomach. God, I felt like shit. If the pounding in my head was any indication, I was in for one hell of a hangover. I squeezed my eyes shut and groaned, rolling to press my face into the pillow next to me. But the next second I realized my mistake. It still stunk of perfume. I heaved it away from me and watched with satisfaction as it hit my closet door.

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I tried to relax to actually go to sleep, but the smell lingered. I realized then that I couldn't roll away from it. It was all over me. I smelled horrible. Like sweat, and that horrid perfume, and cigarettes, stale beer, and sex. My stomach rolled and I wondered briefly if it was from the excess alcohol I had drunk, or from my own stench. Nothing would have done now, except to scrub it off. So I peeled back the sheets and took my naked and smelly self to a hot shower.

Damn it. I didn't have any clean towels.

I did feel marginally better after removing what felt like three layers of skin. But I couldn't bring myself to go back into my bedroom. I'd have to do the laundry sometime today. The couch would be comfortable enough to sleep away the remainder of the blue-black morning. But first, I wanted a cigarette.

I grabbed my pack from the side table near my door and headed outside. I hated to smoke in my loft, and tried to avoid it whenever possible. And I liked the quiet pre-dawn morning hours outdoors. The world was still asleep and peaceful, and it was nice to just sit and think. Though this morning I would have no reprieve. I had barely lowered myself to sit on the steps before the door behind me opened.

The building that housed my loft was a beautifully restructured Pentecostal church. From the street, anyone could mistake it for a house of God. But those fortunate enough to live in any of its extravagant lofts simply knew it as "The Abbey." I remember when I found the place, I considered how funny it would be to lure women home with the promise of heaven. My loft and one other shared a long hallway that led to stairs and street access at the rear of the building. Those stairs happened to be my interrupted resting place now.

"Excuse me, buddy," a male voice spoke clearly. I moved to the side and glanced up over my shoulder to see my neighbor kissing her date goodbye. *Ugh.* There was one difference between men and women. Women would at least be gracious enough to give you a goodbye kiss before they shoved your ass out the door. Men like me couldn't even be bothered to remember your name. I snickered under my breath to realize that her evening's entertainment hadn't made it long enough to see the light of day, either.

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"Edward? What are you doing out here?" Rosalie pulled her robe closer around her body as her attention turned from the man that had just walked around the corner to presumably find his car. I held up the lit end of my cigarette as an answer. She just sighed and sat beside me. Without a word, I handed her my cigarette. She took a long pull before giving it back to me.

Rosalie was a pretty cool chick. She moved in a couple months ago and hadn't been too troublesome. She was pretty. Maybe a couple of years older than me. Nice boobs.

"Remind me why we haven't had sex yet?" She smiled. I knew she was messing with me.

"Because you'd fall in love with me, and I'd never get rid of you," I joked back.

"Ah! That's right!" She leaned over far enough to hit me with her elbow. "I'm going back to bed," she said while standing. "I told you that my little sister will be here tomorrow. Er... today. Right?"

"Oh that's right. What time does Little Sister arrive?" I didn't really care. She had mentioned in passing that her sister would be living with her.

"Sometime in the morning. But remember what I told you. She's off limits. She's way too good for the likes of you."

"Got it," I replied smoothly and tossed my cigarette over the railing. I stood to follow her into the building, to try to catch a couple more hours of sleep.

-BPOV-

I stared through my windshield at the rusty bumper in front of me, and bit the side of my thumb anxiously. It was a bad habit. But there was little else to do to occupy my attention. I adjusted my rear-view mirror so that I could see my own tired reflection, and pushed my dark, side-swept bangs out of my face. Then as I set the mirror back to its original position, my gaze took in the boxes and baskets of clothes that filled my back seat. I knew that my trunk was filled

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as well. Even though I had been stuck in construction traffic and hadn't moved my car an inch in the last twenty minutes, the thought made me smile. I had finally done it. I had moved out of my parent's house in Forks, Washington, and was well on my way to living my new life in St. Louis.

I grew up, raised by a single father. He and my mother divorced when I was a baby. She didn't want to spend her life trapped in the little town, where my father was the Chief of Police. And we got along okay, just the two of us, until I was twelve years old. That was when my father was called to the aid of a single mother who lived across town that was convinced someone was trying to break into her house.

Dad chased the raccoons away from her garbage cans, and three weeks before my thirteenth birthday, Claire Hale became Mrs. Charlie Swan. Just like that... with a couple signatures down at the courthouse and sweetly shared 'I do's', I had a new mother and step-sister. Not that Charlie was forced to offer his sometimes over-bearing parenting skills to another child. Claire's daughter had already graduated from high school and had moved on to college by the time the households were combined.

Rosalie was six years older than me, which pretty much guaranteed that I was completely off her radar. Oh- I knew who she was. She was one of those girls in town that those of us in junior high spoke about with whispered voices, hushed in awe. And she had left quite a legacy behind. She was tall and blonde with big blue eyes. Homecoming Queen and cheerleader. She dated like it was a sport. Rosalie was a social butterfly. She went to school in California, where, I'm sure, she fit right in.

I, on the other hand, had always been somewhat invisible. A tom-boy... thin, and quiet, with brown eyes that were usually hidden behind the glasses I wore. Valedictorian and voted *Most Dependable*. I spent my weekends with my nose buried in books. The only extra-curricular activity I enjoyed was the gymnastics classes that I took for half of my life, trying to rid myself of the near crippling clumsiness I had as a child. If Rosalie was the princess--I was the nerd. We couldn't have been more unlike. And even though we were related by marriage, I'd hardly even have called us more than acquaintances

before about a year and a half ago.

It was Christmas, and Rosalie flew in for a vacation. Maybe in was the yuletide spirit. Maybe it was all the extra rum we snuck into our eggnog. I think that maybe, it was because at that time of her life, Rosalie just really needed a friend. She was going through a pretty hard time. While living in L.A, Rosalie had met and instantly fallen in love with a very wealthy business man named Royce King. Unfortunately, he spent more time in his Tokyo office than he did at home. Rosalie had just finalized her divorce before her trip back home. Suddenly our age difference and polar-opposite personalities didn't create such a huge wall between us. We bonded, or something. Rosalie and I parted ways tearfully after the New Year, and made a point to stay in touch via emails and phone calls from that point forward.

Wanting a drastic change from her married life in L.A, Rosalie's first celebratory purchase made with part of her sizable divorce settlement was a large loft in St. Louis, Missouri. Because she and I had only started to get to know one another, it shocked the hell out of everyone when she asked me if I wanted to move in with her. And it stunned absolutely everyone, when I eagerly agreed. I would have my own room, and freedom to start graduate school in a new city. The opportunity was everything I didn't even know I wanted. I couldn't explain why I jumped so fast at the offer. But I think it had something to do with my day planner.

I glanced over at the small spiral-bound book that lay on my passenger side seat. I wrote absolutely everything down in that journal. It was like documentation of my boring lifestyle. There were no surprises. And that scared me. I knew that if I didn't start letting myself live a little, my next twenty-years would be documented in similar books in just the same rigid and strict manner.

I picked up the book now, and flipped to today's page.

10:00 Arrive at Rosalie's.

I pulled out my favorite mechanical pencil. Click-Click-Click. The sound was comforting. It was the sound of my organized life. The traffic was obviously

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not going to allow me to get to Rosalie's by ten. So I uncharacteristically scratched a line through that entry and used my pencil to draw a large question mark across the whole page. I liked it. That question mark represented a whole new set of unknowns. It felt freeing. I'd been telling myself for a while, that I would learn to relax a little more. To take things a little less seriously. To play things by ear. The question mark was a good start.

And then because I was so inspired, I pressed the button to lower my window and tossed the entire day planner to the side of the road. I felt a very genuine smile pull across my face as I put my hands back on the steering wheel. But then... almost as quickly, I felt a panic start to set in. I bit my lip and looked into my rear view mirror. And then as fast as I could, I popped my seat belt button and jumped from the car to retrieve my book. Of course, that would be the moment that traffic would decide to progress. The car behind mine honked loudly while I rushed to get back behind the wheel and throw my car into drive. Maybe I would just start with more question marks. Besides, I really did love my pencil.

Welcome to my new life.

Reviews are better than playing dead. Leave one.

Auspicious Beginnings

A/N: Twilight belongs to S. Meyer. I'm just running her characters through a few chord progressions.

-EPOV-

I leaned back in the plush leather chair and kicked my legs out in front of me. My jeans were dirty and my boot laces dug the floor. I slept in my t-shirt and I'm sure it was obvious. I hated these meetings. Jason Jenks sat across his large cherry-finished desk with his chin on his fingers studying me. So I pressed a cigarette between my lips and lit it, just to piss him off.

"You know you can't smoke in here, Anthony."

"It's Edward," I reminded him. "And you know I don't give a shit." I took a deep drag and licked at my bottom lip before shooting him an impolite smile. I couldn't stand this smarmy bastard. Every three months I had to meet with this lawyer so he could fill in a report for my uncle. And then, he would hand over my check.

My full trust fund wouldn't go in effect until my thirtieth birthday. Until then, quarterly allotments kept me far more financially comfortable than even the lawyer who now frowned at me over his desk. I'm sure he resented me for it- as much as I resented the questions he needed to ask for his report. It was my uncle's way of keeping tabs on me. In the two years, it was his only means. It wasn't as if I had made a point of staying in touch with anyone from home.

"Still at the same address?" Jenks asked.

"Yes." I took another drag from my cigarette.

"Same job?" I worked a semi-steady gig playing for a friend's band.

"Yep."

"Drugs?"

"Is that a question or an invitation?" I raised an eyebrow to be cocky.

"You know what I mean!" Jenks sounded exasperated. "Have you done drugs?"

"Want a piss test?" I sent a pointed look at the coffee mug that sat between us on his desk. He frowned and pulled it closer, which made me crack a smile. I could imagine the look on his face if I were to actually stand up in his stuffy office and whip it out to piss in his mug. The thought amused me for a moment.

"A test won't be necessary, Anthony."

"It's Edward," I corrected him again.

It wasn't that I disliked the name Anthony, but no one outside of my family used it. My given name was Edward Anthony. I was named after my father. But all of my life, my family called me by my middle name to differentiate between me, and the man I was named after. Even after I moved from London to live with aunt and her family at the age of ten, they still used it.

Edward Anthony Masen.

I usually left off my last name entirely, to avoid the hassle that came attached to having a famous parent. My father was the lead singer and guitarist for The Trips--a rock band with such huge success in the sixties and seventies that I practically cut my teeth on gold records. It wasn't unusual to find members of the Rolling Stones hanging out at our London home on the weekends. And even though I'd lost both my parents in a single-jet airplane crash that took out the entire band when I was still a child, or maybe even more so because of it, people still recognized my name.

No. I didn't mind my name. I just wanted my own identity here in this new life that I was forging for myself.

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"Can you just answer the question please?"

"No," I sighed. "I don't do drugs. At all." It was true. I drank. Quite a lot. Too much, actually. But recreational drugs never interested me. I had seen too many people ruin their lives that way.

"Relationship status?"

I quirked my eyebrow at him again. This one was new. Since I had been away for as long as I had, they probably assumed I was ready to get back up on *that* horse. *Not bloody likely.*

"Are you asking me out?" I smirked. Jenks sighed and tapped his fingers impatiently on the desk between us.

"Blessedly single," I smiled coldly, deciding to cut him a break.

When Jenks opened the ledger in front of him to detach my check, I knew our perfunctory meeting was over. I wondered if he would make note of my surliness in his report to my uncle. I stood and reached for the crisp white envelope as he slid it in my direction, and deposited my cigarette neatly into his mug before turning to leave. *Let him write home about that.*

"See you in a few months," Jenks sighed. I could tell he looked forward to it as much as I.

"Yep."

With that, I was outside of his office and back into the clean morning air. It was rare for me to be outdoors at this time of the day. So I deeply filled my lungs with the morning to tide me over until the next time I was forced to be awake before noon.

A quick stop at the bank, and my check was deposited. A stop at the two-hour laundry service ensured that I would be able to sleep in my own bed tonight. One last stop at the grocery store yielded cigarettes, milk, a six-pack of beer

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and some cereal. These were the items I juggled in my arms as I made my way back to my loft.

A bright spot of white in the hallway caught my eye as I turned my key in the lock. Maybe I had dropped a t-shirt from my laundry on the way out. I went inside to place my groceries on the counter before turning to check it out.

-BPOV-

I placed the wicker basket on the foot of my bed, and carefully started placing my packed items into my top bureau drawer. Rosalie paused in the door way with the phone pressed to her ear, and watched for a moment before shooting me an incredulous look.

"What?" I mouthed towards her. She wrinkled her nose and moved the phone away from her mouth before answering.

"I can't believe that you even iron your socks!" She shook her head in mock disgust and walked away to finish her phone conversation.

Not true, my mind insisted. *They're not ironed. Just folded.* My eyes scanned the carefully organized drawer in front of me. She would probably laugh at the meticulously straight row of similarly folded socks that occupied the left side of the drawer. *A little less strict*, I repeated in my head. *A little less rigid.* To emphasize my new resolution, I scooped up a handful of undergarments from the wicker basket and dropped them haphazardly into the drawer. Then, before my own neurotic need for order could force me to fix the mess, I slid the drawer shut.

I had finally arrived at Rosalie's just before noon. And holy cow. Or... holy loft. I thought she was exaggerating when she told me that the Abbey looked like a church. It actually *was* a church. Or, it *had* been. Rosalie showed me where to park in the garage below, and led me to the back entrance of the large building that had been divided into stunningly beautiful and large living spaces. High arched ceilings and even stained glass windows graced the interior. I had never imagined I'd find myself living in such an unusual and beautiful place. And

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really, I couldn't imagine that it would translate into anything less than the Godly purpose for which it was originally designed. But amazingly, it did.

Rosalie obviously had expensive taste. But she managed to make her luxurious surroundings relaxed and comfortable. She showed me around proudly, and even though I was tired from my drive, I was energized and determined to move my things in, right away.

"Don't worry about the mess," Rosalie said as she shoved a few magazines across the glass table that sat in front of her sofa while we sat. "I have a lady who comes twice a week to clean..."

I blinked up at her, before frowning a little. I wasn't sure how often I'd take advantage of that particular luxury. I was sort of a neat-freak and was used to tidying up my own things.

"So... how was the drive?" Rosalie asked.

"It was fine," I shrugged. "Though Dad made me call in every few hours, just to be sure I was doing ok."

"God," Rosalie flipped her long blonde hair over her shoulder and grimaced. "No offense, B, but I'm so glad I never had to live with your father. He would have driven me up the fucking wall."

I shrugged again. I was used to him being over-protective.

"So... what do you think?" she waved a manicured hand in the air to indicate our surroundings, and I couldn't help but smile as I looked around again.

"It's different," I allowed with a nod. "And amazing. It will take some getting used to..."

"Well, it's your home now too," Rosalie stood and stretched. "So make yourself comfortable. I kinda promised your dad that I would look out for you, but I'm not exactly into that whole Mother Theresa shit." I grinned again. It was ironic,

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considering she lived in what used to be a church. "I want you to have fun."

"I... want that too," I smiled. "Thanks, again. For... everything."

"No problem," she said off-handedly. "I have to call James back. If that's okay?"

I nodded and decided to get back to my room, to finish unpacking. I had nearly finished placing my books on the built-in bookshelves next to my closet when I heard the doorbell ring.

"Could you get that, B?" I heard Rosalie call loudly from the other room. Dusting my hands off on the front of my jeans, I got up to go answer the door.

I tried to convince myself that his close proximity startled me, and that is what caused my heart to suddenly start pounding furiously in my chest. His forearm was braced against the door frame. He leaned against that arm with one leg bent slightly at the knee and crossed over the other. My eyes darted from his V-neck t-shirt, down his faded jeans, and to the scuffed toe of his black boot that pressed into the floor. But when I raised my eyes, I noticed how completely arresting his face was.

His reddish hair looked too wild to have been styled that way intentionally, and he had strong, dark brows that slashed over deep-set green eyes. A chiseled jaw line looked impossibly defined by a day-old growth of stubble. My eyes noted a slight dimple in his chin. And as I began to consider the cupid's bow of his mouth, I noticed the corner of his full lips pull up in what could only be amusement. Too late, I realized to my utter consternation, that I had been caught staring at the stranger that leaned in my doorway.

"Well, *hello* Little Sister."

Aw hell. His voice kinda made me feel like my stomach dropped out. *Could he be any more attractive?* I felt my face flush in self-consciousness.

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"Hi," I finally managed to spit out. *God I must look like an idiot*, I thought. My hand quickly flew up to brush my messy hair away from my face. His smile grew wider. Then he raised his loose hand and casually began twirling a white piece of fabric on the end of his long finger. *A white flag?* I wondered. *Is he surrendering?*

"I found this in the hall," he said evenly. "I thought someone dropped a pillowcase or a bed sheet or something until I picked it up and properly identified it."

I felt my eyes bulge as I looked back at the casually twirled material in question. To my horror, I realized that this gorgeous man was indeed holding a pair of my underwear! I must have dropped them from the last basket I carried inside. To make matters worse, they were a pair of my sensible, white, cotton underwear. And he had just teasingly compared them to the size of bed linens!

"Those are mine." I pressed my lips into a stern line and reached forward to snatch them from his finger. But his hand flashed back quickly and he closed his fist around the cotton before I could steal them away.

"Ah! I see you've met our neighbor, Edward." Rosalie stopped to speak from behind me and I was suddenly thankful that my underwear was firmly hidden in his large fist. I would hate to have to explain the situation. Rosalie would tease me forever. "Edward... this is my little sister that I told you about, Bella. *And don't even think about it...*" She turned with the warning hanging in the air between us and walked away, still talking on the phone. I felt my cheeks burn again at the implied threat. *Not likely*, I thought. Not after this mortification.

"Bella?" he asked, not bothering to drop his devious smirk or to unclench his hand. I frowned again.

"Isabella," I mumbled. "Rosalie calls me..."

"Bella," he said again. "I like it." The honeyed tone of his voice did nothing to stop the warning bells that went off in my head. It wasn't warm and friendly. It was... dangerous. Satisfied that Rosalie was far enough away, I put my palm up

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in his direction and leveled him with the most stern look I could muster.

"Can I have them back now, please?" I hissed. I tried to look serious and remain unaffected. He just smiled and stood straight up, running his free hand through his shock of messy hair. He was taller than I thought.

"Rosie's little sister? You don't look a thing like her."

I raised my eyebrow. *Duh. I'm the brunette with the grandma panties.* His assessment didn't warm me towards him. I just thrust my hand forward a little farther. He shrugged one broad shoulder and finally dropped my underwear into my palm. I bunched the material quickly in my hand and hid it determinedly behind my back. I was about to turn to step back inside when his hand wrapped itself hotly over my shoulder to hold me in place.

I was frozen as I watched him lower his face towards mine. I gulped and stared, but couldn't move. It was like my body wouldn't let me. And then I felt the scrape of his whiskery cheek brush mine as he lowered his lips towards my neck. I felt my heartbeat quicken, and my breathing became embarrassingly shallow. Then I got a chill down my spine as he spoke quietly across my ear.

"In the future, you might want to be careful where you drop your panties, love. Some men might take advantage."

He chuckled as he straightened up and turned towards his own door down the hall. I stood, flaming in embarrassment before slamming the door loudly to cover the sound of his laughter.

Reviews are better than big panties. Leave one.

Cuckoo

A/N: Twilight belongs to S. Meyer. I'm just running her characters through a few chord progressions.

-EPOV-

My life had fallen into a fairly predictable routine. I usually woke up sometime after noon. I'd eat some cereal and watch tv. I spent a lot of time working on music. After dark I would inevitably go out. I played guitar for my friend's band on some nights. Other times I would just go out to meet with pseudo-friends to share drinks. I would lean on the bar and have a beer and decide if I felt like putting in the effort to chat up a random woman. If I did, I would. If I didn't, I'd come home alone. And then I would sleep until after noon and do it all over again.

I was contemplating changing that schedule up a little as I stepped from the shower and got dressed this morning. Again, it was unusual for me to be awake so early. It was only ten o'clock. But Scott, a guy who lived in the larger loft at the front of the building, was bringing by his dog for me to watch for him while he was away for the weekend. And it occurred to me once again, that I actually liked the mornings. I just didn't see many of them. With my hair still wet, I grabbed my cigarettes and headed outside to have a smoke while I waited for guy to show up.

I rolled my eyes when I stepped outside and found that I wasn't alone. My new, prissy little neighbor was out on the small patch of grass doing some sort of stretching exercises with her back to me.

It had been a little over two-weeks since I had met her while returning her underwear that I had found in the hall. A little appreciation might have been called for. But no. On the few occasions that we had run into each other since then, she acted as though I had the plague. She would turn her eyes away and tilt her little chin up and practically run into her loft as soon as she saw me like she was little Miss-Fucking-Riding Hood and I was the big bad wolf down the

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hall. I wondered what Rosalie had told her about me. It's not like I was going to attack her or something. I never had to force myself on women. But hell, if she wanted to avoid me, that was fine. She obviously didn't share Rosalie's sense of humor. I had tried to be friendly. But she seemed uptight and bitchy, right from the start.

I had almost considered going back inside when she bent at the waist and sent her pert little bottom straight up into the air. On second thought- she hadn't seen me yet. I might as well have my smoke and enjoy the view. She *was* pretty damn cute. Especially when I had the chance to push her buttons. And I had to admit, I did that when I had met her. But I couldn't help myself. I had knocked on her door that day, intending to tease Rosalie about the plain little pair of cotton panties that I had found in the hall. I hadn't expected this little brunette in glasses to be the one to open the door, and it caught me in by surprise. So she became the target of my teasing instead. She didn't seem to appreciate it, though. But she had stood up to me. I'd seen a little fire there, under that quiet-looking exterior. Something inside me itched to scratch the surface a little and see if I could bring that spark out again. It would be amusing to try, at least. And it would give me something to do.

So I sat there watching her, and dragging lazily on my cigarette until a sideways twist brought her eyes past her leg to where I was sitting. She frowned a little and lifted her hand to remove an ear bud. It seemed to annoy her to have to actually acknowledge my presence.

"Good morning," she mumbled. Her reluctant greeting made me smirk.

"Is that what this is?" I squinted up at the sky and pretended to be confused by the brightness of it all .

"I'm surprised you haven't burst into flames or something," she muttered. Maybe she wasn't as unaware of my nocturnal comings and goings as I would have assumed. Interesting. She probably didn't mean for me to hear her, but I laughed anyway. She pointedly tried to ignore me, and continued to stretch.

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"Us vampires aren't actually allergic to the sun," I commented, playing on her suggestion with more teasing. "It's all myth, love."

Girls usually look horrible in sweat pants. They are baggy, and unflattering all together. But for some reason, I couldn't stop staring at the way that the soft gray cotton clung around her hips and molded itself across her tight-looking ass. I felt the urge to put two hands on it and squeeze- just to see if it was as firm as it looked from where I sat. Hell- I'd slap out a bongo beat on that thing if she'd let me! My body began to react to my target of concentration, and I shifted a little uncomfortably. She might have been a snotty little thing, but I was only a man. She represented a challenge that I was more than happy to take on. I'd love to see if I could get her to loosen up a little.

"What are you doing, anyway?" she asked as if she couldn't help herself. "I didn't have you pegged for an early riser."

I smiled wickedly at how close she was to a different truth with that statement right then.

"Just enjoying the fresh air..." *and your ass*, I thought to myself.

"Hard to do through a cloud of smoke," she sniffed. And then in a manner that clearly dismissed me, she placed her ear bud back in her ear and turned to start a brisk jog down the street.

I stood and walked forward a few steps so I could more fully appreciate the way her round little butt moved while she jogged. Oh yeah. I was right. She *did* have a feisty attitude. And it was going to be fun to mess with her, just to see it come out. I wondered how long she'd be out on her run. I was tempted to step back outside later just to see if she looked as cute coming as she did going.

Scott had come and gone before Bella returned from her run. I was standing in my doorway, sharing lunch with his large brown dog, when she jogged up the stairs and froze at the sight of me. *Yep. Just as cute from this angle.* She recovered quickly and made move to walk around me as she usually did, but I stopped her.

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"Bella?" *Hmm... hadn't she told me her name was Isabella?* Rosalie called her Bella. I think I preferred it. In fact, I kinda liked it.

She seemed shocked that I was speaking to her again, so I took advantage of her silence. "This is Dazzy." *Why was I introducing her to the dog?* "I'm watching him for a friend."

"Dazzy?" she asked. "As in... Dazzy Vance? Baseball player?"

I frowned and shrugged. Hell if I knew how he got his name.

She timidly peeked around the corner of my door to where Dazzy lapped happily from his bowl.

"What is he eating?" She asked curiously.

"Cocoa Puffs."

"Why did you give a dog Cocoa Puffs?"

"Well... *he is* a Chocolate Lab...."

Too late. My attempt at humor obviously failed and she was looking at me like I had two heads again. I watched as she brushed her hair to the side, away from her face, and darted her eyes quickly away from me.

"Umm... well... ok." She moved down to her loft door and I stood there feeling like an idiot. "See you around, Edward." She spoke again just before she went inside.

It was the first time that she said my name. Out loud. And yeah- I kind of liked that too.

-BPOV-

Click & Strum

I hurried with a shower, and then mixed up two bowls of salad for lunch before dropping into the corner of the sofa with one bowl offered out in Rosalie's direction. She was sitting in the opposite corner, and placed the magazine that she had been flipping through down on the side-table before smiling gratefully at the lunch I had prepared.

I loved how easily she and I had fallen into a routine around the loft. Any awkwardness that I might have worried about had never settled in. She seemed genuinely happy to have me here, and we had actually been having fun getting to know one another a little better.

"So... what's the deal with the neighbor, Edward?" I speared some salad on my fork and tried to pretend to be more interested in the distribution of salad dressing in my bowl than I was about our gorgeous neighbor--who happened to intimidate the heck out of me. I had been completely embarrassed by the way we had met, and could hardly even bring myself to look at him since. It hadn't helped that I had stumbled upon a very compromising sort of situation in the garage one night when I had got home late. It wasn't his car, but I knew he was in it by the way the woman he was with was screaming his name at the top of her lungs. Her red high heel was pressed against the back window of her little white car, and her cries of "Oh, God" and "Right there!" hadn't left much to the imagination about what they had been doing. I closed my car door and hurried quickly up the stairs. It would have been mortifying to have been caught witnessing the sordid event, even though privacy couldn't have been on either of their minds since they hadn't even made their way to his loft. I was sure I'd never be able to face him without my face bursting into flames. And then today, out of the blue, he had decided to speak to me.

"Edward's a decent enough guy," Rosalie shrugged. "I don't really know much about him. He's a musician. And he's a bad-boy," she smiled. "There is a usually steady line of tramps in the hall. But he's never made a move on me."

"He... doesn't strike me as your type," I mumbled.

"Oh God, he isn't!" Rosalie tipped back her blonde head and laughed at the notion. "Doesn't mean that I don't think he might be fun to mess around with."

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You know--if I was slumming!" She laughed again and I forced myself to laugh with her. She might have noticed that I sounded off, because she squinted her eyes and looked at me over her bowl.

"Why do you ask, B?"

"Oh, no reason," I shrugged and bit into a slice of cucumber. She seemed to be waiting for me to elaborate, so I swallowed and continued.

"I saw him in the hall a little while ago and we spoke. He's watching a dog for a friend of his."

"Dazzy. Scott lives up in the front loft, and he has Edward watch his dog from time to time."

"Well... he can't be all that self-involved if someone trusts him with their pet, right?" I shouldn't have said anything else. Rosalie put her bowl down on the table firmly.

"Bella? If you know what is good for you, and I really believe you do, then you won't be searching for many good attributes to place on our neighbor." I rolled my eyes.

"Don't worry," I sighed. "I just thought he seemed like sort of a nice guy. Maybe different from what I originally thought."

"Don't let *him* hear you say that!" Rosalie laughed again and I shook my head. "Speaking of nice guys... what are you wearing tonight?"

I had let Rosalie talk me into going out with her on a blind date. I wasn't really sure how I'd fit in with her upper-class circle of friends, but I hadn't really met anyone else since my move and I was eager to add some more of those question marks to my day planner. I needed more surprises.

"Why don't we shop this afternoon, and you can help me choose something new?" I asked. Rosalie lit up like the fourth of July.

"Let me grab my purse!"

The two of us locked up and walked down the hall. Rosalie was busy talking about her favorite shop that she simply *had* to take me to. Her voice faded away and I couldn't help but turn my head towards Edward's door as we passed. It wasn't entirely closed, and I could hear the quiet strumming of a guitar coming from inside.

"How does that sound?" Rosalie asked.

"*Amazing*," I said, before I had a chance to filter myself. My feet stopped, and I wanted to linger there in the hallway to hear more.

"Really?" Rosalie stopped too, and turned to regard me with surprise. I suddenly figured out that she hadn't been talking about the quiet strain of music coming from within the loft beside us, like I had. I blushed and shrugged. I had no idea what she had been talking about, but she looked excited. So I nodded and smiled and hoped I wasn't agreeing to something too horrible. I would let her dress me up, and I would go out with her and her friends. If nothing else, I would be able to end my day knowing that I had at least met some interesting new people.

Reviews are better than Cocoa Puffs. Leave one.

Jose and James

A/N: Twilight belongs to S. Meyer. I'm just running her characters through a few chord progressions.

-EPOV-

I pulled my hand through my hair and reached to light another cigarette. I only had to play an early set tonight. I considered going home a little earlier than usual... hell, maybe I'd wake up earlier too. Enjoy the morning. Maybe I'd see Bella again.

I brought my beer to my mouth angrily, finished it off, and waved to the bartender to bring me another. It pissed me off that a little girl in sweatpants had been in my mind all day long. It was ridiculous. I wanted to kick myself for letting my thoughts linger where they shouldn't.

First of all, even if she didn't look at me like I was dirt beneath her feet, I would never get involved with a neighbor. I was well aware that I could have had some fun with Rosalie a time or two if I had really wanted to. But there was no way in fuck I was going to mess with that. Besides the fact that her appearance dredged up ghosts for me- (I had sworn off blondes entirely,) getting involved with a neighbor would just be a monumental pain in the ass. Because then when it was all over, I'd still have to see that person all the time. There would be no hiding- no escape. *No*. My time was better spent with girls like Leslie... who was making her way out of the ladies room and walking back towards me at this very minute. She'd been flirting with me all night. And if I decided to take her up on her obvious interest, we could mutually enjoy the evening and I wouldn't have to worry about running into her when I went to check my mail. Or see her stretching for a run when I went outside for a morning smoke...

Damn it. There she was again. I'd only intended to try to get the girl to lighten up a little. Let her know that I wasn't some prick, or someone she had to avoid. I liked that I got along with most of my neighbors. And my efforts might have

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worked, a little. I mean, she actually spoke to me. But then, she'd popped in and out of my head all damn day long. That bothered the shit out of me.

So I ordered up two shots of tequila, one for me, and one for Leslie. Because if I wasn't mistaken, she had undone another button on her low-cut shirt for me while she was in the bathroom. And because I had just decided, she'd do.

I lost count of how many shots I drank after that. But Leslie was sober enough to drive me home. I threw my arm over her shoulder and stumbled my way up the stairs to my loft. *Ow. Shit.* I hit my leg hard on the side table by my door before tossing my keys into the bowl there and staggering forward a few steps to turn on a lamp. *That's gonna leave a mark.* I pulled off my jacket and tossed it over the back of the couch. Leslie was saying something about what a nice place I had. I wasn't really listening. I didn't bring her home to discuss my interior decorating skills.

When she ran her fingers up the black case that held the guitar that I placed in the corner, I winced.

"Don't touch that," I snapped. Okay. So that was probably rude. But I already felt like my space was cramped, with her in it. She looked a little put off though, so I decided to make it up to her by clamping my mouth down over hers while making short work of the rest of the buttons on her shirt.

She moaned appropriately, and I backed us up until I was able to sit on the chair in my living room. Then, before I even knew it, my pants were around my knees and this very eager young woman was doing her best to illustrate why she had gotten the nickname 'Hoover' in college. My head swam when I tipped it back, so I anchored my fingers in her hair to try to stop the world from spinning. And Leslie was a pro. She sucked me hard, and I groaned.

"Oh my God," she moaned like a porn star. "Your dick is so big..."

I didn't really need to hear the talking, so I pushed her head back down on my cock. She choked a little and I smirked. What do you know? I guess she was right. And *that* shut her up. Not that I didn't appreciate every bit of her efforts.

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It felt good. It always felt good. But at one point I opened my eyes and looked around the room. And that's when I saw Dazzy sitting there looking at us. That damned dog cocked his head sideways and looked at me like he was saying "*For the love of God, man! What are you doing?*"

It really was so funny to me in that moment, that I couldn't help but laugh out loud. That, of course, interrupted Leslie's whole game. She looked up at me and clearly thought I was laughing at her.

"What in the hell is so funny?" she asked waspishly.

"The dog is staring at us!" I tried to explain. She turned her head to look at Dazzy, and then smiled a little.

"Then let's put on a good show for him!" She jumped up to straddle my lap, and I turned my head on reflex, not really wanting to kiss her again. She didn't mind and set to shoving her tongue in my ear as far as she could. Which was a little gross too. But oh well. This was the time that I would close my eyes and I would push back all my bitter feelings about tiny little women with blonde hair and fake smiles... who lied when they said they cared about you.... who cried when they admitted they couldn't love you back. And I would lose myself in the thrust and the pull until I couldn't even remember that pain any more. I could just concentrate on the hot breath on my neck... and the hands greedily gripping me... well... *everywhere*. Leslie wanted to be fucked. I was more than willing to make that happen. And I wouldn't even consider the way that Bella looked in her sweatpants.

Where in the hell did that come from?

I stood up so quickly that Leslie fell from my lap and directly onto the floor.

"You have to go," I slurred. It pissed me off, that I was cock-blocking my own fun for the night. But my head wasn't in it, and I wanted Leslie to get out.

"Bastard!" She stood up and stomped to the door. I pulled up my pants and followed her.

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"Hey, I'm really sorry..." I was apologizing as she opened the door. She was so pissed off at me that she wasn't even bothering to button her shirt back up before leaving. And then my eyes flew right over her shoulder to Bella's very surprised face. She was backed up against the wall, trying not to get knocked over by the very frustrated and half-naked woman that had just launched herself from my door. All I could think of right then and there was to keep Leslie from touching her--to keep any trace of my ugly dealings from brushing up against Bella. It was irrational, and hell if I could explain it. But I didn't want those two worlds to collide. So I grabbed Leslie roughly by the arm and pulled her back slightly.

"What in the hell are *you looking at?*" Leslie sneered at her.

"Nothing!" Bella looked stricken. I stood there like a complete idiot with my mouth hanging open.

"If you're here to get laid, you are in for some serious fucking disappointment!"

Bella's cheeks were flushed and she just shook her head, looking mortified.

Leslie took her cue and marched towards the end of the hall. Bella turned slowly and continued on her way going the opposite direction. And I swore to God that I'd never drink tequila again.

-BPOV-

The blind date that Rosalie had set up for me wasn't as bad as I had feared. But when she wanted to extend the evening with her companion, I was happy to take a cab home. My date seemed reluctant to see me go, but was appeased when I agreed to see him again.

I did not expect, when I returned home, to be nearly knocked-over in the hall by an un-dressed and irate woman leaving my neighbor's loft. If the way she hissed at me was any indication, she was leaving on bad terms. And he looked... *well....*

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As I washed my face and prepared for bed, I found myself dwelling on the look in his eyes when he saw me standing there in the hall. I had only been in Edward's presence a couple of times. But my small frame of reference was of him looking self-assured... teasing... cocky. *This* was new. His face had been utterly un-guarded. He had looked completely embarrassed, and somehow- sad. If his date was ending badly, that could explain the sadness. But I couldn't quite understand what could cause embarrassment to cloud his features.

Could it be that he was embarrassed about someone else witnessing the scene?

Maybe he was worried that his reputation as a ladies man would somehow be tarnished by his date ending on an obviously sour note?

I, for one, couldn't care less. As a matter of fact, I felt almost a little warmly towards him. I was thoroughly embarrassed by the way that he and I met. Now the playing field seemed a little more even. And I had a strange and compelling urge to let him know that whatever I had stumbled upon in the hall wasn't really such a big deal. If he was worried about offending *me*, Rosalie's un-worldly little sister... he would have to try harder than that. I was a big girl.

It was probably bad of me to lay there before sleep, thinking more of my neighbor than of the date I had just had. But for some reason I couldn't quite pinpoint, I was intrigued. Edward seemed to represent a mystery- A big question mark. And now that we had both suffered embarrassment in the presence of one another, I felt comfortable enough to decide that maybe I should try to get to know him better. Who knows? Maybe we could end up being friends. *That* would certainly be unexpected! I fell asleep knowing that I would do my best to make sure that happened.

Over the next week, my best intentions were thwarted. I didn't see Edward at all. Each day when I went for a run, I hoped that I might run across him outside having a cigarette. His door was always closed... silence coming from within as I passed. It was as if he wasn't even home. If not for his car being in the shared garage (and much to Rosalie's consternation, taking up her space more often than not,) I would have assumed that he had left town. I didn't see him during the day, and I didn't see him when I came and went during the evenings. I was

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beginning to wonder if he wasn't trying to avoid me altogether.

Thoughts of my neighbor were far from mind as I took my aggressions out cleaning the loft. Rosalie was gone shopping again, and I hooked my ipod to the stereo to play some inspiring music loudly while I scrubbed the bathroom. The louder the better. I was trying to drown out my thoughts. Classes were starting in a few weeks and I was waiting anxiously for a letter about my student loans. I was worried that I'd be dropped from my classes before my loan check could arrive. Rosalie was being very kind about helping, but living here for free was already more than I wanted to rely upon her for. The porcelain sparkled when I glanced at my watch. *Twelve-thirty. The mail should be here by now.* I pulled off my rubber gloves and laid them against the edge of the sink before opening my door and jogging down to the door at the bottom of the steps to see if the mail had arrived.

The mail delivery person was sorting mail for the lofts when I reached the door. So I stood by, patiently, while he finished dropping envelopes in the slots.

"2-C?" I asked him. He smiled and handed me a bundle

"Great song," he smiled at me. My ipod had shuffled to James Brown singing "Papa's got a brand new bag." I could hear it all the way outside. I nodded in agreement and began sorting through the mail in my hand as I walked back up the stairs and down the hall to where I had left my door open. The loan check was there, and I was smiling over it when I stepped into my foyer. And then, because the sight I saw there nearly scared me to death, I screamed and dropped all of my mail on the floor.

Edward was standing in the middle of the room, looking completely bewildered and maybe slightly annoyed. I recovered from my shock quickly and realized that he was trying to yell something over the volume of the music.

"What?" I yelled back, bending to pick up the mail I had dropped. I still couldn't hear him, so I skipped to the stereo and turned the volume off. The sudden silence was alarming.

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"What in the hell is with all the noise?" He asked loudly. He stood wearing grey sweatpants and some ratty old t-shirt with a beer label printed across the front. His hair was standing up wildly, and his eyes were bloodshot. I was willing to bet he'd just been woken up rudely by the God Father of Soul.

"I'm sorry," I bit my lip. "I didn't realize how loud it would be when I left my door open. I just went to check the mail." His features relaxed a little and he pushed his hair back from his face.

"What was that, anyway?" he asked.

"You don't know James Brown?" I couldn't keep the skepticism from my tone. He looked exasperated and rolled his eyes.

"Of course I know James Brown. I just meant, what were *you* doing playing that? I thought you college girls only listened to Britney Spears, or some other crap like that."

I pulled my ipod off the docking station with a small snort and tossed it into his surprised hands. Edward caught it quickly and I folded my arms across my chest.

"Go ahead and try to find *crap* in there. Really. Britney Spears? I'm offended." I wasn't really. But it was fun to watch him as he bent his head and started circling his thumb on the touch pad of my mp3 player. "Have a seat," I smiled. "You'll be looking a while." He did actually take me up on the offer and sat on the edge of the chair while he continued browsing through my music collection.

"You have more music on this thing than I've ever seen," he glanced up at me. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-two," I replied with a smile.

"Ouch, you're a baby," he winced.

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"How old are you?" I scoffed.

"Twenty-five."

"Hmm. Ancient," I nodded jokingly. He just stared at me for a moment before turning his eyes back to my ipod screen.

"You have really eclectic taste in music. This is all over the place. How did that happen?"

"I'm a big computer nerd," I shrugged. "I log in a lot of hours on my computer for school. And I like to listen to music while I work." He seemed interested so I continued. "I decided a few years ago to broaden my horizons. Once a week I would look for some random new artist, or something old I hadn't spent time with, and just try it on for size. Usually you can't appreciate it after just one listen. But it's amazing what you can enjoy if you let yourself try. What do *you* listen to?"

"Right now?" he asked, seeming surprised by my interest. "Mostly old Dylan. There are a couple of artists from the London area that I'm getting into. I don't really like many modern bands."

"Well... you should give some a try. Or at least listen to something unexpected. Broaden your horizons. Once a week," I nodded as if he'd take my advice seriously. But he didn't shun my suggestion.

"Maybe I will," he said. He stood up then and placed my ipod on the coffee table. I followed him to the door.

"Sorry again, about the music being so loud," I apologized. He turned at the door and gave me a small smile.

"No problem. Just make sure it's not before noon. Alright?"

"Got it," I promised. "See you around?" I think I shocked him again, but he turned back towards me and looked me in the eye.

"Sure."

When he left, I felt strangely indebted to James Brown.

Reviews are better than vacuum cleaners. Leave one.

Rip and Burn

A/N: Twilight belongs to S. Meyer. I'm just running her characters through a few chord progressions.

A/A/N: I know the chapters have been pretty short. I stop them when they feel right, to me. They *do* get longer when the couple starts having more interaction. Still... I'm impatient to share the story. So expect two chapters this week!

-EPOV-

When I got back to my loft, I lowered myself to the couch and threw one of my legs over the back. With remote in hand, I started flipping through the channels on my television. But I didn't really see what flashed on the screen. I was too busy thinking about my neighbor.

Bella.

As much as I ever hated to admit that I was wrong, I had a feeling that maybe my initial impressions of the girl were a little off-base. I was under the assumption that she was a snob. Stuck-up. But today, aside from waking me up with her really loud music, she was actually very, very *nice*. Friendly, perhaps?

I felt my brow furrow as I tried to place exactly what it was about her that made me change my mind about her personality. Maybe it was the way that she looked a complete mess in sweatpants and a hooded sweatshirt with water stains on the front. Her dark hair had almost all but fallen out of the little ponytail she had it tucked into. Yet, the eyes behind her glasses met mine straight on with no hint, whatsoever, of self-consciousness. She wasn't trying to impress me in the least.

And yet- somehow, she did.

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Giving it further thought, I realized that her aura of friendliness was aided largely in part by her wide smile. She had the kind of smile that transformed her whole face. It didn't stop at her mouth. It borrowed her eyes, and made a dimple dance in her cheek. And she delivered it often enough during our short visit that I could recall it with perfect clarity now. *Wow. She had a great smile.*

It occurred to me that the last smile I contemplated at length probably belonged to Irina. And as I raised the middle finger of my right hand to rub against my sternum, I felt a satisfaction that I could finally think her name without the searing pain that used to be present each time she crossed my mind. Now, two years later, the memories were only accompanied by a dull, bruised feeling. Almost like the edges of a wound that had come together and were well on the way to being mended. Sure- the shadow of discomfort was enough to be a constant reminder that I never wanted to go through all of that again. But at least I could think her name now.

And apparently, I could think about her smiles. Because that was what I was doing. My mind was filtering through the many smiles that Irina wore like accessories. She had twisted me around with those smiles, particularly with the one that she used when she wanted something from me. The last smile of hers I saw was one of those smiles. She wanted me to forgive her. She wanted me to understand. At the time, I could do neither.

Now, I couldn't even recall a time when any of Irina's smiles had been as open and honest as the very genuine smiles my neighbor had just thrown my way. It was rare to see a smile that wasn't put in place for a reason. Bella just seemed nice- like she was full of happiness and wanted to share a little of it.

It was that reason alone that had me standing in my doorway the next day, waiting for Bella to appear in the hall. She seemed to be a creature of habit, and I could guess the approximate time that she would be returning from her run. My guess wasn't far off. And when she got to the top of the steps and saw me standing there, I was rewarded with another of those wide open smiles.

"Hi," I smiled in return. *Hmm. Maybe this friendly thing wouldn't be so hard to pull off.*

"Hello, Edward. How are you?"

"Great." *Well, almost great. Getting there.* "Do you have a minute? I have something for you."

"Sure!" *Again with that smile. So cute.* She walked past me in my doorway, and entered my loft with no hesitation. I stood there, and watched her turn a circle in my foyer, glancing around what she could see of my living space. I usually got compliments on the modern lines I preferred in furniture, or my choice in art that was evident from place to place- Like it surprised people that a man who couldn't bother to do his own laundry would actually have good taste. I wondered if Bella liked it. But my question would go unanswered. She simply raised her eyebrows and looked at me expectantly. It was then that I remembered what I had invited her in for.

"Oh, right!" I moved past her to the coffee table in the living room, and retrieved two CDs that I had stacked there for her. When I placed them in her hands, she grinned up at me. "Dylan. Early stuff," I pressed my lips together. "I noticed your ipod was sadly lacking in this area."

"Thank you!" She smiled again. And then her eyes lit up with an idea that apparently had just come to her. "You should hear this guy I was listening to on my run!" With that, she turned her hips until she could rest her body against the back of my couch, and started circling her thumb on her ipod. In a minute, she pushed an ear bud into her ear and then reached a hand up towards my face. I froze for a moment, until I realized that she wasn't reaching for me. She was simply placing her second ear bud into my ear for me. I had to move a little closer to her, so that this could work comfortably, so I leaned my hip against the couch too, and listened as she pushed 'play.'

She smiled expectantly up and watched my face as the music hummed in my left ear. I listened for a moment, and then I couldn't help but smile. She looked like she was watching me unwrap a present.

"This sounds like Stevie Ray Vaughn," I nodded. Her smile grew wider.

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"I thought so too! But his name is Jacob- *something*.... I found him online on last fm. He's good, right?"

"Very," I nodded and then reached to remove my half of her listening device. She did the same and then pursed her lips a little. It was distracting in a good way.

"This can't count for broadening your musical horizons," she mumbled. "You're too familiar with guitarists. You need to listen to something out of your element for it to count." I tipped my head back and laughed. She was taking this mission of hers very seriously!

"Well, as much as I'd love for you to ply me with African Jungle Rhythms, or Tibetan Monks chanting... whatever ideas you've got spinning around up there for me... I'm afraid I have plans tonight."

"Ah!" She wrinkled her nose while she smiled. I was distracted again. "Can't keep those ladies waiting!" She actually nudged me with her elbow before she stood and walked towards my door. Then she stopped and looked over her shoulder, holding up my CD's in her hand. "Do you mind if I burn these, and return them tomorrow?"

"That will be fine," I assented.

"After twelve o'clock!" She flashed that dimple before she left.

-BPOV-

I found myself glancing at the clock way too often the next morning. Lying on my stomach, across my bed, I read through my day planner and held my pencil up by my ear. Click-click-click.

10:00 Run

11:00 Shower

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11:30 check email

12:00 E

I was eager for noon to arrive so that I could return Edward's CDs. It was very nice of him to loan me some of his favorites. I had to admit- I was looking forward to seeing him again. It was fun to talk music. And Rosalie was usually out of the house most of the day, so my afternoons had been largely dull. Which was why I was shocked a little when my sister walked into my room and sat on the edge of my bed.

Her eyes narrowed as she glanced from the too-large flannel shirt I wore to the tips of my dirty high-tops.

"Bella? You need to stop dressing like a boy."

"Not this again- please?" I rolled my eyes.

"Something form-fitting wouldn't kill you," she suggested.

"No. But I'd freeze to death. You keep it sub-zero in this place!"

"I do not!" She laughed. The truth was, I did get cold very easily, and Rosalie was naturally warm. I didn't mind her over-use of the air conditioner when I was dressed warmly. "How about a shopping trip? For summer clothes?" She asked. "We could stop for lunch too..."

This time I narrowed my eyes at her. She liked spending her time at the country club or other swanky establishments that catered to the upper-class. That wasn't my scene.

"That depends," I wrinkled my nose. "I'll say yes if I don't have to change the clothes I'm wearing right now for lunch."

"Ugh," she rolled her eyes. "Fine. We'll go to *McDonalds* or something." I smiled as she gave in. I needed a new dress for Friday anyway. With a sigh, I

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scratched through the last entry in my planner. In its place, I wrote another question mark. It didn't look too bad, I guess. I was getting better at this. I'd just move the 'E' a little further down the page.

The afternoon shopping excursion left me well-armed with shorts, a couple skirts, and a myriad of fitted t-shirts and tank tops. Rosalie was satisfied that I would be better equipped to deal with the St. Louis summer. *If I even got a chance to be outdoors*, I sighed to myself. My morning run had, thus far, offered my widest exploration of the city. And I never ran more than a couple miles at most.

It was after five before Rosalie left the loft for the evening and I was finally able to steal away to return my neighbor's CDs. I felt like I was being sneaky. I knew I didn't have to answer to Rose about my activities. I was an adult. But she had already warned me about trying to get to know Edward. She wouldn't understand my inclination to try to be friends with the man down the hall. I'm sure she would turn our innocent sharing of music into something ... it just *wasn't*.

When I pushed his doorbell, he answered right away. I forcibly had to keep my own mouth from hanging open. He stood pressing a towel against his wet hair. His thin, A-line t-shirt was crumpled above a faded pair of jeans that he hadn't buttoned yet. He must have just gotten out of the shower and he looked... *amazing*.

"Oh- hi," he grinned a little ruefully. "I thought maybe you'd changed your mind about stopping by today." He moved to the side in an obvious invitation for me to enter. I tried to act nonchalant as I did so.

"I wanted to return your CDs," I mumbled.

"Well? Have a seat. Tell me what you think."

I walked towards his living room and lowered myself onto the couch. He deposited his towel in the other room before joining me. I tried to ignore the way that his wet hair fell across his forehead as he watched me, expectantly. I

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played with the hem of my flannel shirt where it laid across my lap. His steady gaze was a little unnerving. But then my eyes drifted towards a piece of paper on his coffee table. The woman's name 'Stacey' and a phone number was written across it in red lipstick. The reminder made me smile. I didn't need to be self-conscious around this guy. He and I were leagues apart. I held up the paper and smiled teasingly in his direction.

"Nice color." I joked. He rolled his eyes and flicked his fingers away in a swooshing gesture as if to dismiss the note.

"She's just some girl who gave me a ride home last night."

I'll just bet she did, I smiled.

"What did you think of the CDs?" He seemed far more interested in discussing Dylan. I was happy to oblige.

"I can't believe I haven't listened to more of his stuff by now," I smiled.

"I'm not surprised."

"I like this though," my fingers touched the CD cases that I had placed next to Stacey's phone number on the table. "It was very... unique for the time, wasn't it? I liked how he mixed instruments and genre. And he really is a poet."

"Well, I'm glad you like it." He seemed happy, too. He sat there with his forearms resting on his knees. And I noticed his guitar was leaning against the wall next to the chair he sat in.

"You play..."

"Yes."

"Do you write your own?"

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"I try." He looked down at the floor now, and almost seemed shy about the admission. "Right now, I'm just helping a friend out. He's got a band, and I play a few gigs a week with him."

"Oh."

"What do *you* do?" His chin was still down, so he looked up at me through that mop of wet hair.

"Nothing right now," I smiled with a shrug. "My grad classes start in a few weeks. I got my degree in Computer Science. Now I want my Masters in Software Engineering." When he lowered his brows, I sighed. "You know. Like video games?"

"I don't think I've ever known a girl who likes video games."

"Honey, I *create* them," I laughed. *Honey?* Where did *that* come from? He sat up and smiled in my direction.

"You must be *really* smart."

I just shrugged and stood. It was time for me to go.

"Thanks again for the CDs," I smiled.

"Something new- once a week," he stood too. I wondered if he had any idea how sexy he was, when he wasn't trying to be. But his parting words planted an idea in my mind.

"Hey, Edward? Are you busy Friday night?"

Reviews are better than Dylan. Leave one.

Symphonic Disharmony

A/N: Twilight belongs to S. Meyer. I'm just running her characters through a few chord progressions.

-EPOV-

...And *then* it was weird. One minute we were talking about music, and I was walking her to the door. The next, she seemed to be asking me out. I stood at a loss for a moment. On one hand, I definitely had very friendly feelings surfacing for my neighbor, who just happened to look completely adorable standing in front of me wearing a huge flannel shirt that might as well have been one of my own. On the other hand, I didn't want to give the girl the wrong idea. I didn't really *date* women. Dating was for those who pursued relationships. I avoided them.

"Uh.... I don't really.... *date*," I started to stumble around the words as my hand rubbed at the back of my neck. She noticed my discomfort and laughed quickly, putting me at ease.

"Oh God! I didn't mean it like that!" She smiled. "I'm not asking you out on a *date*," she wrinkled her nose at the last word like it sounded ridiculous even to her. I took a deep breath and smiled. "I have an extra ticket to the Symphony! And Rosalie is busy that night. You know. I thought it would be a good chance to listen to something different. But that's ok if you don't want to." She shrugged and turned back towards the door.

"What time?" I blurted out. Don't ask me why. But since she seemed fine with the idea that it wasn't like a date or anything, I figured it might be kinda fun. She stopped and turned and smiled again.

"Seven. I think."

"I have a show. My friends band--at eleven."

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"I can have you back by then," she promised. "Do you have a suit jacket?"

"Pssh... Of course I have a suit jacket! I'm not a complete Neanderthal!" *Note to self. Buy a suit jacket tomorrow.*

"Well, good. I'll be by to get you at six on Friday."

So there I stood, at nine-thirty on Friday evening, smoking a cigarette on the street corner in front of Powell Symphony Hall -feeling just a little bit like an ass. I should have known that Bella was serious about the whole "not a date" thing. The girl seemed to be as genuine as they come. Sure it wasn't a date--because she *already had a boyfriend*. Of course, I didn't know that until I happened to lay my arm across the back of her seat halfway through the performance of Tchaikovsky's 5th Symphony.

She had picked me up promptly at six o'clock. I was pleasantly surprised that her hair was softly curled to lie on her shoulders, and she wasn't wearing her glasses. It was the first time I had clearly seen her eyes. They were gorgeous. Warm brown, with thick, dark lashes. And she looked very pretty in some long, floral-printed dress--even though she was covered from shoulder to thigh with a too-large suit-jacket. *What was it with her and her love of baggy clothes?* She complimented my jacket and tie, and I shrugged as if I hadn't purchased the new clothes just for our night out. She offered to drive.

We had very nice seats, and had a while to sit and talk before the show began. The girl was... charming. She was funny, and interesting, and I actually found myself enjoying her company. When the show began, I admit, I watched her more than the performers on the stage. She caught me staring once, and blushed prettily. I reacted to that without even thinking. I reached over and draped my arm across the back of her seat.

Bella stiffened slightly and frowned. I couldn't quite understand that. It wasn't like I had touched her or anything. Then she picked up her program and flipped through the pages quickly. Stopping at the page designated for the short bios of the oboe players, she pointed to a blonde man who smiled from the third picture. It looked like a high school yearbook picture, and the guy seemed like

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the sort that probably jacked off to Sarah Palin on C-Span coverage. "This is Michael," she whispered, showing me the picture and pointing to indicate his place on stage. "He's the one who gave me these tickets."

She didn't have to explain any further. And really- what was I thinking anyway? She had a boyfriend who played in the Symphony Orchestra. So there I stood on the street corner, glancing up occasionally to where she stood to wait for him by the side stage door--feeling utterly ridiculous in a suit jacket and tie.

Bella smiled warmly at the man as he walked out the door. He took her hand in his, and I watched as she turned her body in my direction and gestured towards me. *Great. They were walking my way.* I ground my cigarette under my heel and turned to face the man that Bella was walking with. I did have a small surge of satisfaction to know that he was closer to Bella's height than my own.

"Edward? I wanted you to meet Michael. Michael... my neighbor, Edward."

Great. Introductions made... relationships defined. I reached out to shake the man's hand.

"Michael Newton," he announced in a whiny, pompous sounding voice. "Nice to meet you... Edward, was it? I didn't catch your last name. " That was it. *I already didn't like him.*

"I didn't throw it," I replied dryly. I dropped his hand and pressed my own into my front pocket.

"Well... I thought Isabella would be bringing Rosalie along with her tonight. I trust you enjoyed the performance?"

"I enjoyed my evening." I deliberately changed his words. It was fun to watch him squirm before he threw an arm possessively around Bella's waist. She looked a little uncomfortable. That shit was funny.

"How about you, Isabella? Did you enjoy the show?" Then before she could answer, he spoke to me again. "She's quite the little music lover." *Ooh... I had*

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a feeling she wasn't going to like that. My eyes darted to her face and I grinned. I was right. I didn't know my neighbor well, but she didn't disappoint me. Bella frowned and ducked out of Michael's embrace.

"I'm sorry Michael. We need to go. Edward has an appointment..."

"Why don't you come back with me, to my place?" I heard him whisper in his whiney voice while he turned in her direction. I sickly wanted to stay to hear the way she would answer. But I really didn't want to witness a goodbye kiss or anything. She was too good for that stuffy oboe-playing bastard.

"I'm sorry, I drove."

I smiled as I turned. I could have sworn I heard just a little relief mixed in with her apology. *Too bad Mikey*, I chuckled.

"Bella? I'll meet you at the car. Mike...." I left with my parting words stifled. I couldn't really say it had been a pleasure. It hadn't. I just crammed my hands into my pockets and walked briskly towards the parking garage. I hadn't walked more than fifteen feet when I heard her short heels clicking on the sidewalk, hurrying to catch up to me. Must not have been much of a goodnight kiss. I smirked again.

"Hey, wait up!" She hurried to my side, and I slowed my pace to match hers. We walked to her car in silence. Once she started the engine and had backed out of her parking space, I turned to look at her.

"So how long have you two been dating?"

"About three weeks?" She bit her lip and concentrated on navigating through the parking garage. "We've only gone out a few times. Rosalie introduced us."

"He seems... a little stuffy." She glanced over at me in the dark interior of the car, but didn't say anything to refute my observation.

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"You were a good sport, sitting through the concert," she finally said. "It probably wasn't your cup of tea."

"No. I had a really good time," I insisted. Her company was the most pleasant aspect of my evening, but after insulting her boyfriend a few moments ago, I thought it was probably best if I didn't mention that. "Did *you* have a good time?"

"It was alright," she shrugged. "The music was nice."

"But?" I could hear that she wanted to say something more.

"It's probably not my style, exactly."

"What *is* your style?" I couldn't help but ask, and really, I was surprised that I even cared to know.

"I don't know," she shook her head and shrugged. "I guess I'm trying to figure it out."

I nodded and looked out the windshield ahead of us.

"I was just wondering..."

"Hmm?" I looked over at her while she drove down the city street.

"I was just wondering when I might hear *you* play."

It wasn't something I would normally suggest. But I couldn't seem to stop myself.

"What are you doing later tonight?"

Her smile flashed hugely in the dim light from her console. *You lose, Mike.*

-BPOV-

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I flew down the hallway and promised to meet Edward outside his door in fifteen minutes. Neither of us were dressed to go to the bar where he'd be playing. The heels had to go first. And my eyes were killing me, so I got rid of my contacts. Better. I stood looking at my meager wardrobe, trying to decide what to wear. I was very glad that Rosalie was not home, so I wouldn't have to explain my extended evening plans with our neighbor.

The truth was--I had a good time with Edward tonight. He was pleasant to talk to and he seemed to really listen when I spoke. Before the orchestra began, we actually had a really nice conversation. Neither of us knew a lot about classical music, but we knew what we liked. And it was nice sharing my opinions with someone who genuinely seemed to want to hear what I had to say. Unlike Michael. *Ugh*. I rolled my eyes and let my dress fall to the floor. We had only gone out on a few dates, and already he had a knack for making me feel so insignificant. He sure did like the sound of his own voice, and that annoyed me.

I tugged a pair of jeans up over my hips, and rolled a white racer-back tank top over my head. I looked in the mirror. *Good Lord*, that was a tight t-shirt. It would never do. But I was in a hurry. So I grabbed the large black jacket that I had just worn to the symphony and buttoned it around me. *There*. I smiled. I quickly laced up my favorite Converse high tops, but frowned when my hair fell into my face as I bent with the chore. So I pulled it into two low ponytails, just under my ears, and ran out the door to meet Edward.

He joined me right away, with a frown on his face as he took in my appearance. We were dressed very much alike. He also wore a white t-shirt and jeans, minus the jacket. I couldn't understand the look on his face. But his voice dropped when he turned and mumbled.

"I hope you brought your ID." I did. So I hurried to keep up with him in the hall. I offered to drive again, and he nodded and put his guitar case in the backseat before he closed the passenger door behind himself. Other than giving directions, he didn't talk a lot on the way to the riverfront bar where he would be playing. I followed him towards the front entry way, and stood nervously while the doorman checked my ID twice.

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"Robbing the cradle tonight, Edward?" he smirked.

"She's legal," Edward insisted coolly before putting his hand on the small of my back and leading me inside the dark room.

"What was that all about?" I asked, slipping my ID back into my wallet.

"You look twelve," Edward muttered. "I think 'Little Sister' is a good name for you, tonight." And then as if he couldn't help it, he gave me a crooked smile and pulled one of my pigtails. "Don't worry about it. You look cute."

I blushed at his semi-compliment and let him direct me through the bar. He kept his head down and didn't speak to anyone as he led me to a dark corner-booth behind the bar.

"Will you be comfortable here?"

I nodded and smiled.

"Okay. Well then... I'll check in with you later." And then his tall form disappeared into the crowd.

I saw when he made his way to the stage. He stood with a few more men and helped to get equipment set up. I ordered a vodka and cranberry juice from a waitress who looked at me oddly.

"So... how do you know Edward?" she had asked. I smiled. She seemed curious, but friendly.

"We're friends. He's my neighbor," I said above the loud music. Maybe 'friends' was stretching it a bit. But I kinda hoped we were moving in that direction. It was my goal, at least. She seemed just a little amused by my answer. But she shook her head and shrugged.

"Well, you see something new every day," she grinned. "I'm Kate. I'll take real good care of you tonight, honey. Just let me know if I can get you anything

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else." I watched her step away through the crowd and sipped my drink before sitting back to take in the show.

Edward's friend's band was pretty good. The sound was a little bluesy. And a little folk. I liked it. Edward sat on a stool in the darkened corner of the bar, and kept his head bowed down over his guitar as he played. Other than a few times when his mouth lifted to the microphone to offer harmonies, he seemed content to fade into the background. It didn't stop him from getting plenty of attention though. I noticed girls fluttering near his side of the stage. I heard a few make comments from the bar area. He was apparently, a wanted man. I just continued to take it all in as I sipped the drinks that Kate kept refilling. When Edward's friend announced that the next song would be their last, I reached for my purse to get my wallet. It was then that I noticed things were looking a little bit... fuzzy.

I reached out towards the waitress as she passed by, and tried to ask her about settling my tab- but my tongue felt thick. *Crap. I was drunk.* In my excitement about going out to the symphony, I'd pretty much neglected to eat all day. I didn't know that I'd be going out to drink afterward, though. And I really wasn't keeping track of how many drinks the waitress brought to my table. I'd been busy enjoying the music and the new environment.

"Don't worry about it honey," she smiled at me. "Edward has it all taken care of."

"Thanks," I smiled. And then I hiccupped. *Great.* I looked around the room and tried to make my eyes focus. I thought I saw Edward walking my way. Then I was sure of it, as he was stopped by a leggy-red-head in a short dress. He stopped to talk to her for a moment, and then she twisted a hand into the back of his hair and pulled his mouth down towards hers. I felt a little sick as I watched her press against him. But almost as soon as it began, he laughed and raised his hand to extricate hers from the back of his head. Then he said something else to her, shook his head, and turned to continue towards where I sat. I hiccupped again, embarrassingly loud.

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"Bella?" His face seemed amused as he looked at me and lowered his lanky frame into the bench seat at the opposite side of my table.

"Hi," I tried to smile but felt the room spin. I hiccupped again and groaned before putting my head down on the table. I heard him laughing.

"How much did you have to drink?" I couldn't answer. So I heard him ask someone else. "How much did you give her?"

"She only had four," the waitress giggled. "Emmett might have made them a little strong. But I swear she didn't have much!"

"Bella?" Edward's voice was warm near my ear as he moved to sit beside me. "Will you be ok here while I get my guitar out to the car? I'll be right back for you."

I nodded and tried to answer, but only hiccupped instead. I reached into my pocket for my car keys and placed them on the table without looking up. He laughed again and then was gone. I wasn't sure how long I sat there before I felt him pull me up against his side. "Come on, drunk girl," he murmured.

"It's 'Little Sister'," I snorted. Then I slapped my hand over my forehead. How lame was I? He just chuckled and hoisted me up more firmly.

"Okay, Little Sister. Let's get you home, alright?" I actually felt better when I stood up. The room wasn't spinning as badly as I feared, but I couldn't stop the hiccups. I grimaced.

"Sorry," I mumbled. "I didn't mean to get..."

"Don't worry about it," his laugh was near my ear again. "We've all been there. Besides... I'm sure the band sounded much better this way." I wanted to shake my head, but it seemed like a bad idea at the time. I needed to concentrate on not tripping over the rough cobblestone road as he practically carried me to my car.

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"I didn't eat today..." I tried to excuse my unexpected reaction to the alcohol.

"Do you need me to take you for some food now?" I groaned and my head fell forward once I was finally in my passenger seat. *No food. Bad idea.* He laughed again and started the car. At least he seemed amused and not irritated by the situation.

I kept my eyes closed and tried to concentrate on breathing without hiccupping. Sometime on the ride home, I fell asleep.

Reviews are better than Vodka and Cranberry. Leave one.

Illusions

A/N: Twilight belongs to S. Meyer. I'm just running her characters through a few chord progressions.

A/A/N: This is another short but (I think) necessary chapter in getting to know the characters. For what it's worth, I DO plan to continue updating twice a week.

WARNING: There is a *tiny* mention of rape in this chapter. I don't spend a lot of time on it... but it's part of Rosalie's back story.

-EPOV-

The night had been interesting, to say the least. After our trip to the symphony, Bella had come with me to the club to hear me play a set. I was still surprised by how quick I was to offer that she come with me. I never did shit like that. Maybe it was because I was feeling a little smug that she had ditched her oboe-playing dick wad of a boyfriend and seemed willing to spend more time with *me*. She had just sat through a performance by the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra, and yet, she had wanted to hear *me* play. It stroked my ego a bit, so I thought 'why not?' and invited her to tag along. And she got hammered. Completely shit-faced. I smiled when I thought of how cute she was. Usually I was annoyed by drunk people if I wasn't in the same state. But I was completely sober. And she was adorable. Her hiccups made me laugh out loud. It was the absence of those horrible hitches in her breathing that clued me in to the fact that she had fallen asleep while I drove us home in her car. I turned down the knob on the stereo so that she could rest undisturbed for a few minutes.

When I parked in her assigned parking space, I took the keys from the ignition and turned in Bella's direction. She was still passed out. So I unhooked my seat belt and leaned over to unhook hers. And then, I swear, I only intended to put my hand on her shoulder so that I could shake her awake. But when I raised my hand, my eyes slid beyond her shoulder to where her large black jacket was

gapping open to reveal a tiny little white tank top she wore beneath.

Well, hello. What is this? My eyes lingered unashamedly on the way her tight white t-shirt twisted up against her ample curves. I had no idea she was built like that underneath all the clothes she usually wore! I could see the faint lacy design of her bra under the thin material, and my fingers twitched a little—waiting for permission to see if she felt as soft as she looked. Her chest looked like she'd fit perfectly in my palms, and I had pretty large hands. How had I not noticed that before? My face must have dropped closer to hers than I intended, because she turned her face towards me then, and I felt her breath against my cheek. *God help me.* She smelled so sweet. I pulled my face back far enough to see her eyes flutter open. A slow smile pulled across her features as she looked at me.

"Edward," she slurred, smiling. "You are so *handsome*."

Drunk.

I reminded myself that she was completely obliterated. I would *not* take advantage of the girl. I gritted my teeth and jumped from the car before helping her out of the passenger side. And I might have held her a little too close while I led the way to her loft. But once I'd seen what she kept covered up all night, I couldn't help but want to feel her pressed up against my side. Shit. Those things were real. And I loved real tits. I used her keys to open the door, and because I wasn't sure which room was hers, I deposited her on the sofa instead. She was asleep again before I let myself out.

Once in the hallway, I deliberated for a moment. I was sort of ramped up, and not drunk, as I usually was when I came home from a gig. I was also alone. I considered heading back out to the bar for a while, to see if maybe that red-head was still around. I knew she wanted a piece of me. She made it kind of obvious when she shoved her tongue down my throat and grabbed my dick through my jeans before I was able to pull myself away. But I remembered the way her firm body had felt against me. Definitely implants, on that one... though usually I didn't mind. I dragged my hand through my hair and huffed. It probably wasn't worth the time or the headache to fuck with it. I just grabbed

my keys, and decided to see what was on television instead.

-BPOV-

I woke with a lurch to a sitting position as soon as I heard the echoing sound of the loft door slam.

"Fucking idiot men," I heard Rosalie mutter a string of profanities as she made her way across the dark room in front of me. I quickly reached behind me to turn on the lamp, and illuminated the room around us. Rosalie walked barefoot across the floor, with the delicate ankle-straps of the high-heels she had worn, twisted around her fingers. She stopped in surprise when she saw me, and then gave me a sleepy smile. Her shoes dropped to the floor, and she came over to flop heavily down into the seat beside me.

"What are you doing out here?" Rosalie asked. "You almost gave me a heart attack."

"I... don't know?" I was confused, and sat there blinking, still trying to wake up. "What time is it?" My throat felt thick.

"Almost four," Rosalie answered. "And please, Bella... tell me that you didn't wear that out to Powell Hall."

I looked down at my clothing and saw that I was still dressed in the large jacket, t-shirt and jeans that I had worn to go out after the symphony. Edward had taken me to see his band play...

I felt my face heat rapidly when I realized that Edward must have been the person to get me home, and onto the couch. My glasses were folded nicely on the table in front of me, and I fumbled with them while trying to put them on.

"We uh... went out for a while after," I explained. She didn't need to know who constituted the 'we.'

"Well, that explains why you smell like an ashtray," Rosalie sniffed. "Did you have a good time?"

I couldn't remember. Instead of answering, I directed the conversation back to Rosalie.

"How was *your* night?" I asked.

"Ugh." Rosalie rolled her eyes and leaned back into the cushions behind her. "Nothing ruins a good post-orgasmic high like finding out that the man you just screwed has a bigger vagina than you do."

"What?" I asked. I was either still a little drunk, or confused. "Are you saying that James... is a woman?"

Rosalie laughed good and loud, and actually wiped tears from under her eyes before regarding me with an amused smile.

"No!" She was still chuckling. "But he wanted to start talking about exclusivity and shit. You know... us being a *couple*. I don't *do* relationships. So... I won't be seeing him anymore. And it's a shame. He was a pretty good lay."

My brow wrinkled in confusion, and I frowned. Rosalie noted my expression and shook her head sadly.

"Don't tell me that you are one of those hopeless romantic types!" I shrugged, and Rosalie sighed loudly before tugging on my shoulder to get me to lie down on my side. She maneuvered her body so that she spooned up behind me on the couch. It was strangely comfortable.

"Don't fall into that trap, Bella," Rosalie spoke against the back of my hair. "Love isn't real. It's an illusion."

I thought about her bitter assessment for a minute, and frowned once more.

"You were in love with Royce," I stated. Though she didn't display them, I had seen pictures of the young, beautiful couple at their extravagant beach-side wedding. I felt Rosalie sigh heavy behind me.

"I think I was in love with the *idea* of Royce," she finally allowed. "And he definitely didn't love *me*."

My heart felt sad for her solemn admission.

"What happened with you two?" I asked quietly. Rosalie shifted her legs and curled them closer behind mine. We hadn't broached the subject before, but I knew that there was a chance that she'd be more forthcoming with her answer since I was facing away from her. Rosalie wasn't comfortable with appearing vulnerable in any way. When the silence stretched between us, I began to think that she might avoid a reply. Then finally, she began to talk.

"Royce was very busy being primed to take over his family's company," she stated. She didn't sound sad or upset. She just sounded resigned, and cold. "With main offices in LA, New York, and Tokyo... he travelled a lot. And I went with him, most of the time, back and forth to New York and LA. There were a lot of social engagements that he preferred that I attend with him. But I never went over-seas with Royce. And he started spending more and more time over there. Months..."

I didn't say a word. I just looked at the floor in front of me, and tried to will her to keep talking.

"I found out, through whispered gossip, that Royce was keeping a mistress in Tokyo."

"No way," I gasped quietly.

"Oh, yes," she chuckled bitterly. "It didn't take much digging into expenses to see that he bought her a condo, a car... basically, they were living like they were married while he was over there. When he came home from one of his trips, I confronted him. I asked him if it was true, and he couldn't deny any of

it. So I told him I wanted a divorce."

"Just like that?" I asked.

"I wish," she snorted. Rosalie was tense behind me. I reached back and grabbed her hand, twisting my fingers with hers.

"We got in a horrible fight, and he left. When he came back later, he was drunk and pretty much out of his mind..." she swallowed. "I know that some people will argue that it's not rape if you're married or some stupid shit like that. *Ignorant bastards*. But... Royce totally forced himself on me that night. And he hurt me. No... nothing *bad*. I didn't have to, like... go to the hospital or anything. But, the next morning he *knew* he had fucked up. And he knew I could ruin him, socially, if I wanted to. So... he agreed to give me the divorce and anything else I wanted from the settlement."

"So. Here you are," I whispered.

"Here I am," she said with a sigh. "I couldn't stand the idea of living on either coast. Too many associates and memories. So I decided to stay in the middle. And I think I'm doing okay here..."

"But you don't believe in love anymore..."

Rosalie snorted softly.

"I think it's... rare," she finally allowed. "Maybe it exists. But... I think mostly people just throw the word around like it's some rational explanation for why they do the shit they do. Like it's some magic get-out-of-guilt-free card. I mean... going ass-to-mouth with someone doesn't turn into some sacred or special thing just because you claim to love them. Your breath will still smell like shit in the morning." Rosalie laughed again, and I frowned. *Ass-to-mouth?* And suddenly I was very aware that my own drinking had left my mouth tasting less than fresh. Sensing that Rosalie was done speaking, I rolled off the couch and moved to get a bottle of water. I grabbed one for Rosalie too, and placed it on the coffee table when I saw that she had moved to lie on her

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stomach across the space on the sofa that I had just vacated.

"Thanks," she mumbled with her face pressed to the cushion. Her eyes were closed, and I had a feeling she'd be asleep soon.

"No problem," I said. "And sorry you had a bad night."

"Wasn't bad until the mushy part," Rosalie mumbled. "Take my advice... Bella. Have fun with Michael. Fuck him... then forget him. Men aren't worth the trouble."

I walked toward my room, sipping my drink and considering her words. But as I placed my bottle of water on the table beside my bed, and pulled my covers up over me, I could only commit myself to following half of her advice. I didn't want to 'fuck' Michael. The 'forget' part seemed more applicable. Already as my body started to slip back toward sleep, he was far from mind.

Instead, my thoughts shifted toward a shadowy figure sitting on a bar stool at the back of a stage, away from the spotlight. Sounds of a robust symphony were replaced by the simple, quiet strumming of an acoustic guitar. And I smiled as I drifted off to dream.

Reviews are better than smelling like an ashtray. Leave one.

Stone Hippo

A/N: Twilight belongs to S. Meyer. I'm just running her characters through a few chord progressions.

-EPOV-

Because I had turned in fairly early, and uncharacteristically sober considering I had played out the night before, I was awake before noon, once again. I took a shower, and probably would have worked on a few tunes that had been in my head, but I left my guitar in the back of Bella's car the night before. Normally something like that would have made me feel panicked. But I guess it was alright, since I knew it was close to home. Still, I was at a loss about how to spend my time. I was unaccustomed to the feeling, and it made me I felt antsy, and anxious. I had an odd urge to actually do something with my day. To join the living, and get out of my apartment for something that wasn't related to my usual routine. With absolutely no idea what I actually felt like doing, I grabbed my cigarettes from the table near my door, and went outside for smoke. It was a complete, but welcome sight to see Bella outside already. She was sitting in the grass with her back against the tree, reading a book.

The elm back-rest couldn't have been too comfortable, but she seemed totally relaxed and engrossed in what she was reading.

"Waiting for me?" I teased, getting her attention. She startled appropriately at the sound of my voice, and looked up with a shy little smile. I lowered myself to the bottom stair across from her.

"Maybe a little," her cheeks got pink as she looked up. "I was hoping I'd see you this morning."

"Oh yeah?" I asked, lighting up. I was only joking with her about waiting for me. Her answer had surprised me.

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"I wanted to apologize for drinking too much last night. Thanks for bringing me home safely."

"It's no big deal," I waved it away. "People drive me home all the time."

"Yeah... I know," she said quietly while she glanced down at her book again.

I took the pause in conversation to flick my ashes to the ground.

"I can't believe that you are actually sitting out here anyway. I would have guessed you would have a major hang over."

"I didn't drink *that* much, Edward," she scoffed. "I just forgot to eat yesterday."

"You were drunk enough to tell me that I'm handsome!" I kept my eyes on her face, waiting to see her cheeks turn pink again. I wasn't disappointed.

"It's not like you don't already know it," she argued. "Girls drive you home all the time, remember?" Her eyes were back on her book. I hadn't specifically mentioned that it was girls that drove me home. But I guess that meant that she had noticed.

"Hmmm." I really couldn't argue with her. I did get a lot of female attention. But for some reason, none of it seemed as important, right then, as deserving the attention of this pretty little brunette with a book in her lap. "The weather is nice." *I was talking about the weather?* I just wanted to keep her talking. And that was weird.

"That's the other reason I'm out here." She put her book back down and sent another of her lethal smiles. "I'm usually way too active to stay indoors for long. And soon classes will be starting..."

"Active... yeah. You like to jog." I took a moment to remember the sight of her stretching on the lawn. "What else do you do?" I cringed at the sudden interest I had in her fucking hobbies. But she had been fun to hang out with the night before. And for some unexplained and probably stupid reason, I wanted to spend more time in her company. She was... nice to talk to. That's not

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something I was used to doing with women. I was bored. And if I was being honest with myself, I kinda wanted to earn a few more of those warm smiles that she seemed to hand out so readily. But I wasn't about to start jogging with the girl just so we'd have something to do together.

"I took gymnastics and tumbling for four years," Bella told me. I felt my face twist in question and she sighed and put her book aside before she stood up, obviously willing to demonstrate. Then she very easily bent her body into a backwards arch, put her hands on the ground behind her, and kicked her feet up and over her head until she was standing upright again. I felt my mouth go dry. *Of course, she'd be very bendy.* I think my mind had shifted into attack mode. She looked apologetic as she shrugged and offered a different option. "Baseball?" she asked.

"Baseball?" I know I sounded confused. But I was still lost in my own fantasies about her flexibility.

"I love baseball," she smiled. "I used to watch all the time with my dad. I have a couple of gloves! Do you want to play catch?"

"Catch?" Okay. So I was beginning to sound like an idiot.

"Yes. You know... catch? I throw the ball... you catch it. You throw it back... I catch it?"

"Hell, no." I snuffed out my cigarette on the step and stood up.

"Well, why not?"

Because I probably throw like a girl... and I have a feeling that you do not. And there is no way in hell that I'm setting myself up for that humiliation, I thought.

"Because it's stupid!" I said. Thank God, she didn't look offended by the way I shot down her suggestion.

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"Oh. Okay." She sat again and picked her book up to read. I threw my spent cigarette on the ground and got up to go inside. A strange idea had popped into mind, and I needed to check to see if it was even a possibility. I opened my old laptop computer and fired it up. It took a little time before I got the information I needed, but twenty minutes later I was on a mission. Bella was nice enough to invite me to the symphony. It would only be neighborly if I returned the favor with an outing, right? It wasn't music related, but I had a feeling she'd like it.

I went back outside, but Bella was gone. I wouldn't be deterred so easily. I hurried down the hall and rapped loudly on her loft door. She answered right away.

"Edward?" God, I loved the way my name sounded coming from her lips.

"Grab that glove of yours, Little Sister," I let myself smile. "I'm taking you to a ballgame."

I had never been to a ballgame while living in St. Louis, and neither had Bella. She was so excited about my suggestion that she didn't even complain when I bought a couple of cheap bleacher seats just past centerfield. And she didn't question my totally out-of-character invitation. She just acted like it was something we were used to doing together... hanging out. In fact, she acted so cool about it, that I started to think of other things we could do together. Friendly things. Hanging out, things. Just a couple of neighbors, stepping out for a break. Sounded fine, in my head, when I worked out the logistics of it. I wanted to get outside, and so did she. Simple. No reason why we couldn't go do that, together.

Something about the sun, and being outdoors... the excitement of the crowd... or hell, maybe the girl beside me... had me feeling awake- and I mean, *really awake*- for the first time in ages. I quickly figured out that going to the game was a pretty great idea. And because it was fucking hot outside, for the first time since I'd known her, Bella wasn't dressed like a snow man. She wore cute little khaki colored shorts and a concert t-shirt. It was hard for me to keep my eyes off her legs. But I tried really hard. Because checking her out would have definitely put all of this in a different category. I wasn't even about to go there,

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in my head. And the way that she joked around and laughed with me... giving me shit right back when I handed it out... let me know that she was totally relaxed about it all too. Perfect.

Bella was surprisingly relaxed in this element. She let her guard down. We shared nachos with extra peppers, and she drank a tall beer with me. She cheered for the local heroes even though she swore allegiance to a Washington team, and thoroughly cussed out an umpire for making a bad call at second base. I laughed in appreciation at her sailor's mouth and wondered how long it would be before I did something to piss her off enough to get her to yell a few of those colorful phrases at me. And then as easily as she had turned into a bad-mouthed sports nut, she switched gears and sweetly applied some of her sun block to my face before the afternoon sun could burn us both down. I had never been a sports enthusiast. But I sat there considering becoming a season ticket holder. I had fun. *A lot* of fun.

By the seventh inning stretch I had made a decision. I needed to re-think my whole "no-friends" rule concerning women. I couldn't remember laughing so much, or having so much fun in someone's company. Maybe a man and a woman really could be friends if that was honestly what both of them were looking for. Sure- she was adorable. But that only made it more pleasurable to be around her. I felt a natural high from my time spent with Bella- and all I could think about was how much I wanted to do it again.

"Hey, Bella?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you have any plans tomorrow?"

"Hmm?" She pulled a black book from her bag and I couldn't help but grin.

"What is that?"

"It's... my day planner," Bella said, flipping through the pages in front of her.

"Do you always have a day planner with you?" I asked, with a chuckle. I watched as she pushed her chin down a bit and blushed.

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"Pretty much," she admitted. "It's... like a security blanket. I'm... not really comfortable without it."

"Sounds like Beatrice," I nodded, trying to make her relax again.

"Who?"

"Beatrice. My guitar," I smiled. She smiled then too.

"Why is your guitar named Beatrice?" she asked. I watched as she fished a silver pencil from her bag, and held it across the pages of her book. She clicked the thing a few times absently while she spoke.

"Uh..." I stammered. I hadn't really meant to say anything. But she was looking at me with a curious expression, so I shrugged. "Beatrice is my mother's middle name."

"Oh really?" she raised her eyebrows. "That's sweet."

"Well, it's also Bob Dylan's mom's name. So I thought it worked on two levels. And it's not sweet. It's cool. Very, very cool."

She smiled and shook her head.

"Well, I think Beatrice is still out in my car," she told me. "I'll get her back to you, as soon as we get home. I know I wouldn't feel comfortable if I left my day planner somewhere else..."

"Tell me you haven't named it," I teased. She blushed again but shook her head. "So... tomorrow?" I urged. She looked back down at the book on her lap.

"Nothing until dinner at seven," she answered while clicking her pencil a few more times. "Why?"

"I was thinking we should go to the zoo."

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I watched as her face lit up in the smile I was hoping for. "But I have to play out tonight. So let's make it around noon. Okay?" She nodded and quickly scribbled 'ZOO' in large letters over the space reserved for twelve o'clock in her day planner. Then she put her thumb and pointer fingers between her teeth to loudly whistle towards the beer vendor walking by.

"Two more!" she shouted and grinned at me. Ah... a girl after my own heart.
-BPOV-

Edward didn't actually show up to get me until almost one. His hair was still wet, and he looked tired. If the dark red splotch that was visible just over the edge of the neckline of his t-shirt had been any indication, he had probably entertained another girl that he brought home from the bar. Or one that brought him home. Whichever. It didn't really matter. He seemed happy to continue with his plan to take me to the zoo, so I decided not to give him too much shit about it. Besides, it wasn't really my place. Edward was acting really friendly, and that had been my goal, all along.

"Thanks a lot for doing this," I told him, as I got into his car. "Rosalie isn't much for sight-seeing. I haven't even been to any fun places in the city yet. Other than the baseball game. Oh- and the symphony." I felt my face heat up. I'd pretty much admitted that the only fun things I had done since I moved here, had been with him. He didn't seem to mind though.

"Well... I haven't either," he told me with a smile. "First time for everything... right?"

If I assumed that my neighbor was more suited to the dark environment of a nightclub, I was mistaken. His brooding demeanor disappeared as we walked in the sun, smiling and laughing, and searching for animals in their enclosures at the zoo. We spent a particularly long time searching for the leopards that were well camouflaged in the tall grasses of their designed habitat. The search led our conversation towards camouflage in general.

"So.... is that why you are usually dressed in sweatpants and shirts that are way too big for you?" Edward asked while leaning on the railing in front of us. "I

mean... are you trying to stay hidden from something?"

I was a little shocked that the conversation had changed to my clothing preferences. But I didn't mind.

"Maybe that's *part* of the reason," I shrugged. "At school I'm in a male-dominated subject. When I'm working as part of a team, it's easier to be taken seriously when I'm not calling attention to everything that God gave me."

"Men don't work that way," Edward shook his head and smirked. "They'll think about it anyway. If you are covered up, they'll just spend their time wondering what you look like underneath."

"Really?" I asked, genuinely curious.

"Yes, really," he said somberly, not looking at me.

"Well then, I'm screwed," I laughed.

"You aren't covered up today," Edward glanced at me from the corner of his eye and pulled the side of his mouth up in a smile. I had worn a t-shirt and shorts to accommodate the warm August temperature.

"Well, that's the *other* reason I dress warmly," I explained. "I get chilly easy! I need a sweater when it hits seventy-two degrees. The humidity here is hard to get used to. And Rosalie runs the air-conditioner in the loft so that I'm freezing most of the time."

"Oooh. You'd hate London then," Edward smiled at me and turned to walk down the path. "It's not nearly as warm, there." I followed him through the door to the Children's Zoo. He stopped at the gate to hand an attendant a few dollars for our admission.

"You're from London?" I asked. "You don't have an accent."

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"I moved away when I was young," he shrugged. "It comes and goes a bit. Mostly when I've been drinking."

"Bet that's helpful with the ladies," I teased. Like he needed any help in that area. He just shrugged. But then he surprised me by putting his hand on my arm and spinning me toward him. I took an involuntary step back, and was halted when the low wooden beams of an animal enclosure hit the back of my legs. Edward smirked and stepped toward me, leaning forward until our chests were nearly touching. In shock, I held my breath. He just lowered his head until his nose was next to my ear, and I felt his hand slowly rub a passage up and down my arm.

"You tell me, love," he said with a low, obviously accented voice near my ear. "Would it work on you?" I shivered, but put my hands up on his chest before laughingly pushing him away. He straightened his frame with a cocky grin on his face and an eyebrow raised. I rolled my eyes and blew a strand of hair away from my forehead, trying to hide the way he had flustered me.

"Yeah. Yeah... that's a deadly weapon," I mumbled. He just laughed and shrugged again. "So, London. Wow. I've always thought that would be an amazing place to visit." We started walking again, and he shoved his hands in his pockets.

"It's hard to explain... everything is different. The air... the *smell*..." I heard a melancholy tone steal into his voice, and I stopped at a climbing statue of a large hippopotamus. Placing my foot into its open mouth, I climbed up and sat with my legs astride the stone animal. Edward smiled and jumped up to sit facing me.

"You sound like you miss it."

"Not so much right now," he smiled.

"Do you get a chance to go home often?" I asked.

"Ummm... no. Not in years," he scrunched up his face.

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"Have you lived in St. Louis long?" I asked, hoping to keep up the conversation. He shook his head.

"Nah. Lived in New York before coming here." His countenance changed. I watched the sun leave his eyes to be replaced by shadows.

I raised my eyebrow and hoped he would take it as an invitation to continue. His long fingers rubbed the smooth stone underneath us, and he looked hesitant. But then he took a deep breath and smiled up at me from under his long lashes.

"I... uh... was sort of kicked out," he explained.

"From your home?" I asked.

"No," he shook his head. "My aunt's home." He ran his fingers through his hair and then reached for his pocket before stopping himself.

"Shit," he said. "Don't suppose they allow smoking in here?"

"Don't suppose so," I said with a small smile. He seemed agitated. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to pry."

"No. It's... okay," he said, looking down. "I just don't really talk about it all that much."

"You don't have to," I hurried to tell him. He gave me a grateful smile and shrugged again.

"That's okay," he said. "I don't think I mind. Really."

"So?" I asked, since he seemed willing to share. I could be a good listener.

"My parents died when I was ten," he told me.

"Oh. I'm really sorry, Edward."

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"It's alright," he told me. "It was a long time ago."

"And that's why you moved from London?" I asked.

"Yeah. I went to live with my aunt and her family."

"In New York?"

"Right," he nodded. "So anyway," he continued, "I get these quarterly stipends from my parent's estate. I was young, and I did a lot of crazy shit." He rubbed his hand across his jaw and looked away. "Once... some stuff went down and I went to Vegas with a couple of friends. I pretty much blew my entire allowance in about a week. Gambling... lots of drinking... *so* many women. My uncle came to get me. He told me that I needed to straighten myself out and grow up. Learn some responsibility."

"So he just kicked you out?" I asked.

"Not in as many words," he shrugged. "He suggested that maybe I should get away for a while to get my shit together. I wanted to leave."

"All because you got a little crazy in Vegas?" I asked skeptically. Edward dropped his head and exhaled loudly.

"Going 'a little crazy' burnt through almost two hundred thousand dollars...." Edward said so softly that I thought I had heard him incorrectly.

"Oh." I didn't know what to say about that. He said he got a *quarterly* allowance. I swallowed hard. "Your family must have been really rich."

He tilted his head a little and laughed, but without much amusement.

"Can you keep a secret?" he asked. I nodded quickly. I was a vault. He seemed to study my face for conviction before continuing. "My dad used to be in a rock band. You actually have a couple of his songs on your ipod, love."

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"Oh," I said again. My mind had automatically started to go through the possibilities of who his father might have been, but I stopped when Edward started talking again. "I admit. I was raised in a very cushy environment. I had everything I ever needed. My aunt and uncle took good care of me, and treated me like one of their own. But I was pretty hard to deal with, in my teen years. I spent most of my time going out to bars and nightclubs before I was even legally old enough to be doing that. I was rebellious and didn't play by their rules very often. I think looking after me pretty much drove them mad."

"Why?"

"Because they already had a very responsible son," he gritted his teeth when he spoke. "He was wonderful in school, well mannered, had an outstanding future all mapped out for himself. He hung out with the right people, and usually made all the right decisions. He was everything that I was not."

"And?"

"And my uncle was terrified that I'd follow the same path my dad had chosen. He didn't want me to pursue a career in music. My father's life, before he met my mother, had been a rough one at best."

"But it turned out well. You said your father had a good career?"

"My father was Edward Masen." Edward said quietly.

It took me a second to place the name. Edward Masen. *The Trips*. Oh Jesus. He wasn't kidding. I felt stunned by the new information, but shook it off. Edward's last name wasn't nearly as important as the story he was sharing with me.

"I never wanted to live his life. I didn't even want a career like his," Edward continued. "I'm happy just writing music. I don't want to be in the spotlight."

"But your uncle was worried, all the same?" I reached out and put my hand on Edward's knee. He looked at it and smiled.

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"I suppose so. He really does only want the best for me. But he thought I was heading down the wrong path- Especially after the Vegas incident. So he sent me away. He wanted me to find myself. To grow up."

"That's..."

"A lot to swallow," Edward finished for me. He laughed then, and pushed his fingers through his hair. "And I can't believe I just told you all that. No one knows this shit..."

"Just give me a minute to process," I told him, holding my finger up. I hadn't in a million years guessed that my guitar-playing, Dylan-loving neighbor had such a wild history. But he seemed to value his privacy, so I knew I wouldn't breathe a word of it to anyone.

"I won't say anything," I promised. "Thanks. For trusting me with all of that." Edward nodded, and turned his attention back to the statue we were sitting on. We sat there in silence for a few more minutes, and I slid my hand from his knee. He looked up at me then.

"You're very easy to talk to," he said. I smiled, and he cleared his throat. "So why hasn't Mike taken the time to bring you to the zoo?" He was changing the subject. I was fine with that. At least he wasn't acting all strange because about letting me get to know him.

"Michael works during the day," I answered. "Besides... you met him. Can you really see him crawling up to sit on a giant stone hippo with me?"

Edward stared into my eyes for a moment, thinking about it. Then his lips started to twitch. Eventually, we both started laughing.

"No. I guess not," he informed me. Edward moved his legs to the side and slid to stand on the ground again. I felt his hands on my hips as he steadied me on my climb down.

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"So what's your story then, huh Little Sister? How did you come to live in this illustrious city?"

"Little Sister?" I cocked my head. "You call me that a lot."

"It's what Rosalie called you, before we met," Edward explained. "And you told me to call you that, when you were drunk."

"Well, if Rosalie's introductions are the criteria we are using for choosing nicknames, maybe I should start calling you 'Sleazy Neighbor.'"

"Touche!" he winced.

"Besides," I added, "I don't think we are supposed to be held accountable for the things we say and do while we've been drinking."

"*Be-lla*," he corrected himself with a sing-song voice. "Why did you move here?"

"I just needed a change," I told him, matching my steps to his as we walked down the path toward another section of the zoo. "I was born and raised in a small town, under pretty strict supervision by my father. I wanted to shake things up a little. I spent too many years planning out every single detail of my life. I decided to stop, and try to just enjoy my life- come what may."

"Hmm. Then you probably won't be opposed to the totally random and unexpected suggestion that we should get some ice cream." His expression was full of mock severity. "*That* should shake things up a little." It made me laugh. It really was unfair, how attractive he was.

"I'll buy," I told him.

Reviews are better than a trip to the zoo. Leave one.

Surprising

A/N: Twilight belongs to S. Meyer. I'm just running her characters through a few chord progressions.

-EPOV-

For the next two weeks, I spent a lot of time with Bella. And it wasn't like I had started out planning it that way. It just sort of happened. I became determined to take her around to as many of the St. Louis tourist attractions as possible before she got "locked away" (as she referred to it) by her classes. We visited the Botanical Gardens, the Science Center, the Art Museum, and we took a tour of the Anheuser-Busch brewery. I nearly regretted our trip to the City Museum when she made me climb and crawl through a bunch of tunnels and caves that were clearly never meant for someone of my height. But getting the rear-end view of her climbing ahead of me in her little shorts made the effort worth it. That girl had a great ass. I was having a good time, enjoying the daylight hours for once. Rosalie's little sister surprisingly made damn good company.

Bella finally told Rosalie that we had been spending time together. I really didn't know why she was so nervous about that. It wasn't like we were *dating*. We were hanging out- and having fun. I didn't think we exactly needed Rosalie's permission or anything. But I guess we sort of needed to come clean about how much time we had been spending together, when we started hanging out at home too. If I wasn't over at Bella's loft, she was at mine. We watched movies, or talked about music. Even Rose couldn't argue with the innocence of the situation, though she did initially doubt my intentions. But she was appeased when Bella continued to date Michael, and I, obviously, didn't change my nightly habits either.

The two of us had become friends. We were open and honest with each other. She knew shit about me that I hadn't told anyone. But she never treated me differently. She accepted who I was, and that was really nice. Sometimes, it felt as though we had known each other for years, instead of just weeks.

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One evening, we sat with our legs bent at the knees, our feet together in the middle of my couch, when Bella wrinkled her nose and looked at me.

"Your feet smell," she complained.

"They do not!" I grabbed my ankle and pulled my foot towards my nose. Nope. It wasn't my feet.

"Well, something in here is funky," she insisted. She scooted up on the couch and looked around. I glanced around as well. I usually kept my apartment fairly clean. But I had to admit, there was an odor.

"Maybe it's my clothes?" I suggested. I pulled my t-shirt up over my face and took a whiff. *A little musky. Not horrible.* "I need to drop a load off at my laundry service."

"Why don't you just buy a washer and dryer and clean your clothes like the rest of us commoners?"

"I know that you guys have maid service," I shot back. Bella frowned.

"Rosalie does. I clean up after myself."

"I don't even know how to use a washer and dryer!" I argued. " *You* could wash my clothes for me...."

"Oh no!" She laughed and held up her hands. "I am *not* becoming your maid. Forget about it!" She stood up then, and took a candle from the entertainment center. She placed it on the coffee table in front of us.

"Ah. Candlelight," I said, throwing her a suggestive look. "Trying to seduce me, Bella?"

"Yeah right," Bella snorted. "Do I look like I'm dressed for seduction?" She pulled out the hem of the large sweatshirt that she wore over her shorts. I smirked and reached forward to wrap my hand around the back of her knee,

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tugging her a little closer and letting my thumb make a lazy pass on the soft skin of her leg.

"Try me," I said, playfully. Bella laughed and swatted my hand away.

"Lighter?" she asked.

"In the drawer on the table by the door," I indicated. I was still perplexed about the stench, but was glad that it wasn't bad enough to make her leave. She walked over to open the drawer where I usually emptied my pockets at the end of the day- or night. I typically tossed my cigarettes and lighter in there as well. She stood for a moment, looking perplexed. And then I saw the reason why, as she gingerly held up a wrapped condom with two fingers and looked at me.

"*That's* not going to work for lighting the candle," I joked. "But if we're back to the seduction route... I'm game." She blushed and looked down.

"Jesus, Edward. You have about a million condoms in this drawer!" she exclaimed. She was poking through the drawer, with one finger.

"One less than a million," I smirked. "I might have used one last night."

She raised her eyebrow and stuck her tongue out at me, and I laughed.

"What can I say? I'm safe." I shrugged. She held up another to inspect it closely.

"This one is cherry *flavored*?" She sounded incredulous.

"Some might also call me considerate," I teased. She shook her head and grabbed the lighter before closing the drawer and returning to the couch.

"I thought most American women over the age of eighteen were on the pill by now," she smiled. She was concentrating on lighting the candle, and not looking at me.

"Are you?" I asked.

"Of course," she smiled over at me. "I got started early. They keep my periods regular." She shrugged.

"There *are* other considerations besides pregnancy, you know," I informed her softly. She made a little face of distaste before turning to sit with her back on the arm rest of my couch again. I mimicked her posture and put my feet with hers again.

"Diseases? That's kind of gross, Edward."

"Hey!" I felt a little defensive. "At least I can honestly say that I have never, *ever*, had sex without a condom. It's stupid to take chances."

"I guess if you are with a lot of people...." her voice trailed off and her head turned so that she could look at the television screen again. After a minute she gave up pretending to try to watch the movie. "I'm not so naïve as to believe that sexual attraction and love go hand in hand. I get that. But shouldn't you at least.... have *something* with the person? I mean... trust? If nothing else?"

I turned my head away now. I looked at the television and tried to ignore her question. I didn't want to consider the truth of her softly spoken words. I had occasional relationships while I lived in New York, but nothing was ever *that* serious. Mainly because I had only *really* wanted to be with one person. But Bella didn't know about all of that. It was one area of my life that I still kept to myself. Since moving to St. Louis, sex had become almost like a form of revenge to me. I didn't take advantage of women. I didn't make promises that I couldn't- or wouldn't- keep. We shared mutually satisfying time with each other, and then went our separate ways. But I couldn't say that I didn't use them. I *did* use every single one of them to prove to myself that the rejection from the *one* girl that I actually wanted *more* from, wouldn't own me forever. When I moved, I left her behind. I was doing my best to make that a distant fucking memory.

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A knock on the door brought both of our heads around at the sound. I went to answer the door, and Bella stretched out, taking up my space on the couch. Rosalie stood in my doorway with her phone in her hand.

"B? Michael called. He said that he's a little miffed that you didn't return his call today. I told him I'd let you know."

Bella groaned and rolled off the couch before walking to join us near the door.

"Miffed?" I asked with my eyebrow raised. I couldn't keep the smirk from my face. "Mike get's *miffed*?" It was a funny word. And it seemed to suit him. Rosalie shook her head at my obvious amusement.

"I should probably call him. Edward? Can we finish the movie another time?"

"No problem," I shrugged and put my hands in my pockets. Rosalie looked between the two of us speculatively, training her eyes on my face for a moment before turning back towards the hall. I wondered what she hoped to find there. Did she think I would be upset that her sister was leaving in the middle of a movie to call her boyfriend? She would be sadly disappointed. Bella could do as she pleased. And so could I. We were both comfortable with that.

With that in mind, I waited until they had gone then grabbed my jacket, my keys, my cigarettes and my lighter. I was going out for a drink.

I left the cherry flavored condom in the drawer.

-BPOV-

A couple of evenings later, as I lied on my bed with my pillow hugged to my chest, I contemplated the beauty of acting on impulse. Rosalie entered my room then, and sat in my desk chair- swiveling until she could face me.

"Are you going out with Michael again tonight?" she asked.

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"We went out earlier, I told her. And uh..." I took a deep breath, still looking at the ceiling. "We broke up." I suppose to her, I probably looked like a lovelorn teenager, crying and hugging her pillow for comfort- because she immediately sounded upset.

"Why? What happened? Did he break up with you?"

"Whoa, one at a time," I sighed and sat up. My pillow fell into my lap. "No reason, nothing happened, and *I* broke up with *him*," I answered her questions in order. Rosalie looked baffled, at best.

"I don't understand," she muttered. "How could I have not known about this?"

"It just happened tonight," I explained. "We had dinner. And then... I don't know. He wanted more from our relationship than I did. And I realized it wasn't very nice of me to lead him on. I just... wasn't really as interested in him as I thought I was."

"He was perfect for you!" Rosalie insisted.

"Maybe for the *old* me," I mumbled. I couldn't really explain it. I didn't know what I wanted. But I knew it wasn't Michael. It was unfair to make him think we could ever be more.

"Wow...maybe you *have* changed," Rosalie twisted her smile wryly. "The *old* you would have written lists of pros and cons and studied every angle before making a decision like this. I'm a little surprised!"

"Don't sound so shocked," I grumbled. "I can be surprising."

"Wait a minute," she held up a hand and frowned. "This doesn't have anything to do with Edward, does it?"

"What?" I asked, and shook my head emphatically. "No. Of course not. I didn't even mention it to him."

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"But you two have been spending an awful lot of time together." She narrowed her eyes.

"We're *friends*," I told her. "Edward is a great guy. But that's all there is. I swear."

"If you say so." Rosalie smiled and stood, offering her hand to pull me up from my sitting position on the bed. "Come on then. We need to go out!"

"Out?" I asked.

"Post-break-up rule number one," Rosalie smiled. "You *always* go out! Drown your sorrows and what-not."

"But, I'm not sorry," I shrugged. I wasn't even a *little* sad. Mostly, I just felt relieved.

"Then we'll drink to celebrate you finally doing something impulsive and unexpected!"

I couldn't be offended by Rosalie's logic. I even let her choose a ridiculously short plaid skirt for me to wear. I only insisted on wearing a soft cardigan over the spaghetti-strap tank top she had paired with it. A compromise allowed me to button it once, just under my chest, but at least she agreed that I could wear flats instead of the white knee-socks and mary-janes she initially had in mind. Slutty-school girl was *so* not my style. Twenty minutes later, we were in the hall, ready to go out.

I was confused when she stopped and knocked loudly on Edward's door.

"What are you doing?" I whispered. I wasn't even sure that he'd be home at this hour. She didn't get a chance to answer, though. Edward immediately opened the door.

"Hello ladies!" He smiled lazily while he took in our appearance. I tried not to blush as his eyes lingered on my clothing. He was probably shocked to see me actually looking like a girl for once. "To what do I owe this honor?"

"We're going out," Rosalie said. "Grab your wallet. You can come with us."

"Okay."

He agreed readily, and didn't even ask questions until the three of us were walking towards the garage together. I nervously twisted the edge of my sweater in my fingers. I'd not gone out with Edward to a bar, since the first night he'd invited me along to hear him play. We kept most of our activities for the day time hours. And we'd never hung out with Rosalie, together, before.

"This is new, Rosalie," he grinned, and it seemed he was reading my mind. "Why are you asking me out with you?"

"Because I don't hang out in crappy little dive-bars and *you* do," she said snobbishly. "I wouldn't even know where to go. Bella needs a night out, and I was pretty sure she wouldn't want to go anywhere I usually hang-out. So I figured *you* could be our slum-tour-guide for the evening." He laughed at her reasoning.

"It's true. I know of a few places," he grinned. I just followed them in silence until they each split to walk to their own cars. I stood between them, as impartial as Switzerland.

"Do you really want to park your Mercedes behind one of the 'crappy little bars' you mentioned we should visit?" Edward raised an eyebrow in her direction. She rolled her eyes and lifted her lip distastefully at his car. I didn't mind the rips in the vinyl roof or the bumper that was slightly askew. I thought his car had personality. His logic won out, and Rosalie tried not to look disgusted as she walked towards him and lowered herself delicately into his passenger seat. Edward looked as though he was trying not to laugh as he held his seat forward for me to climb into the back.

"Ugh!" Rosalie held her nose and complained. "Your car smells like cigarettes and cheetos."

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"You'll learn to love it," Edward laughed and caught my eye in the rear view mirror while he backed out. "And I usually don't get any complaints." He wasn't offended by Rosalie. He was having fun.

"That's because your dates usually smell worse," Rosalie continued to be snide. Edward pressed on the brake hard, and caused Rosalie to fall forward.

"Ow!" she huffed as the shoulder restraint pulled tight against her chest.

"Sorry about that," Edward smirked, sounding anything but apologetic, and started driving again. Rosalie just gave him a nasty look. "So... what's the occasion?" he finally asked.

"Bella broke up with Michael. So we're taking her out." His eyes flashed to mine again in the mirror.

"When did that happen?" He might have been asking either of us. But Rosalie answered.

"Tonight. Took me completely by surprise. It's *so* not like her!"

"I don't know why you keep saying that," I finally said quietly, playing with the hem of my skirt. "It's not like I am so boringly predictable. I can be impulsive!"

"Yeah right," Rosalie sniffed. "I'll bet you have your day planner in your bag right now. And I'll bet that even though we only decided to go out... like an hour ago... you probably already made the time to pencil it in your book."

"So?" I grumbled and tried to ignore Edward's laughing eyes in the mirror. He was amused. "It's not like I am completely predictable," I insisted. "I can be surprising!"

They both snickered in the front seat and I folded my arms across my chest.

"Okay," Rosalie turned to look at me over the seat. "Prove it. Do *one* unexpected thing tonight. Shock us!"

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"Tell you what," Edward suggested. His eyes were on me again. "I'm clearly the most jaded person in this car. Do something that surprises *me*, and I'll buy you breakfast later." He sounded so smug. It made me mad. Somehow they had formed a team, and it felt like they were ganging up on me.

"Fine." I snapped.

"Fine," he agreed with a laugh.

"I will," I warned him, narrowing my eyes. He was supposed to be on *my* side.

Edward took us to the same bar I had been to before. The bouncer at the door didn't question my ID this time, and the waitress remembered me and said "hi" with a smile.

"Emmett!" Edward called out, leaning far over the bar to get the bartender's attention. "Three beers."

"Do they even have clean glasses in this place?" Rosalie curled her lip and wiped at the edge of a bar with one of the napkins that she picked up from a stack placed there. The big bartender put one of the beers in front of her, still in the bottle, and leveled her with a cocky grin.

"Drink it with your pinky up, Princess," he told her. Edward and I took our beers and laughed at the shitty look she shot him. "You're hanging with a different breed tonight, Edward." The bartender laughed, still obviously checking out Rosalie. She turned her back to him, and sipped her beer while looking out at the crowd. Edward just shrugged, and took a long drink from his own.

If Edward was uncomfortable standing there with us, he didn't show it. He laughed easily, and kept buying us rounds of drinks. Neither he nor Rosalie brought up the earlier challenge they had given me, but the dare was still hovering there, in the back of my mind.

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After a few beers, Rosalie lightened up and seemed to actually be having a good time, despite the fact that she was out of her normal element. I even went out to dance with her a few times on the crowded dance floor. Edward kept his post, at the corner of the bar, and chatted with random people that approached him. I tried hard not to focus on how attractive he was, with the bar lights glinting off his unruly hair and casting shadows across his strong facial features. He stood head and shoulders above most of the guys he stood near, and was far more good-looking than the few men who had been brave enough to attempt dancing with Rosalie and I. It was hard to keep my eyes off him as he leaned against the bar in his favorite old jeans and faded t-shirt. Edward was effortlessly sexy. And I wasn't the only one to notice. More and more girls seemed to gravitate to where he stood. I drank my beer, and shook my head at their obvious displays of interest.

Rosalie and I joined him again when the song was done, and we were laughing and having fun, though I was still focused on my goal of surprising them both before the night was over. They seemed to have forgotten all about the conversation, or they had written the possibility off. But I was on a mission. Would I dance on the bar? No. My skirt was too short. Maybe I could ask a random stranger to buy me a drink? Nope. That wasn't shocking enough.

"I'm gonna go to the ladies room," I yelled to Rosalie over the noise.

"There's a table opening up," Edward told me, pointing with the bottle he was holding. His hand was already on the middle of Rosalie's back, intent to lead her over to the vacated seats. "Find us over there, when you're done."

I made my way through the crowd, and cringed out how nasty the facilities were when I finally got there. I hoped that Rosalie wouldn't need to use them soon, or I was pretty sure that we'd be leaving in a hurry. I had just made my way in line to the mirrors above the sinks, when I inadvertently picked up on the conversation of a couple of women who stood near the mirrors beside me. When I heard them mention Edward by name, I deliberately washed my hands slower so that I could eavesdrop. After all, it's not like he had a very popular name. So they *had* to be talking about *him*.

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The woman with long black hair applied a new layer of sticky-looking red lip-gloss while she talked to her friend.

"I heard that Edward doesn't ever see the same woman more than once. But I wouldn't mind giving him another go. He's sexy as hell... and he's *great* with his hands!"

"Well, I'd let him play me, like he plays that guitar of his," the other girl said, fluffing her hair. The two giggled conspiratorially while they planned to go talk to him. I tried to tell myself that the surge of anger I felt was due to them talking about a friend of mine in such a crass way. I would have felt the same if it had been any of my friends as the subject of such a lewd conversation. And then as the bathroom door closed behind them, inspiration hit. I knew exactly how to kill two birds with one stone. I dried my hands quickly and hurried back into the dark bar.

It only took a moment for me to locate Edward. He sat facing the restrooms, with his back against the table he'd claimed. His arms were draped casually across the surface behind him, and a shot glass full of some dark liquor was held loosely in the fingers of his left hand. From my vantage point, I could see as his eyes took in the two women from the bathroom who were walking towards him. And then, as if utterly bored, he turned his face to the side and contemplated the dance floor instead. His obvious disinterest added a spring to my step and a sway to my hips as I increased my pace, passed the women, and intercepted their target. While the two women watched, I stepped over Edward's outstretched legs, effectively straddling his lap.

His head turned, and his eyes narrowed as he looked at me. I smiled and pulled the shot glass from his fingers, before drinking the strong liquid in one gulp.

"What are you...?" I didn't give him a chance to finish his question. As soon as I placed the shot glass on the table behind him, I threaded my fingers into the hair just above each of his ears and tugged his face up to mine. Then before I could chicken out, I took a deep breath and covered his mouth with my own.

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Edward didn't respond- *At all*. He was frozen. As a matter of fact, I might as well have been kissing a statue. I figured it would be up to me alone to put on this show for my 'friends' from the bathroom. So I angled my mouth to press against his more fully. The liquor I had just swallowed caused a surge of heat to travel from the top of my head to the tips of my toes... and I felt brave enough then to pull his bottom lip between my teeth with a little bite. Finally, I noticed that his hands had found their way to my hips. His mouth parted just a little under mine with a rough exhale. But then I pulled away quickly as I heard Rosalie's maniacal laughter just inches from our faces. My eyes flew open to look at Edward's stunned expression. His eyes were wide and his cheeks were flushed. Rosalie snorted indelicately and slapped him on the shoulder, laughing so hard that she looked like she might cry.

"Oh man!" She fought to catch her breath, pointing a manicured finger at Edward. "You should see your face! You *so* owe Bella some breakfast!"

Reviews are better than proving a point. Leave one.

Bacon and Eggs

A/N: Twilight belongs to S. Meyer. I'm just running her characters through a few chord progressions.

-EPOV-

Bella sat eating yellow eggs, laughing at a story that her sister was trying to relate to both of us. I couldn't understand how she managed to look so pretty, even under the harsh fluorescent lights of the diner where we were having breakfast at two in the morning. I sipped strong coffee and tried to pay attention to Rosalie's words. But my mind kept straying to the little plaid skirt worn by the girl across from me. Every time I caught myself thinking about her legs, and it was often, I had to forcibly remind myself that I was not supposed to be checking her out. I couldn't help it. She looked really good tonight. And her legs were long and toned from all the running she did. They looked especially good when she had straddled my lap in the bar. And just like that, my thoughts had slipped back to dangerous territory. I took a large drink of my coffee and cringed when I burnt my top lip with the hot liquid. Bella was my friend. Nothing more. I needed to remember that shit.

That was a little harder to do, after she kissed me. Sure. She did it on a dare. And damn if the girl didn't get one over on me. She had marched right up to me, as confident as you please, and totally fucked with my head. I hadn't expected her lips to be so soft, or to fit so perfectly against mine. I couldn't help but dwell on the sensation that I had honestly not given any thought to previously. I had asked to be surprised, and I sure was.

I had been sitting in my seat, minding my own business. I was only half-paying attention to the way that Rosalie was shooting down some guy that was trying to flirt with her. Because, let's face it, the guy was a dumb ass if he even considered he might have a shot with her. And it was funny as hell to hear my neighbor put him in his place, using colorful language to express that exact same sentiment. Then my eyes started scanning the room, wondering what was taking Bella so long. I saw a couple sharks circling, like they smelled blood in

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the water, and immediately tried to turn my attention elsewhere. I mean, it's not like I'd be taking anyone else home with me, while I was driving Bella and Rosalie back to the Abbey. Plus, I honestly had no interest in the pair of girls that were walking my way.

I felt a warm body come close... *too* close, and figured that one of the two girls who had been coming my way, didn't take the hint that I wasn't fucking interested. But when I turned my head to tell the chit to piss off, I was shocked as fuck to see that Bella was standing there, with her legs stretched over either side of mine.

Maybe I should have guessed what she was up to. But really, I was just dumbfounded when she took my shot of Jager, tossed it back, and then totally fucked with my head by kissing me.

I didn't even kiss her back.

By the time I figured out what was going on, it was too late to react. Rosalie was laughing, and Bella was pulling away. And she probably got the idea that I was the fucking worst kisser she'd ever had the misfortune of touching with her lips. That bothered the shit out of me, and I tried not to scowl as I thought about it over my coffee.

Bella looked every bit like she was enjoying her reward as she ate her sunny-looking scrambled eggs and mostly ignored me, sitting at the table across from her. If it wasn't for the glances she occasionally shot my direction from under her lashes, I would think she wasn't even aware that I was sitting at the table. She was probably waiting for me to make some big deal out of her behavior. It wasn't going to happen. If she wanted to pretend the kiss never happened, I was fine with that. I could be nice about things. I lost the bet graciously, and picked up the tab for all three of our breakfast platters.

Rosalie continued to fill the silence in the car with her chatter as I drove the three of us back to the Abbey. She was a hell of a lot more talkative when she had a buzz. Bella didn't say much, and I tried my best to keep my eyes off of her in the rear-view mirror while I drove. Then we were home, and the three of

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us walked together down the hall to our lofts. I halted with my keys in my hand when Bella paused at my door.

"I'll be there in a minute," she called to Rosalie, who bypassed us entirely to open her own door further down the hall. I turned and leaned my shoulder in my doorway with an eyebrow raised.

"Thanks, Edward," Rose called out before going inside. "I had a surprisingly good time."

"Emphasis on the 'surprising'," I insisted. But I was looking at Bella when I said it. I was curious to see if she was going to say anything about what had happened at the bar. She stood, shuffling her feet back and forth. Her skirt swayed side to side. I had to tear my eyes from it.

"Classes start Monday," she finally said. *She wanted to talk about school?* "I'm not sure how busy I might be this week..."

Ah. She didn't want me to think that she would be avoiding me.

"Well, Love," I smiled. "I think we pretty much visited every spot in the St. Louis Tourism Guide. That should hold you for a while when you are locked up with your studies." She smiled up at me, so I continued. "Though... I am not sure what I'll do to fill my newly-rediscovered daylight hours." She laughed then. I liked making her laugh. I was glad to know that what had gone down at the bar hadn't made things awkward between us. We were in our familiar comfort-zone with each other, once again.

"See ya soon," she smiled and turned to leave. I watched the swish of her little skirt as she walked away from me, and hoped she meant what she said.

-BPOV-

I was still riding the high of my successful attempts at shocking Rosalie and Edward as I sat in my desk, mapping out my upcoming schedule in my day planner. "See?" I spoke to the familiar lines that held my scrawling notes. "I

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can be unpredictable!" My pencil clicked comfortably under the push of my thumb as I smiled to myself. Rosalie came into my room in a robe, drying her face.

"Tonight was fun," she grinned at me. "I guess I'm glad that we didn't end up at a martini bar."

"It *was* fun," I nodded up at her. "Thanks."

"So... Edward." She sat on the edge of my bed, and I bit my lip. I knew this was coming. "You sure shocked him tonight."

"He's a good sport," I shrugged.

"And?"

"And what?" I asked.

"Is he a good kisser?"

I frowned, and pursed my lips a little. It wasn't like I had good dirt to share.

"I wouldn't know," I shrugged again. "He didn't really kiss me back, Rose. It was just a dare."

"I know," she giggled. "It still looked pretty hot."

I blushed and looked back down at my book.

"What possessed you to go that route?" She continued to interrogate me. I spun in my chair to face her.

"There were a couple of girls in the bathroom that were talking about him," I told her with honesty. "I don't know. I guess it kinda pissed me off. He's my friend, you know? And they were talking about him like he was a piece of meat."

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"And how did you kissing him, prove otherwise?" Rosalie asked with an arched eyebrow. I frowned, and looked down. It had seemed like a good idea at the time. But what had I really proven? Rosalie laughed. "Yep. You sure showed them!" she said, sarcastically.

"Damn it," I muttered. "I wasn't thinking... God. I hope I didn't offend him."

"Edward? You couldn't have offended him if you had pulled his dick out and gave him a blow-job right then and there. One little kiss certainly wouldn't do it."

I cringed at her less than positive assessment of his morals.

"He's not *that* bad..."

"Well, he *is* kind of a whore," Rosalie said.

"He didn't try to pick up any women tonight," I argued.

"Not that he could have, after *you* peed on his leg," Rosalie teased. She said good night then, and left me alone once more. With a sigh, I closed my planner and moved to get into bed. But with the lights out, it became even harder to not relive the way that Edward's lips had felt, pressed together with mine.

He didn't kiss me back. I hadn't really expected him to. But I couldn't help but wonder how awesome it would have felt, if he had. I mean, I knew we were friends and all. I wasn't about to think about Edward any other way. Still... I was starting to be really tired of feeling so inexperienced when it came to matters of the opposite sex. And Edward had experience in spades. There was nothing wrong with me being curious, right?

I'd never had a boyfriend in high school. I wasn't sure if any of the boys I'd gone to school with would have even been interested, even if my dad *wasn't* such an over-protective guy. And I was way too busy in college, to do more than casually date. Michael was the first guy I dated since I moved here. And while he had made his interest perfectly clear, I really had no intention of

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handing my V-card over to *him*. He just didn't *do* it for me. We'd kissed and fooled around a little, but none of it made my toes curl or my heart pound in my chest. I was always the one to pull away and end our evenings. In the spirit of fairness, I finally cut the guy loose. I'm sure some girl would feel lucky and flattered over his attention. It just wasn't going to be me.

It's not like I was under some illusion that losing my virginity would come with hearts and rainbows, and declarations of undying love. I just wanted it to be something that I wouldn't regret. With someone that turned me on. I was never going to find someone to fit the bill unless I allowed myself to look.

That didn't seem like it would happen, once I started classes. I was immediately paired with two guys on a design team. The first, Eric, was short and had really bad skin. He was also, very obviously gay. The second was a guy named Tyler who talked about his on-line girlfriend of three years who lived some place up in Ohio. I was pretty sure that he looked more attractive, from that far away. She also wouldn't be able to see how often he picked his nose. I looked across the table at the two of them, while we all tried to figure out a schedule for working together on our first project. Eric poured over a black book that looked a lot like mine. Tyler pushed his finger against the tiny keys of a hand-held device. I sat there, clicking my pencil, wondering what Edward was up to.

I hadn't seen him all week. I had thrown myself into my first assignment, eager to let Eric and Tyler see that I was serious and capable when it came to our work. But by Thursday, I was practically dead on my feet from lack of sleep, and sick to death of the hours that I had logged in front of the computer, trying to earn their respect. I was ready for a break, already.

Through it all, Edward had never been far from my mind. Occasionally a song came on while I was working, that made me think of him. I wished that I was goofing off in his apartment, watching a movie or eating some pizza. And when I wasn't terribly careful, my thoughts strayed right back to the half-kiss we had shared at the bar. I called it a half-kiss. All of the kissing had been done on *my* half, obviously. I still couldn't get it out of my mind.

I wanted to do it again.

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I wanted him to kiss me back.

I still wanted to be his friend. And I wondered if it was even possible to have all of those things at the same time.

Probably not.

I squinted at the lines of code on my computer, and mentally chastised myself for even allowing myself to imagine it as a possibility. But while I could mentally re-direct my thoughts during the *day*, I had no control over them, whatsoever, while I dreamt at night.

Edward had started to take a starring role in my nighttime fantasies. I was actually glad that I didn't see him the day after it first happened. I was pretty sure that I'd never be able to look at him without blushing furiously. In my dream, I had taken the position of the girl that he'd been with in the back of that car. It had been *me* screaming his name in ecstasy. I had woken up sweaty, and totally aroused. And I blamed it on being nervous about starting school the next day.

I couldn't use the same excuse when he showed up in my dreams on Wednesday night as well. We were back in the bar, and this time, Edward was kissing me back. His mouth devoured mine, and his fingers plunged eagerly under my skirt. I didn't even care that we were in the middle of the crowd. All I could think about was his mouth... and his fingers... and the way they made me feel.

It was official. I was sexually frustrated, and I definitely needed to get out and date more. I just wasn't sure if I had it in me, to take my chances on the next guy that Rosalie deemed suitable.

Fuck suitable.

I wanted something unexpected. Something hot, and something unpredictable.

Damn it. I wanted Edward.

Reviews are better than half-kisses. Leave one.

For Whom the Bell Tolls

A/N: Twilight belongs to S. Meyer. I'm just running her characters through a few chord progressions.

A/A/N: Thanks for catching my screw-up, guys. And for being SO nice when pointing it out. I think it's fixed now. *embarrassed face*

-EPOV-

I should never doubt that Bella is a woman of her word. She really had no intentions of avoiding me. I returned from a trip to the grocery store on Thursday to see a crisp, white piece of paper folded and taped to my door. I held it in my teeth while I unlocked the door and placed my bags on the counter. When I opened the note, I quickly read Bella's slanted handwriting.

-I still owe you the rest of a movie. And I need a study break- already. Are you free Friday or Saturday?-

I smiled and pulled the cap from a marker with my teeth. I had a gig on Friday night, but I circled "Saturday" on her note and jogged down the hall to slide the paper under her loft door. I was suddenly in a really good mood.

I had actually missed having her around all week, though it pissed me off a little that I couldn't stop inappropriate images from mixing into my mostly innocent thoughts. She'd have to take the blame for sending my brain there. While I always easily recognized her as pretty, I hadn't allowed myself to think of her as anything other than a friend.

And then she had to kiss me.

Suddenly that was *all* I could think about.

I told myself it was a matter of pride. She'd definitely won our wager that night. But I was worried that I'd left her with a less than stellar opinion of what

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I was capable of. I had been so shocked by her actions, I hadn't even kissed the girl back. I could tell by that first few seconds, that Bella was damn-near perfect in the kissing department. But what kind of impression could I have possibly made on *her*?

I had spent a couple of days, beating myself up over recreating the situation in my mind so often. I mean... I'd had a pretty good buzz. Maybe it wasn't even as good as I had remembered. But something told me it was. Something told me it could be better.

I wanted those lips again. I wanted her breath, and I wanted her tongue. I wanted a chance to prove myself. And I wondered if I'd ever get that chance.

Probably not.

I still wanted it. And that was *her* fault.

Saturday night, I stood in the middle of the living room and turned a quick circle. I needed a few of those throw pillows to make the sofa look a little more comfortable. And I wondered if I should wipe the coffee table. I settled, instead, for just removing the two beer bottles that had taken up permanent residence that week. When I realized I was bending to pick my shoes up from the floor, I righted myself and cursed, leaving them where they lay. This was *not* a date. For good measure, I even left my jacket draped across the chair.

After a quick glance at the clock, and I ran into the bathroom to brush my teeth furiously. But then the door bell sounded. No time for a shower or a shave. I scrubbed my hand through my hair. I probably couldn't find a brush if I tried. I did locate a pair of jeans that were lying in the corner of the bathroom floor. They didn't smell too bad. So I grabbed them and shoved my legs through, hopping and tugging them into place as I went to answer the door.

I couldn't help but smile when I saw her. Bella was dressed in a pair of sweatpants and her ever-present, giant hooded sweatshirt. Her hair was drawn back into a messy ponytail, and she was wearing the glasses that I loved. I was relieved that her casual clothing matched the tone for the evening that I had

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hoped for. She obviously wasn't dressed for a date. I wasn't prepared, however, to see her standing there holding a pie.

"I thought I'd bring over dessert," she smiled.

"Pie?"

"Apple pie. Is that ok?" She walked past me into my loft and I shut the door before following.

"Sure. What's the occasion?"

"Boredom," she laughed. "The bi-laws of post-break-up-angst pretty much dictate a night of junk food. It was either this, or a gallon of cookie-dough ice cream. And since I needed a break from working on my project anyway, I thought I would bake a pie."

"I didn't think that you were all that upset about dumping Mike."

"I'm not," she shrugged. "But I'm following Rosalie's rule anyway. Apparently there is a list of things that I'm supposed to do after a break up."

"And pie is one of them?"

"Pie is one of them," she nodded with a grin.

"I don't have any clean plates..."

"Who needs them?" she asked as she produced a couple of forks from the front pocket of her sweatshirt.

"You know me so well," I grinned.

I followed her as she carried her dessert to the sofa. We each chose a corner and she placed the pie plate on the cushion between us.

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"Tell me about school. What kind of project are you working on?" I asked, as she handed me a fork.

"I'm on a team with two guys. Eric and Tyler. They're okay," she shrugged.

"But let me guess. You've volunteered to work on the biggest part of the project to prove yourself."

"I guess you know *me* pretty well too," she blushed. It was cute as hell, and I smiled. But then she cleared her throat and looked a little self-conscious. "I don't really want to talk about it. It's boring. Right now I'm just writing lines and lines of code. And I worked on it too long today."

"Fair enough," I nodded. Truthfully, I could have listened to her describe her work for the rest of the night and skipped the movie entirely. She was smart. And it was a major turn-on.

"Oh! The movie!" It was like she read my mind. She retrieved a DVD from her bag and handed it to me.

"Alien vs. Predator?" I asked with disbelief. She laughed and took a bite of pie. I tried not to stare at her mouth.

"Did you expect a chick-flick?" She made a face and laughed again.

"Post-break-up angst remember? It's on the list, and I was in the mood for something violent!"

She really was too good to be true.

I put the DVD in the player and returned to the sofa to dig my fork into the pie. It was delicious, and I told her so. She just grinned and settled in to watch the movie.

Halfway through the epic battle of movie monsters, our forks lay in surrender on the coffee table. I placed the remains of the pie with them and turned to look at her profile. She was raptly watching the movie. But my attention was

diverted. She had a really cute nose.

"What?" she asked, catching me staring.

"I've missed you this week," I said. I kinda wanted to kick myself for sounding like a pussy, but Bella smiled and reached over to touch the top of my hand.

"I missed you too," she said in a throaty whisper. The sound went straight to my dick, and I moved my hand away and placed it over my lap, hoping to hide the tightening under my jeans. I'd been thinking about her a little too much, and in all the wrong ways, all week.

We turned our attention back to the television, but it wasn't long until I found myself staring at her once more. She caught me staring, and turned her head towards me. I blinked and said the first thing I could think of.

"So... what happened with you and Mike? I mean--why did you two break up?"

She pressed her lips together and seemed reluctant to take her attention from the gruesome battle that played itself out on my television screen. But she sighed and answered anyway.

"He talked down to me. I didn't like that."

"I noticed. But was that it? I mean- that's all it took?"

"Not exactly..." her eyes strayed back to the screen and she spoke while watching the movie. "I found, that I wasn't... as attracted to him as I thought I was in the beginning."

"Whoa! The ref is blowing the whistle on that one," I laughed. "What exactly does *that* mean?" She glanced at me from the corner of her eyes and twisted her mouth wryly.

"It was okay at first. Then... it just wasn't. I mean... have you ever tried to kiss someone that you are just not attracted to? At all?" She gave an exaggerated

shudder.

"Yes." I nodded, and she laughed at the seriousness of my tone. She found humor in my sad truth.

"You kiss girls often," she said quietly. She didn't look at me. She just stated it like a fact.

"Some not as often as I would like..."

I don't know what made me say it. But she blushed and looked down, which made me strangely glad that I did. When she bit her lip and raised her head to consider me from the corner of her eye again, I felt a very physical reaction. I stared as she darted her tongue out to wet her lips. *Cut it out*, I warned myself.

"I think that the bi-laws of breaking-up also contain something about make-out sessions with random guys in dark bars," she laughed a little nervously. "Sorry about that."

"I'm hardly some random guy," I smiled, meaning to put her at ease. "And I'm *not* sorry about it." The devil on my shoulder continued to egg me on. I slid a little closer to her on the sofa. "Still- I hardly think that one little kiss can be called a make-out session. Hell. I didn't even get a chance to make a good impression."

"No?" She raised her eyebrow in a cocky way that encouraged me. Okay. So maybe I was too easily encouraged. And maybe I was just waiting for any opening. But I found myself reaching to tuck a piece of hair behind her ear. She blushed again and looked down, but she didn't try to move away. I took that as a good sign.

"What would you say if I told you that my ego took a serious bruising?" I murmured quietly to her.

"*Your* ego?" Bella's eyebrows shot up. "I seem to recall that I was the one that didn't even inspire a response out of you."

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"You inspired a response, alright," I chuckled. She was inspiring a response right now, in my pants.

"I thought maybe I offended you or something," she admitted, looking a little shy.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" I asked in a louder voice. Her eyes widened, and I shook my head. "You gotta know that I think you're fucking gorgeous."

Her face had taken on a permanent red glow, and I brushed my fingers down her cheek to see if it was as warm as it looked.

"I think you're gorgeous too," she whispered, and I smiled. It was good to know. "So... we're friends," she stated, "who happen to find each other attractive?" She still sounded uncertain.

"Friends," I nodded. Right. "Nothing wrong with that."

"Sorry for bruising your ego," she smiled softly.

"You could make it up to me," I told her, sliding closer. Our legs were touching then, and I did an internal fist-pump that she didn't seem to be shooting me down.

"How?" she breathed.

"You can let me kiss you right, this time," I said leaning toward her. "Let me redeem myself."

"Okay."

Okay? Just like that. She was giving me permission to prove myself as a man. I thought she'd laugh and tell me to stop being an idiot. I expected I'd have to try to talk her into that shit, break out a little charm and work some magic to get her to give me my way. But when did the girl ever do things like I expected? Her simple, one-word reply to my request totally gave me the go-ahead I

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needed. I'd be damned if I'd let *that* opportunity pass me by. Before she could change her mind, I leaned forward the rest of the way and pressed my lips to hers.

So, yeah. I initially had two goals, when I even considered proposing the idea that she let me kiss her again. One- I wanted to deliver the kind of kiss that she'd remember as one of the best of her life, just for my ego's sake. And two- I wanted to prove that the little kiss she had given me on Saturday night, *wasn't* one the of the best of *mine*. I had replayed that moment so many times in my head, in the past few days, that I thought maybe I had built the memory of it up in my own mind. That maybe that instant chemistry and connection I felt the first time was a fluke. There was really only one way to find out. And I expected that she'd pull away as soon as I took things beyond a chaste little peck- that she would laugh, and rebuff my efforts. But she surprised me again. She fisted my t-shirt in her little hand and pulled me closer. *Oh- it was on!* Lord help me, it didn't compare to that first kiss at all. If anything, *it was better. Much, much better.*

I took my time, and explored her plump lips with my own, just as I had imagined doing all week. And when I teased the center of her top lip with my tongue, she opened her mouth for me. I slid my tongue against hers with a groan that rumbled through my chest.

I didn't spend a lot of time kissing girls, just for the pleasure of doing so. Typically I used the act as a way to get them to shut up. And it was good to get them primed up and ready for what inevitably came after. But there was something delicious about kissing Bella... that came with the freedom of enjoying the act just for what it was. I traced the edge of her teeth with my tongue, and sucked on her lower lip, enjoying her kiss like a starving man at a banquet.

At that point, the movie was completely forgotten. Friends or no friends, I was enjoying this way too much to stop. I leaned back into the corner of the couch, and used my hands on the back of her head to pull her mouth against mine, successfully stretching her out to lie between my parted knees and against my chest. God, she tasted sweet. Like sugar, and apples and cinnamon. I held her

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face and feasted on her mouth with licks, and nips. It had been a really long time since I actually enjoyed just kissing someone. When she shuddered against me, I groaned into her mouth again. She was so good at this. My goals were soon forgotten and replaced with only one thought... More. More, more, *more*.

Bella didn't complain when I pushed my hand up the back of her shirt to explore the soft skin of her lower back. And since I was apparently green-lighted on the under-the-shirt issue... I didn't think she would mind too much if I moved my hand around to the front so I could cup her full breast in my hand. I had wanted to touch her like this since the night she was drunk, and I drove her home. Lord, she felt good, soft and heavy in my hand. This time she was the one who moaned. And it was nearly my undoing.

I know I promised myself that I would never have sex with a neighbor... too many aggravations and what-not. But my body started trying to convince me otherwise. My regularly scheduled common sense was shoved aside as easily as the lacey bra she wore. She was so soft and eager as she pushed herself into my hands and kissed me back that my baser instincts took over. I wanted her, and I wanted her to know it. She didn't have a boyfriend anymore. And she admitted that she was attracted to me. *So why not?*

Why not?

Because this was *Bella... that* was 'why not.' And this was supposed to be nothing more than an experiment. We were friends, and I knew I couldn't let things get too far. Still... we were friends who were kissing. And I currently had my hand shoved up her shirt. She certainly didn't seem opposed to taking things a little bit farther. And so I reached for her hand and placed it very firmly against the front of my pants. Then for good measure, I rolled my hips up towards her so she'd get the idea.

"See what you are doing to me?" I growled against her ear before biting the lobe beneath my teeth. "You've got me so fucking hard."

She pulled her hand away quickly and gave a nervous sounding giggle. The sound was enough to cause me to open my eyes and look at her.

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Her cheeks were stained pink, and her lashes drifted down in the sweetest, most innocent looking expression of embarrassment. I had already surmised that Bella wasn't the type of girl who slept around a lot. But she shouldn't have been quite so shy about the basics. So I ignored the voice inside my head that told me it was time to back the fuck up, and put her hand against me once more, this time capturing her mouth with mine to encourage her. I smiled against her lips when she didn't pull her hand away, and I settled back into a relaxed position to enjoy the sensation of her soft fingers exploring me through the denim of my jeans. When she pulled her mouth from mine, and started kissing across my jaw, I began to wonder if I couldn't negotiate a few less articles of clothing. I mean- I still didn't plan on having sex with her. But some heavy-petting wouldn't be out of line. Now would it? What's a hand-job, between friends?

I was so lost in my thoughts and the sensation of her tentative fingers pressing against me, that I almost missed the words she whispered across my neck.

"I'm not sure what I'm doing, Edward," she whispered while trailing kisses across my skin. "You'll have to show me..."

Whoa. The warning bells started ringing loudly now. And as badly as I wanted to ignore them, I knew I couldn't. She kissed me again, and slid her warm tongue against the edge of my teeth. *Forget the stupid bells!*

No.

No.

Warning bells. We all have them for a reason. And mine could not be ignored.

I sighed and broke our kiss, combing her hair away from her face and twisting my hips to escape her touch. She lowered her brows in confusion and looked at me. I stared hard at her puffy mouth and hoped against hope that I was mistaken about what she had just whispered.

"Did I... do something wrong?" she asked with a timid voice.

Again, that blush- that beautiful, *innocent*, blush. I saw it for what it was now, though I tried to ignore the guilt I felt for causing it. I closed my eyes and

leaned my head back.

"You were doing everything perfectly," I said quietly. "I'm sure you've been told that before."

Please let her have been told before, I hoped. That hope was dashed quickly away by another nervous laugh. It brought my eyes back to her face. She shook her head to indicate the opposite.

"Guess I'm a fast learner?" She suggested with a small smile. This time I groaned out loud and sat both of us up.

"What?" She asked, obviously confused.

"We are *not* doing this." I stood up and went to sit in the chair across the room, facing her. I watched a myriad of emotions cross her face before she steeled her expression into one of nonchalance and shrugged.

"It's just sex."

Hearing those words from her lips made my mouth go dry. I lowered my head into my palms and ran them upwards through my hair.

"No. It's not." We hadn't really been heading there, had we? I just wanted to touch her. I wanted her to touch me. I wouldn't have let things get that far. Or at least, that's what I was trying to convince myself.

"It's not?" She raised an eyebrow and looked skeptical. "You mean to tell me that you are in *love* with the parade of bimbos that usually come and go through this place?"

"It's not supposed to be like that," I shook my head. "It's different. *You're* different."

"How so?" She sounded dubious, and crossed her arms over that tempting chest of hers.

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"You're better than that." I hated admitting it as much to myself as to her. But I already cared for her more than I should.

"Why? Just because I'm a virgin?" She sounded incredulous. But then it was out there. Officially. There was no second-guessing her meaning now. I took a deep breath and struggled to find words that wouldn't sound false.

"God Bella," I moaned. "Even *I* am not such a monster that I could ignore that fact!"

"Says the sudden Patron Saint of Ethics and Morality," she muttered. Then, before I could say anything else, she stood up. "Never mind, Edward. You're right. I don't know what I ... I never meant for this to..." She didn't finish either sentence, but turned to walk towards the door.

I was torn between wanting to salvage the situation and being glad that she was leaving so that I could have some time alone to think.

"The movie isn't over yet..." *Shit. Guess I was going the 'salvage' route.* But thank God she decided to let me off the hook. She just gave a small shrug and smiled.

"That's okay. I need to get home to work." I stood and followed her to the door quietly. I felt like a complete ass. A cad. Though I had shown uncommon self-restraint in ending things between us tonight, I had also taken small liberties with this girl that no one ever had. I beat down the sort of... pleasure... that thought brought with it and decided to apologize instead.

"Bella. I'm sorry. For... you know... er...my hand. And putting *your* hand... and uh...the boobs..." Fuck. I was digging a large hole for myself, stumbling around a mouthful of sorry. *Nice apology, ass.*

She stopped outside the door and sighed loudly.

"Forget about it."

When the door closed, I stood staring at the vacant space for a minute. *Forget about it.* Yes. That is exactly what I planned to do. As if to illustrate the fact, I went back to the living room to pick up the remains of the pie she had baked.

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Then I slid it very purposefully off its plate and into the trash bin. I stood there for a moment, wanting a cigarette, and staring at the broken, crumbled mess of dessert that laid there. One thought dominated my brain.

What a waste.

Yeah. And it was too bad about that pie, too.

-BPOV-

Mid-way through the week, I said goodbye to Eric and Tyler in the hall outside my loft. I had finished my part of our project, and they had come over for a work-session to add their own pieces. Now they left with their laptops under their arms, and I smiled as Edward opened his door just as they were walking by. He looked over the two men as with amused expression, and then looked over to where I was standing when the main door closed behind them.

"Hey there, Little Sister," he smiled. It was the first time I'd seen him since Saturday, and his grin was a welcome sight. I had mentally kicked myself over and over for letting things get so out of hand with him. I didn't go over to his loft with the intentions of attacking him. But we started casually flirting... and one thing led to another. And I really *had* wanted to know if he was a good kisser. I was curious.

And oh boy was he.

I had been reduced to a pile of goo in his very experienced hands. But because it was Edward, and because we were friends, I still couldn't make myself feel bad about it. I didn't regret it, even though I knew I should probably write him a thank-you note or something for being the voice of reason for us both. I just didn't want things to be weird between us. I didn't want him to feel awkward. But if his smile now was any indication, things were fine.

"Hi, Sleazy Neighbor," I joked, watching him grimace.

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"Your school mates?" He guessed as he closed his door with a black hard-cover book in his hand.

"Yes," I nodded and yawned. I had been awake all night in front of my computer. I was exhausted. He frowned for a moment as he looked at me.

"You look dead on your feet," he noted. I just blinked my blood-shot eyes in silent agreement.

"I nearly am. We've been working non-stop since this time, yesterday. But we finally got our project done. So that's good."

"Do you have time for a nap?" It was so sweet that he sounded worried.

"Soon, maybe," I yawned again. "I need to shower first. Gotta wash the nerd off."

"Need some help with that?" he pushed his eyebrows up and down in a clear indication that he was teasing.

"Perv," I laughed and shook my head. I was glad that we were comfortable enough to joke around with each other, after the tense way we had parted ways the last time we had seen each other.

"Well, don't scrub *too* hard," he laughed. "I like you a *little* nerdy."

"What are *you* doing?" I asked. He glanced down at the book in his hand and then back up to me.

"A friend showed me this really cool place under the tree out there, for reading," he smiled. "I thought I might get some fresh air."

"Oh," I smiled and turned towards my loft. "Well, have fun."

"You get some rest," he suggested me again. And then he left.

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After my shower, I actually had a little more energy. Or maybe it was seeing Edward again that made me feel so buoyant. I was just very thankful that things remained fine between us. I jumped to sit on the kitchen counter, and peeled a banana. By the time I had finished my snack, I decided that maybe I could use some fresh air too.

When I stepped outside, I saw Edward sitting with his back to the tree. His long legs were crossed out in front of him and he held the pages of his book up somewhat close to his face, concentrating on the text that he was reading. He actually looked beautiful, in the dappled light that filtered through the leaves over his head. I stared at his long, tapered fingers that wrapped around the edge of his book, and felt a little warm when I remembered how those same fingers had felt while he held *me*. Then I frowned and mentally reminded myself that I had no business thinking of him in that way. He glanced up as I walked into the grass to join him.

"I thought you were going to sleep," he said reproachfully.

"I will. I just wanted a little air first," I smiled and sat next to him in the grass. "What are you reading?" I asked. He turned the book so that I could read the binding. It was a book of English poets. It made me smile. He just shrugged.

"That's an unusual choice," I commented. I hadn't really expected Edward to be the type to enjoy poetry.

"It's just something I picked up at a used-book store this week. You know... while you were avoiding me." His lips twisted up as he teased me, and he leaned over to nudge my shoulder with his.

"I wasn't avoiding you," I hurried to reassure him. "I've been working my ass off."

"Oh yeah?" his eyebrow pulled up, and he looked like he didn't quite believe me.

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"Listen," I began. "I'm not going to apologize for what happened on Saturday. Because I'm not sorry."

"Really?" He looked slightly incredulous.

"I'm sorry if I made you feel... uncomfortable about the situation," I allowed. "I wouldn't do anything to put our friendship in jeopardy."

"You didn't," he shook his head. "I was afraid that I pissed you off. You know... the way I took advantage..."

"Stop," I said quickly. "I'm a big girl, Edward. I make my own decisions."

"Is that so?" he asked me then. His eyes were serious, but kind. I sighed deeply and twisted a blade of grass around my finger.

"I'm not experienced with these things. But I'm not completely naïve. I knew exactly what I was doing. And what I was offering," I said, looking down while I spoke.

"Well... you shouldn't have *offered* that to a guy like me, Bella," Edward said softly. "I'm not a good guy."

"You're my friend," I said, looking up at him so he could see my sincerity. "I care about you Edward. I trust you."

"Don't."

"Why do you say things like that?" I angrily tossed away the piece of grass I had been holding.

"Because if you knew how hard it was for me to end things that night, you would know that your trust is misplaced."

"I trusted that you'd treat me right," I told him then. "I trusted that... I'd look back on it someday and smile at the memory."

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"Losing your virginity in a casual fuck on my couch is hardly a memory I'd like you to be saddled with." He cringed as he said the words, like maybe he regretted saying them. But I appreciated his candor. It was one of the things that made me enjoy his company so much. Neither of us ever had any problem in just saying what we meant. We could be ourselves around each other. I decided to return his honesty with some of my own.

"I've not sat around picking out wedding dresses and tiaras, imagining that I'm saving myself for the great love of my life," I told him then. "Sometimes it isn't about that."

"What is it about, then?" he asked.

"Lust," I said simply. He raised his eyebrows again, and reached for his pack of cigarettes that rested on the ground beside him. He pressed one to his lips and lit the tip while I continued speaking. "It's about being mature enough to know what your body wants. And feeling comfortable enough with yourself, to recognize what you need."

Edward stared straight ahead then, and I watched as he exhaled a thin line of smoke that danced around his head before disappearing in the air around us.

"You sound like you have it all figured out," he finally said. I shrugged.

"Well, you can relax now," I told him. "My virtue is safe. All is right in the world. Just... stop beating yourself up about it. Alright?"

"Yeah. Sure," he nodded and snuffed his cigarette out on the ground.

""So... what were you reading when I interrupted you?" I asked, changing the subject with a large yawn.

"Keats," he answered simply. "To Hope."

"Will you read to me?" I asked. He smiled and glanced down at his book. Then he looked over at me again.

"If I read, will you try to rest?"

I wasn't sure he meant me to take him quite so literally, but I laid down on the grass and put my wet head on his thigh. He contemplated me for a moment before pulling his book back up in front of his face to continue where he had left off.

*' Should e'er unhappy love my bosom pain ,
From cruel parents, or relentless fair;
O let me think it is not quite in vain
To sigh out sonnets to the midnight air!
Sweet Hope, ethereal balm upon me shed,
And wave thy silver pinions o'er my head!'*

The words, read with in the warm timbre of his voice lulled me to complete relaxation. Before he had finished the poem, I fell asleep there in the grass with my head on his lap.

I woke sometime later, chilly and uncomfortable on the hard ground. The sun was setting in the western sky. Edward moved beneath me when he realized that I had opened my eyes.

"Are you awake?" he asked with a husky voice. I nodded.

"Good. I really have to pee."

"Oh!" I exclaimed. I sat up, and felt myself blush. I didn't intend to fall asleep on him. "Why didn't you wake me?" I rushed. "How long have I been asleep?"

"You needed your rest," Edward smiled. "I was reading anyway. And it's been... a little over an hour." He stood and stretched. It must have been uncomfortable for him to sit still so long. He reached a hand down to pull me up. I popped up, but swayed a little and almost fell against him. His hand on my shoulder quickly steadied me.

"Whoa. Got up too fast," I mumbled.

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"You could probably use some more sleep," he scolded. I shivered a little and he noticed. "And apparently the temperature must be hovering near seventy-two degrees... because you're cold." I laughed a little. He knew me so well. "Come on," he draped his arm around my shoulders to help me up the stairs.

"Let's get you in some warmer clothes, and into bed."

I blushed and looked down. Thank goodness the darkening sky hid my reaction. He was just trying to be my friend. He walked me slowly, all the way to my door.

"Are you sure you're alright now?" he asked. I nodded and he finally stepped away from me.

"Thanks, Edward."

"No problem- Little Sister," he smiled. I scowled at the nickname and he laughed and pretended to land a slight punch on my arm. "Hey," he said, as if suddenly inspired. "If your project is done... do you think you'll have some time later this week to show me that music-downloading program that you told me about? I'm supposed to be listening to something new once a week." He smiled again and I felt a responding tug deep in my chest.

"Sure, Edward. How about Saturday afternoon?"

"Sounds good. Go get some sleep. I'll see you later."

I didn't have to be told twice. I walked to my room, kicked off my shoes, and pulled an extra pair of slipper socks over the top of my feet. Then I dropped my body across my bed and fell to sleep almost as soon as I landed.

Reviews are better than warning bells. Leave one.

Golden

A/N: Twilight belongs to S. Meyer. I'm just running her characters through a few chord progressions.

A/A/N: Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays to everyone who celebrates! See you on the 27th! :)

Yet A/A/N: DAMN IT! Jeans/ Pants... wish I could say I did it on purpose. (again)

-EPOV-

Saturday found me lounging on my couch, yet again, with my remote in my hand. I flipped through the channels aimlessly, looking for something that looked even slightly entertaining.

I wondered when Bella would show up.

When I saw her last, she had agreed to help me download some new music. I could have gone out and just bought a new CD. But at the time, I was looking for a reason to see her again. I had walked her to her door, and she looked so tired. She had just spent the last hour sleeping with her head on my lap, and my fingers itched to be back in her hair. She was fresh from the shower, and she had smelled so good. I couldn't help but to twist strands of her hair around my fingers while I read and she slept. But too soon, her hair was dry, and the sun was setting.

I didn't read the *entire* time. I did spend a portion of our time together, watching the sleeping girl. It was hard for me, sometimes, to understand how she had brought so many changes to my personal life. But she had.

I had sworn to myself that women, as friends, were completely unnecessary. But Bella had somehow become necessary to me. My days were so much fuller, for having her in them. I was drinking less, and getting more sleep. My

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writing had picked up. I actually looked forward to daylight hours, instead of hiding in my loft, waiting for the solace of the night. As Bella mumbled and rubbed her cheek like a little cat against my leg, a feeling I could only describe as fondness settled over me.

She was so sweet. And genuine. She was *real*.

She also completely fucked with my head when she had been so candid and open with me about her views on sex. And more importantly, about losing her virginity. As much as I would like to say otherwise... I couldn't get it out of my mind in the several days since I had seen her. Bella might have looked sweet and innocent. But she had a sharp mind, and clearly knew who she was. She also had no qualms about sharing her feelings and being completely honest with me.

It was these things and more that stood in such stark contrast to my memories of Irina. It was these things that had earned my respect, and caused me to care for her despite my very best-laid plans. I furrowed my brow over the discovery and my hand paused on the remote when I found an episode of 'The Golden Girls' starting. The theme song cheerfully offered a soundtrack to my current thoughts.

Thank you for being a friend...

Suddenly I was laughing out loud. Bella would probably laugh too, if she knew I was comparing our relationship to that of some little old ladies on television. I was still chuckling as I heard the knock on my door. I rolled to stand, and happily answered the summons to find Bella looking better-rested, and as adorable as ever on the other side.

"Hey!" she smiled at my mirth. "Is now a bad time?"

"No! No... come on in," I shook my head and pressed the button on the remote to turn off the television. I had already placed my laptop on the coffee table, and had turned it on so it would be ready to go. That usually took a little while.

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"Is.... this.... your computer?" Bella looked slightly horrified. If I assumed that I would never actually see Bella looking like the snob that I first imagined her to be- I was wrong. Her nose crinkled cutely as she sat in front of my laptop.

"It's sort of old," I admitted while I sat next to her. "I don't use it that often."

"Good thing," she muttered. "The thing might blow up if you tried. What in the hell do you have running it? Is there a crank for its generator....?" I could tell she was teasing so I nudged her with my elbow.

"Well? What do you think, doc? Is it a goner?" I asked. She looked up and nodded with pretend remorse. "I think it's time to put this to sleep, Edward. Seriously. I don't think I could download any music on here if I tried..."

"My last download took about three days," I admitted, only half-jokingly.

Her fingers flew over the keyboard, and she cringed at the response time. I watched as she used the touch pad, and navigated through the controls to search for God-knows-what.

"Wow. You have quite a collection of porn," she complimented me. "Anything I should be worried about if I decide to hook this up to my system at home? I mean... you don't have like kiddie pictures... or donkey-sex on here or anything do you? Something I could get in trouble with?"

"Donkey-sex?" I laughed out loud. She just smirked at me. I knew she was teasing again. Then she closed the lid with finality.

"We can't do anything with this," she sighed. "If you want, I can take it to my place and see what I can do about fixing it up for you. It might take about a week. I get busy with my classes..."

"No. That's fine," I shook my head. "Do you think maybe, I should just buy a new one though?"

"Let me play around with this one first," she said. "I'll let you know."

"You won't get rid of my porn?"

"No, Edward. Maybe I'll even hook you up with some of mine. Come on. Let's go set this up in my lab."

"You have a lab?" I asked with my head still reeling with the possibility of Bella actually having her own stash of porn.

"All evil geniuses do," she laughed.

My laptop was tucked under her arm as she led me into the loft she shared with her sister.

"Where's Rosalie?" I asked.

"I don't know," she shrugged. "Out at the golf club. Or the wine club. Or the Better-than-everyone-else club. She'll be back this evening." I continued to follow her back to her room. She immediately walked over to a long desk that took up an entire wall and cleared a spot for my computer. She sat in her desk chair, so I walked over near her bookshelf and looked around.

"There is no way I'm going to get your computer going for you now. But I can burn you a couple of CD's to get you by," she informed me.

"Take your time."

Her room wasn't very girly. It was decorated in shades of chocolate brown and light green. But it was very, very clean.

I could see the black and white converse high-tops she always wore, in a perfect row with her other shoes on the bottom of her closet. Her clothes, also, seemed to be color coded, and hanging with precision. What the room lacked in pink and flowers, it made up for in tidiness. I was afraid to touch anything and mess up her perfectly organized existence. But when I saw the bindings of a few class year books on her shelf, I couldn't resist pulling out the oldest one from the line up.

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She was still busy, so I kicked off my shoes and jumped up onto her bed. It took me a while to locate her picture, but when I did, I had to check the name in the margin just to make sure I was looking at the right one. Bad perm. Braces. She wore different frames on her glasses, but those were still cute. Her t-shirt....

"You... were... a Backstreet Boys fan?" I started laughing in earnest now, and she turned to see the source of my information.

"Oh, God. Put that away Edward."

"No way. This is a gold mine. Spanish club. French club. Gymnastics club. Hmm... Rosalie isn't the only one who likes clubs."

"Sure. Laugh it up," Bella said, shaking her head. "But remember that payback is a bitch. Besides... I doubt you looked all that hot in *your* freshman yearbook."

"At least I didn't have a perm," I told her.

"You think your hair is so much better now?" She quirked her eyebrow and I ruffled my hand through the top of my hair.

"My hair is awesome," I told her.

"Keep telling yourself that," she murmured. I could hear the smile in her voice as she turned her attention back to clicking at the keyboard in front of her.

"You know you like it," I teased. "You can say it. Go on. Say it. Out loud."

"I'm ignoring you..." she continued to work. I closed the book with a sigh, and reached over to put it on her bedside table. But then I saw her little black day planner resting there, and picked it up instead. I had always been curious about what kinds of things she wrote in that ever-present little journal. I thumbed through the pages quietly.

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"E?" I asked her, realizing that she had made notes about helping me burn CD's. "You don't even write my whole name in this thing? It looks so... sordid," I told her. Bella turned with alarm, and saw that I was looking through her planner.

"Put that down!" she nearly yelled.

"No way," I grinned. "I wanna see what else you have in here!"

"I mean it! Put it down, Edward!" I chuckled and shook my head. I wasn't at all prepared for what happened next.

The girl turned beet red and launched herself off her desk chair. In a moment, she was on top of me, straddling my hips and wrestling with me. I covered my face with my arms and laughed under attack.

"Give it to me !" She was trying to get her planner from me, so I pulled it away and extended my arm as long as it would go to keep it out of her reach. She struggled and tried to pull my arm down, but all that did was stretch her body out over mine. One minute we were wrestling, and laughing. The next minute... I was kissing her.

She should have stopped me. But she didn't. Bella was kissing me back almost as soon as I started. She didn't stop me when I urged her mouth to open for me so I could tangle my tongue with hers. She didn't even stop me when I put both of my hands on her ass and pushed her down against my body. What she did then, was moan into my mouth. And I almost went crazy at the sound of it. Her day planner had fallen on the floor, totally forgotten, and all I could think about was how fucking good it felt to kiss her. How far would I allow this insanity to control me before I would be forced to stop myself? *Could I stop myself?* My mind started negotiations with my body. My body was winning.

Just... a little... more.

Her mouth was so sweet, a perfect contrast to the way we aggressively kissed. I wanted to eat her alive. And then I couldn't stop myself from wanting to know

if she tasted just as sweet all over.

I felt Bella's hands tugging the hem of my t-shirt from my sweatpants. So I broke our kiss long enough to reach down and pull it off for her. My eyes nearly popped from my head when I realized that she had used my pause to discard her own shirt as quickly. She wore a purple and white plaid bra. It definitely made my top ten list of the sexiest things I had ever seen. I grabbed her arms and pulled her down so I could bury my face against the softness of her chest. It was like heaven.

Just... a little... more.

I nuzzled my nose into her cleavage before turning my face to search for her nipple. I bit her lightly through the thin material of her bra, and then she pulled my hair! Pulled my hair hard! She tugged my face up towards hers and kissed me again until my head started spinning. And then it was my turn to groan when I felt her hands lightly scratching down my own chest towards the edge of my pants.

Just...a ... little....

I rolled her off of me in one swift motion and rose half-way up to look at her. I had to end this. But it would take the strength of a thousand men to deny her next words.

"Edward?" She brushed her fingers through the side of my hair and spoke to me in a softly husky voice. "Please? I... want to be with *you*."

I was weak.

Hell. Who was I kidding? I wanted to be with her too. I was horny as hell and I had a partially naked girl staring up at me with big brown eyes that were more or less begging me to continue. I could blame the fact that I hadn't even touched another woman since the night Bella first kissed me. But that really wasn't it. I had wanted her all along. There was no sense in denying it.

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My throat constricted and I wasn't sure if I could speak. So in reply, I started pulling down the blanket that was beneath us. Even though I was pretty sure there was no way I'd let her get cold, I didn't want to take any chances. Bella caught on quickly and wiggled until the blanket was free and I was able to pull it over our half-naked bodies. And then I made it my mission to fix that 'half-naked' part.

Bella wasn't shy at all, and lifted her hips to help me pull away her sweatpants and underwear in one quick motion. My own sweats were removed and thrown to the floor just as quickly. She smiled and raised an eyebrow when I reached behind her and removed her bra in record time. I was like Houdini with those things. Front closures, back-hooks, hell... even sports bras could not deter me when I wanted to get at the treasure beneath. But then... I'd had a lot of practice.

My task gave me time to clear my head. I didn't doubt Bella's willingness to participate in what we were about to do. But it *was* her first time. It would be *my* responsibility to make it... as *comfortable* an experience as I could for her. I didn't want my over eagerness to ruin it. Or worse- I didn't want to hurt her. So I set in, determined- touching her and kissing her in ways that would hopefully ready her for what was to come.

It was difficult. I could lose my head just kissing her. She was so soft, and so eager. And admittedly, I didn't spend a lot of time throwing out the extras with the girls I was usually with. A 'Hey, love. Wanna go back to my place?' was normally all the foreplay that was required. But I knew I needed to be different for Bella. So I pulled my mouth down from her lips to kiss my way down her throat. And then I ducked under the covers to rain kisses across her chest. God, I loved her tits. I palmed them, and pushed them together, and smiled against her nipples that hardened to little raspberry points between my lips. Bella shivered and pushed her fingers into my hair, and I continued my exploration, kissing down her ribcage with licks and nips that made her squirm. *That* was when I first heard the noise. I paused for a second before I started kissing her again, breathing in her skin and sucking on her stomach. And then I heard it again. Only this time, there was no mistaking what I heard. *What the hell?* I pulled the covers from my head and looked up at her. Bella's hand was pressed

over her mouth as she tried to stifle another giggle.

"What's so funny?" I growled, only half-serious. She looked apologetic for a moment, and then a wide smile pulled across her face. *Man, I loved her smiles.*

"Your whiskers tickle!" She finally rasped out. And then she started laughing again, which made me laugh too. I growled and leaned down to suck gently on the skin under her ear, which only made her laugh harder. Finally I gave up, and moved until I could kiss her lips again. We were both still laughing, and I swallowed that smile of hers. But the feel of her warm body under mine soon drove all thoughts of laughter from my mind.

I moved my hand so that I could cup her between the legs, and *that* stopped her giggling. Instead, she breathed out a surprised little "oh," that made me smile while I pressed my mouth to her pulse-point and sucked hard. I brushed my fingers slowly over her, and then tentatively pushed a finger into her when she lifted her hips to encourage me. My thumb did its work, right where she needed it to be. This stuff wasn't a mystery to me, though I was amazed anew at the wonderful tell-tale signs that let me see how responsive she was to my touch.

Bella wasn't a very vocal person, which was something that I wasn't used to. Not that I particularly enjoyed it, but I was accustomed to women who screamed and moaned and told me exactly what they wanted. It took some of the guess-work out. So I bit the lobe of Bella's ear and added another finger down below.

"Do you like that?" I asked into her ear. Bella's cheeks were flushed and she arched her neck up with her head pushed back into her pillow while she bit her lip. "You can tell me what you like," I urged her, still breathing across her ear.

"I... like... *that*," she whispered, wiggling her hips a little for me. I bit her shoulder a little, and rubbed my cock against her hip. She hadn't touched me at all yet. But I didn't need her to. My cock was hard as a rock, and I ached to get into that sweetness that I felt squeezing around my fingers. I knew it was going to feel like absolute paradise. The more I thought about it, the harder it was to control my breathing. I knew I was running out of self-control, so I slowly

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pulled my hand away from her and opened my eyes to start looking for my pants.

"What are you...?" She was breathless too- which made me think I was probably successful in making her ready for me.

"Condom," I ground beneath my teeth. My eyes were desperately darting around, trying to figure out how far I must have thrown those damn things. But her hand caught my chin and forced me to look down at her again.

"You don't need it. Not with me," she said quietly. "Please Edward? Can it just be... *us*? I trust you."

I stared wordlessly into her eyes. *What was it she had said before?* Shouldn't people in this situation at least have trust? She *trusted* me. She was asking me to trust her.

I nodded and nudged her knees apart. And then I took a moment to marvel that this was *Bella*. This was my *friend*. And she was sharing something so very special with *me*... I covered her mouth with a kiss and pressed my body to hers.

Slowly. Slowly.

It was difficult for me to not throw myself against her and lose myself in her sweetness completely. My body wanted to fuck her hard. But I knew I couldn't. The feeling of being with her was unlike anything I had ever experienced. It was a completely different universe, having sex without a condom. Knowing that Bella trusted me changed everything around, too. I clenched my fists into the sheets by her head and kissed her and tried to ignore the sudden urge I had to claim her frantically and furiously. I knew that if I did... I would turn every bit of this into a lousy experience for her. And I'd embarrass myself. Because I was nearly crazed with lust, and because she was trusting me to treat her right.

When I felt her body's natural tightening response to the intrusion, I thought I would lose my mind completely. I had to get my head clear. I had to think of *anything* to take my mind off the sensations that were shaking me to my soul.

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Her body was tight and pulling me deeper. I wanted to grab her hips and thrust into her completely. But I knew I had to make myself slow down. My mind started flipping through the channels as I struggled to stay as still as possible and let her adjust to me. I couldn't help but sigh in relief when my brain landed on an episode of the Golden Girls. I listened to the theme song in my head and hid my smile against Bella's shoulder and found the control I was looking for.

-BPOV-

How could anyone blame me? Edward was stretched out on my bed, looking like he had stepped from one of my personal fantasies. I tried to ignore him for a few minutes while he teased me about an old yearbook photo. But then he started looking through my day planner... so I went a little nuts and tackled him.

I only meant to get my planner away from him. But he squirmed underneath me and covered his face. And his laughter... *God I loved his laugh...* it shook me. The next thing I knew, I reached down to kiss him.

He kissed me back, almost as soon as I started. He seemed enthusiastic too. His tongue teased my mouth until I opened for him. Then, his hands grabbed my butt and pulled me down against him.

Whoa.

I felt a heady rush of adrenaline when I realized that Edward wanted me. He wasn't trying to hide it. I wanted him to know I felt the same. So I went to work on his shirt. He seemed anxious to help me with that, so I hurried and removed mine at the same time. His eyes bulged when he saw my silly plaid bra. I anticipated his laughter, and was impressed when he was somehow able to control it. Remembering to breathe was definitely an issue when he wrapped his arms around my waist and pushed his face against my chest to place hot kisses there. When he bit me a little, I returned the favor by pulling his hair. Then he was kissing me again, and I gloried in the feel of his chest under my hands. He sucked at my mouth and I let my hands slide lower...

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In an instant, he had rolled me off of him and was lying somewhat beside me. The look of conflict and confusion in his eyes made me afraid that he was going to call an end to all of this. But I didn't want it to end. Not right now. Something inside was telling me that this was exactly the right time... and exactly the right place... and yes- Edward was exactly the person that I should be with. I had never fooled myself with the notion that I would wait until I was married to have sex. But I *did* always promise myself that I would wait until I was positive that I would have no regrets. Right then- I knew with perfect clarity that I would only regret it if I let him stop what we had begun.

"Edward? Please? I... want to be with *you*."

He didn't say a word, but he started pulling down the covers on my bed, which was all I needed for encouragement. I hurried to help before he could change his mind. But then I saw the determined look on his face and it made me shiver. I knew there would be no going back.

Edward's eyes seemed to darken as he removed the rest of my clothing. He took inventory of each newly exposed area as though he were committing it to memory. I absolutely could not find the will to be shy under his rapt attention. His clothes were soon discarded as well. But he didn't initiate me touching him as he had before. He was concentrating on me.

I, on the other hand, was trying once again to concentrate on my breathing. His lips and his hands were everywhere. I bit my lip to keep from making embarrassing noises. Then, to my horror, I could not suppress laughter when his whiskery chin tickled my chest and my stomach. Thank God, he laughed too. Soon our laughter subsided and we were kissing again. He put his hand between my legs, and I thought I might die from the pleasure he provided. He asked me what I liked, and I could barely find the breath to answer him. I think I mumbled something stupid about liking what he was already doing. I'm not really sure.

I had another brief moment of panic when he paused again. I thought that he might be having second thoughts. But my mind was eased when he gritted his teeth and admitted that he was searching for a condom.

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I immediately knew that I didn't want him to use one. And I told him so. He had told me before that he had never, ever had sex without protection. His experience wasn't debatable. I just knew that I wanted what was happening between us to be *different*. I wanted him to trust me, the way that I trusted him. And I selfishly wanted to be different from the other women that he had been with. Because this was *Edward*. This was my *friend*. And I wanted something of this experience to be unique for *both* of us.

He didn't argue. He just stared into my eyes for an unfathomable amount of time. And then I felt him nudge my legs. So I took a deep breath and accommodated him. He seared my mouth with another kiss, and then he brought our bodies together.

Slowly. Slowly.

I felt him filling me, and I could tell by the strain of his arms as he fisted my sheets that he was exerting an amazing amount of self-control. The pressure was... admittedly... uncomfortable at first. But he was moving so slowly that my body was able to adjust and compensate. I was in wonder of the way I naturally fit myself around him. And then, the pressure built again until it bordered a bit on pain, and I stiffened in reflex. Edward froze as well. But he didn't retreat. He didn't move. We were completely joined, and he buried his face into my shoulder and just stayed motionless. My heart thumped a little unevenly when I imagined the thoughts that must have been going through his mind. He was obviously as moved by the whole experience as I was.

The discomfort ebbed almost as quickly as it had come, and I tilted my hips a little, experimentally. I smiled when Edward's breath hissed from between his teeth. He turned his face back towards mine, and kissed me lightly- trailing his tongue around the outline of my lips. Feeling brave, I tried it again. He groaned into my mouth and kissed me harder. I felt powerful. My simple movements had encouraged him to begin his own.

"You want more?" he asked into my mouth. I nodded, and sighed when he finally started moving against me.

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He was careful... ever mindful of my inexperience. But he kissed me and touched me in ways that clearly meant he wasn't only thinking of himself. I kissed along his jaw line and threaded my fingers into his hair while he pulled back and brought us together again and again. He seemed to like my responses to his efforts. Actually, *like* might not have been a strong enough word. His breath was as ragged as my own and his cheeks were flushed. *He was beautiful.*

When his fingers on my hips tilted me upwards, I did my best to match his movements. And all the while he whispered delicious and encouraging words into my ear. He was moving more quickly than... his eyes squeezed shut tight. His chest glistened with the light sheen of perspiration between us, and he almost looked like he was in pain. I grabbed his face between my hands and pulled his mouth down to mine. And then I wrapped my legs around his waist and locked him to me.

"Fuck, Bella," he rasped against my lips. "I'm gonna come." Afraid that he would pull away, I tightened my legs around him and held him close. His body went still, and he groaned loudly against my neck as I felt his body shudder in release. We stayed there like that for a while- locked together and breathing heavily. Finally, he rolled from me, but pulled my shoulder with his movement so that I was cuddled up against his side.

Edward stretched his free arm up and draped it across his eyes. I drew a pattern in his chest hair with the tip of my finger. I never expected that my first time would end in some earth-shattering explosion of fireworks... but I *also* didn't expect just how altered I would feel afterwards. Edward was still Edward. He was still my friend. That hadn't changed. What had changed was the amazing sense of bonding... of closeness that I felt towards him.

Then I started to worry. What did he expect from me now? Did he expect me to be clingy and ask him to stay... ask him to hold me and make flowery promises that I knew he didn't intend to keep? Or would he be happier if I let him know right away that I didn't expect this to change anything between us? We had managed to remain friends up until now. I wouldn't be the one to make things weird. He was probably already wondering how long he would have to stay so

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as not to offend *me*. I didn't have a problem with letting him off that proverbial hook. I was contemplating what to say when his voice rumbled under my ear.

"Are you.... okay?" He was worried about me.

"Better than okay," I smiled up at him. He looked relieved to see me grin and squeezed my shoulder, placing a kiss on the top of my head. I lowered my eyes and cleared my throat. "You know... Rosalie will probably be home soon."

"Do you... want me to go?" I couldn't tell by the tone of his voice if he sounded surprised or was asking for permission.

"I would just, hate to have to explain... this." I smiled up at him and his eyes searched my face for clues. He was probably trying to decipher if I was playing typical female games to get an expected response from him. I wasn't. He should have known me better by now. I rolled over and brought the blanket around me. "I'll... just use the bathroom. Be right back," I told him.

Fortunately, my robe was hanging on the bathroom door. I belted it around my waist and then took a moment to stare at my reflection in the mirror. No discernable outward changes. Aside from a few dark spots low on my neck, I looked exactly the same. But I felt different. I felt... amazing. I was a little nervous about what waited for me beyond that bathroom door. But I was determined that Edward and I could figure it out together. I refused to entertain the notion that this would ruin anything between us.

When I entered my room, he was sitting on the edge of my bed, dressed, and bent to tie his shoes. He looked up at me, and I silently walked over to stand between his knees. And then, we wrapped our arms around each other. His arms were around my waist, and my hands cupped his head to my chest.

"Thank you, Edward," I whispered. "You really... made this exactly what I hoped for."

He grimaced and shrugged away.

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"I thought most girls dreamed of roses and candlelight..."

"Has it ever occurred to you, that I'm not really like most girls?" I asked. His eyes looked a little sad as they met mine. But then his lips curved up in an irresistible smile.

"Love, you have no idea just how often that fact *has* occurred to me." He raised my hand to his face, and kissed my open palm before standing and walking out my door.

Reviews are better than evil geniuses. Leave one.

Table for Three

A/N: Twilight belongs to S. Meyer. I'm just running her characters through a few chord progressions.

A/A/N: For those of you who are interested... I'm going to do my best to start posting three times a week. M, W, F. It might mean that more mistakes will slip through, but Kalejay is gonna do her best to keep up with me, for as long as she can. Click, click, click... strum, strum, strum. And away we go!

-EPOV-

My back stiffened in surprise. I hadn't even made it all the way inside my loft when I heard Rosalie's voice behind me in the hall.

"Edward?"

I irrationally felt as though I had been caught with my hand in the cookie jar. But I was no stranger to playing it cool, so I willed my features into calmness and turned to look at her with a grin.

"Hello. What's up?"

"Coming, or going?" She asked.

"Excuse me?"

"Are you on your way in? Or out? And what in the world are you looking so guilty about?"

Truthfully, her innocuous question had thrown my mind into the gutter for a moment. *So much for playing it cool.*

"In," I muttered and twisted my door handle, hoping she would let me escape gracefully.

"I was going to ask you over for dinner tonight."

"Hmm?" She had my attention again. "I never thought of *you* as Julia Childs."

"Thank God for *that*!" Rosalie laughed. "A friend of mine is opening a new Italian restaurant. He's offered to send over one of his chefs tonight to whip up a few of his signature dishes in my kitchen- so that I can give him my opinion."

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He's even providing formal table service..."

"And what kind of service is he looking for in return?" I raised an eyebrow and teased her. She was hard to shock. She just tossed her hair behind her shoulder and rolled her eyes.

"He's trying to sleep with me. But of course- I'll wait to see how successful his restaurant is first. I'm not giving it up just because he's got a good recipe for ravioli!" The throaty sound of her laughter seemed harsh to my ears. I stood for a moment, wondering if all women were as cold about making such intimate decisions. But then, I already knew my answer. No, they weren't. Not *all* of them.

"What time would you like me over?" I asked.

"Eight?" She suggested. I nodded. I had a gig, but that would give me plenty of time.

Once in my loft, I went straight for a shower. I turned the water almost as hot as it would go. And I allowed my thoughts to travel back to Bella. Despite the sting of the water on my skin, I couldn't help but smile. I didn't feel one ounce of regret for what I had just done.

It had been the single, most satisfying sexual experience of my life. And now that it was over- I felt free to move on. Not 'on'- as in 'away' from Bella. No- she wasn't like other women I had been with. I knew we would be able to remain friends... just as we had been before. I simply meant; now that the curiosity was sated between the both of us, we could go on with our friendship without it being an issue.

Even as I tried to convince myself that I would be able to train my thoughts down purer paths, my shower walls started echoing with the sound of her laughter. And then, they taunted me with the more personal sounds that I was able to illicit from Bella earlier. I closed my eyes to force the sounds away, but then I was haunted by the image of purple plaid. Impossibly, I felt my body hardening in response to the memory. I stood in my shower, like a horny teenager lusting for my neighbor down the hall. Again. *How pathetic.*

Not wanting to dwell too long on ideas that I was supposed to be putting behind me, I finished the rest of my shower quickly. Then because I didn't

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really want to be left alone with my thoughts of her again, I spent the next couple of hours working on my music. My guitar was a trusted escape. I nearly lost track of time completely, and ended up knocking on Bella's door ten minutes after eight.

Rosalie opened the door with a hard smile and a glance at her watch. I didn't mind that I was late if it annoyed her. I rather enjoyed pissing her off.

"Come on in," she suggested. "We're running late."

I had the impression that she wasn't only talking about my tardiness, so I didn't apologize as I followed her towards the dining room. The table had been set for a formal dinner, with two chairs facing one other. A man in a white coat appeared out of nowhere and led Rosalie to sit in the single seat. I frowned. That meant Bella would be seated next to me. I wouldn't be able to watch her during dinner without turning my body and being obvious about it.

"Where's your little sister?" I asked then.

"She'll join us in a minute," Rosalie said, sliding her napkin into her lap. "I swear that girl sleeps like the dead. She was asleep when I got home today, and even the chef banging around in the kitchen didn't wake her. I finally just got her up by threatening to throw water on her. And I told her that you were here. So she'll be right out."

I smirked. *Heh. I wore her out.* It was enough to feed my ego tremendously. But Bella walked in the room then, looking sleepy and messy. She even blushed a little when she looked at me.

"Hi. Sorry I'm late. I had no idea that Rosalie was planning... all this." Her hands made a little circle over the table while the server hurried to seat her beside me.

"I surprised Edward too," Rosalie smiled "I caught him sneaking in today. On your way home from a booty call? Or were you actually doing something non-lecherous for once?"

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I wasn't prone to embarrassment, but I felt my cheeks heat at her words. I didn't dare risk a glance at Bella.

"I uh... had an appointment."

"For what?" *God, she was nosey.*

"Lab-work." I said the first thing that came to mind, remembering Bella's reference to her 'secret lab.' I felt Bella kick me sideways under the table, and I couldn't help but laugh. Bella was trying very hard not to. I watched her lips twitch in amusement.

"Ew," Rosalie sneered. "Do I really want to know what diseases you're screening for?"

"Rose!" Bella quickly interjected on my behalf.

"Just sayin'," Rosalie shrugged.

The dinner passed nicely. The server brought us samples of several dishes that the chef planned to feature at the new restaurant. The three of us talked and joked, and the food was really, really good. I didn't realize just how hungry I was. I was practically shoveling food into my mouth when Rosalie addressed Bella.

"So. What did *you* do today?"

I was curious about if her answer would be as off-the-wall as mine.

"I just... spent time in my room. I'm going to be fixing Edward's computer for him; adding new hardware and such. It's going to be fun." I should have known she would find a way to avoid lying. The girl was honest to a fault.

"Oh hell, Edward," Rosalie said loudly. "You probably made her the happiest girl in the world. There is nothing Bella enjoys more than a good hard drive."

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No way. With that, I was choking. I started coughing around my mouthful of lasagna, and Bella stood to start thumping on my back while I reached frantically for my wine glass. I started drinking, and didn't finish until I had drained the glass. The waiter refilled it for me and Bella's face was totally flushed- but that could have been from her efforts to get me breathing again.

"Sorry," I gasped. "Swallowed wrong."

I kept my glances towards Bella at a minimum after that. I knew that if I saw even a hint of a smile about the incident, I would probably break into hysterics and start choking again. I already felt like an idiot. She seemed to be concentrating very hard on twirling her pasta around her fork. The motion was mesmerizing, and I almost missed the turn that the conversation had taken.

"So, Bella? Have you given any more thought to going out with Garrett?"

Hmmm? I was instantly alert and hanging on to Rosalie's words. Bella just looked a little uncomfortable and shrugged.

"I don't know, Rosalie," she seemed to be hedging. "I am *so* busy with school."

"*And* you promised that the *new you* was going to make sure to go out, at least on the weekends so that you didn't turn into an all-work-and-no-play-zombie again! You aren't going out with Michael anymore. It's time you got back on that horse!" I smirked at the comment and earned another kick to my shin under the table.

"I'll... think about it." Bella tried to dismiss the topic. But Rosalie was having none of that.

"Come on, B! You can't spend all your free time just hanging around with *Edward*! I mean... *look* at your *hair*. Have you even brushed it today?" I looked at her hair. And I smiled because I knew the reason it was so messy. "You two are hanging around together so often, that you are starting to *look* like *him*," Rosalie continued, pointing a finger in my direction. "The next thing I know, you'll stop showering, and you'll... you'll start making your own clothing out of

hemp or something!" Rosalie was practically huffing after her tirade. Bella and I both stared at her with our mouths hanging open. I tried to feel insulted, but I couldn't. Instead, I started laughing. And then Bella was laughing too. Soon the three of us were laughing until Bella and Rosalie were wiping their eyes with their napkins and my sides actually ached.

I was strangely satisfied that the Garrett-discussion was left unresolved. I really did have to leave then, to get to the club where I would be playing. So I made my excuses to the ladies and I forced myself to leave one of the most enjoyable dinners I had remembered having in recent history. I touched Bella's leg lightly under the table before I stood. She smiled over at me.

Yeah. We were going to be okay.

-BPOV-

After dinner, Rosalie went to the living room and called her friend to give him our impressed opinions about the meal that he had provided. Though she told me that his employees would clean the mess before leaving, I absolutely insisted on helping to clear the table. They begrudgingly accepted my help, but then sent me from the kitchen in almost an embarrassed manner before I could start to help clean the dishes. They probably thought they would get in trouble. I thanked them for their efforts, and went back to my room.

I didn't really want to be alone with my thoughts. But there I was, facing the evidence that my afternoon spent with Edward had not been a product of a dream. The blanket from my bed still laid on the floor from where I had dropped it. His laptop was still on my work desk. My yearbook was only partially visible from where it had fallen next to the bed. I went to work now, straightening things. It wouldn't do to have Rosalie start asking questions. Not that I had to explain myself. I was a grown woman. My decisions were my own- and I didn't regret a single one of them.

Edward had been.... wonderful, generous, and caring. Rosalie would probably argue against any of those adjectives. Though, after he had gone she did turn her questions to a more complimentary nature. *Well-* complimentary for *her*

anyway.

"Hey, Bella? Don't you think it's just a little strange that Edward," (she wrinkled her nose while she said his name), "sat here with us for this entire dinner... you know... like totally at ease?"

"Why shouldn't he have been at ease?" *Did Rosalie suspect something?* I really didn't understand where she was going with her question. So she continued.

"I mean," she said. "It's like sometimes this... *inner refinement* comes out in him. He even knew which forks to use..."

"Oh!" No. I hadn't noticed. I had been too lost in my own jumbled thoughts. The only time I had even briefly considered his fork was when I caught myself staring at his hands. He had great hands.

"Has he ever told you how he got the money to live here?" Rosalie asked then. "Did he inherit his loft? Or... did he win the lottery or something? These places are expensive..."

"No," I lied. I had promised to keep Edward's family history to myself. And to be honest- it annoyed me that it seemed of such importance to my sister. Those sorts of things didn't help me to form an opinion about a person. If Edward was not from an affluent family, I would still want to spend time with him. He was my friend. That didn't come with a tax code.

Mid-way through the week, I flipped open Edward's laptop again and started to take the thing apart. Eric and Tyler had just left and I needed something to do with my hands. I was aggravated. Even though I had worked harder than either of them on our first project, they insisted on treating me as though my ideas were some how worth less consideration than theirs. *Fine*. I accepted the delegated work. It would be boring- not much of a challenge- but it would give me more free time. Let *them* lose sleep this time.

If I was being honest, I would have to admit that their chauvinistic tendencies weren't the only thing that had me on edge. I had already been in a poor mood when they arrived.

I hadn't seen Edward in days.

I had purposely taken study breaks under the tree, thinking I might see him come out for a cigarette, or to read. But I didn't see him once. I had been out late in study groups every night, but when I got home, his car was always absent from the garage. I wasn't trying to keep tabs on him. I just missed him. And I guessed that he had been going out every night again. My suspicions were confirmed when Rosalie stopped in my doorway after a night out.

"Ugh. Don't go in the hall without a gas mask. Someone was wearing an entire bottle of perfume..." I closed my eyes and put my head down on my desk. *It wasn't my business. It wasn't my business. It wasn't my....* But damn if it didn't sting just a little. My feminine pride was hurt. I didn't expect what happened between us to make him turn into a monk. But shouldn't it have been... at least... *satisfying enough* to keep him from seeking female attention just four days later? I opened my eyes and attacked the inside of his computer with a little more fervor. Tomorrow I would reinstall programs and be done with it. I might even "accidentally" erase his porn collection. It would serve him right.

"Hey... have you given any more thought to letting me set you up with Garrett? Maybe this weekend...."

Her voice droned on, but I wasn't really paying attention. I was concentrating on the pieces of metal and circuitry in front of me. If only real life dilemmas could be fixed so easily. I could remove the hardware that had made me think about Edward too many times this week... in ways that I had *no* business thinking about him in. I'd install some virus blocker that would keep my cheeks from feeling warm at just the memory of the way he had made me feel....

"Bella? Earth to B? Hello?" Rosalie had walked in, and sat on the corner of my desk trying to get my attention. Apparently she was still trying to talk me into going on that blind date.

"I'm sorry. I'm distracted," I apologized with a smile.

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"I know that you didn't exactly hit it off with Michael. I really thought that since you were a music lover..." Rosalie shook her head. "Anyway- Garrett is probably more your type. He actually owns his own business and contracts out people who do this stuff," she waved her fingers over my desk. "He's into computers... like you! You'll have tons to talk about..."

I tried not to cringe as mental images of Eric and Tyler came to mind. I couldn't see myself dating anyone even remotely like them. What Rosalie didn't consider was that maybe I didn't want to be with someone *exactly* like me. Maybe I needed to find my complement. The peanut butter to my jelly. The chaos to my order.

But Rosalie was probably right about one thing. I did need to get out more often.

Reviews are better than good table manners. Leave one.

Me First

A/N: Twilight belongs to S. Meyer. I'm just running her characters through a few chord progressions.

-EPOV-

A week had passed since I had seen Bella. Well, since I had actually seen her in person. For the past seven days, she had been making fantastic appearances in my shower, and even in one of my dreams. It was my inability to get her out of my mind that led me to avoiding her all week. I didn't intend to. But I needed to clear my head. Because if I planned to stay friends with the girl (and I *did* want to remain friends with her), it wouldn't do for me to entertain these fantasies about her.

It was a bit like the first time she kissed me. I had been distracted by the idea of kissing her again. And if I thought that having sex with her would be any different, then I had been seriously deluding myself. I wanted to be with her again. And that shit *never* happened. *But what then?* When would it be enough?

For the life of me, I couldn't condone asking her to become my "friend with benefits." How could that be fair to her? At the same time, I had never been in a situation like this. I wasn't sure how to proceed. Should I tell her what I was thinking? What if she were thinking the same? She was an intelligent woman. Maybe I should just lay my feelings about the subject out there and let her make that decision for both of us. She was honest. She would tell me to piss off if she wanted to. Or...

My thoughts were interrupted by a knock on my door. I put aside the book I had been trying to read, and went to answer it. Then, like an answer to my prayers, she was standing there.

Damned if it didn't look like Bella had been thinking the *same* things as I. Because she stood there in my doorway completely dressed to impress. My

thoughts immediately went back to our first kiss. She wore the same clothes that she had worn out that fated night. The same little plaid skirt. The same soft sweater. The same little white tank top. I smiled widely. She had even curled her hair a little. All of this- *for me*.

Her clothing had never mattered that much to me. I thought she was sexy as hell in the sweats and big shirts she usually wore. She could have shown up with her hair in a messy ponytail, wearing her glasses, and I would have been just as happy. But I appreciated her efforts. The way she looked tonight seemed like a pretty obvious indicator that she was trying to get my attention. It worked.

"Hi!" She grinned. "I'm glad that I finally caught you home!"

She had been looking for me? True. I had been out every night- trying to distract myself from thoughts of her that were making me crazy. Seems my efforts were unnecessary.

"I finished your computer," she finally finished. I saw then that she carried it tucked under her arm. I stood aside for her to step into the loft. If she wanted the computer as an excuse to come over, I wouldn't call her on it. But the clothes and the hair were a bit of a give away. Who went to such trouble just to return a laptop?

She walked over to my couch, and lowered herself to sit while she flipped the computer open and pushed the start button. When I saw the way that her skirt barely covered her bottom while she sat on the edge of the couch, I felt as though she had pressed *my* start button too.

The computer came instantly to life- No choking, no groaning, no wheezing- and she looked up with a smile that seemed a little smug. The bright screen lit her face with a bluish glow that almost made her look like an angel or something. Man... I needed to get a grip.

"What did I tell you?" she asked. "Better than new!" I sat down beside her and tried to think if I had even said a word since she arrived.

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"You look really pretty tonight," I muttered. Probably the wrong words to start out with. But still- true. And it wouldn't it be even more rude if I didn't acknowledge all the effort she had made for me?

"Thanks," she mumbled. And then her fingers on the touch pad started navigating through my new computer system. She pointed to the screen and tried to explain the programs she had installed. She did all of that work *for me*. I felt really damn spoiled. And I tried to concentrate on her words. But I was completely distracted by the expanse of her creamy skin between the hemline of her short skirt and her knee.

"I missed you this week," I blurted out. *Damn*. Where was that censor of mine? Bella frowned a little then but kept her eyes on the screen.

"Come on, Edward," she scoffed. "Rosalie told me that your company Wednesday night left a bimbo cloud of 'Vanilla Fields' in the hallway."

"If someone stopped by Wednesday, I didn't hear them," I said sincerely. I had been alone Wednesday night. I had been alone every night. But Wednesday night I remembered quite specifically. It was the night that I had woken up from a completely sexual dream about the girl who sat next to me now. And I couldn't get back to sleep. The few stone walls between us pissed me off. My sheets were too soft, and my bed was too empty. So I had slept the rest of the night on my couch and suffered a sore back for it the next day. Bella turned her eyes to search my face. She was probably trying to determine if I was lying to her. I had nothing to hide.

"Not that it's my business," she mumbled and looked down at her watch.

"Do you have someplace else to be?" I teased. I hoped to lighten the mood a little before I brought up what had been on my mind all week.

"Actually..." she said quietly. "I have a date. He should be here any minute."

Whoa. What?

"A date?" I asked stupidly. My brain started trying to process the information. I could barely hear her talking around the cacophony of my thoughts.

"Yes. You remember? Rosalie's been trying to set me up with this guy... Garrett? She's convinced that because he's into computers, we should meet. I don't know." She shrugged. "He's supposed to be here at seven." The clear sound of the door at the end of the hall banging shut punctuated her sentence and snapped me out of my stupor. Our heads turned in unison. I didn't even realize that I had left my loft door open. And now the sounds of someone walking up the stairs signaled the arrival of the man that was coming to pick her up for a date.

Garrett.

He was the man she had curled her hair for. And worn her plaid skirt for. And chose the soft sweater for. It was *all* for *him*. *None* of it was *for me*.

We stood at the same time and started walking towards my door. I could hear the footsteps in the hall getting closer, and so I increased my pace. And before I knew what I was doing, my hand shot out and closed my loft door loudly so that Bella could not step through it.

"Edward? What are you doing?" She looked confused. Hell- I *felt* confused. I wasn't even sure what I was doing.

If I had given it any thought at all, I would have accepted already that she would be dating other men. *Of course she would*. And she would be curling her hair, and wearing short skirts to look pretty for them. But that would just be the trappings on the outside. The real treasures were beneath. Her smile, and her laughter... her honesty... her intelligence... her humor. All of those things would eventually be shared with other men.

But not tonight.

Tonight I wanted all of it to be *for me*. Those things were *mine first*. She could eventually date the entire department of nerds and math geeks that she knew from school. I didn't care. As long as I took the things that were meant for me-

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and me alone- before someone else tried to claim them.

And even though I knew her outward efforts tonight were for Garrett... they would be mine too, if I *took* them. And I *wanted* to take them. So I did. I reached out and shoved my hands into her hair, and I pushed my mouth down against hers, hard. I knew I was being rough. I knew it was probably wrong. But I ground my lips and my teeth against her mouth until she opened for me with a slight gasp. And damn it, that gasp was *for me*. I thrust my tongue against hers, desperate for her taste, waiting for her to push me away and tell me to stop acting so insane. But she didn't.

Bella stood on tiptoes and kissed me back. Her fingers found my hair, and she gripped my head as firmly as I was gripping hers. She gave as good as she got. And that response was *for me*. I felt a heady rush, knowing that these things weren't fabricated. They weren't planned. They were real, and they were intense. And they were *all...for... me*. My hands traveled down her back until I could grab her hips, and I tugged her forward, hard, up against me so that she could feel how much I wanted her. Bella actually moaned. *So damned hot*. Yeah- I'd be taking that for me too.

The man outside in the hall was forgotten when she tugged on my hair to pull my face away from hers. Then she surprised the hell out of me when she jumped straight up and wrapped her legs around my waist. Her arms wound around the back of my head and she started to kiss me again. My hands found purchase under that tiny little skirt of hers, and I held her weight by digging my fingers into the top of her thighs tightly... saying silent prayers of gratitude and thanks for those four years she spent in gymnastics. *All. For. Me*.

There was only one place that this would end. So I turned and carried her to my bedroom. Once inside, I regretfully had to lower her to the floor. But we never ceased our frantic kisses. I was still making inventory of all the things that were mine, kissing and sucking and biting at her mouth and her neck and her shoulders while I pulled that sweater off of her and tossed it away. I was being aggressive and I knew it. But I couldn't seem to stop myself. And she certainly wasn't stopping me. When I noticed that she was pushing on my chest with her hands, I struggled to find the willpower to step away from her. If it was her

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wish to stop, I would never force myself on her. I stood there with my chest heaving, licking my lips and trying to gain some measure of control. But she only smiled. Then she reached her hands under that little plaid skirt of hers and slowly pulled her panties down so that she could step out of them.

White cotton panties.

God help me. My eyesight actually went hazy with lust. I grabbed her by the hips again and practically threw Bella back onto my bed. Depraved as it was, I didn't even remove the rest of our clothing. My pants were around my knees and that skirt of hers was flipped out of my way. And then I just dove into her.

I had been with many experienced women. But their deliberate and practiced involvement was absolutely nothing compared to the honest abandon of the girl beneath me. I felt such elation as she naturally matched her movements with my own. And the sounds she made....they were the *sexiest* sounds I had ever heard. *All of this was for me. Just me.* And I wanted more. Like she was reading my mind, she wrapped those long legs around me again. I really thought I might go mad. The sensations of being with her like this were almost more than I could bear. As good as it felt, I needed more. So I tugged one of her legs away from me, and hooked it over the crook of my arm so I could pound my body into her. I grunted, and Bella moaned and clutched at my shoulders while I thrust us into a tangled heap across the side of my bed.

I felt a small stab of guilt when I thought of how she deserved to be treated better than this- taken so roughly- still mostly dressed, like some casual toss. She was so much more to me. *So very much more.* But I was in a frenzy and I knew there was no going back now. Instead, I concentrated my efforts, trying to make sure that she would find pleasure in this too. I shoved my hand between our bodies, and touched her the way I knew I should. And I was rewarded right away when her back arched, bringing her body even closer to mine. I could feel her constricting and shuddering against me, so I buried my lips in her neck and I raced to join her.

When her eyes squeezed shut tight, it was *my* name that she yelled out. *All for me.* I groaned in victory while my own release shook me to the core.

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We both layed motionless then, still joined. Our heavy breathing filled the silent air around us.

"Holy Jesus," Bella exhaled with a shaky voice. I lifted my forehead from her chest, and looked above where her head was dangling upside down off the edge of my mattress. My eyes went to the stained-glass window on my wall that was undoubtedly in her line of vision.

Holy Jesus. Yeah. That about summed it up.

-BPOV-

I laid there breathing heavily beneath him, and felt him pull my spent body around so that we lay across the bed properly. Though the first time I had been with Edward had been special and wonderful... I had no idea that sex could be like this. My entire body was still tingling in the aftermath. I finally understood what the big deal was all about.

"Umm... wow," I whispered. It seemed a meager compliment, but I couldn't come up with much more. He chuckled against my shoulder before holding my hip and pulling me towards him so that we could face one another.

"Sorry about that," Edward said quietly. "That was a little... out of hand."

"You won't hear me complaining!" I quickly insisted. He smiled and chuckled again. His eyes traveled down my body, and his long fingers pulled at the edge of my skirt. A frown stole across his lips and his eyes looked troubled when he brought them back up to mine.

"Are you alright?" He looked genuinely concerned. I put my hand on his cheek and smiled.

"Definitely," I told him. He seemed to be relieved, and moved closer to place a kiss on my forehead. I sighed and rolled to lie on my back, staring at the ceiling. He probably mistook the contented sound for a worry.

"I ruined your date," he stated. He didn't seem terribly apologetic. But I didn't need him to be.

"You didn't ruin anything. I didn't even really want to go. I just let Rosalie talk me into it."

"What will you tell her?"

"When Garrett informs her that I wasn't home?" *Hmm*. I thought about it for a second. "I'm not sure. It probably wouldn't be smart to try to explain this."

"You're right. I don't even know what *this* is," he admitted. I didn't mind him voicing his confusion. I felt it too. "She would probably assume the most nefarious of motives on my part."

"She'd be out for blood," I agreed with a nod. And then we both turned our heads to smile at each other.

In a moment, our smiles faded, and we laid there just looking at one another. His face had become so dear to me. The dark slash of his brows- his cheeks that were still flushed- his strong jaw line... I had to force myself to look away. Despite what we had just shared, this quiet intimacy somehow made me feel on edge. With my eyes safely back on his ceiling, I sighed again.

"I suppose I should get back..." I mumbled. I began to roll to my side, but Edward's hand on my arm stopped me. My eyes flew back to his face.

"Don't go," he said in a rush. The words seemed to pour out of him as he stammered. "I mean... don't go yet. You can stay. With me. If you want." He pushed his hand through his hair and rolled his eyes. "Bella- will you stay?" he finally asked.

My heart started to pound painfully in my chest. He seemed as uncertain about things as I did. But I didn't want him to feel obligated.

"Edward... you know I wouldn't expect you to ask..."

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"I *want* you to stay with me," he said firmly. The look on his face was so serious that my heart over-reacted once again. I tried my best to ignore that.

"That isn't your typical MO," I teased, trying to lighten the mood.

"*You* aren't my typical MO," he admitted with a chuckle. "I've never even considered asking anyone to stay over here before." My heart clenched again. *Stop it*, I ordered.

"I'll stay- for a while. But only on one condition." He quirked his eyebrow, waiting for me to continue. "You have to tell me why you've got that wall up, Edward. And don't try to tell me that there isn't one. You as much as admitted it just now. I just want to know why you work so hard to keep people out."

He could have tried to deny it. He could have told me to mind my own business. And I would have been fine with that. I would have gotten up and been on my way. But he didn't. He just stared into my eyes for a long time. And then he nodded.

"Alright," he breathed. I was tense, not expecting him to give in. I felt him shift to lay against me, and his lips kissed my bare shoulder next to the strap of my tank top very lightly before he sighed and placed his cheek against my skin. "I told you about my big trip to Vegas. About- how my uncle was so disappointed and wanted me to leave?"

"Yes," I whispered, encouraging him to go on.

"Well, that was just a small *part* of the story," Edward said. "The bigger part had to do with a girl."

I stayed quiet. I didn't want to interrupt. He seemed comfortable enough to share more of his story with me, and I wanted to hear it.

"Her name was Irina," he began. "And I adored her. I mean... I really *really* loved that girl. She was sweet, and beautiful... fragile like a little china doll. Her father worked at the same hospital with my uncle, and they were old

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family friends. So of course, she was one of the first people I met when I moved to the states. We kind of grew up together. And eventually, as we got older, she and I just started spending more and more time together on our own. She was probably my closest friend."

"She wasn't your... *girlfriend*?" I couldn't help but ask. I felt him shake his head against my shoulder.

"No. No one knew how I felt about her. I never told her. It was my big secret. I planned to, of course. But I didn't get the chance until it was really much too late."

"What happened?"

"She came to me one night, and told me that she was pregnant." Edward said quietly.

"Were you the...?"

"No," he stopped my sentence. "Irina and I never were together like that. Contrary to what you might be thinking... I don't make a habit of ravishing my best friends! You're the first!" He laughed lightly and kissed my shoulder again. In a moment, his voice had lost its playful edge. "My cousin, Jasper, was the father."

"No way" I muttered. He nodded.

"I didn't hold it against him. He couldn't have known how I felt about her. I hadn't exactly made my intentions public. But there was a bigger problem. He was already engaged to someone else."

"He cheated on his fiancée?"

"Yes. Irina told me that it was just something that had happened at a party. There was another man there that Irina had been interested in. But he was with someone else. Irina had wanted to make him jealous... and my cousin just

happened to be there. They were both drunk."

"It sounds so cheap," I frowned.

"It really was," he agreed. "I guess if I had been at the party... it might have been me..." he stopped and shrugged. "Ah well. I suppose there really is no knowing." He was quiet again for a moment before continuing.

"My cousin had no idea. She never wanted him to know. The whole incident would have ruined his relationship... caused a scandal... could have ruined everything for him. So Irina decided to keep it from him."

"So what happened?"

"Well... at first I was crushed. But then, I had this idea. I was such a *fool*," he groaned and rolled away from me, pushing his hands up through his hair. "I thought that I would be able to use the whole thing as an opportunity to finally let her know how much she meant to me. So I told her how I felt. I told her I was in love with her. And I promised Irina that I would take care of her- that I would marry her... and raise the child as my own." His voice sounded strangled as he stared upwards, lost in his own story. "Jasper would never have to know. And she wouldn't have to worry about speculation and gossip... I could protect my cousin and Irina that way. But of course, I wasn't being *entirely* unselfish. I would finally have her for my own. She would be my wife. It all seemed a bloody perfect plan."

He rolled towards me again and nuzzled his nose into the hair at my temple. His arms folded around me, and I stayed still and quiet.

"She agreed. We told our families that we were engaged, and that she was expecting a baby. They weren't pleased with the order of events, but they were all quite ecstatic about planning the wedding. They even threw us a huge engagement party." His voice dropped low.

"Then- the night of the party she pulled me away from our guests and said that we needed to talk." I swallowed hard and waited for him to finish.

"She didn't want to marry me. She said she couldn't go through with it. She... said she couldn't love me like that. *Couldn't love me*. Those were her words. Not that she 'didn't' love me. But that she 'couldn't' ... like it would be some impossible thing to ever consider. She was in love with the man from the party... the one that she had tried to make jealous by sleeping with Jasper."

"Yeah, *that* sounds a lot like love," I said sarcastically. I couldn't help it. He laughed softly though and I felt him kiss the side of my head.

"Anyway- she broke our engagement that night. And to her parent's utter disgust, she had an abortion. Of course, by the time it was all said and done, everyone believed that it was my inability to commit that caused the break-up and her decision to end the pregnancy."

"Why didn't you tell them the truth?" I asked, shocked.

"Because they already believed the worst of me. Remember? I was the wild nephew who never had responsibilities. I was a reckless and careless lay-about. Trying to change their minds would only cause pain to Jasper and to Irina. It was so much easier to let everyone believe what they wanted."

"But that's not fair," I whispered. I could hardly comprehend what kind of selfish woman would have let Edward take the blame like that.

"At the time, I was feeling pretty damned broken anyway," Edward admitted. "I was crushed. Maybe those things about me were true... helping to make me the person that Irina could never love." I felt him take a deep breath. "I went off the deep end. I packed my bags,"

"And went to Vegas," I finished for him. He nodded. "My uncle came to fetch me. He found me completely out of my mind. We had a horrible fight. And I know he meant the best for me when he told me not to come home until I got myself together. He told me to find myself, and to learn to act responsibly."

"He didn't see. You were trying to take on responsibilities that weren't even your own..." I said.

"I would have done anything for her," Edward said against my hair. "I would have given her anything. Everything. I just hoped- that someday she would be able to love me back."

His lips against my hair moved until I felt him kiss my ear. His breath across my delicate skin made me shiver, and I felt his lips pull up in a smile. Apparently, my presence was somehow comforting to him. Edward wrapped his arms around me, and pulled me closer against him. I didn't know what I could say. His story had filled me with such conflicting emotions. I had never known anyone to act so unselfishly for family or for friends. And what kind of person was this Irina, to have the power to make him believe that he wasn't deserving of her love?

Edward's fingers strayed to the strap of my tank top, and pushed the material aside while his lips lightly grazed my skin. Then, he reconsidered and just lifted the whole shirt up and over my head, kissing each new exposed area. I wouldn't deny him.

"Bella?" he whispered against my chest. "I need you."

I threaded my fingers through his hair and swallowed a huge lump in my throat. I nodded, and he pulled my skirt down over my hips. His clothes were removed quickly, and he pressed our bodies together so that every inch of our skin was touching. Our joining this time was un-hurried, and tender. His hands framed my face and he kissed my eyelids, my cheeks, and the tip of my nose. I had to close my eyes and turn my face away, struggling to hold back the tears that I felt threatening to run over. It was beautiful. And he didn't let go of me afterwards, he pulled me even closer. He was shivering as much as I was.

Edward didn't have to use his words to ask me to stay again. He simply threw a heavy leg over mine, and nuzzled his face into my chest. I kissed the top of his head, and held him close until I felt his breathing relax and I knew he slept against me. It wasn't until I was sure that he was sound asleep, before I finally allowed silent tears to fall. I had never meant for any of this to happen. And I wouldn't take it back. But I knew that I would never be the same because of it.

Edward had said needed me.

And in that moment I *knew* that I was in horrible trouble. I had finally done the one thing that would destroy this friendship that we had built together. I let my heart go exactly where I promised that it wouldn't. But I could never, ever tell him. Because as I laid there in the dark and listened to the sound of his peaceful breathing, I knew that I would have given him anything. Everything. I just hoped- that someday *he* would be able to love *me* back.

Reviews are better than stained glass windows. Leave one.

Happy Meals and Matchmaking

A/N: Twilight belongs to S. Meyer. I'm just running her characters through a few chord progressions.

A/A/N: Happy New Year! OXOX

-EPOV-

I slung the dishtowel over my shoulder and grinned when I looked at where Bella was taking up space in my living room. Since she was over again, I actually decided to take a couple minutes to wash a few dishes. Pizza was on the way for dinner, and it would nice to not have to eat over the cardboard box again.

At the moment, Bella was lying on her stomach on my couch, with her ipod playing something into her ears that I could not hear. Her laptop was open in front of her, and her knees were bent... her feet tapping out the unheard rhythm into the air behind her. Of course, her ass looked totally distracting in her sweat pants. I smiled as I pulled the towel from around my shoulders, twisted it a few times for tension, and sent it whistling through the air to deliver a stinging snap to my intended target.

"Ow!" Bella jerked her head up and one of her hands flew back to quickly rub the spot on her backside where my towel had just popped loudly. "Asshole!" She muttered. But she was smiling. I shook my head and walked around to see what she was working on.

Apparently, her work team from school had given her some bogus work to do on their most recent project. I liked hearing her talk about it, because she was so cute and saucy when she was pissed off. Since her work was less labor-intensive this time, it didn't require as much thought. She didn't even oppose when I suggested that she bring her laptop over to work on it here. She had spent the last two nights typing lines of code while keeping me company. I liked having her around.

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The whole atmosphere of my loft brightened with Bella's presence. Usually she just worked quietly and listened to music. But then she would stretch and take out her ear buds, and I would come join her for a break. We watched television, or sometimes we would just talk. A couple of times, we stretched our legs and got some fresh air outside. My towel snapping likely interrupted her, but she was due for a break anyway. I smiled as she saved her work and stood, stretching her arms over her head with a yawn.

"Are you sure you don't mind me hanging out over here?" she asked with a frown. "This can't be fun for you."

"It's easy to ignore you," I told her, only partially lying. "You aren't interrupting anything."

"But it's boring," she insisted.

"Not really. I kind of like watching you do what you do best," I assured her. I did. It blew my mind sometimes, how smart she was.

"Hmm," she seemed thoughtful for a moment. "I wonder when I'll get to see what *you* do best."

"Love, I've already shown you what I do best. Three times, I believe...." I deliberately leveled what I hoped was a suggestive look in her direction, and was rewarded when she twisted to hit me with a throw pillow.

"That's not what I am talking about... and you know it!" she laughed. I laughed too.

It was so easy to joke around with her. Since we had woken up together a few days before, I was amazed at how relaxed and natural things were between us. She gave me a hard time for drooling on her. I teased her about snoring. And that was it. No tension. No strain. We were fine. At least we weren't in denial. We knew that we had to talk things through, but she seemed to be as happy as I was to just let things be without over-analyzing everything. And she was incredibly cool about it. *When was she not incredibly cool?*

"Edward, you know that you don't have to worry about me ever telling anyone about the things you told me," she had told me sincerely.

I never doubted her honesty. We both also agreed to keep our... *personal* affairs between just the two of us. I didn't regret telling her about Irina. She deserved to know the truth. And I could understand her being hesitant about having Rosalie find out about what had happened between her and I. It would just be a whole lot of trouble for nothing. She shouldn't have to explain her actions. But I wouldn't wish for her reputation to be compromised in any way. What we shared was intense and personal... impossible to explain, really. And absolutely no one's business but our own.

"I meant your music." Bella brought me back to the present. "What you do best. I'd love to hear it."

"You've heard me play," I wrinkled my nose at her. She just shook her head and gave me a tolerant looking smile.

"I was drunk. Besides... you were playing back-up for a friend's band. That is *not* the same thing. I want to hear something that *you' ve* written."

I could tell that she wouldn't be dissuaded, and the pizza hadn't arrived yet. So I did something that I usually never did while with company. I sat on the edge of the chair and pulled my guitar up to rest on my legs. Damn if Bella didn't look like I just gave her a Christmas present. She hopped up onto the middle of the couch with her legs criss-crossed beneath her. Her face was lit up expectantly. I just smiled and shook my head at her enthusiasm.

"You might not believe this, but I've actually been working a song about *you*," I smiled. She looked surprised, so I hurried to reassure her. "It's just a simple little melody, really."

"Will you play it for me? Please?"

I felt the familiar comfort settle around me as I always did when I played my guitar. It didn't even bother me that Bella was sitting as my audience. It felt

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very natural to share this part of my life with her. I just closed my eyes and let myself feel the music as I started playing the chords to the song that I had started writing, the day that she slept with her head against my leg out under the tree.

My fingers strummed the chords that told the story of the light on the ends of her hair, the poetry that had been bouncing around in my head that day, and the sounds of the wind through the leaves above us. The music was as lilting and peaceful as the moment had been for me. It wasn't quite finished... but neither were we. I wasn't sure how any of it would end, yet.

I finished what I had so far and scrunched my face up, waiting for her opinion. I couldn't guess what she was thinking. Her face was just... blank. And then, finally she smiled.

"I love it." She actually looked like she might be getting a little emotional.

"You aren't going to start crying or anything are you?"

"I might! No one has ever written a song for me before!"

"It's not that big a deal," I shrugged. I was starting to feel a little self-conscious.

"No lyrics?" Bella asked.

"I couldn't find them," I told her honestly.

"Well, thank you anyway," she grinned. "It's beautiful."

I nodded and put Beatrice back on her stand.

-BPOV-

Edward and I were together every night that week. I was a little worried that my constant presence might be cramping his style. When I voiced my concerns, he calmly explained that he hadn't changed his daily routine at all,

only now had someone to talk to from time to time and that he was "rather enjoying that."

"Well... what about your... *social* life?" I tried to ask like it didn't matter. I kept my eyes trained on my computer screen and pretended like it was of no consequence. I absolutely hated the thought of him spending time with his usual circuit of women. But I also knew that I had no right or reason to expect him to stop his social activities. I just wish it didn't hurt so much to think about.

"Bella... I have not spent time with *any* other women since the night you and I went out with Rosalie." He said it so quietly that I had to look up at his face to make sure I had heard him correctly. His eyes were on his book. He was sitting on the chair in my living room while I worked from the couch. And at the moment, he *seemed* to be totally engrossed with what he was reading. But if I understood him correctly, he had just told me that he hadn't been out with another woman since the night I first kissed him. An irrational surge of pleasure made my cheeks feel hot. I forced my eyes back down to my work and changed the subject.

"Hey, Edward?"

"Hmm?" he asked, looking up.

"What are you doing Saturday?"

"I have a gig. Why?"

"No reason." I frowned down at the computer screen. My eyes were tired. So I took off my glasses and rubbed my eyes.

"You look worn out," Edward commented.

"I am a little. But I'm nearly done with this- which will free up my weekend." I rolled my shoulders to work out the kinks.

Edward put his book aside and walked over to me.

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"Come here," he held out his hand. I reached up and put my fingers in his grasp and he pulled me to stand.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"To your room," he stated. I felt my heart jump in my chest, and I was glad he couldn't know the reaction that I had to his casual words.

"Why are we going to my room?" I asked.

"So I can get you out of your clothes," he smiled wickedly. "Or at least *some* of them."

"Excuse me?" I felt flustered and he laughed. We were inside my doorway now and he merely tilted his head towards my bed.

"Trust me, Bella. Jump up there and take off your shirt." The look on my face made him laugh. "I'm not trying to attack you. I'm offering a massage. Now get up there before I change my mind."

I really had been hunched over my computer for days. There was no way that I'd pass up this opportunity. I quickly pulled my sweatshirt up over my head and laid down on my stomach.

"Okay," I said with my voice muffled by my pillow.

I felt the mattress give as Edward moved to crawl up next to me. And then I felt as his long legs straddled my hips. He carefully kept his weight above me, but wrapped his long hands over my shoulders, deeply kneading the sore muscles there.

"Ow! Ungh!" I groaned immediately. He laughed a rich, throaty sound.

"Love, you are all knotted up."

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"I know," I groaned. His fingers felt wonderful. I wanted to ask him how he was so good at this, but decided against it. I didn't really want to hear tales of how he gained experience.

When his hands slid down the center of my back, he stopped to unhook the back of my bra and pushed the strap of material out of his way.

"You have the cutest bras," he murmured. I struggled to remember which I had worn today. It was blue with little yellow daisies. Not exactly from the Victoria's Secret Super-Sexy collection.

"Haven't you spent enough time making fun of my underwear?" I groaned. He laughed down at me.

"I am not making fun of anything," he assured me. His hands up and down my back felt heavenly. And he really was being a perfect gentleman. I sighed contentedly.

"This is the best," I mumbled. "You'll have to let me repay you for this somehow."

"I'll try to think of something," he warmly agreed. The sound of the front door opening made me roll over and sit up so fast that I knocked Edward off the bed and onto the floor.

"Ow!" He complained when he bumped his head on my bedside table. But he recovered quickly and handed me my sweatshirt. I barely had time to pull it over my head when Rosalie walked in.

She looked at my messy hair and flushed face, but seemed satisfied by the distance between Edward and me. He was still sitting on the floor where he had fallen.

"What are you two up to?"

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"Nothing," we said in unison. And then we both started laughing. Rosalie just rolled her eyes.

"Bella? You promised me that I could take you shopping for a proper dress to wear on Saturday."

"Ugh, I know," I cringed.

"What's Saturday?" Edward had planted his feet on the floor and had his forearms resting across his knees. I glanced over him quickly. I had just asked about his plans for Saturday. I guess that Rosalie bringing up the same night was enough to make him curious.

"An evening of refinement for a change," she sniffed. She didn't approve of me spending so much time with our neighbor. But she knew better than to complain. We were together all the time now.

"Well, don't let me keep you ladies," Edward said while he stood. "I was just on my way out."

"See you tomorrow?" I asked.

"Hmm... well I am actually playing out tomorrow night too. But I'm free in the afternoon."

"I have my presentation tomorrow," I frowned.

"For Pete's sake," Rosalie huffed. "If you two can survive without each other until Sunday afternoon, I'll buy you both Happy Meals for lunch or something." Edward and I grinned across the room at each other.

"I want the cheeseburger," he said.

"Chicken nuggets!" I grinned. Rosalie just threw her hands up in the air, pretending to be exasperated with both of us.

The fundraiser supporting autism awareness on Saturday evening was actually not as bad as I feared it would be. Sure- Rosalie and I shared a table with people that I had nothing in common with. But she was in her element. *They* apparently found it common-place to pay a thousand dollars a plate to show support to causes that they found worthwhile- *not that it wasn't a very wonderful charity*. I enjoyed hearing all of the guest speakers. The entertainment was nice top-notch as well.

The biggest downside was when I found out that Michael would be sharing our table. He had, apparently, paid for our seats for the evening. If I had known that, I would have declined Rosalie's invitation. She knew that Michael and I hadn't worked out the first time she'd tried, but she seemed to be trying to play match-maker again. Maybe it was because I had missed my date with Garrett. Or maybe Michael's bank account was enough to convince her that I should give him a second chance. I tried to be gracious while letting him know that her efforts hadn't made me change my mind about dating him. An expensive dinner wasn't going to rekindle my interest in that area. Michael seemed to take it well. Instead of being insulted, he acted genuinely friendly, and even managed to keep his flirting subdued. He didn't seem anxious to press the issue and make our evening uncomfortable.

Rosalie wasn't as easy to dissuade. As we stood to depart, she suddenly informed me that she was going for a nightcap at a friend's house. She tried to act innocent as she suggested that Michael could give me a ride home. I wanted to kick her when she very obviously winked at me. I guess she thought that being wealthy was enough sway me to her way of thinking. It simply wasn't going to happen. She and I were going to have to have a serious talk about this, later.

Of course the early fall air had gotten very chilly while we were inside. Michael noticed me shivering as we walked to his car, and he pulled off his tuxedo jacket to lay over my shoulders. I was thankful both for the body heat that clung to the material and for the fact that he really did seem to be on his best behavior. I was dreading the idea of having to explain to him again why we wouldn't work as a couple. But it didn't look as though I would have to.

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One small moment of discomfort arose when he pulled up in front of our building, and insisted on seeing me all the way to my door.

"A gentleman would never just leave you on the street side," he insisted. "I'll walk you in." I acquiesced and allowed him to walk me into the building.

I was looking down, and really hoping that he wasn't going to try for a goodnight kiss or something. I was so distracted that I nearly crashed headfirst into Edward, who was standing in his open doorway.

"Wow, Edward," I breathed, feeling suddenly nervous about him seeing me with Michael. "You surprised me. I didn't expect to see you home tonight."

"I guess we surprised each other then," he said darkly. His face matched his voice. He looked... furious.

I couldn't even begin to guess why he seemed so livid, standing there. But I felt a twist in my stomach all the same.

"I thought you had a gig..."

"It was canceled," he twisted his lip and looked hard at Michael. His show was cancelled. Maybe that explained his irritation.

"Rosalie left early to go to a friend's house. Michael was nice enough to give me a ride home," I began to explain. But then, as if on cue, my loft door opened from further down the hall. Rosalie stepped into our line of sight and waved down at us.

"Bella! Michael! Glad you could finally join us! Michael- *do* say you can stay for a drink..."

My mouth popped open. She wasn't supposed to be home. And now I just looked like a big, fat liar. By the look on Edward's face, he apparently thought so too.

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Reviews are better than match-makers. Leave one.

Building Walls

A/N: Twilight belongs to S. Meyer. I'm just running her characters through a few chord progressions.

-EPOV-

My night had gone from bad, to worse. I spent an entirely dull day moping around my loft and trying to pretend that I wasn't missing Bella's presence. Finally, it was time for me to go out. I was actually looking forward to the diversion. But when I got to the bar, I found out that our set was cancelled. It would have been nice to have received a bloody phone call so I wouldn't have dragged my ass all the way down there for nothing.

I decided to have a drink at the bar. After three beers, I decided that re-runs on my television and cold pizza sounded much better than dodging the affections of a certain redhead that had taken up residence near my arm. She was pretty, and she looked familiar. She certainly *acted* as though she were familiar with me. I probably should have recalled her name. But for the life of me, I couldn't. And it really didn't sit well with me.

I stood and threw some bills down on the bar before rushing for the door. I wanted to get the hell out of there while my unwanted company was occupied with some friends on the other side of the bar. But once I got to my car, I was frustrated to no end when the piece of shit refused to start. *So much for a stealthy get away.* I slammed the door behind me, and walked to the corner to look for a cab. That's where the redhead found me. She must have left, right after I did.

"Leaving so early?" she pouted. It was probably meant to be sexy. I wondered if I ever would have thought so before.

"My car is broken," I muttered.

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"That sucks, Edward," she smiled. "I'll give you a ride home. I remember how to get there..."

Great. We did know each other .

At that point I wanted my night to be over as quickly as possible. So I threw my guitar into her backseat and sat beside her, closing my eyes and trying to recall her name. It would be the least I could do to say "thanks" for the lift home.

By the time we reached my building, I still hadn't dredged up her name.

"Thanks..... er...." Thank God she laughed.

"Josie," she smiled.

"Sorry."

"You don't need to be," she shook her head. "We all have *those nights*, from time to time, right?"

I didn't know if she was referring to the stellar night I seemed to be having... or to our earlier meeting that I couldn't remember. But she wasn't acting bitchy. So I was truly grateful.

"I hate to ask," she smiled a little. "But would you mind, terribly, if I came in for a second to use your bathroom?" I frowned, and she hurried to speak before I could refuse her. "I swear... I'll only be a minute. The one at the bar was disgusting... I couldn't go in there."

"Sure," I nodded. She had given me a ride home. I could offer her this much, at least. "Come on in."

"Wow. You have a really nice place," the girl told me, smiling when I turned on the nearest light to the door.

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"I thought you said that you'd been here before?" I said, confused.

"We... uh... never really made it further than your garage," she chuckled. I scratched my cheek and shook my head. Hell if I could remember even meeting her before.

"Well, the bathroom is right there," I said. She smiled and sashayed in the direction I'd pointed.

While Josie did whatever women do in the bathroom... fixed her lipstick or plotted world-dominance... I paced back and forth across the floor. It didn't feel right, having her there. I hoped that she wouldn't try to linger. Then to make sure she'd get the idea, I walked to my loft door and opened it. Surely she would understand that cue when she emerged from the bathroom.

That was when I saw Bella and Michael in the hall. Bella was dressed in some formal little black dress that was mostly covered by the man's suit jacket that was draped over her shoulders. She looked beautiful, and guilty.

She stammered about how I surprised her, and made an excuse about Rosalie leaving to go to a friend's house. She probably was trying to explain why she was with Michael. But I already had that all figured out. After all, Rosalie had pointed out that Saturday was for an evening of refinement. Apparently Michael fit the bill. Bella's fabrication was unnecessary, but at least it would have seemed plausible if her sister hadn't taken that exact moment to stick her head out their loft door.

Bella didn't belong to me. She could see whomever she chose. If she wanted to get back together with her dick of an ex-boyfriend, she could. But I couldn't believe that she was standing there, lying to me. Bella- the most honest person I had ever known.... or I had *thought* so up until this point. My already foul mood was sharpened when Michael reached to put his arm around her shoulder to steer her down the hall. Fine. Let them go sip their champagne. I didn't need any of it.

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Josie had seen my open door as an invitation to leave, as I had hoped she would, and took that moment to step around me into the hall. I didn't miss that Bella's eyes widened at the sight of her. Inexplicably, I wanted to send *her* a signal as well. Without giving it much more thought than that, I snaked my arm around Josie's waist and pulled until her back came in contact with my chest. I moved her hair away from her shoulder, looking straight into Bella's surprised eyes while I lowered my lips towards the girl's ear.

"Thanks for the ride, love," I whispered loudly, and gave her a tiny little kiss on the neck. It was enough to make me feel like vomiting. She must have just put on some perfume. It made my nose burn and my eyes sting. But at least Bella seemed to have gotten the message. Two could play hurtful games.

"Anytime! Bye!" Josie giggled and made her way down the hall.

"Are you two coming?" Rosalie asked, stepping closer. Bella had gone completely white, and was shrugging out from under Michael's arm. He didn't seem very happy about it. But I was. And because my blood was still boiling, I could only think of increasing that distance between them. She was handing him his jacket, and I barely heard the words, she had spoken so quietly.

"Thank you Michael. I'm not cold anymore."

I don't know what in the hell possessed me. Suddenly I felt like the first man on the moon... only I forgot to put up the flag to let everyone know that I had gotten there first. And though I hated myself for what I was about to do... it would make me a bastard at best... I felt my face pull into a sneer as I looked at that smug son of a bitch standing next to Bella and I said it anyway.

"I wish I would have gotten your sweater back to you sooner. I found it, by the way. It was under my bed."

She didn't blush. If anything, her face turned positively ashen. And my verbal diarrhea just kept coming.

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"You can stop by for it whenever you'd like, love. Though we both know by now, that I know better ways to warm you up."

Her nod was barely an infinitesimal lifting of her chin. Her eyes focused on the floor in front of her as Rosalie glared at me from her place in the hall. Michael just placed his hand on the small of Bella's back and began to lead her away. I felt the urge to jump forward and tear his arm from his shoulder. But I was pretty much held immobile by the guilt of what I'd just done. She trusted me to keep what had happened between us private. I'd pretty much announced to everyone that our relationship was anything but platonic.

The two of them made their way to the end of the hall. I watched them go, feeling horrible. So she had gone out with Michael. Maybe she lied about needing a ride home to spare my feelings. Did that really make her deserve me outing our relationship, as it were, in front of her sister and her date? I had broken a confidence. It was uncalled for. I deserved whatever ire I'd have to face.

Just as the three of them made it back to her loft, Bella stiffened her shoulders and turned to march right back to my doorway. I expected her to be angry. I expected her to scream, and maybe cry, and tell me off properly. But I wasn't expecting the coldness that had stolen her features. She looked positively frozen.

And then she pulled back her arm and slapped me across the face. Viciously.

This was not one of those romantic movie-type slaps that ended with the heroine being captured in her lover's arms for a kiss. She meant to hurt me, as badly as I had just hurt her. I guess I should be grateful that she decided not to throw a punch. I got the feeling that girl had a mean right hook.

Without a word, she turned and walked away.

And I was alone. Again.

-BPOV-

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My palm still stung when Michael and I joined Rosalie and her guest. I had slapped Edward hard. And I hoped it hurt. He deserved it. Rosalie clearly couldn't question me about what had taken place in the hall, but I saw her sending curious glances my way while she struggled to make up for my lack of participation in the conversation. Michael seemed quiet and made his excuses to leave quickly. I escaped to my room as soon as I was politely able to do so. Rosalie's inquisition would have to wait.

She didn't have to wait long. She found me hovering over the coffee pot the next morning. I stared at the slow drips, cursing the slow percolation process.

"Spill," she said behind me. I jumped at the unexpected sound of her voice. Rather than play innocent, I simply cursed the coffee maker one more time and sat at the breakfast table with my hands folded in front of me.

"What do you want to know?" I asked.

Of course, she wanted to know if I slept with Edward. I wasn't quite expecting the reaction I got when I admitted we had been together. She actually seemed excited about it. I wasn't sure which was worse then... her lecture about how she had warned me against getting involved with a womanizer like him- or her press for the dirty details. She hit a brick wall with that one. It was too personal to share, even with my sister. And despite *his* lack of discretion, that was still between Edward and me.

Which is how the whole situation was to have remained. Edward broke my trust when he all but announced that we had slept together in front of my sister and Michael. Worse- he had made it all sound so... *typical*. Maybe I was the fool for thinking that any of it had been something beyond normal for him. Even if it wasn't precluded with some grand announcement of love, it certainly had meant something to *me*. And he managed to make it seem ugly. *Damn him*. That hurt.

And then, there was the girl. Edward knew what he was doing when he leaned down to whisper to her. He looked me straight in the eye while he kissed her. It shouldn't have bothered me as much as it did. But I had been foolishly flattered

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when he said that he hadn't been with other women since the night we first kissed. Obviously that didn't mean that he wouldn't be with women in the future.

God- I felt like such an idiot. If I hadn't let my heart get involved, none of this would hurt so much. But I did. And so I had to deal with the pain.

"Just, please," I asked my sister. "Stop trying to set me up with people. I know you mean well... but, I want to handle things on my own. I'll date *who* I want, *when* I want. Alright?"

"Fine. Fine," Rosalie waved me off. "But if this is because you're hoping that Edward..."

"The only thing I'm hoping is that he'll stay the hell away from me," I said sharply, letting my anger speak for me.

I began working around the ache in my chest by staying busy with school and staying away from home. Study groups were easy to organize at Eric or Tyler's place, and a nearby café had wireless internet. I also spent a lot of time in the library. I didn't want to take the chance of running into Edward. I didn't want to see him. At all. When I *was* home, I was tense and edgy. Rosalie did her best to try to draw me out of my foul mood.

"You know, Edward was probably just jealous," Rosalie brought the subject up again a few days later, as she carried a mug of coffee into my room and placed it on the desk next to me. I shook my head, stubbornly.

"He doesn't want me like that," I said with conviction. He didn't want *anyone* like *that*. Irina had made sure of it. "He... just doesn't want anyone *else* to have me like that, either." I put my head down on my desk, relieved when Rosalie let the subject drop and stepped out of my room. As soon as I was alone, I straightened my shoulders and pulled out my day planner along with my favorite pencil.

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Click-click-click. I let my eyes scan the notes in front of me, and threw all of my attention into filling the spaces to keep myself busy. To keep myself from thinking of Edward. And to keep myself from focusing on the pain in my chest. But it was hard to push the anger and hurt away, as my fingers traced the slightly recessed shape of an 'X' that was pressed into the current page I was writing plans on. Sunday, a week ago, my planning page had been noted with the lunch that Rosalie had promised to buy for Edward and me. We both had laughed about the Happy Meals that we would choose. But then Edward had to ruin everything by acting like a cruel, insensitive bastard. And the worst part was... I *knew* he was a better person than that. He had shown me how caring he really could be. I trusted him. But he slipped right back behind that wall where he liked to hide from the world. And he left me standing on the other side of it. I had so viciously drawn an 'X' through the notes scheduling our lunch, that the pressed image of the letter still haunted me in my plans, a week later. I sighed and tossed my book aside. Time. I just needed time. Or maybe I needed to get a clue, and put up my own damn wall. Maybe it would hurt less, if I had a place to hide, too.

Reviews are better than borrowed jackets. Leave one.

Icecream and Daisies

A/N: Twilight belongs to S. Meyer. I'm just running her characters through a few chord progressions.

-EPOV-

I stood motionless in the hall for a minute or two, before my earlier rage caught back up with me. This time it twisted its hateful tentacles to mix with a healthy dose of derision that I placed on myself, for the way I had handled the whole situation.

Because I should have stood there and smiled and wished them a nice evening. I should have pretended that I didn't care.

Because I wasn't *supposed* to care.

And it pissed me off to no end that I did.

I slammed my door loudly, and grabbed the nearest object- the glass bowl where I usually tossed my keys, and hurled it to break into jagged clattering pieces against my wall. I didn't want Bella with Michael. But I'd gone and practically pushed her right into his eagerly waiting arms. They were down the hall having cocktails, and probably enjoying the rest of their evening together. And I...

My chest heaved while I stood there, trying to get a grip. I shouldn't have done that to her. I shouldn't have made her think that I was with Josie. I was an asshole. And I deserved it if Bella never spoke to me again.

And maybe, that would be best.

I tried to convince myself of that, over the next two weeks when Bella's absence from my life made me absolutely, fucking miserable.

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I didn't see her in the hall. I didn't see her outside. The girl disappeared. I tried to tell myself that it was a blessing in disguise. I wasn't sure what I would say to her, even if our paths *did* cross. I kept telling myself that things would get back to normal. And that maybe, soon, I'd stop missing her so damn much.

I tried to write. I tried to go out. I *didn't* try to spend time with any other women. I... just wasn't interested. Women were a hassle that I didn't need in my life. But I drank too much. And I stayed out too late. And I slept away the daytime hours that I didn't need anymore. My life was pretty much as it was before Bella stumbled into it.

On a morning when I was required to be up early, I dragged myself over to Jenks' office for our familiar routine. My shirt still smelled like the beer I'd sloshed on it the night before, and he grimaced as I reached into my pocket for my pack of smokes.

"You know you can't smoke in here, Anthony," he sighed. It was our typical greeting.

"Like I give a fuck," I muttered, but I pushed my pack down into my pocket instead of lighting up. "And, it's Edward."

"Thank you, Edward," he replied. I shrugged.

"Can we just get this over with?" I asked.

"Are you still at the same address?" he asked, opening up his notebook.

"Yep."

"Same job?"

"Yep."

"Drugs?"

"Nope."

He looked at my appearance as though he thought about arguing. I leaned forward and put my forearms on my knees before smirking.

"Long night," I said lowly. "Too many beers. Too much pussy. No drugs, though. I don't do that shit."

Jenks gulped and reached for his coffee cup. I had lied about the pussy. But I liked keeping him on his toes.

"I guess that answers the next question," he said, placing his mug back on the table.

"About?"

"Relationship status."

I frowned then and Jenks studied my face for a moment.

"Has that changed?" he asked. I swallowed hard and turned my head to look at the diplomas and certificates he had displayed on his wall.

"No," I said quietly. "That hasn't changed."

I don't know why it bothered me to say that out loud. A few months ago, I'd been happy to announce that I hadn't fallen into that trap. I didn't look at him again until I heard the perforated tear of the check from his ledger. I accepted it without a word, and left the office.

I don't know why the last question made me so fucking moody. I mean, I didn't want to be in a relationship. Not really. Not at all. It just... left me feeling unsettled. Because while Bella and I were never in an actual relationship, it was probably the closest I had ever really had to one. And I missed having her in my life.

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I was still mulling it over when I deposited my check, and stopped in at a gas station near home to pick up a few things I needed. Milk... cigarettes... beer... cereal... I remained lost in my thoughts until I opened the door to exit, and ran almost straight into Rosalie.

"He lives!" she exclaimed, causing me to look up and squint at her in the sunlight.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"Getting gas?" she tilted her head and stared at me quizzically. "You look like death."

"Thanks," I muttered, moving to step around her. She turned and followed me out toward my car.

"Couldn't leave well enough alone, could you?" Rosalie asked. I sighed and placed the brown bag that I carried on my passenger seat, before turning toward her. I knew this was coming, sooner or later.

"How is she?" I asked.

"Is that really any of your business?" Rosalie asked. I sighed. She stood with her legs apart, and her arms folded over her chest. I was in no mood to deal with her bullshit. "I told you to stay away from her, Edward."

"Maybe she didn't want to stay away from *me*," I smirked coldly. Rosalie narrowed her eyes and jabbed the sharp tip of her pointer finger into the center of my chest.

"Don't play tough guy with *me*, Edward!" she hissed. I brushed her hand away from me and she glared. "I didn't want her getting hurt. I didn't want you to turn her into another one of your conquests!"

"It wasn't like that!" I said loudly. "Not with her. Not ever." I stared right back into her eyes. It hurt to think that Bella might feel I'd done that. But I'd never

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intended anything of the sort. I cared about the girl. Rosalie looked at me for a moment before her posture changed. She dropped her arms and took a step back. Something on my face must have cooled her off a little.

"Jesus," she breathed. "This has messed with you. Hasn't it?"

"You could say that," I said, tiredly running the back of my hand over my neck. "Listen," I said quietly. "I didn't take advantage of her. She... means a lot to me. I didn't handle things well. I admit that. But I didn't... it just wasn't like that. Alright?"

"Yeah," Rosalie nodded. "Yeah. Okay."

"Okay then," I told her. She still hadn't moved, and I turned to get into my car.

"She wasn't out with Michael that night," Rosalie said. My hand froze on my door and I frowned. "She really did go to a charity dinner with me. Michael bought the tickets for all of us, but she didn't know that until we got there."

"They looked pretty fucking cozy in the hall together," I said through gritted teeth, before I could stop myself.

"I sort of ditched her there with him," Rosalie said then. "I was going to go to my friend's house, so I asked Michael to give Bella a ride back to the Abbey. My plans changed, and we came back to the loft for nightcaps instead."

I turned to look at her with my eyebrows down.

"It's the truth," she said. "You can do what you want with it. But I thought you should know. Bella and Michael aren't back together. "

Rosalie flipped her hair over her shoulder and turned to walk away. I just groaned and pressed my forehead to the roof of my car.

Bella had been telling me the truth, and I fucked up, completely. And now, it was going to be up to me to fix things. If she'd let me.

-BPOV-

I tried to keep myself busy. I really did. But everything I tried to do to take my mind of things, only made me focus on the reason I had for doing so. I was more miserable than ever. I was between projects at school and had nothing to occupy my mind from the man I knew was right down the hall. I missed him. And that just made me angry.

I stalked into the kitchen and grabbed a spoon from the utensil drawer before hopping to sit on the counter to eat directly out of a carton of ice cream. Triple Fudgy Meltdown. I could feel my ass getting bigger with each bite. I didn't care. Rosalie entered the kitchen then, holding a cellophane wrapped bundle of daisies.

I licked the back of my spoon and frowned over at her flowers. Usually her dates sent more extravagant arrangements to try to impress her. She filled a vase with water and somehow resisted making a comment about me eating my feelings.

"I saw Edward at the gas station this morning," she told me with a quiet voice. I had to hand it to Rosalie. She had really been sweet about this whole thing. She had even managed to keep her "I-told-you-so's" to a minimum. I shrugged like it didn't matter and dug my spoon towards the bottom of the carton. "And just now, he brought these flowers by for you."

My eyes flew back to the cheery flowers that she was arranging in the vase. I guess that solved the mystery. The flowers would never have impressed Rosalie. But Edward knew me well enough to know that I would love them. She held a small folded note between her fingers and held it towards me. I hesitated only a minute before taking it and opening it.

Sluggo-

I'm so very sorry, and I miss you.

-E

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I rolled my eyes and laid it beside me on the counter, turning my attention back to the ice cream in my lap.

"Maybe you should give the guy a break, B," Rosalie suggested. I could hardly believe my ears, and I looked at her, feeling stunned. "I think he really misses you," she continued. "And he looks even worse than usual. He's a mess."

"Whose side are you on?" I groaned.

"There shouldn't be sides," Rosalie said coolly. "You told me yourself- you two are friends."

"Yeah... I thought we were."

"*Just* friends?" she pressed. "Even though you two did the deed?"

"Yes," I nodded, not wanting to let her know how much more I felt for him. "*Just* friends."

"So then why are you acting like you broke up?" She sent a pointed glance down at the ice cream I held, and I swallowed loudly. I never told her that I had made the mistake of falling in love with the guy. But there I sat, clearly nursing a broken heart.

"Did you know that Edward thought you were actually out on a date with Michael? I straightened him out on that. I totally took the blame for trying to set you up that night. He seemed... *relieved*."

"I'm sure you're wrong," I insisted. "He was with a *girl* that night, Rose," I sighed. " *Before* he saw me with Michael."

"Well, that is something that the two of you need to deal with," Rosalie shrugged. "But you can't deal with anything when you're avoiding him."

"Why does it matter to you? You don't even like him," I mumbled.

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"Edward isn't such a bad guy. And believe it or not, I think that his friendship was good for you. I hate to see you both looking so unhappy."

"He looked unhappy?" I asked.

"If Ben and Jerry made a Heineken flavor, I'd bet he'd be pigging out on ice cream too," Rosalie smiled.

I tossed my spoon into the sink and put the unfinished ice cream back in the freezer. Turning to go back to my room, the cheery little flowers caught my attention again. After only a moment of hesitation, I picked up my daisies to take them with me.

Reviews are better than beer flavored ice cream. Leave one.

Toasted

A/N: Twilight belongs to S. Meyer. I'm just running her characters through a few chord progressions.

-EPOV-

It had been two weeks since I had seen or spoken to Bella. It was getting ridiculous. I felt like shit for what I had done, but she wouldn't even give me a chance to apologize. I had even bought her flowers. Rosalie told me she wasn't home... and I'm pretty sure she was lying to me. But she promised to give them to Bella and even managed to not make some smart ass comment when I reluctantly handed them over. And okay- so I chose them because they reminded me of one of Bella's cute bras. But they really were sweet little daisies. Just the sight of them in the shop window made me smile, and they looked like something she would like. After what Rosalie had told me, I knew I had some major ass-kissing to do.

Not that it mattered. Bella was still avoiding me.

I knew I probably deserved it if she never wanted to talk to me again. I really was horrible to her. Bella had been telling the truth about being with Michael. I should have known that she wouldn't lie. I should have had more faith in her. And I needed to realize that I had no claim over her. If I wanted to be her friend, I would have to act like one.

But now it was too late, and I might not be given the chance again.

I scratched my whiskery cheek and reached my hand to light another cigarette. Here I was at the bar again, trying to find the solution to my troubles in the bottom of a beer bottle. Maybe if I kept looking, I'd find it. Might as well order another. The bartender, Emmett, knew me well. He just shook his head and popped the top before placing the bottle in front of me. I didn't meet his eyes. I didn't want to see pity there. And I had no desire to strike up a conversation. I was fine with drinking alone.

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In fact- I wanted to be left alone. Which is exactly why I was so annoyed when a brown-haired girl in a short green skirt slid onto the barstool next to me. She ordered something fruity and glanced at me from under her long fake lashes. I squinted at her and tried to figure out if she would even be remotely attractive if my vision wasn't so blurry. If she had a beard and smaller tits, she would actually look a whole lot like the drummer of my band.

"Screw you!" She hissed and walked away quickly. *Shit. Did I say that out loud?* Emmett was laughing into his fist. *Yep. I guess I did.* I snorted and brought my beer back to my mouth. I would need to have Emmett call a cab for me soon. I could feel the familiar dizziness starting to take hold. I had been falling into bed with this feeling all too often in the past two weeks. I needed to get a grip.

But God, I missed Bella.

"Hey, Edward?" I sighed loudly and rolled my eyes. What now? But then I took a deep breath and relaxed when I saw that Kate, the waitress, was standing beside me. She was a decent enough girl.

"Yeah love?" I muttered.

"Can I ask you a question?"

"I have a feeling you are going to whether I agree or not," I slurred.

"What's got you so down, man?" She asked, sounding worried. "I mean, I've known you for a while. And I've never seen you like this."

"I'm a dick," I moaned and put my head down onto my arms on the bar.

"Well yeah- we know that," she laughed

"Remember that girl? Bella?"

"The real pretty, young thing you brought in here? Can't hold her liquor?"

Click & Strum

"That's the one," I smiled. "She was my friend. A really, good person. And I just... ruined everything. She won't even talk to me."

"Give it some time," she said as she laid her hand on my arm. "If she's as good a person as you think she is, I'll bet she'll come around."

I hoped so. I was about to ask Kate to call me a cab, when my attention was drawn to the big man who walked up behind her and crossed his arms over his massive chest. My vision wasn't exactly clear, but I could tell by looking at him that he wasn't happy, and he seemed to be staring at me.

He wore a flannel shirt and work boots, and he spoke with a slight country twang. Definitely one of the good old boys from across the river. My guess was Southern Illinois.

"Hey. You got something to say about my sisters' tits?" the man asked loudly.

I almost laughed at his question. But then my eyes landed on little Miss Green-Skirt who stood off to the side glaring at me too.

"She's your sister?" I asked, pointing at her.

"Yeah."

"Well no. I don't have anything to say about her tits," I slurred. "Her doctor did a great job."

"What the hell kind of accent you got there, sissy boy?" The man asked. "You sound gay. Are you gay?"

I cringed. Traces of what was left of my accent occasionally came out when I was drinking. Lucky me, he picked up on it.

"No, I'm not gay," I mumbled, lifting my beer to my mouth and turning my head to dismiss him.

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"What'd you say there, fancy-boy?" The man growled and put his hand on my shoulder. That pissed me off. I didn't want him touching me.

"I said," I turned and tried to speak clearly. "If I was gay... I might find your sister more attractive." I snorted. "You like Aerosmith? Yeah... you know the song. Dude looks like a lady..."

Well... at least *I* thought it was funny. I did, that is, until I felt myself falling backwards. A heavy punch landed near my temple, and I felt myself crashing to the floor. *What in the hell was with everyone wanting to hit me lately?* I staggered up to my feet and lunged towards the flannel shirt in front of me, wrapping my arms around the man's thick waist and trying to take him down in a tackle. We both hit the floor hard. I could hear the Emmett yelling for us to break it up. The police were on their way.

-BPOV-

The angry red numbers on my alarm clock screamed that it was two twenty-seven in the morning. I focused on the numbers and yawned, trying to figure out why I was looking at my clock display. Then I heard it again. My cell phone was ringing from somewhere on my desk. Not many people had that number, and I worried briefly that it might be some sort of emergency to make someone call at such an ungodly hour. So I swung my legs from my bed and stumbled to the desk to find my phone.

With the offending electronic device in my hands, I frowned at the display screen. It wasn't even a number I recognized. Satisfied that it wasn't an emergency call from someone I knew, I considered letting it go to voice mail. But then curiosity got the best of me, and I pressed a button to answer the call.

"Hello?" My voice was still husky with sleep, so I tried to clear it quietly.

"Is this Bella?" A woman's voice was not one that I recognized, but it was clearly not a wrong number.

"Yes, it is."

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"Hi," the voice sounded relieved. "Sorry... you might not remember me. My name is Kate. We met when you came with Edward down to Muddy's bar. I was your waitress..."

"Oh, Hi," I mumbled. I did remember her, but had no idea why she would be calling me.

"I'm so sorry to call this late," she quickly told me. "I got your number from Edward's phone. There was a bit of a situation. And well, I remembered that you were his neighbor."

I was immediately alarmed. "Is everything okay? Is Edward alright?" I asked quickly.

"He's alright," she chuckled. "For the most part anyway. Edward got himself into a fight. And Emmett and I thought that maybe if you could come get him and take him home, he could avoid a trip to jail."

I frowned up at the ceiling and rubbed my eyes. I might be upset with the guy, but there was no way that I was going to stand by and let him be hauled off to jail.

"I can be there in fifteen minutes," I told her.

"Great. Come around back, will you? Emmett can keep the police out front and no one will be the wiser."

Fifteen minutes later, and still dressed in my pajamas, I arrived at Muddy's. The flashing red and blue lights of the police cruiser out front made the old brick riverfront buildings look eerie. I followed the service alley as directed, and found Edward sitting on the back steps propped up between Kate and the man I recognized from checking ID's at the door. She smiled when she saw my car.

"Thanks for coming," she said. "This is Danny. He's a bouncer here."

"Hi Danny," I said. My attention was on Edward, who for all intents and purposes looked like he had already passed out. His head lolled forward and his hair hung heavily to veil his face.

"Are you sure he's alright?" I asked.

"He took a couple good hits," Kate nodded. "But he's mostly just drunk. The other guy started the fight really. Emmett figured Edward had been punished enough. We were nearly closed, so there were only a few regulars left, and no one was going to identify Edward. We've just been sitting back here waiting for you." Kate explained everything while she and Danny stood with Edward between them. Together, they managed to get him to my car. I opened the back door for them, and they helped to lower him inside.

"Well, thank you for calling," I said again. "I'm sure he'll appreciate it when he wakes up."

"Oh, I know he will!" Kate smiled. Then she tapped on the back window. "You owe me big time for this, Edward!"

Edward groaned and I looked over my shoulder when I got behind the wheel. "Don't puke in my car," I warned. And then I sent Kate a small wave and drove my inebriated passenger home.

I made it back to the Abbey in complete silence, convinced that Edward was asleep. He didn't move or make a sound until I opened the back door of my car for him. When my interior light came on, Edward finally squinted against the light and opened his eyes enough to look at me. "Bella?" he asked, sounding surprised. "What are you doing here?" He might as well have been in a cab. It was like he didn't even know that I had driven him home.

"I'm trying to keep you out of jail," I muttered with irritation. "And I'm going to try to get you into your loft. But I'll need some help. I won't be able to carry you."

"I can walk," he slurred. After a brief struggle to get out of my backseat, he was able to stand on his own beside my car. Thank God for that. If he could

walk, I could keep him upright. It was the most I could hope for. I went to his side and pulled his arm heavily over my shoulders.

"Come on Rocky. Let's get you inside."

"It's Edward. Who's Rocky?"

He totally missed my boxing joke. I decided to let it slide. Besides, it was taking all of my concentration to keep his feet on the straight sidewalk towards our building. He was swerving us both on a curvy path as he staggered heavily. Somehow I managed to get him up the stairs and down our hall. When I propped him up against the wall next to his door, I asked for his keys. He just closed his eyes and half-heartedly patted on the outside of his jacket pockets. *Great.* I took a step forward and reached into his jacket to search on my own. *Nothing.* He still stood there with his eyes closed, not saying a word. So I gritted my teeth and reached behind him to pat his back jeans pockets. That made him grin. My eyes tightened with my resolve. I frowned and pushed my hand into his front jeans pocket. He shifted a little and laughed.

"One comment Edward, and I will leave you to sleep here. I swear to God I will."

"Sorry," he tried to pull the smile from his face while I crammed my hand into his other front pocket. This time I was rewarded by his keys under my fingers.

"You could have got these for me," I muttered while I turned the key in the lock.

"I know." He was smiling again with his eyes closed. I just sighed and grabbed him by the arm to turn him into his loft. I moved to drop his keys into the dish by the door, and was surprised to see it missing. I placed his keys on the bare table-top instead and Edward threw his arm around me again while I fumbled for a light switch. I felt his face press into the side of my hair and I stiffened as he inhaled deeply.

"No one smells as good as you."

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"That's nice Edward," I groaned, leading him towards his bedroom.

"I'm serious," he slurred the 's' sound. "You smell soft... and sweet."

"Okay..."

"Bella... you smell like marshmallows." *Marshmallows?* I couldn't help but find his current obsession with my smell to be a little funny. But it brought to light the problem I was having with *his* current condition.

"Well I wish I could say the same," I finally said. "You smell like Muddy's floor."

"I spent a lot of time down there on the floor," he nodded clumsily. "I'm sorry. I'll never be able to fight for your honor." He leaned forward and whispered loudly, "I've been told I punch like a girl."

"It's too late to fight for my honor anyway," I muttered. "But let's get you out of these clothes."

He didn't say a word as I stripped him of his jacket and shirt. But when my hands went to the waistband of his jeans, that irrepressible grin came back across his face.

"I'll show you mine, if you show me yours," Edward said with a husky voice. I rolled my eyes.

"Shut up Edward!" I put my hand on his chest and pushed him backwards. He fell easily onto his bed and laughed. But I was able to make short work of removing his shoes and jeans. When he was in his boxer shorts, I left him there and took his nasty pile of clothes into his bathroom.

I grimaced when I saw the large pile of dirty clothes on the bathroom floor. He clearly had not used his laundry service in a while. In fact, the whole bathroom was dirty. Bypassing the man on the bed, I walked slowly back through his loft. This time I noticed what I hadn't before. Edward usually kept his living space fairly tidy. But his place now, was a mess. I put my hands on my hips. I

had planned to stay for a while, in case Edward woke up and needed something. Now I knew that I could keep myself busy while staying available for him.

I began by placing all of the dirty clothes I could find in a basket that I found in the corner of his bedroom. I took them to my own loft to toss them in the wash with a copious amount of detergent. While they washed, and then dried, I spent time at Edward's place washing his dishes, sweeping his floors, and throwing away all of the clutter that littered his floors, counter tops, and end tables. He had dozens of sheets of paper around his chair that looked to be scribbled with lyrics or possible chord progressions. I simply stacked those and left them on his coffee table. By the time I sat folding his laundry, I was really exhausted. It was nearly five in the morning. So I quietly placed the stacks of folded clothes on the chair in his bedroom, and walked back out to lay down on his couch. He hadn't moved or made a sound since I got him in bed. Surely it wouldn't hurt for me to rest my eyes... at least for a little while.

Reviews are better than Aerosmith. Leave one.

Back to the Basics

A/N: Twilight belongs to S. Meyer. I'm just running her characters through a few chord progressions.

-EPOV-

I rolled over with a groan, and winced as pain lashed through my temple.

"Fuck," I moaned. I sat up, and threw my bare legs over the edge of my bed, concentrating on the cold floor beneath my feet to help me shake off the fog of sleep. My mouth tasted like ass, and as I pressed my lips together in distaste, I felt the sting at the corner of my mouth that reminded me that I'd been punched in the face, repeatedly, the night before at the bar. Yeah... I'd gotten in a fight. Not my finest moment. I looked down at my bruised knuckles, feeling only slightly mollified that I must have gotten in a couple of good hits of my own. But then I blinked bleary eyes toward my wall. How in the hell had I gotten home?

I took a cab when I left to go out. Thank fuck I hadn't tried to drive. My bed was in the same sorry state that I had left it in. So obviously I hadn't been brought home by anyone hoping for a casual screw. Since I couldn't even remember how I got my clothes off, I'm certain that nothing like that had happened anyway. I had been so plastered, I was sure couldn't have gotten it up, if I tried.

I looked around, and my confusion only heightened when I noticed what appeared to be a stack of clothes on my bedroom chair.

"What the fuck?" I asked out loud. I shook my head, wincing again at the pain it caused, and tried to remember anything to help me piece shit together. I was at Muddy's. I'd been drinking. I got in a fight. Then there was something about Kate? I owed her something... But then everything went black. And I had been dreaming... about *marshmallows*? I was going off the deep end. I seriously needed to get my shit together.

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First things first. I needed aspirin and water. And I needed a fucking shower.

I stumbled into the bathroom connected to my bedroom, and turned the water on as hot as it would go. After rummaging through my medicine cabinet, I swallowed a couple aspirin down with water cupped in my hand from the sink, and then studied my reflection for a moment. I had a bruise that darkened the skin under my eye and across my cheekbone toward my ear, and a cut in the corner of my mouth. Not as bad as I'd feared. With a sigh, I dropped my boxers on the floor before stepping under the stinging shower spray. The steam and hot water actually helped me to feel more human and cleared my head. I soaped down and washed my hair, with my thoughts still occupied about all the missing pieces in my memory from the night before. It wasn't until I finished, and reached for the towel hanging outside the shower door, that I realized... there was a *towel* hanging outside the shower door. I wrapped it quickly around my waist, and stepped out of the stall, seeing with clearer eyes. I hadn't even noticed... my whole bathroom was clean.

Dripping water everywhere, I hurried back out into my room. My clothes... those were *my* clothes... clean and folded on the chair in my room. I slipped a little on the floor as I rushed into my living room. Everything... was clean. Everything was in place.

And Bella was sleeping on my couch.

My heart pounded furiously in my chest as I stood there, staring at her in disbelief. *Bella* had brought me home? She had put me to bed. And apparently, she had cleaned my entire fucking loft while I was a passed-out waste in the other room.

I could hardly believe my eyes, and I was afraid she would disappear if I so much as blinked. So I quietly moved to the corner of the room, and lowered myself into the chair. I sat there for a while, just soaking up the image of her actually being in my loft. She was dressed in pajamas, and her hands were pressed under her cheek while she softly snored, unaware that I sat there watching her. She was curled up on her side, and she didn't even have a blanket or a pillow. I frowned, and sat back, rubbing at the center of my wet chest. I

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wanted to wake her up. I wanted to rush to her side and hug her and thank her and apologize for everything I had done to mess up things between us. But I knew that I should let her sleep. She must have been fucking exhausted, if I hadn't woken her with my shower and stumbling around.

So as quietly as I could, I went to the other room and grabbed a blanket off my bed. I returned, and draped the material as gently as possible over her sleeping form. She just murmured a little and snuggled under the new warmth. The action made my chest tighten, and I stepped away, satisfied that I'd made her at least a little more comfortable. Then I left the room to finish drying off, and got dressed.

It was two hours later, and she was still sleeping. Though I hated to do it, I couldn't take it anymore. So I pushed open the window and stood beside it to have a smoke. I didn't want to take the chance of her waking up and leaving while I went outside for a cigarette. I had taken a couple of drags, before I turned back to look at her and saw that her eyes were open. She hadn't moved, but was laying there, looking at me in silence. We stared at each other for a minute before I tossed my cigarette out the window and pulled it closed again with a sigh.

"Hi," I said tentatively sitting back down in the chair across the room. Bella raised herself to sit, looking in confusion at the blanket she pushed away before lifting her eyes back to mine.

"Hi," she said softly. Her voice was raspy with sleep, and I gave her a small, embarrassed smile.

"I suppose thanks are in order..." I said, glancing around at our clean surroundings. Bella frowned.

"I was afraid you'd throw up or something... in your sleep," she muttered. "I didn't have anything else to do while I waited..."

"You shouldn't have done all this," I shook my head. "The place was... disgusting. And... I didn't deserve it."

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"No. You didn't," she agreed quietly. "But... uh... you know how I am about messes."

"Yeah," I said, sheepishly running my hand through my hair. "Yeah. I know."

We both nervously cleared our throats. Bella hadn't moved to stand yet, but I was afraid she soon would.

"It's so fucking good to see you here," I admitted in a rush.

"Edward..." Bella breathed and looked down.

"No. No... please," I told her. "I know I fucked things up. Badly. Please... just... we need to talk. Can we? Talk?"

Bella didn't say anything, but she nodded, and then she moved her hand to shift the blanket over her lap, creating a space for me to sit on the couch. I hurried to accept the silent invitation, and sat down beside her.

After a few moments of silence, Bella turned her body to look at me.

"Thanks for the flowers," she said.

"I was just trying to say I'm sorry," I told her. "I'm so fucking sorry, Bella."

"For what?" She sounded tired and wary. Bella wasn't blowing-off the reasons I had to apologize with her simple question. She just wasn't letting me off the hook without having to elaborate. Cellophane wrapped daisies weren't going to be enough. She wanted to know, specifically, that my apology held weight.

"I'm sorry for hurting you," I said sincerely. I wanted to move closer, and reach for her hand. But I knew my coming any nearer to her would be unwelcome at that point. She had already offered quite enough, by sticking around so that we could talk. "I don't know what came over me..." I closed my eyes and groaned. "Shit, Bella. I saw you with Michael and... I just wasn't even myself. I was so... *livid*..." I swallowed hard. "But I had no excuse to be. You're my friend. And...

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you should be able to spend time with whomever you choose to..."

"I wasn't out on a date with Michael," Bella said. "I tried to tell you..."

"I know," I groaned and dropped my head. "I was... behaving like a jealous ass. And I had *no* right to."

"*You* were with someone else too," Bella pointed out quietly. I looked up to see that she was frowning down at the floor.

"My car broke down at the bar," I explained. "That girl just gave me a ride home..." I watched as Bella cringed. "That was *all*," I said. "I swear. She came in to use the bathroom. And that was it."

"Edward," Bella sighed. "You don't have to just say that..."

"I'm not," I shook my head quickly. "I know how it looked. Hell... Bella... I know how I *made* it look. But I wasn't with her. Aside from a rather disgusting attempt to make you think otherwise, at the door..." I dropped my head sadly, and pressed the heel of my hand to my forehead. "I was pissed. And... I wanted to hurt you. There was no excuse for that. None at all."

"Well," Bella said quietly. "It worked."

I swallowed the lump in my throat. I knew I'd hurt her. It sucked to hear her confirm it, though. I looked around the room.

"You've fixed this mess..." I said, sweeping my hand in front of me. "So... will you give me a chance to fix *this* one?" I motioned between the two of us, and hated the uncertain look that remained on her face.

"How?" she nearly whispered.

"By letting me be your friend. The way I should have, all along," I told her. "I crossed a line Bella. A line that I should never have crossed. And... I think it made things too confusing. I sure as hell know that I was confused by everything," I admitted with honesty. I watched as she nodded slowly, still not

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looking at me. My hand reached forward, and I hesitated only a second before allowing myself to tuck a piece of sleep-tangled hair that had fallen out of her ponytail, behind her ear.

"You didn't cross it alone," Bella shook her head sadly. "And I was confused too..."

"So draw a new one," I told her then. "Draw a line. I'll stay on my side of it. Scout's honor." I held up two fingers in a salute, and Bella looked up at me with the barest hint of a smirk tugging at the corner of her mouth.

"You were never a Scout," Bella pointed out.

"I just want to earn your trust back," I said, teasing aside. "If you'll let me try. I don't want to lose you Bella. I've missed you like crazy."

"So... you want to be friends," Bella said with a soft voice. I nodded eagerly.

"And if..." *not 'if.'* " *When,*" I restated, " *When* you decide that you want to start dating someone... I'll be the friend that I should have been. I'll support you. I won't act like..."

"Like what?" Bella asked, looking into my eyes.

Like you're mine, I wanted to say. I licked my lips.

"Like an asshole," I said instead. Bella sighed and nodded before pushing the blanket off her lap and standing up. I stood up too.

"Alright," she finally said. "I guess... we can try." I couldn't keep a wide grin from pulling across my face. It hurt the cut at the corner of my mouth, but I didn't give a shit.

"Would I be crossing your new line if I just... hugged you?" I asked, feeling pathetic to crave the closeness so badly.

"No. I don't suppose so," Bella shook her head. And just like that, I wrapped my arms around the girl and pulled her into my chest. It only took a moment, before she lightly returned my embrace.

And in that action... everything felt right again.

-BPOV-

Edward apologized. And I could tell... he really meant it. What kind of friend would I be, if I didn't give him a second chance? To be honest, it bothered me a little when it seemed so effortless for him to consider me dating other people. Because I knew that I would have to offer the same support to him with *his* recreational activities. And I didn't know if I had it in me. But I knew that I had to try. It wasn't *his* fault that I'd screwed up the plan by falling for him. I decided the best way to handle that, was to try my best to not even think about it. If he didn't bring it up, neither would I.

And he *didn't* bring it up again. The two of us spending time together was tentative at first. A little awkward. But within a couple of weeks, we slipped back into our familiar comfort zone with one another. Edward was clearly happy to have me around, once more. We hung out at the Abbey in his loft or mine, around my school schedule and around his gigs. Once, we even went to a movie, and he bought the popcorn. He acted just like he always had with me. Well... *almost* like he always had. Gone were the occasional little teasing ways that he used to flirt from time to time. He was taking the new line drawn between us, very seriously. I sometimes wished that he wouldn't. But I couldn't lie. It was a relief to not have my heart clench, the way it did each time he used to send me a suggestive look, wondering if maybe, just maybe, he actually meant more than just teasing.

"I saw that bartender friend of yours," Rosalie told him one night, when we were all sitting around my place watching a movie.

"Emmett?" Edward asked, looking up from where he sat with one leg draped over the edge of the chair.

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"At the grocery store," she nodded. "He told me I should come back into Muddy's sometime. Said he'd buy me a drink. As if," she scoffed.

"Emmett's an alright guy," Edward shrugged. "He's a good person to know."

"He's a *bartender*," Rosalie scrunched her nose. "But hey... maybe he'd be willing to make some side-cash. I'm looking for a bartender to work Bella's party."

"What party?" Edward looked over at me with his eyebrow raised. I just cringed and tried to hide in the neck of my hoodie.

"Her birthday party, you dolt," Rosalie sniffed. "Next weekend. Our parents are flying in and everything. I rented out a room at the club. It's going to be very posh."

"Posh?" He asked again. I just shook my head at him. I didn't want to talk about it in front of Rosalie. I didn't want the party. I hated celebrating my birthday. And I certainly didn't want some formal to-do at the club, in my honor. But Rosalie's mother had tastes very similar to her daughter. And they both had been on the phone for a week, making plans for me.

"I didn't know it was your birthday," Edward remarked.

"Figures," Rosalie said, standing up from where we shared a blanket on the couch. "Well... see if you can drum up a date or something. It's black-tie. So you'll have to actually dress accordingly. And brush your hair. If you can manage that..."

"Hmm." Edward turned his attention back to the television. "Maybe I'll ask Kate if she wants to go. I kinda owe her. She might like a chance to dress up and go out. You remember Kate, Bella? You two seemed to hit it off."

"Yeah... she's nice," I muttered. The whole idea of the evening left a sour taste in my mouth already.

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"You kids be good," Rosalie looked pointedly between us. "I'm going out."

"Have fun," I murmured. Rosalie left us, and we watched the movie in silence for a few minutes before Edward looked at me and stood up.

"Share the blanket," he instructed. I scooted over, and lifted the edge of the blanket, happy to let him slide into the space beside me. He hunched down until the side of our shoulders were touching, and held the worn material up to his chin.

"It's like a fucking ice-box in here," he commented.

"Told you," I said, shifting a little closer to steal some of his body-heat. We sat side by side, with the sides of our arms and legs touching. Nothing inappropriate. Though I kinda wished it could be.

"Why didn't you tell me you were having a party?" Edward asked, turning his face to look at me. I could feel his breath on my cheek, and shrugged, trying to remain unaffected by his nearness. It was as close as we had been since we started working on our friendship again.

"Because I hate the entire idea of it," I told him.

"Do you not want me to be there?"

"Of course I want you there," I sighed. I couldn't look at him. He was close enough that if I turned my head, our noses would be touching. "It's just that my dad and Rosalie's mom are flying in on Wednesday. They're staying through the weekend like it's some big event. I'm really not looking forward to it."

"It will be fun," he nudged me, and turned his face away. "Are you worried about your parents meeting me?"

"Why would you ask that?" I asked as I turned toward him this time. He shrugged.

"You didn't invite me yourself."

"Consider yourself invited. Officially," I told him. "I just didn't think it would be something you would enjoy."

"It's your birthday," he said quietly. "That's a pretty big deal. I can get dressed up in a monkey suit if that's what I need to do, to help you celebrate."

"You can help me celebrate by planning an escape route," I grumbled. "Start weaving a ladder to drop from a back window or something. I'm sure it's going to suck."

Edward laughed, and I leaned my head down to rest on his shoulder.

I woke sometime later. The movie had changed to a static buzz on the television, and Edward was asleep in the corner of the couch. Somehow I'd managed to snuggle down across his chest, and his arms were wrapped around me warmly. I pulled my head up, only far enough to look at the shadows that his lashes left on his cheekbones, and the curve of his soft top lip. Not for the first time, I wished that things could be different between us. I knew such thoughts were dangerous, and that I should retreat back to my side of the sofa. But I was lax to move away from the comfort he unknowingly offered while he slept. Edward must have felt my subtle shifting though, and his lashes fluttered. For one glorious moment, his arms tightened around me and his hands made a soft pass up and down my back. But then as he became fully conscious, he stiffened and dropped his arms.

"Sorry about that," I said, moving away.

"Yeah... er..." Edward sat up as I did, and pulled his hands through his hair with a raspy chuckle. "I guess I was pretty tired."

"You should get in bed," I told him. " *Your* bed. You know. Your loft. To your bed. To sleep..." I was stumbling for words, but Edward just laughed.

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"Yeah, yeah. I get it. You're kicking me out," he smirked and stood up. I stared at the exposed skin of his lower back before he straightened his t-shirt. On the contrary, I'd have liked nothing better than to just invite him back to my room so I could continue sleeping in his arms. Instead I sighed and stood up to walk him toward the door.

"So. Party. Next weekend..." he said. I licked my lips and nodded.

"If you aren't busy with a gig or something," I told him.

"I won't be busy," he said with a soft smile. "I wouldn't miss it."

"Okay then."

"And... if there's anything I can do to help. With whatever..." Edward shrugged. "Just let me know."

"Actually, " I said, stopping him by putting my hand on the door. "There *is* one thing..."

"What's that?" He asked, turning with his eyebrow raised.

I considered for one brief moment, asking him to forget about inviting Kate to accompany me, instead. But I gulped, and thought better of it.

"I'm not really sure about driving out to the airport," I told him. "Do you think that maybe you could give me a ride on Wednesday? To pick up my parents?"

Edward smiled and nodded.

"Sure thing," he told me. "Wednesday. No problem."

Reviews are better than sharing a blanket. Leave one.

Gardenia

A/N: Twilight belongs to S. Meyer. I'm just running her characters through a few chord progressions.

-EPOV-

When Bella fell asleep against me, I knew I should have gotten up and left. But I was selfish. I hadn't had her close like that, in too long. So I pretended that I was doing her a favor, and settled into the side of the couch, pulling her to a more comfortable position against my chest. I just lay there, savoring the feel of her pressed against me. I didn't even budge when the movie ended. Sometime later, I must have dozed off. But I woke soon after, when I could tell that she had woken up too. She didn't move away immediately, and my mind started going right back down that old road that it always wanted to travel down when I was with her. Of their own accord, my arms tightened around her, and I could feel myself starting to get hard, just because of the way her soft curves felt against my body. She just felt so right. I knew I shouldn't linger. It wasn't fair in keeping with the promise I had made. And so I pretended to wake up. Bella moved away then, as I knew she would.

I had thought that maybe she didn't mention her birthday party to me, because she didn't want to have to introduce a guy like me to her parents. But she surprised the hell out of me when she asked me to drive her to the airport to get them when they arrived.

And so on Wednesday, I put on one of my nicer button-up shirts and looked at myself in the mirror, wondering what they might think of me. And I wondered why it mattered so much, that I would have their approval. It's not like Bella and I were dating or something. I was just a friend.

The friend that had taken her virginity. But her parents didn't need to know that. Right?

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I frowned at my reflection. The shirt made me look like I was going to church or something. Regardless of my living quarters, it didn't quite work. So I pulled the hem out of my jeans and rolled the sleeves up to my forearms. Better.

"You ready to go?" I asked, after Bella answered my summons at her door.

"Ready as I'll ever be," she sighed. I noticed that she had traded her usual sweatshirt and sweatpants for a soft-looking blue sweater and a pair of jeans. I tried my best not to stare at her ass when she walked ahead of me, down the hall.

"We should take your car," I told her when we got to the garage. "Mine smells."

"Yours isn't so bad," she told me. But she didn't argue. She just held her keys out to me, and got into the passenger seat. I adjusted her driver's seat and mirrors, and then started our drive out to the airport.

"So... tell me about your parents," I told her as I drove.

"They're not so bad," Bella shrugged. "Just typical parents, I guess."

"Your dad is a police chief?" I asked, remembering an earlier conversation.

"Yes. Typical, over-protective father," she sighed. "He means well. He's just..."

"What?"

"He thinks of me as a little girl," Bella said, twisting a piece of her hair around her finger. She'd worn it down, and it looked soft and pretty against the blue of the sweater she wore. "He has always been pretty controlling."

"And Rosalie's mom?"

"They were married when I was almost thirteen," Bella explained. "She's pretty much the only mother I've ever had."

"But?"

"But... she's more like Rosalie than me," she shrugged. "We've never really enjoyed the same things. I don't think I was girly enough for her."

"You're plenty 'girly'," I smiled over at her. Bella smiled a little in return and shrugged again.

"Anyway," Bella went on. "I'm sure the two of them will have fun, dragging me around to do all of the stuff that they enjoy while she's here."

"That doesn't seem right," I frowned. "It's *your* birthday. You should be able to do what *you* want."

"Try telling *them* that," she muttered. "Anyway, it's only for a few days. I can sacrifice myself at the altar of beauty products for a little while, if that makes them happy."

I shook my head. Bella didn't need all that shit. But she was always a giving person. I knew that she'd forsake her own comfort, for the sake of making her family happy.

"You look really nice today," Bella said then. "That shirt makes your eyes..." she caught her lip between her teeth and stopped what she'd been about to say. Instead, she reached over and straightened my collar for me. I tilted my head to give her access, and wisely didn't encourage her to say more. Instead, I concentrated on getting us through the traffic that led to the airport.

"Which airline are they coming in on?" I asked.

"American," she told me. I nodded and followed the signs that would get us closer to the correct area for passenger pick-up. The closer we got, the more my nerves started to get the best of me. My fingers tapped out a beat on her steering wheel.

"Nervous?" Bella asked, sounding amused.

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"A little," I admitted with a wry grin. "Your dad sounds scary."

"He's not, really," Bella shook her head. "He likes fishing and beer."

"Well, we have *one* thing in common then," I chuckled. She laughed too.

"And since he traveled by plane, that means he had to leave his gun at home," Bella teased. Good to know.

After I parked the car, Bella and I walked inside the terminal to wait for her parents' arrival. We hadn't been there long when Bella hopped on both feet and took off running.

"Daddy!" she cried, after spying her father through the crowd that walked toward us. I shoved my hands in my pockets, and stood there, watching as she launched herself at the man standing several feet away wearing a flannel shirt and tan pants. He was taller than I had imagined, as evidenced by the way he wrapped his arms around her and picked her feet up off the floor in a hug. The woman that stood beside them was graced with a warm hug too, when Bella was finally placed back on her feet. She looked far more polished than her husband, as she stood there looking hardly ruffled after their flight, carrying an expensive-looking carry-on bag. I was far enough away not to hear their voices over the general clamor of the crowd. But after their initial greetings, Bella turned with a smile to start leading them my way. The three of them stopped in front of me.

"Edward?" Bella said. "This is my father, Charlie."

"Hello, sir," I said, removing my hand from my pocket to offer it to him. *Sir?* Bella must have thought it was funny too, because she quirked her eyebrow at me.

"Edward," Charlie nodded. He was younger than I imagined, too. The barest sprinkling of grey streaked the temples of his dark hair, and a thick moustache rested above his top lip. Other than that, it was clear that Bella was the spitting image of her father.

"And this is Claire," Bella continued the introductions.

"Hello," I told her with a nod. Rosalie's mother had dark hair, and didn't look a bit like her daughter. She smiled at me with a curious glimmer in her eye. Maybe her expression *did* remind me a bit of Rosalie. She looked like she didn't miss much. I'd have to watch myself around her.

"It's very nice to meet you, Edward," she said pleasantly enough. I reached for her bag, hoping to make a good impression. She just raised one groomed eyebrow and allowed me to play the gentleman by helping with her bags.

"I didn't know you'd be bringing a guest along..." he father said, eyeing me suspiciously.

"Edward lives down the hall," Bella explained. "He offered to drive today, since I don't really know my way around the airport."

"Oooh, how nice," Claire practically purred and moved into step beside us. "It makes me feel so much better to know that you girls have a nice, strong young man just down the hall to help look out for you."

I would have snorted, but I caught myself in time. Rosalie certainly didn't need anyone to help take care of her. And most of Bella's problems since she had moved here, were because of knowing me. Charlie harrumphed next to me, and I had a feeling that he wasn't sold on Claire's assessment.

"You brought your car?" Charlie asked, as we popped the trunk to put their luggage inside.

"Yeah," Bella said, not offering much more of an explanation. "But Edward drove." Thankfully her parents got in the backseat. I didn't want to have to sit next to her father and try to come up with conversation.

"Still getting good gas mileage?" he asked as Bella settled into her seat.

"Yes, Dad," she said with a roll of her eyes.

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"You know you have to fill it with premium," he told her.

"I know," she muttered.

"Have you had the fluids checked regularly?" I couldn't keep the grin from my face.

"Yes, Dad. Sheesh."

"Don't take that tone with me, young lady," he instructed from the back.

"You're all alone, driving in a strange city. I'd like a little peace of mind in knowing that your car is safe."

"I'm sorry," she said, sounding genuine.

I interjected by asking the name of their hotel. Bella had already told me that they had opted to stay elsewhere, rather than be cramped at the loft. By Claire's reply, I found that they were staying at the hotel next to the building where Bella's party would be held.

"That way we can get back to our room early, if the party runs too late," Claire said. "Charlie is usually in bed by ten."

"You mean once he's had too many beers, you can stumble back to your hotel," Bella giggled.

"I promised your mother I'd be good," her father replied from the backseat.

"Dad will drink a six-pack and about twenty minutes later, he'll start snoring loud enough to wake a three-block radius," Bella giggled.

"So now I know where you get it from," I mumbled. The uncomfortable silence in the car alerted me to the fact that I probably shouldn't have mentioned the fact that I knew Bella snored. I cleared my throat and tried to lie my way out of the slip-up. "It's a running joke," I shook my head. "Rosalie says that Bella keeps her up at night."

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Bella laughed a little nervously as she tried to help me out.

"Rosalie exaggerates," she said. "I don't snore *that* loudly."

"Always were like the old-man," her father allowed. I breathed easier, knowing I'd smoothed out my slip of the tongue, and shot Bella a grateful look for her help in the recovery.

"So... Edward," Claire said from behind me. "What do you do?"

I rubbed my hand across the back of my neck.

"I... play guitar for my friend's band," I told her. Charlie snorted loudly behind me.

"What kind of career is *that*?" Bella turned in her seat and gave her father a reproachful look.

"Dad!"

"Waste of time, is all I'm saying," he said, sounding anything but apologetic. "Remember how you used to beg me to get you guitar lessons?"

"You wanted to learn to play guitar?" I asked, turning to look at Bella. She blushed a little and nodded, before looking down.

"Her time was better spent studying," Charlie said stubbornly.

"I could teach you to play," I said softly, ignoring her father for a moment. "If you still want to."

"Thanks." Bella smiled over at me. "I'd like that." I didn't even care at that point, if I was pissing off her father with my suggestion. Bella was grown, and could spend her time doing what she wanted. I was amazed that she hadn't mentioned it to me before.

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Claire filled the silence in the car with her chatter, remarking on the architecture of the city buildings that we passed. She certainly reminded me of Rosalie, in that respect as well. Thank God, their hotel wasn't far. We unloaded her parent's luggage for the curbside attendants, and Bella made plans to return to pick them up for dinner. I let out a huge sigh of relief when we were alone again.

"Wow," I said. "Is your dad always like that?"

"Pretty much," Bella grimaced. "He means well."

"'Controlling' was putting it mildly," I commented. Bella shrugged in agreement. No wonder she couldn't wait to get away, to live on her own for a while.

"So... that's where your party will be?" I pointed at the building next to us. Bella nodded. "Kate's excited," I told her. When I brought the idea up to the waitress at Muddy's, she had been thrilled to change shifts with another girl to free up her evening. I knew it would be comfortable, hanging out with a friend who didn't expect more from the evening. And it seemed like a good idea to bring someone along that Bella was familiar with, as well. It would be one more friendly face in the crowd, of what I expected to be of a pretty stuffy-variety.

"I guess I'll see you Saturday night, then?" Bella asked as we pulled back into her parking space in the garage below the Abbey.

"Not sooner?" I asked. She shook her head.

"I don't know. Maybe? I'll be pretty busy running around."

"Doing girly stuff," I smirked.

"Yeah," Bella grimaced.

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"Well, have fun with that," I told her. Bella didn't look convinced, so I put my hand under her hair and started gently massaging her neck. She relaxed a little then and smiled. "It's only a few days, right?"

"Right," she agreed.

"And maybe on Sunday? After your parents leave?"

"What?" She asked.

"We can get started on those guitar lessons," I smirked. Bella smiled too.

-BPOV-

The three days leading up to my party were tedious, at best. I lost track of how many times I wished I could go down the hall to Edward's place, just to scream in frustration and let some of my aggression out. The one night I actually attempted to do so, he wasn't home. Instead, I let my family pull me around, and thoroughly exhaust me in the process.

Rosalie was intent on spoiling my parents while they were in town, and so we seemed to endlessly be going out to the establishments that she liked to frequent, beginning with her favorite little Thai restaurant for dinner the night they arrived. I ended up ordering some shrimp dish that was covered in green Thai curry that made it too spicy for me to eat. Our parents were impressed though. I sat miserably, picking at my meal while my father grilled me about my checking account and interest rates. I wished he'd ask Rosalie about *her* savings balance, and try to impart some of his advice about *her* spending habits. But it seemed his controlling efforts were still placed solely on me. Maybe it was because Rosalie clearly didn't have any issues with her finances, as she threw her acquired money around. Or maybe it was because I had been away so long, and my dad felt the need to play catch-up. I don't know. As well-meaning as I knew he was, I just wished he'd stop. I craved some breathing space.

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On Thursday, I showed them around campus, and had to endure an hour-long lecture about the classes my father was certain I should sign up for. Rosalie took us all out for lunch after. At least the steak place she chose allowed me to choose something from the menu that I could actually eat.

On Friday, I was rubbed-down, plucked and tweezed, painted, polished, and buffed from every angle in what was supposed to be a relaxing spa day for the girls. I seriously almost lost my shit when Claire suggested that I get a bikini wax.

"My bikini line is fine," I argued, standing firm. No one was going near my hoo-haw. I managed to keep that area tidy just fine, on my own. I'd also reached the end of my tolerance. But shopping was next. I honestly think that I was just worn-out from the stubbornness I had exerted at the spa. Because I let Claire and Rosalie easily talk me into a form-fitting strapless green dress for my party the next night.

"It looks beautiful on you, darling," Claire had insisted.

"I'll be cold," I muttered, shrugging my bare shoulders in the mirror.

"Nonsense," Rosalie scolded. "The room will be warm with so many people in it. You look amazing in that dress."

"I won't even know anyone there," I complained. Most of the guests were associates and friends of Rosalie's.

"Please... let me buy it for you," Claire begged. "It will be your father's and my birthday gift to you." I didn't want an expensive dress for my birthday. I would have been happy with a gift certificate to a music store, and maybe some new slipper-socks. But I couldn't let her down, and so finally, I acquiesced.

Which is why I stood in the corner of a crowded ballroom, in that same green dress on Saturday night. The beautician that they had dragged me to that morning had pulled my hair back in such a tight chignon at the nape of my neck, that I practically had a headache from it. The large white flower that was

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pinned under my ear did look pretty and exotic. I supposed I really did look good. But I just didn't feel like me. I was on edge, and feeling a little lost.

Until I saw Edward walk in the room.

My breath caught in my throat when I saw him there. He looked sinfully gorgeous in a dark tuxedo. His hair was its usual riot, which made me smile. But my lips pulled down when I saw Kate step in beside him. I might not have recognized her, if Edward hadn't already told me that he'd be escorting her to the party. Her hair was twisted up prettily on her head, and she looked beautiful in a dark blue dress that made her skin look almost luminescent. They were such an attractive pair, that it made my chest ache.

I watched as Edward offered her his arm, and the two made their way into the crowd. For a man who never went on dates, he sure was doing a good impersonation of one. Feeling my spirits deflate even more, I turned and walked to the bar.

I wasn't sure if Edward ever brought up the bartending thing to Emmett, but some sandy-haired girl was pouring drinks instead. I shook off her offer of champagne, and stubbornly asked for a bottle of beer. As I ignored the glass she gave me and took a long drink from the bottle, I heard a soft chuckle beside me. Raising my eyebrow, I turned to look at the friendly looking guy standing to my left.

"Not a fan of the bubbly stuff?" The man asked. I shook my head and indelicately wiped my mouth with the back of my hand.

"Not really," I said dryly.

"Well, then I'm happy I'm not the only one," he said, tipping his own beer toward me. With a smirk, I tapped the tip of mine against his in a sort of cheers between us. "You're the birthday girl. Bella, right?" he asked.

"The one and only," I muttered. He smiled wider.

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"I'm sorry. I don't think we've had the official pleasure of meeting yet," he said. "I'm Garrett. We were supposed to go out, once."

My mouth popped open, and I blushed, remembering exactly why I had blown off the blind-date that Rosalie had set me up on, with the guy who stood beside me. Wow. Going out with him wouldn't have been such a hardship. He was very handsome, and had a friendly smile.

"I'm so sorry about that," I said quickly, extending my hand to him. He shook it nicely and we both turned with our backs to the bar. "Something came up... last minute." I blushed again, thinking of how true that excuse really was.

"Well, it's a pleasure to meet you finally," he told me. I nodded, thankful that he didn't seem upset or offended.

"So... you've got quite a turn-out," he said, indicating the crowd. I shrugged.

"*Rosalie* has quite the turn-out," I corrected him. "I really don't know all of these people." He looked at my frown for a moment and then shrugged.

"I don't either," he said. "I'm not exactly comfortable at events like these. No offense," he quickly amended. "Maybe we can save each other. It will be nice to spend a little time with someone who seems a little more..."

"Completely out of her element?" I offered.

"I was going to say 'down to earth'," he corrected me. "I won't feel so lonely, drinking a common man's drink." He raised his beer again, and I laughed lightly. Yeah. We were going to get along just fine.

When dinner service was announced, it was a nice surprise to see that Garrett's name was placed at our table. I wondered if Rosalie had anything to do with the seating arrangements, but I was happy to not be the odd man out at a table meant for eight. Rosalie sat beside her date. My parents sat to my left. That left two seats open. I smiled as I saw Edward lead Kate to join us.

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"Happy Birthday, Bella," Kate smiled sweetly. I stood from my seat to accept the hug she offered. "It's good to see you again."

"It's nice to see you too," I said, sincerely. Kate was a nice person. It wasn't her fault that I resented her for being with Edward. He pulled out Kate's chair for her, and I grinned up in his direction as he leaned forward and put his hand on my shoulder for a minute.

"Happy birthday, Little Sister," he said into my ear, before offering me a cocky wink. I playfully leveled him with a dirty look before sitting in my seat once more.

Introductions were made to those of those who didn't know each other around the table. I smiled to see that at least half of us had beer bottles beside our plates, while the champagne was refilled generously to the others throughout our meal. And I have to say, this part of the evening wasn't so bad. At least I knew everyone in our small group. I was able to ignore the other tables of diners while the conversation was relaxed and easy at ours. Garrett was a funny guy, and he kept us all in stitches. And if I wasn't mistaking the looks that were shared between him and Kate during dinner, I had a feeling he was quite taken with Edward's date. That made me happy.

All too soon, our plates were cleared, and music from a small band in the corner of the room started to inspire couples to take the dance floor. I smiled as Charlie led Claire to the group, twirling her under his arm while she smiled.

"Want to give it a go?" Garrett asked me politely. I shrugged and smiled. Why not?

We were stopped by dozens of people who felt obligated to wish me well, even though they didn't know me. The band had already moved into the second number, before we actually even made it to the dance floor. Garrett held me politely, while I tried my best to not step on his feet.

"I'm sorry, " I apologized to him once more. "I'm not a very good dancer."

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"It's all about faking it," Garrett grinned down at me. "Look at these people. They're all pretending too."

"You think?" I asked, looking around. I caught Edward's eye then, surprised to see him and Kate dancing in the throng a few feet away. His face was expressionless at first, but then he tucked his chin and gave me a small smile over Kate's shoulder. I smiled in return.

"Of course," Garrett continued. "The trick is to look very pretentious and full of yourself. Then no one will doubt your confidence." I knew he was teasing, and so I followed his instructions to throw my shoulders back and tip my nose to the air. I knew we both looked ridiculous, assuming our pompous poses. But it was fun, and he helped me relax.

"So... your friends," Garrett gestured toward where Edward and Kate danced with a tip of his head. "Are they like... a couple?"

I turned to look at the attractive pair, laughing and dancing nearby.

"No," I said, shaking my head. It sorta killed me to see how comfortable they were with each other, but I knew exactly how Edward was. He wouldn't want to be labeled with anyone *that* way. "They're just friends," I said.

"Hmm." Garrett was looking at them again, and it made me smile. "You wouldn't be upset if I asked her to dance... would you?"

"Not at all," I shook my head. "In fact, I'll give you an opening. I could use a little fresh air." The song ended, and I stepped away, wishing him luck with a friendly pat to the lapel of his jacket. I had to speak to a few more people I didn't know, on my way to the balcony doors, but then I was able to step into the relative quiet of the night for some much-needed space.

The air was cold, but my body was still warm from the crowded dance floor. I leaned with my arms on the balcony railing, and looked down at the cars that passed on the street below. The night had so far, gone better than I had imagined it would. It still wasn't exactly where I wished I could be, doing what

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I wished I could be doing for my birthday. I'd have been happier lounging around in my sweats, eating pizza. But it wasn't as bad as I'd feared. And I was really glad that I had gotten a chance to meet Garrett. He was a genuinely nice guy.

I heard the doors open behind me, and stiffened my shoulders. It looked like my break from the party would be shorter than I hoped for, considering I really didn't want to try to make small talk with some other stranger who wanted to share the balcony. I relaxed with a smile, however, when I recognized the voice of the person who had walked out to join me.

"The rope ladder I wove, isn't long enough to get you to the street," Edward said. I laughed and turned around to face him. "You weren't considering jumping, were you?"

"Nothing so drastic," I promised with a shake of my head.

"What are you doing out here?" Edward asked, stepping to stand beside me at the railing. He reached into his pocket, and withdrew his pack of cigarettes, lighting one and blowing the smoke into the chilly night air. "Aren't you freezing?" He looked down at my bare shoulders, and I shrugged.

"Not yet," I told him. "I'll go in soon."

"Gotta get back to your date," Edward said, flicking his ashes over the railing, and watching them fall. "Garrett is it?"

"He isn't my date," I said, pulling up one shoulder. "I only just met him here, at the bar. But he's cool. I like him."

"I think he has the hots for *my* date," Edward rested his forearms on the railing, and turned his head to smile at me, "but I didn't want to say anything. You know. In case you were here together."

"Sucks to be you," I said, not really caring. Edward laughed.

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"Isn't he the guy that you were supposed to go out with the night that uh..." his voice trailed off, and I nodded.

"Yep. That's him," I said. No need in dwelling on what had occurred that evening to put an end to my date with Garrett before it had even begun.

"They seem to like each other," Edward murmured.

"They'd make a cute couple," I agreed. Edward frowned and took another drag from his cigarette.

"It's just that easy, huh?" He asked quietly.

"What's that easy?" I asked, confused.

"Making a cute couple," he said, dropping his cigarette to the floor before snuffing it under his polished shoe. "They're attracted to each other. They get along. Bang. Just that easy. A couple."

"For some people, I guess," I shrugged, looking down. I was starting to get chilly, but I was reluctant to leave Edward when we had not really had a chance to speak all evening. "So anyway... I don't think you have to worry about Kate or anything. Garrett seems like a nice guy."

"Though his eyesight is obviously questionable," Edward said, leaning down to brush the top of my arm with his.

"His eyesight?" I asked.

"Something has to explain why he didn't realize that he was the luckiest bastard in the room, to be dancing with *you*," Edward said with a low voice. "The way you look tonight... Christ, Bella. I don't even have words."

He raised his hand, and pulled the back of his index finger down the skin of my arm. I immediately shivered, and broke out in goosebumps. Trying to disguise my reaction to his words, I rubbed my own hands up and down my arms, and

stepped away from the railing.

"You're right," I said with a shaky laugh. "It *is* cold out here. Maybe I should go in..."

"Wait," Edward called out, stopping me. I paused a few steps away, and turned to look at him. He looked almost shy, when he reached into his inner jacket pocket, and pulled out an envelope. "I got you a birthday present," he told me. I smiled and stepped back toward him.

"Edward? You shouldn't have," I shook my head, but took the gift from his fingers anyway.

"It's not a big deal," he promised. "It's... just something that I thought you'd enjoy." I opened the envelope to see red-edged papers nestled inside. "I bought season tickets. Baseball. Well... it's a partial package for some of the home games. But I bought a set of two. You know... so you can take a guest or whatever." Edward rubbed his hand across the back of his neck, and looked uncertain about the gift he had presented me with. I felt tears pool in the corner of my eyes, and tried to blink them away. My family gave me a party, and a dress, that were nothing that I would have picked for myself. But Edward chose a gift that was so perfect for me, that I couldn't help but put my arms around him in thanks. He hesitated only a minute, before returning my embrace.

"So you like it then? I was worried..."

"It's perfect," I assured him. "Just make sure that you're ready to go to the season opener with me."

"No problem, love," he said, hugging me just a little tighter.

We stepped away from one another when the doors behind us opened once more. This time, it was Kate and Garrett that joined us on the balcony.

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"Oh man... you missed it," Kate laughed. "Bella's dad had like one beer too many, and started doing the Running Man on the dance floor."

"Your mom said she was taking him back to the hotel to go to bed," Garrett told me. I nodded.

"Does that mean we can make our escape now?" Edward asked, quirking his eyebrow in my direction.

"I'll just have to tell Rosalie," I nodded with a smile.

"I already called Emmett," Kate said. "He said that he'd keep the back door open for us. He's closing a little early, but he said it was fine if we keep the party going down at Muddy's."

"Sounds like a plan," I smiled. Finally. My birthday sounded like it was going to end up pretty good after all.

Reviews are better than sharing a blanket. Leave one.

Jericho

A/N: Twilight belongs to S. Meyer. I'm just running her characters through a few chord progressions.

-EPOV-

I slammed back another beer at the bar, while waiting for Bella to tell Rosalie that we were ditching her snob soiree. Kate was driving us back to Muddy's, where I'd met up with her for the evening, so it didn't matter if I had a buzz. I had been throwing them back pretty heavily all night anyway. A certain piece of mail that had arrived for me around noon had already left me edgy and tense all day. And forcing myself to stay mellow and cool while I watched Bella with Garrett at her party had been much harder than I wanted it to be. I had assumed that he was her date for the evening. I was thankful as fuck when he started flirting with Kate, making me suspect otherwise.

The guy must have had a fucking problem with his brain, though. Because Kate was cute and all. But Bella was fucking breathtaking. I could hardly keep my eyes from her all night. The flower tucked behind her ear made me want to take her hair down, and loosen it with my fingers before burying my face in the soft waves to breathe in the scent of the flower that might still linger there, near her neck.

And her dress.

The creamy skin exposed at the top of her strapless dress made me want to lick every inch I could see, and then unwrap the parts that were still hidden from my eyes, so I could taste her there, too.

I *definitely* needed another beer. Because I had too many thoughts plaguing my brain, and focusing on the way Bella had driven me to distraction all night was just not fucking cool at all. I needed to stop thinking about that shit. I wasn't allowed to. Not anymore.

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I grabbed one more beer for the road, and tucked it into my inner pocket as Bella came walking back to me with Rosalie in tow.

"I guilt-tripped her into coming with us," Bella smirked. "It's my birthday... and she owes me big-time for letting her put all of this together." Bella waved her hand around at the party still in progress, and Rosalie shrugged.

"My date had to leave early, anyway," she said. "He has an early flight out to L.A. The bar is paid until midnight, so no one will really miss me if I leave. Bella and I will ride over to the bar, together."

"I'll go with you," Garrett quickly invited himself along, smiling over at Kate.

"Good. We'll meet you guys there," Kate grinned at him. "Just go around back. Bella? You remember the way."

"Yep. I'll get us there," she smiled. And then we all made our way out the door, toward a place where I knew we could all cut loose a little, despite our formal wear. And I could get some more to drink.

We made it to Muddy's before Bella did, and I frowned when I walked in the back door. I'd expected the place to be empty, since it Kate said that Emmett was closing things down early. But I recognized a the members of my band hanging out by the pool tables, with a typical slew of groupies standing nearby. I looked over at Emmett and reached over the bar to tap his shoulder.

"What's with the extra guests?" I asked, looking over my shoulder. Emmett just grinned and handed me a shot of Jagermeister.

"Knew you guys would be partying tonight," he shrugged. "Figured a couple more friends wouldn't hurt." I nodded and tossed the shot back, wincing slightly at the taste, but feeling appreciative of its welcome burn. I couldn't be mad at Emmett for inviting a few other people to stick around. He was nice enough to shut down and let us hang out in the place. And besides the girls who I didn't give a shit about, everyone he had invited to stick around were at least people we knew. I grabbed a bottle of beer, and sauntered over to get

ribbed about my tux, and join their game.

I was bent over the table, lining up a shot when Rosalie and Bella arrived. Emmett made a big production of announcing Bella as the birthday girl, and I grinned over my shoulder while I watched Garrett help her with her coat. She was smiling, and probably blushing under the attention that the rambunctious bartender bestowed upon her, but she looked a hell of a lot more relaxed than she did at the big formal event that Rosalie had paraded her around in.

"Damn," I heard my drummer issue a low whistle while the guys at the table openly stared at Bella and Rosalie. "Been holding out on us, Edward?"

I smirked up at him, and shrugged. Kate had already changed into some comfortable clothes that she left at the bar. Bella and Rosalie stood out like jewels in their formal attire.

"Don't even think about it," I told him, smiling at the memory of the words Rosalie had first given me. Too bad I wasn't the type to follow orders. Mates or not... these guys had better heed the warning.

After taking my shot, I handed the cue stick over to some blonde that was lingering beside us, and made my way over to the bar.

"Just a beer," I heard Bella tell Emmett. He was busy pouring some pink concoction into a little martini glass that he presented to Rosalie. I'm guessing he was trying to impress her sister. I silently wished him well. Still, I eyed the two drinks and raised my eyebrow at Rosalie.

"Which one of you are driving tonight?" I asked her.

"Neither," Rosalie sniffed. "I got us a limo for the night. An unfamiliar concept, I know. A car that doesn't stink like convenience foods and bimbos."

I snorted at her obvious attempt to put me in my place and took a drink of my beer.

"I was *conceived* in the back of a limo," I smirked at her. "So I might be a little more familiar with the concept than you know. And if you can manage to stop acting like a fucking snob, your little sister might actually be able to have a little fun on her birthday."

We both turned our heads to where Bella was leaning over the bar. Emmett was touching the flower in her hair, and had made some comment that made Bella laugh and blush. She looked happier than I'd seen her all evening. Rosalie shook her head a little before smiling her begrudging acceptance to my suggestion.

"Who are all these people?" Bella turned to me finally, looking around the room shyly.

"Come on," I told her with a tilt of my head. "I'll introduce you."

Garrett had already found his place at Kate's side, so I took Rosalie and Bella over to the pool table to meet the others. Introductions were quickly made, though I excluded the group of girls that stood on the side-lines, who were looking at Bella and Rosalie with barely concealed jealousy.

"Bella? Rosalie? This is Todd, Rory, and Dave." I said, pointing to each man in turn. My rowdy band mates were all completely taken by the beauties at my side. But I could tell they would be on their best behavior. It's amazing how being in the presence of ladies can actually bring out good manners in even the roughest individuals. They weren't bad guys though. And as soon as everyone had been properly introduced, they went back to their casual attempts at showing off and vying for the attention of the women in attendance.

"This place looks so much larger, without being packed with people," Bella smiled, looking around. I nodded. Muddy's was a popular hang-out place. It was usually filled from wall to wall. Our small group made the place appear practically cavernous.

"I'm pretty sure Emmett even had the place cleaned up, after he shut down," I said. "But don't call attention to that fact. It might embarrass him."

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"How'd he manage to keep the place open for us?" Rosalie asked.

"Emmett can do whatever he wants," Dave joined the conversation. "He owns the place."

Rosalie sent a new look, laced with curiosity toward the bar. I rolled my eyes.

"Well, now we've got more room to dance," Todd told Bella with a cheeky smile. I tried not to cringe as he wrapped his hand around hers and pulled her over toward the jukebox in the corner. It was her night. She deserved to have fun. That included being flirted with, by men who were smart enough to take the opportunity to try. As long as none of them got out of line, I was fine with it.

Emmett stepped from behind the bar, and joined us when loud rock music started pounding through the speakers. Without a bartender, we all took turns diving behind the bar to refill our own drinks. Except for Rosalie, who was still spoiled by Emmett refilling her glass whenever she needed it. I wasn't so much for dancing, but even I allowed Kate to pull me forward to mix with the small crowd of people on the dance floor.

We danced through a few songs before some of us men eventually took reprieve back at the pool table or the dart board. I smiled to see that even the groupies had lightened up, and decided to be friendly with Bella and Rosalie. Disdainful looks had been replaced by "Oooh. I really love your dress," and "Those shoes are amazing." Somehow, drinking a bunch of alcohol turned people into the best of friends. I lined up several shots of Jager on the bar, and smiled when Bella came over with a few others to accept the drinks. I watched her toss back the shot of dark liquor, and wondered if she'd recognize it as the shot she had stolen from me, right before she'd kissed me for the first time in this bar. I could still remember the sweet taste of licorice on her lips, and licked my own.

"Having a good time?" I asked, leaning over the polished bar.

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"The best," she smiled. "Thanks, Edward!" I nodded and drank my own shot, before coming back around to join them.

"No hiding out by the bar," Garrett scolded Bella, as soon as I'd reached her side. I sighed as he pulled her toward the dance floor again, and a slow song started over head. "Who wants to dance with the birthday girl?"

I lit a cigarette and moved to lean back against the pool table while I watched Bella being passed around from man to man on the dance floor. Those bastards must have queued up about four slow songs, anxious to take their turns holding her a little closer than I liked. Everyone made a half-circle around the floor and watched as Bella graciously let them each have a turn spinning her around the floor. She smiled, and laughed, and accepted polite kisses on the cheek that were delivered with probably very impolite sentiment while I stood back and watched, wondering if any of them actually stood a chance with her. I flinched a little when I felt warm arms casually drape over my shoulders from behind. I was on my way to being slightly drunk, but couldn't understand how some girl had managed to get up onto the pool table behind me, without me having noticed.

"You look lonely over here," a voice whispered near my ear.

"I'm not," I shrugged her arms off when I saw Bella look my way from where her last partner had left her, anticipating the next. I was the only man who hadn't danced with her yet, and Bella smiled as I walked her direction.

"Having fun?" she asked, as I eagerly stepped up to take her into my arms.

"I am now," I said, pulling her against me. Unfortunately, I didn't get to dance with her for long. The last slow song was ending, and our dance was cut short by the switch back to silence.

"What now?" I heard a girl ask loudly. It might have been the one I left at the pool table. Like I cared.

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"You guys should play a song for Bella!" I heard Rosalie suggest. "You're all in a band, right? Play something for the guest of honor!"

Bella smiled and stepped away from me, obviously accepting the idea. My band mates all jumped up on the stage, happy to oblige. I rolled my shoulders and jumped up to join them, accepting an old acoustic that Rory pushed into my hands. It wasn't Beatrice, but it would do. I spent a few minutes strumming chords in the corner, making sure it was in tune.

When I was ready, the guys quickly broke into a couple of songs from our usual set-list, and I stood back and accompanied them, watching where Bella looked on happily, from a stool that Emmett placed for her by the stage.

"Aren't you supposed to actually serenade the girl with a song that has her name in it, or something?" Garrett asked drunkenly when we paused between numbers.

The guys all turned to congregate in the center of the stage, trying to figure out how to honor the request.

"What the fuck?" Todd asked. "I don't know any songs that have 'Bella' in them!"

"Maybe we could make something up?" Rory suggested, being drunk and stupid. "Bella, Bella... wish I was your fella?"

"You're so fucking dumb," Dave hit him in the arm. I just shook my head and laughed. But then an idea came to me.

"I think I have one that might work. But we'll have to change it up. A lot."

"You lead. We'll try to follow," Todd said, pushing me out toward the center mic. I grabbed a stool and sat on it, clearing my voice nervously.

"I'm not sure that this will work," I twisted my lips apologetically. "I'm not much of a singer... But it's your birthday..." Bella had a huge smile on her face,

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and her cheeks were pink from all the alcohol she had consumed. Rosalie stood at her side, next to Emmett, and everyone watched me curiously. I didn't like being the center of attention. But I started the song that had come to mind. It was a different arrangement. Not the rock sound from which it was originally created. But it was the best I could come up with on the fly. And Bella started laughing happily, when I started to sing.

Hey Little Sister... what have you done?

Hey Little Sister... who's the only one?

Hey Little Sister... who's your super man?

Hey Little Sister... who's the one you want?

Hey Little Sister... shot gun! It's a nice day to... start again.

By the time I reached the familiar chorus, everyone in the room had caught on to the acoustic change and sang along.

It's a nice day for a white wedding...

It's a nice day to... start again!

"I don't get it," Rory announced when the song ended. I just laughed and handed the guitar back to him before jumping from the stage.

"Best birthday present, ever," Bella grinned and jumped up from her stool to hug me enthusiastically. I took advantage of the situation, to lean my head down toward her neck and breathe in deeply. She smelled so fucking good.

"Let's do another round of shots!" Emmett yelled out. Rosalie grinned and let him throw his arm around her shoulder, leading her back to the bar to pour the drinks he offered. I guess she must have been pretty drunk. And I pulled away to look down at Bella, who seemed a little wobbly in her heels, as well.

"What do you think, Little Sister?" I asked. "You got it in ya, to do another?"

"Maybe one more," she concurred. She wasn't slurring, so I didn't protest. But I kept my arm around her, while we walked back to join the others.

Apparently the other girls weren't happy with the lack of attention they had been receiving for a while, so the shots at the bar started turning into body shots. One of them laid on the bar and put a shot glass on her bare mid-drift. A couple others put shot glasses into their ample cleavage, to offer to the guys that jumped from the stage. I shook my head at their obvious antics, and rolled my eyes toward Bella. I reached over her head, ignoring the girl who looked at me, waiting for me to take the shot glass she had pressed between her boobs, and grabbed the ones that Emmett handed me, instead, before handing one to Bella.

"Cheers," I told her.

"Cheers," she smiled. We both downed the shots, and I smirked when the burning liquid made her shiver on its way down. My eyes zeroed in on a dark drop of liquor that clung to the corner of her mouth. Without being able to stop myself, I raised a finger to capture it, and then placed it against the tip of my tongue for a taste. Bella held her breath as she watched me, and I swear the look on her face sent me reeling. It was dangerous for me to be so close to her, when we had both been drinking so heavily. I was fighting way too many urges, and I didn't want to stop at a taste. The look on Bella's face made me think that she wouldn't stop me, if I tried to take more.

"Bella?" Rosalie asked, stepping up beside us. Bella blinked and tore her eyes from mine to look at her sister. "I need to use the bathroom. Walk with me?" Bella nodded, and barely looked at me again, before turning and walking away, putting a very necessary distance between us. I chugged what was left of my beer, and placed the empty bottle on the bar as Emmett sidled up next to me.

"Man. You are in trouble, my friend," Emmett said, as we both watched the girls walk toward the bathrooms.

"I don't know what the fuck you're talking about," I lied and lit another cigarette.

"Sure you don't," he chuckled, recognizing bullshit when heard it. "That girl's in love with you."

"Bella? You're out of your mind," I shook my head.

"You should have seen the way she was watching you, when you sang for her," he told me. "Starry-eyed and shit. She's got it bad."

Emmett throwing the L-word out caught me off guard, and I looked at him skeptically.

"Don't try to tell me you don't see it," he said, turning his shoulders and looking at me incredulously. "It's written all over that pretty face, every time she looks at you."

"We're *friends*," I said through gritted teeth. The turn in conversation made me feel almost panicked. My heart beat in my chest like I was about to have a panic attack or something. It wasn't comfortable, at all.

"Tell me you haven't tapped that," he said, lowering his eyebrows. I couldn't deny the accusation, and I lowered my gaze to stare at the red tip of my cigarette. He just laughed. "Girls like Bella don't fuck and go," Emmett warned me. "If you've been in that pussy... they start picking out drapes and furniture and shit for down there. Make the place all fucking homey so you never want to leave." I cringed at his hard words, and looked up worriedly toward the hall where Bella and Rosalie had disappeared.

"Bella's not like that," I insisted. "She's... different."

"Denial, denial, denial," Emmett chuckled. "She's different. I'll give you that. She has to be, if she's managed to hold your attention after giving up the goods. But..."

"But what?" I asked, feeling angry about his analysis.

"I'm just saying... she's probably not as different as you think she is. Open your eyes man. The girl is probably picking out flower arrangements, while we speak."

I turned my attention back in the direction that the girls had left in, to see them returning to the room. What I saw made me swallow hard. Because I took his advice. I *did* open my eyes. And I saw a very determined and resolved look on Bella's face as she looked at me from across the room. And what I saw... scared the ever loving shit right out of me.

-BPOV-

While the first part of my night had been more or less a bust, though I couldn't blame Rosalie for the efforts she'd made to celebrate my birthday in style, I ended up having a lot of fun once we got to Muddy's. Everyone had been so nice to me, and I'd had a *lot* to drink. Not enough to be a mess, though I decided that last shot was definitely going to be my last drink for the evening.

"Sorry to interrupt your 'moment'," Rosalie told me from behind the stall door where she was using the facilities. I stood at the mirrors above the sinks, taking in my flushed cheeks and smoothing back my hair.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I mumbled. Rosalie laughed and flushed the toilet, then stepped out to join me. I was happy to see that Emmett had the bathrooms cleaned before we arrived, as well. Otherwise it would have been a less than pleasant environment to stand around, chatting.

"Sure you don't," Rosalie chuckled while washing her hands. I just stood to the side, and watched her. "You two looked like you were about to go at it on the bar."

"There was no room on the bar," I said snidely. "Someone was laying on it, trying to get Edward to lick booze off her stomach." Rosalie laughed.

"Oh please," she told me. "Those bitches have been throwing themselves at him all night, and he hasn't been able to keep his eyes off *you*." I couldn't help the small smile that came across my lips. It was true. I'd watched Edward dodging their advances all evening. He hadn't seemed interested in any of them.

"That's just because it's my birthday," I shrugged. "He's being nice."

"Yes, it's your birthday," Rosalie nodded. "So... you should get to decide how you want your night to end."

"Oh really?" I raised an eyebrow and Rosalie laughed. Funny, coming from the girl who didn't consider anything that I wanted for the first part of the evening.

"I know that you guys are doing the whole 'let's be friends' thing. But how long can that really last?" Her words dropped the smile from my face, and I leaned against the wall with a sigh. Rosalie reached out to touch my shoulder, and then her face softened. "Is that what you *really* want?" she asked quietly. I felt my shoulders slump as I reluctantly shook my head. "Then go out there, and *get* what you want," she instructed.

"I don't know what that is," I told her. But it wasn't the truth, and she knew that.

"I think you do," she said. "You want Edward. So... go get him."

"I don't think he wants *me*," I whispered. He'd been so cautious with me lately. I wasn't sure what would happen, if I even tried to cross the lines that had asked me to draw between us.

"Trust me," Rosalie said, stepping toward the door. "Before I made you come in here, the guy looked like he wanted to eat you alive."

"But... I don't think we want exactly the same thing," I admitted. "It's not... *just* about sex for me, anymore." I hated admitting it out loud. But I couldn't keep it to myself any longer. Rosalie paused with her hand on the door. I expected her

to tell me how stupid I was. But instead, she sighed and gave me a soft smile.

"So... start with what you know you *both* want," she suggested. "And make amendments from there. Have you tried being honest with him... and just telling him how you feel?"

I took a deep breath, and tried to find the internal strength I would need to take her advice. Rosalie was right. I couldn't keep going on as I was... having unreciprocated feelings for the guy down the hall. But how would I ever be able to move past this, if I was too afraid to put my cards out there on the table?

"God. I must be really drunk," Rosalie laughed then. "Because I'm actually in here encouraging you to try for Edward."

"You must be," I laughed with her then.

"And... I'm going home with Emmett," Rosalie said then. "Just thought you should know."

She hurried from the room before I could question her about her last statement. I quickly followed her out of the restroom. I guess she'd decided she might be interested in Emmett, after all. And if Rosalie wasn't afraid to take chances, I wasn't going to be, either. Tonight, one way or the other, I was going to tell Edward what was on my mind. I was going to be brave. I was going to be fearless. I was going to take her advice, and go out there and get what I wanted. I might fail, miserably, but I knew I had to try.

I saw Edward as soon as I entered the bar, and he watched me warily from across the room. I straightened my shoulders and mustered up some courage, before smiling and making my way back toward the object of my inner warring.

Rosalie had stepped behind the bar and was talking with Emmett quietly while I took my place beside Edward.

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"Alright," Emmett called out loudly. "Everyone out. I'm closing this party up for the night." He didn't sound apologetic, and I guessed that was because Rosalie had just informed him that he'd be spending the night in her company. He was very eagerly clearing the bar, and I licked my lips nervously before looking up at Edward. He seemed to be looking everywhere, but at me.

"Are you okay to drive?" I asked him.

"Probably not," he said, rubbing the back of his neck tiredly. "I mean... I'm not wasted. But I've had too much to get behind the wheel."

"Share my ride?" I asked.

"I've got this one," Kate called over to us, as Garrett helped her with his coat and sent a large grin in our direction. I nodded over to the cute new couple with a smile.

"Rosalie is going home with Emmett," I said to Edward then. "And I've got the limo here..."

"Yeah, okay," Edward told me. "We can pick up my car tomorrow."

He was still acting weird, but he walked around the bar and grabbed my coat for me. I smiled while he held it out so that I could put it on, and we both said good night to the rest of the people that filed out of the bar ahead of us.

Edward sat in the corner of the long bench seat in the back of the car that Rosalie had rented, and I fidgeted across from him. He played with the switches that turned on some music, and I looked out the dark tinted windows, trying to imagine how I was going to bring up any of the thoughts that were currently chasing through my head.

"Big car for only two people," Edward commented, making idle conversation.

"Rosalie wanted to drive my parents around the city, before the party," I offered as an explanation.

"Sounds like fun," he said.

"Really?" I raised my eyebrow at him, and he slowly smiled before shaking his head.

"No. Not really," he admitted. We both chuckled then, as some of the tension between us dissolved.

"All of this... just isn't *me*," I said, smoothing the soft material that draped over my legs with my palms.

"You do a pretty good job of faking it," Edward replied. I swallowed hard and looked at him. If he only knew. He broke our gaze after a minute, and turned his head to look out the tinted window. "My life would afford me to live this way, if I wanted," he said.

"But it's not really *you*, either," I finished. He gave me a small smile before returning his attention to the passing scenery.

Luckily, the drive back to the Abbey wasn't a long one. I was feeling more and more anxious, the closer we got to home. Edward was content to sit in silence. Soon, the driver opened the back door for us, and I thanked him with a smile before Edward and I walked up the stairs toward our lofts.

"Drunk?" Edward asked, holding the main door open for me.

"Buzzed," I corrected him, moving inside. Most of the alcohol we had consumed had begun to wear off.

"Yeah, me too," he said, shoving his hands in his pockets. His quiet feet and the clicking of my heels on the tiles below us, were the only sounds that filled the air of the quiet hallway. We both paused when he reached his loft door, and retrieved his keys to open it. I stood there awkwardly, shifting my weight back and forth on my feet.

"Thank you," I blurted out first thing I could think of to keep him standing there. Edward raised his eyebrow and turned in his doorway, while I continued in a rush. "For tonight. I know you and Kate arranged for us to go to Muddy's. And well... it was the best birthday party I can ever remember having. I really had so much fun. So... thanks."

"It was my pleasure," Edward smiled then. But his eyes looked serious as he reached out and lightly let his fingers brush against the flower under my ear. "You deserve... so much more." His words made a lump catch in my throat. It didn't sound like he was only talking about the party. But he sounded almost sad.

"It was perfect, really," I hurried to reassure him. "Everything I wanted." Well... *almost* everything. I bit my lip nervously, and stepped a little closer, allowing my palms to slide up the lapels of his jacket for a moment and rest on his chest. He watched me, but didn't say a word. The indiscernible look on his face made my nerves jump into over-time, and I let my hands drop to my sides.

"Well... good night then," I mumbled.

"Goodnight, Bella," Edward quietly replied. He turned to go inside, and I mentally berated myself as I walked down the hall and into my own loft.

"Stupid," I growled out loud with the door shut safely behind me. "Scared... chicken-shit..." I pulled off my shoes and threw them angrily into the bottom of my closet, not even caring that they confused the order that I usually treasured there. The carefully lined up items were mocking me, with their like-colors and straight lines. I turned a circle, distastefully looking around at the evidence of my organized existence. Why? Why couldn't I just step away from the plan for *once*, and really just *live*? I glared balefully at my planner, resting on the edge of my desk. It seemed to be the final object to set me off the edge. I was tired of being afraid of the unknown. Clenching my hands, I turned quickly and rushed out of my loft. It was now or never. I refused to not even try.

Edward answered the door, looking confused. He had already taken off his jacket, and unbuttoned the top of his shirt.

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"Bella?" He asked, holding the door. "Are you alright?" He looked worried as he stared down at me. I wasn't sure how I looked to him. But I felt like I was going crazy, under my skin.

"Can I come in for a minute?" I asked, refusing to lose my resolve again. He nodded and held the door open wider so that I could enter.

"Did you forget something?" he asked warily. I nodded and looked up at him before taking a big breath to calm myself.

"Yes," I said then. He stood there, waiting, so I continued before I could talk myself out of it.

"It's my birthday," I told him.

"It *was* your birthday," he smiled, looking confused and tilting his head toward the clock near his door. My eyes darted there, before coming back to him. It was true. My birthday had ended a couple of hours before.

"*Was* my birthday," I allowed the correction. "But can I still ask for just one thing?"

"What's that?" he kept his head cocked, and looked at me curiously.

"A birthday kiss," I said then. He straightened his frame, and his face became serious once more when he heard my request.

"Bella..." he shook his head slowly. Then he smiled again. It was a small, sad smile. "You had lots of kisses tonight." I knew he was referring to the many gestures that had been placed on my cheeks from well-wishers. I shook my head and moved closer to him.

"That's not the same," I said with a whisper. He looked torn, but he raised his hand to slide the back of his fingers down my cheek, and I closed my eyes while I exhaled. The soft touch was only the beginning of what I craved. What I knew I was asking for.

"I don't think it's a very good idea," he told me quietly. "I'd be lying if I told you that I don't want to kiss you. I mean... Bella? You look..." I opened my eyes and grabbed his hand in mine, holding it against my face. "You leave me breathless," he said simply. The admission gave me strength and I placed my other hand on his chest.

"Please, Edward?" I wasn't above begging at that point. Need laced through me, and he was the only one that could make me feel this way.

"We'd be crossing the line," he said, still trying to dissuade me.

"I hate the line," I told him with sincerity. I could see it in his eyes. As determined as I was, small parts of his resolve were crumbling. I just needed to pull him over the edge, with me. "I want you."

Edward groaned and literally tore his hand away, turning to walk several strides into the room.

"Fuck!" He muttered angrily, facing away from me. "You don't know what you're asking."

"I do," I insisted, stubbornly. I watched as he raked his hands through his hair before turning around again to face me.

"You can't come in here and say shit like that to me!" Edward's cheeks were flushed, and he looked pissed off. But he didn't make me feel frightened. His aggravation only made me want him more.

"Tell me you don't want me," I said, happy that facing him finally seemed to give me the courage I needed to continue. "Tell me to leave, and I will."

"If I kiss you... I won't want to stop," he warned me with a low voice, taking one step toward me.

"I know," I insisted.

Edward rushed to me then. His fingers grabbed the back of my neck harshly, and he slammed his mouth against mine. I couldn't stop the whimper that I uttered beneath the onslaught of his lips.

"Is this what you wanted?" he asked through gritted teeth.

"Yes!" I gasped, latching my mouth back to his. I bit at his bottom lip before he opened his mouth and pushed his tongue against mine. There was nothing soft or careful about the way our teeth, and our tongues, and our lips meshed together. It was bruising, and hard, and punishing as we both attacked one another with a need that both thrilled and terrified me.

"Goddammit," Edward groaned. "Why are you fucking with my head?"

"I'm not," I shook my head and kissed him harder. "I don't mean to... I'm not trying to..." He swallowed my words and used his hands on my back to bend me against him. My hands were in his hair, and I felt him stumbling us backward. I followed his lead. His hands were hard on my waist as he lifted me to sit on the side table in his entryway, and I eagerly put my legs on either side of his hips, pulling him closer. Edward was angry. I could feel it in his shoulders and his chest as he pushed against me. But I wanted that passion. I wanted it all. My head hit the smooth surface of the large mirror behind us, and I moaned as he pulled his lips across my jaw to bite at the skin under my ear.

"Fucking flower," he muttered. I wasn't sure what he meant, but he breathed raggedly there for a moment before dragged his mouth to the skin above my dress line. His lips left a burning trail at the top of my chest, and I shoved my hands under the collar of his shirt, wishing we were both wearing less clothing.

"Edward... please," I said again. My words caused him to look up, and we were both breathing heavily. The look on his face was frightening, as he seemed to be searching my eyes for some answer to a question he didn't ask. His eyes were dark, and fierce.

"You want *this*?" he asked then, sounding tortured. "You want me to *fuck* you, Bella?" His words were harsh, daring me to admit that I was asking for

anything other than the lust that was consuming us both. I knew that I'd wantonly brought about the situation we were now in. I also knew what was in my heart. I licked my lips nervously, afraid that he'd see the hesitation I felt. Instead, I nodded. His eyes narrowed, and he stepped away, only to put his hands on my hips and lower me to the floor while turning me away from him.

My eyes were wide open as I stared at the image of the two of us, reflected in the mirror behind the table. I looked scared. And Edward looked like he was fighting some demon inside. His face was stony, and his mouth was pressed tight.

"If you want this... I want you to see it for what it is," he said darkly. I swallowed hard, unable to tear my eyes from the sight of his fingers as they wrapped around the back of my neck, and slid down my shoulders. They kept on their path down my arms until he reached my hands and lifted them, to lay my palms against the table on either side of me. I was unable to ignore the warning in his words, but I still wanted him. My fingers pressed into the smooth wood as he released my hands and snaked his hands around my waist and upwards to put them over my breasts. My mouth fell open, and my eyes widened when he pinched at my nipples beneath the thin fabric of my dress.

"*This*," he nearly growled, "is all I have, Bella." One hand dropped and slid down my stomach until he bunched up the fabric of my skirt and cupped me between my legs. My head fell forward then. He released my breast to press his fingers harshly under my chin and force my eyes back up to our image. His fingers down below pressed through the lace of my panties and made me pant in stunned surprise. "Tell me this is *all* you want," he said with his jaw tight. "Tell me this is enough for you... and I'll make you feel good. I'll make you feel so good..."

I shook my head and closed my eyes for a minute, trying to make sense of the emotions that flooded through me. He knew. He *knew*. I could see it then, in the rigid way he held his shoulders, and the dangerous glint in his eyes. He *knew* that this was more to me. And he was angry. He wanted me. But he didn't want the feelings that I thought I had hidden inside.

Edward dropped his hand from my jaw, and lowered his face to suck at the side of my neck. I melted against his chest, tempted to give in to everything that his hard body was promising me. But his actions and his words did the job that he'd intended them for. I knew he could make me feel good. But I also knew it wasn't going to be enough.

"Say the words, Bella," Edward muttered harshly against my skin. "Tell me what you want."

The problem was... I knew the words I wanted to say, were not the ones that he wanted to hear.

"More..." I breathed. I felt his hand under my skirt press harder, in response to my demand. But that wasn't what I meant, and I was sure that he knew it.

"Spread your legs, and I'll give you *more*," he chuckled humorously. My body tensed then, and not in a good way. He knew what I was asking. But he chose to ignore it as he purposely rocked his erection against me from behind. Reality crashed in, and hit me forcefully. I straightened my back, and reached for his wrist, trying to pull his hand away from me. He resisted for a moment.

"Stop," I said firmly, tugging his wrist again. This time my word and intent reached his ears, and he dropped his hands and stepped back. I turned in front of him, staring with a frown. Edward's chest was heaving, but he looked strangely relieved that I'd halted things. Like he had been trying to get me to stop this madness, all along. He smirked at me, and I felt ice creep down my spine.

"Not what you were looking for?" he asked, seeming satisfied by my response. I narrowed my eyes at him. Edward had that wall up, and I could see it now, for what it was.

"More," I said again, feeling self-righteous anger take over my lust addled brain. It was enough to make me clarify things, for once. "I want *more*. More than *this*. More from *you*."

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Edward shook his head and took another step back. He shoved his hands in his pockets and looked at me coldly.

"I don't have any more to offer," he said then, stubbornly. " *This* is what I am." In that, I had my answer. He wasn't willing to give me what I wanted. And what he was offering, would never be enough for me. At least I could finally move on, knowing that I had at least tried. He wasn't even willing to do that.

"You're a coward," I told him then. He actually flinched as if I had hit him. Edward didn't move from his place as I stepped around him and left his loft. He let me go.

Reviews are better birthday cake. Leave one.

(For anyone who is even remotely interested in things like this... here is where you can listen to the acoustic version of "White Wedding" that Edward sang in this chapter. [.com/watch?v=pMjl1gfWWJk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pMjl1gfWWJk)

If the link doesn't get you there... just look up the Billy Idol White Wedding cover by Projected Twin, on youtube.)

Under the Wire

A/N: Twilight belongs to S. Meyer. I'm just running her characters through a few chord progressions.

-EPOV-

"Fuck!" I yelled angrily when I was alone. "Fuck... fuck... *FUCK!*" I wanted to throw something. Instead of giving in to my destructive mood, I stomped into my bedroom and started tearing my clothes off. In a hot shower, I was still unable to shake the tension in my body. Emmett's words had been fucking with my head, ever since he had told me that he thought Bella was in love with me. Of course, he was mistaken. He *had* to have been. He didn't know Bella, like I knew Bella. But his words made me doubtful. And I found myself really *looking* at the girl, and the way that *she* was looking at *me*. I was still certain that Emmett was wrong. But I started worrying that maybe Bella cared for me, more than she ever let on.

And *that* was confirmed for me, just a little while ago.

Bella came to me. She wanted me. And God knows, I wanted her too. I wanted to bury myself in her body, and lose myself in the sweetness and passion that she offered. But was it fair to her, if she was acting on feelings that went beyond those I expected from her? Lust? I could understand that. Hell... I *still* felt that, even though she'd called me a coward and left me with only my anger and a huge slice of guilt to take with me to bed. I hit the side of my fist harshly against the shower tiles, and dropped my head under the spray, wishing I could wash all of it away. But I knew it was pointless. My head was a mess.

After drying myself, I slipped into pajama pants and a t-shirt, and dropped heavily onto my back across my bed. Staring at the ceiling, I tried to make sense of what the hell I was feeling. I couldn't be pissed at Bella. She had approached me, fearless and bold as I knew her to be. She told me what she wanted. And like a bastard, I sent her away. But now that I was alone... I was left with this rage that I could only direct toward myself, and the way I'd

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treated her. And I was left with a big fucking question.

What the *fuck* did 'more' mean, anyway?

Sure- I had feelings for the girl. I couldn't stand the thought of her being hurt and quite possibly, finished with me. It left a physical ache in my chest that I couldn't deny. But I'd done that shit to myself. I purposely made what was between us seem ugly and cold, making her think that I didn't care at all. Of course I cared. I cared so much, it freaked me out. Because I wasn't supposed to. Hell... I didn't even know that I *could*.

I sat up and looked around. The emptiness of my room felt like a prison. With a sigh, I stood, and made my way silently out into the other room on bare feet. My living room. I snorted. It's not like I did much *living* in it. Unless Bella was around, of course.

I could see her lying across my couch, clicking her little mechanical pencil while she jotted notes in her day planner. I saw us there, watching movies together, and laughing over a box of pizza. I could imagine the look on her face, while she worked on homework and I worked on sheet music, in the chair in the corner. And I could see her body lying on top of mine, kissing me and reaching for me... *knowing* me... like no one ever had before. The room was cold and empty without her in it.

And the more I considered that, the more I started seeing that the same sentiment could apply to the rest of my life.

How in the hell had that happened?

What the fuck did she *do* to me?

Bella started out as an annoying neighbor... and quickly turned into a friend that I didn't even know I wanted. Then we went and let things get confusing for a while. Hell... who was I kidding? Things were definitely still confusing.

Bella wanted *more*. But... didn't we already have that? I mean... she already meant more to me than anyone else I could think of. I was happiest spending my time with her. I don't even remember how long it had been since I even thought of trying to have sex with someone else. I fucking hated even *thinking* about Bella being with another guy, though I tried to cover that shit up for the sake of our friendship. Could it really be so simple, as just admitting to myself that I already thought of her as *more* than a friend? Maybe the thing that would change it all, is if I was just willing to admit that to *her*? Would that be enough? Would she be happy slapping a few titles to a relationship between us that we'd previously left undefined? Or had I fucked things up so completely this time, that she wouldn't even be willing to consider it?

I pushed my hands through my hair. I hadn't felt this uncertain about things in a fucking long time. I didn't *want* to feel uncertain. I needed to fucking *know*. I remembered all too damn well how fucked up I was when Bella had taken herself out of my life. I didn't want to go back there. I *couldn't*.

Bella had certainly taken me by surprise. But now, a little time had afforded me a clearer head. I felt panicked when Bella stood in front of me, admitting that she wanted more from me. But that was nothing compared to the fear I felt now, knowing that I might have fucked things up for good. I needed to fix this. And I needed to fix this right fucking now.

With a determined stride, I left my loft and walked down to Bella's. She didn't answer the door when I knocked, but I knew she wouldn't. I also knew that she wasn't asleep. So I started ringing the door bell. I admit, it was obnoxious. I kept pressing the button over and over, knowing that eventually she would come to stop me. She hated the annoying chime with a passion, and had told me more than once that she wished Rosalie would change it. After about the twentieth ring, I was rewarded by her opening the door.

Of course, she was glaring at me.

Bella was in pajamas too, and her hair was pulled up in a knot on top of her head. But she looked anything but comfortable, as she folded her arms over her chest. Her face was a blotchy mess, a dead-give-away that my asshole behavior

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had made her cry. I was so fucking sorry for that. God, I was such an asshole.

"What do you want, Edward?" Bella asked, sounding worn-out and upset.

"I want to talk," I told her.

"Too bad," she said, moving to shut the door in my face. "I don't want to talk with *you*."

I hurried to grab the door before she could close it again.

"I'll just stand out here and ring the doorbell," I warned. She glowered at me, and I tried not to smile. I was in deep-shit and I knew it.

"Just say what you have to say, and go," she bit out.

"I *am* a coward," I said quickly. Bella grimaced and moved to reach for the door again.

"Yep. Goodnight then."

"No. Wait," I hurried. "Will you give me a fucking minute?"

"I've given you enough," Bella moaned, turning to walk back into the loft. I stepped in behind her, and shut the door.

"You're right," I said, following her toward the living room. Bella sat in the corner of the couch, and pulled her knees up under her chin before wrapping her arms around her legs. She looked defeated, and it killed me. I gave her the space she needed, and sat in the chair to face her.

"Can you just say what you need to say, and leave?" Bella asked in a tired voice.

"I don't want to be your friend," I told her. I saw a pained look steal across her face, and hurried to finish what I was trying to say. "You're already *more*,

Bella. You have been... for a long time. And I was too much of a coward to just see that for what it was."

"I don't... understand," she admitted with a sigh. I took a deep breath and continued.

"You said you wanted more, from me," I said. Bella cringed at the memory and put her forehead against her knees. "But what I'm trying to say is... we're *already* more. We already spend all of our extra time together. Do we need to label it? Because what's the difference between what we are already doing, and dating? You want a commitment?" I swallowed hard, because that word was still hard to say. " *Fine*. I don't want to be with any other women. And I sure as hell don't want *you* to be with any other guys." Bella looked up at me then, and her face looked cautious but hopeful. I was guessing I was on the right track with all of this truth shit. "I'm *so* fucking sorry that I hurt you, earlier. And I'm sorry that I made you cry. I'm a dick. But if you want to call me your boyfriend, or something like that... well, fuck. I guess I can try the title on for size. If that's what you mean by 'more'... you've already got it Bella. I'm just sorry that I didn't tell you sooner. And I'm sorry about the way I acted. I was freaked out. And I pushed you away. And I'm *so fucking sorry*."

I dropped my own head into my hands, and gripped my hair tightly in my fists, waiting for her to say something... anything... to put me out of my misery. But she didn't.

"Please say something," I finally groaned, when the silence became too much for me to bear. I looked up when I heard Bella stand. I watched her warily, waiting for her to leave the room. But instead, she sighed and walked over toward me. Warmth and genuine relief flooded through me when Bella crawled up into my lap. My arms found their way around her quickly, and I lowered my cheek to her chest while she put her arms around my neck and hugged me to her. How could I, even for one second, have thought that I didn't want *this*? I squeezed her tighter, hoping she would feel my apology and my remorse.

"Why do you have to be so difficult?" she finally mumbled against the top of my hair.

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"Because I'm an idiot," I groaned with relief, against her chest.

"Sometimes," she agreed, quietly.

"I'll probably fuck this up," I warned her, just as solemnly.

"Maybe," she allowed.

"But... I want to try."

I looked up at her then, and Bella stared into my eyes for a moment. Finally, *finally*, Bella nodded. It was a little nod. And I admit, she looked pretty fucking doubtful. But she was going to let me try. I pressed my cheek against her chest again, and sighed when she combed her fingers lightly through my hair.

"We... don't have to use titles. Not if they make you uncomfortable," Bella told me. I rocked her a little on my lap, too fucking happy to be in her good graces again to contain myself.

"I don't mind," I told her. "I'm not sure how good I'll be at doing the whole 'boyfriend' thing. I don't think anyone has actually called me that since I was about fifteen years old."

"You're doing a pretty good job of it, right now," Bella offered. I smiled.

"Does that mean I get to call you my 'girlfriend'?" I asked, grinned up at her. Bella looked like she was trying hard not to smile at my newfound enthusiasm.

"Only if you want to," she offered. I let my hands rub up and down her back. Sure... I still felt scared. But being with her like this, made it worth it.

"I'd be fucking proud to tell people that you're mine," I said simply. "So..."

"So?" She asked.

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"So... what does this mean?" I asked. "You said you wanted more. I told you what I thought that was. Now, you tell me."

Bella took a deep breath and tilted her head up to look at the ceiling for a moment.

"It means that I want to be your friend," Bella said then, quietly. "But I want to be able... to touch you. I *care* about you, Edward. I don't want to have to hide that, anymore."

"I never want you to have to hide that," I shook my head when she looked back down at me. "I care about you too, Bella." She lowered her hand, to cup my cheek, and I just stared at her for a minute.

"No more girls, Edward," she said then, seriously. "That's a deal breaker for me. I mean it."

"It won't even be an issue, love," I promised, turning my face to place a small kiss on the side of her hand. "Other girls don't mean shit to me."

She pushed her hand through my hair again, and cradled the back of my head. I hummed in contentment and closed my eyes. I wasn't sure what I'd done, to deserve her forgiveness. But I was so fucking glad I had it.

"Does this mean that I get to kiss you now?" I asked, smirking.

"Yes," Bella replied.

Taking advantage of her acquiescence, I put my hands on each side of her face, and pulled her mouth down to mine. Our kisses were slow, and sweet, and tasted of her forgiveness and the shaky promise that I'd made to head down this new, frightening path with her. We were both smiling against each other's mouths when we finally pulled away.

"Do you want to stay?" Bella asked then. I nodded, and swallowed hard. I wanted that more than anything. She slid from my lap, and offered her hand

while I stood, then led me through her dark loft to her room.

"We're not having sex," Bella spoke again, looking at me over her shoulder. "I'm still mad at you."

"I know," I nodded eagerly. I hadn't expected otherwise. I had acted like a shit. I was just lucky that she was letting me stick around. Together, we climbed under the blankets on her bed. And I sighed happily when Bella nestled against me and put her head on my chest. She was asleep before I was, and I held her for a while, just staring up at the dark ceiling above her bed. Strange... my thoughts were content. Happy. For once, I didn't feel nervous or scared at all. I'd have to say, it felt just about perfect.

Sometime later, I woke to the sound of the loft door closing loudly. I blinked and rubbed my eyes, looking around me in confusion. I remembered where I was, and what had brought me here, almost immediately. I was lying alone on Bella's bed, with her blankets twisted around my legs. The quiet sound of the shower in the adjoining bathroom let me know where Bella was, though Rosalie obviously hadn't heard it yet. She was talking loudly while she made her way through the loft toward me.

"Oh my GOD, Bella," Rosalie exclaimed. "That man is hung like a fucking racehorse! I'm going to walk bow-legged for a couple of days. I swear!" She stopped and her words trailed off when she saw me, instead of her sister, in the bed. "Well, I'll be fucked sideways..." she breathed out, looking at me. I grinned up at her.

"Sounds like you *were*," I teased. Rosalie looked between me and the closed bathroom door before shaking her head and rolling her eyes.

"It's too early for this shit," she said, walking away. "I need coffee."

I couldn't agree more, so I jumped out of bed with a grin, and followed her out of the room.

-BPOV-

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Amazingly warm and comfortable, I woke with Edward wrapped around me. I laid there for a moment, looking at his face while he slept. His jaw was slack and his lips softly puffed out with every exhale. His hair was a usual mess around his head, and I wanted to put my hands through it. But I didn't want to wake him. We hadn't gone to bed until the early hours of the morning, and I was content to let him sleep for a while longer. It wasn't an easy feat, slipping out of bed without disturbing him. But I managed, and quietly made my way to a much needed shower.

I hastily washed the remainders of make-up from my face, and lathered shampoo through my hair to rid it of the mountains of product that had been used to design my hairstyle the day before... a task I hadn't bothered with when I returned to my loft. I had been too upset, and heartbroken over the way that things had been left between Edward and me.

But he came to me. And he apologized. And, he completely surprised me when he told me that he wanted more from our relationship, too.

I frowned while I scrubbed soap up and down my body. I wasn't entirely sure how much more to actually expect from him. I worried that he was willing to promise just about anything, to make me happy. And the problem with that was... I wanted to be sure that *he* was happy, too. None of this would work, if he was only doing what he thought I wanted, and if he didn't actually want the same things.

I knew he was scared. I shivered when I recalled the harsh way that he had tried to shut me out, when I first admitted to him what I wanted. The wall he threw up, and his ice-cold demeanor was Edward's defense mechanism. I left, just as he'd intended me to do. And I was genuinely shocked, when he came after me.

He had said that he wanted to try to be my boyfriend. He promised that he wouldn't be seeing any other women. And he told me he cared for me. And that... was really more than enough. It was certainly more than I imagined he'd offer. I might not have broken down that wall. But he lowered it for me. I just hoped like hell, that he didn't regret it this morning.

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My room was empty when I returned, wearing soft sweat pants and a large hoodie. On silent socked feet, I made my way toward the quiet sound of voices in the kitchen.

Rosalie and Edward both looked over at me, when I entered the room. Rosalie stood, refilling her cup near the coffee maker. Edward leaned over the bar, with his hands wrapped around a cup of his own. I searched for the hesitation that I thought I might see in his eyes. Instead, I received a smile.

"Coffee?" Rosalie asked, as if it was the most natural thing in the world for us all to be together, like this.

"Mm-hmm," I nodded, moving over to the stool across from where Edward stood. If Rosalie was shocked by our additional guest this morning, she was already over it. She just poured another mug from the pot and handed it to me.

"You've missed a rather enlightening description of Emmett's penis," Edward smiled, sipping his coffee.

"Quit complaining," Rosalie scolded, slapping him lightly on his shoulder. "You wake up in my place... and you get what you get."

I shook a packet of sweetener before tearing the top and dumping it into my cup. Edward slid a spoon across the counter, and I accepted it quietly. I wasn't sure what I had been expecting, but the relaxed atmosphere was a welcome relief.

"So... you and Emmett, huh?" I asked, looking up at her. Rosalie just shrugged.

"So... you and Edward, huh?" she mimicked me, and I tried to suppress my nerves as I looked over at Edward. He just grinned and sipped his coffee, not seeming disturbed in the least. Neither of us said a word to clarify her statement. In an uncharacteristic move, Rosalie let it drop. "Alright you two. I need ibuprofen, and a few more hours of sleep. I'll see you later."

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I nervously watched her leave the room. Edward finished his coffee with a gulp, and then turned to deposit his mug in the sink.

"I gotta get going too," he said. "I've got some shit to do today."

"Okay," I mumbled, standing to follow him toward the door. I was on edge, and nervously twisted my hands in the front pocket of my sweatshirt. I was still waiting for Edward to tell me that he'd made a mistake. That we were fooling ourselves. That after thinking things through... he'd changed his mind. I chewed my bottom lip and looked at the floor while he opened the door. But then he paused, and turned toward me.

"I was thinking... maybe you'd like to go out to dinner tonight?"

I looked up at him in surprise, and saw that he actually seemed a little nervous too. And... he was asking me out on a *date*? He wasn't shutting me out again, as I feared he might do. Edward was actually, *trying*.

"Umm..." I said, hesitating for a minute. If Edward was legitimately going to try to do this, then I wanted to make things as easy as possible for him. "How about if we just get carry-out later?" I asked. "We could just hang out at your place?" Just like nothing had changed, even though we both knew that *everything* had. I relaxed when a large smile pulled across his face.

"Yeah," he nodded, rubbing his hand across the back of his neck. "That sounds really fucking good. Around seven?"

"Sure," I smiled. See? This didn't have to be so hard.

Edward leaned down and put a soft kiss against my cheek before turning to walk down the hall. I rested my back against the door for a minute, after closing it, and just willed myself to calm down. I'd been so afraid that everything would be different when we both woke. It was a huge relief to know that Edward wasn't tripping out, or acting weird. Instead, I was the one with her emotions all over the damn place. I shook my head and scolded myself internally, promising to get my shit together before I saw him again later in the

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evening. If Edward really was fine with this, I didn't want to over-analyze things to the point that I would make him change his mind.

Though I promised myself that I would try to relax, I couldn't help the sick feeling I got when I pressed Edward's buzzer just before seven and he didn't answer the door. My stomach dropped after the third ring, when I realized that he wasn't even home. My afternoon had pretty much sucked, and my shoulders slumped while I dejectedly stood there holding a bag of Chinese food, feeling like a moron.

I had just turned to go back to my loft, when I heard the lower door open, and heard fast feet approach behind me in the hall.

"Whoa!" Edward called out. "Hold up. Sorry I'm late. I just ran down to the gas station to buy some beer."

I turned toward him with a sigh, hating how quickly I had doubted his intentions, and wondering how long it would take for me to finally trust that he'd legitimately meant what he had said about wanting to be with me, too.

"Hey..." he asked softly, with his eyes traveling all over my face. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah," I nodded. "Sorry... it's been a long day."

"Tell me about it," he offered wryly, opening his door with his key. I felt like shit, for being so insecure.

"So, what did you do today?" I asked, placing our dinner on his counter top. Edward shrugged out of his jacket and tossed it across a chair before grabbing a couple of plates for us.

"Just... stuff," he told me. "We can talk about yours, first. What's put that frown on your pretty face?"

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I emptied a couple cardboard cartons out onto each plate while Edward opened two beers, and we each carried our dinner to the living room.

"I finished some homework," I shrugged and talked while we ate. "And then Rosalie and I spent some time with our folks before we had to take them back to the airport."

"Ah." Edward nodded around a mouthful of food before putting his plate down on the table. "I'm sorry. I didn't know that they were leaving today. I could have driven you again." I shrugged and put my plate down too.

"Be glad you missed it," I told him. "Mom has me practically engaged to Garrett, and Dad lectured me on everything from carrying pepper spray on campus to my five-year plan."

"Garrett?" Edward winced. "I guess they *would* assume that, since he started out as your date last night."

"He wasn't my date," I argued again. "I told you. I just met him there."

"He's a nice guy," Edward shrugged. "Kate told me that they really hit it off. I guess I'm happy for them."

"You saw Kate?"

"Took a cab down to Muddy's to pick up my car," Edward offered, taking a drink of his beer. He placed the bottle beside his plate and leaned back in the corner of the couch, looking at me. "Still... your mother might have had a different reference to go by, if I'd have been with you today. You know... as your *boyfriend*." A teasing smile played on his lips and lit his eyes, and I couldn't help but smile back. How was it, he seemed more comfortable playing around with his new title than I did?

"Would you really want to go through all of that?" I cringed. "You know... the stern lecture from Dad, warning you about taking care of his little girl?"

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"I don't know," Edward lowered his eyes then to a strand of my hair that he casually reached for and began twisting around his finger. "Your dad can be pretty... uh... intimidating."

"Yeah. I know."

"But I'm going to. You know."

"Going to what?"

"Try to take care of his little girl."

I sighed, and my head dropped down a little. Edward moved his hand to gently cup the back of my neck and began kneading my stiff muscles. "Damn, love. You're all knotted up."

"Like I said," I sighed again. His fingers felt so good. "Long day."

"Come here. Let me give you a massage."

"Trying to get me out of my clothes again?" I managed to turn my head and grin up at him. Edward smiled back at me.

"Not yet," he shook his head. "Just... come here."

I rotated my body to sit between his legs, and moaned when he started rubbing the sore muscles in my shoulders. Edward chuckled.

"Keep making noises like that, and I'll change my mind," he said in a low voice. I relaxed farther into his chest, and closed my eyes.

"Tell me about your day," I said, wanting to change the subject. Edward's hands halted for a moment, before he resumed his task.

"I worked on some music. Got my car. And I spent most of the day, trying to talk myself into making a phone call."

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"A phone call?" I turned my body, and his hands dropped down to rest on either side of me. He leaned forward then, and grabbed a little square of paper that was partially covered by his plate on the coffee table. Without a word, he handed it to me. I took it from him, and let my eyes scan over the embossed gold lettering on the card.

"Jasper and Alice?" I asked, looking back up at him.

"My cousin," Edward nodded. His eyes looked dark, and his face was serious. "I guess they are finally getting married. That invitation arrived yesterday."

"Oh," I said, looking back at the paper before placing it on the table once more.

"I knew it was only a matter of time," Edward sighed, rubbing his hands over his face, and up into his hair. "But it kinda threw me off yesterday."

"I can imagine," I frowned. I probably couldn't have picked a worse day to add drama to his life. "Are you going to go home to New York?" I asked.

"I'm not sure yet."

"Maybe you should," I offered quietly. Edward just shrugged and reached for the remote.

"Want to watch a movie?" He was obviously done talking about it. I smiled, and nodded. He needed time. I could give him that. I relaxed back into his chest again, and Edward settled on something on the television before wrapping his arms around my waist. It felt good, and natural to be sitting with him. Not strange. Not uncomfortable. We laughed, watching Tom Hanks fall in love with a mermaid, and forgot about the stress we'd carried around all day. Easy.

When the movie was over, I reluctantly stretched and got up to leave. Edward followed me to the door.

"What is your week like?" he asked, just like he had many times before.

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"Classes," I shrugged. "I think we are going to start our final project soon." I was glad the semester was wrapping up. "You?"

"I have a gig, down at Muddy's on Wednesday," Edward told me.

"Oh," I paused at the door.

"I was thinking... maybe you'd like to go with me?"

I couldn't help myself. I grinned hugely and nodded. Edward smiled too, and put his hand on the back of my neck again.

"I'm going to kiss you now," he said.

"You don't have to ask permission, anymore," I teased.

"I wasn't asking," he smirked. He tugged me closer, and I stood on tip-toe to reach for him. He hummed happily while he dragged his lips across my mouth. And just for a moment, he let the tip of his tongue caress mine. Before it got too heated, Edward pulled away with a sigh. "Get some rest," he told me. I nodded again and turned to go back home.

Reviews are better than race horses. Leave one.

Closer

A/N: Twilight belongs to S. Meyer. I'm just running her characters through a few chord progressions.

A/N: This chapter earns me my M rating. Just sayin'.

-EPOV-

I only saw Bella a couple of times, over the next few days. If I thought that our new relationship status was going to turn her into a clingy caricature of her usual self, I was mistaken. Bella was busy with her studies, and gave me plenty of space.

We shared lunch on Tuesday. And I offered to start giving her those guitar lessons I'd promised. I thought I'd feel anxious, letting someone else play my guitar. But when Bella held Beatrice gently on her lap, I felt more comfortable than I imagined I could. I even teased her a little, about how hot it was to see her holding 'the other woman.' But that led to a rather uncomfortable conversation about threesomes. Bella asked me if I'd ever been part of something like that. And yeah- I had. But it wasn't like I wanted to talk about all the sad shit I'd done before Bella was part of my life. That kind of stuff was in the past. I'd like it to stay buried there. I was trying to turn a new leaf, and all that. She wouldn't relent until I'd admitted it though. She wrinkled her nose and made a face. She said it was 'nasty' and I didn't disagree. Still, I was glad that she didn't press for details.

On Wednesday night, I was standing near my door, trying to fix my hair in the mirror when the doorbell rang. I answered it to see Bella, looking hot as hell and ready for a night out. Not that she didn't always look gorgeous. But she'd taken time to do her hair, and was wearing some bright red button up shirt with a pair of tight jeans that immediately made me want to forgo our plans and stay in, instead. I knew I had to play though, and so I forced myself to grab my keys.

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"You look beautiful," I told her. Bella smiled, and nervously twisted her hair over her shoulder, exposing the side of her neck to my hungry gaze. I felt my mouth water, just looking at her. Jesus, I needed to get laid.

"I wasn't sure what to wear..." she said. I shook my head. I could tell she was probably nervous about actually going out with me, as my girlfriend, or whatever. She didn't have to worry. No other girl would be able to hold a candle to her. I grabbed her hips playfully and tugged her against me.

"If your goal was to make me completely insane with wanting you... you've succeeded," I told her, moving in close so I could nuzzle my face into the part of her neck that was tempting me to forget my obligations. Bella giggle and seemed to relax.

"Rosalie is coming with us," she said, stepping out of my embrace. "I think she wants to see Emmett again."

"Alright," I told her. I grabbed my guitar, and we made our way down to the garage.

I felt a little ramped up as I led the three of us into the bar. Danny didn't bother with Rosalie and Bella's ID's this time, and I took their coats and placed them with mine behind the bar before walking through the crowd to put my guitar on the stage.

"Ah. You brought the girls with you," Rory said, greeting me. I nodded, and looked over to where they were standing, talking with Emmett. "Classes the joint up a little," he smiled. I smiled too, in total agreement. Bella wasn't showing a bunch of skin like some of the trashier looking girls that lingered by the stage. But she stood out like a beacon, from the back of the bar. "You got something going on there?" my band mate asked. I just grinned and went back to strumming my guitar, making sure she was ready for our set. It wasn't like I was going to start putting my heart on my sleeve, making declarations of devotion and dedicating songs to her and shit. Bella and I knew who we were.

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I couldn't keep myself from glancing her way a few times, while we played. Just to make sure she still seemed alright, sitting in the back with Rosalie. She held a beer bottle between her palms, tucked between her knees, and smiled my way when she caught me looking. Bella looked happy, laughing and talking with Emmett and Rosalie. Kate stopped by to make sure their drinks were never empty. And I happily sat on my stool in the corner, playing along to music that made the crowd dance and have fun. I did start to feel tense when during the final song before our break, I noticed a couple of guys moving closer to where Rosalie and Bella sat. They were pretty girls, and they were bound to draw attention. But it pissed me off, just the same, when one leaned down and started to try to talk to Bella.

I cringed, and tried to concentrate on getting through the song. It wasn't like I had walked in the joint with Bella on my arm, or anything. I hadn't made it obvious, that she was with me. I probably should have... but I wasn't used to this whole 'boyfriend-girlfriend' thing yet. Needless to say, I was happy as fuck when the song ended. I put my guitar to the side, dodged a few bullets dressed in short dresses, and made my way over to where Bella sat. She held a beer in my direction, and I took it before leveling the guy beside her with a shitty look.

"Fuck off," I told him, distinctly. He looked back at Bella, then once more at me, before taking my advice and moving away. Bella laughed.

"Thanks," she said, nudging my arm with hers. I smiled at her approval, and tipped my beer back.

"I like your music," Rosalie told me, nicely. I raised my eyebrows, unaccustomed to her handing out compliments.

"It's not mine," I told her. "But, thanks."

The guys from the band eagerly congregated to the corner of the bar where I stood, anxious to throw back a few beers before our next set. We talked about another show we had coming up, in a different part of town.

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"Are you two going to be there?" Todd asked, looking at the girls in our company.

"Probably not," Rosalie shook her head. I didn't expect her to start hanging out in dive bars. She was only here tonight, because Emmett owned the place.

"I don't know," Bella shrugged, glancing at me from the corner of her eye. I put my hand on her back, and leaned down to speak across her ear.

"I'd like you to be," I said. She just smiled.

I hurried to slam back another beer, searching for the buzz I knew it would provide, and then it was time to head back to the stage. I hadn't gone more than a few feet into the crowd when I felt a pair of arms wrap around my waist from behind. Thinking that Bella had caught up with me, I turned with a large smile on my face. That smile quickly dropped, when I realized that it was the wrong pair of fucking arms touching me.

"Hey there," I said, frowning, trying to extract myself from her grip. The girl was tall, and blonde, and definitely wasted as she smiled up at me with shiny red lips.

"You're so hot," she said, slurring a little.

"And definitely not interested," I told her, pushing her hands away.

"Aww... don't be like that," she pouted, stumbling closer. The press of the crowd behind me held me in place. She was obnoxious, and I just wanted to get to the stage to finish our next set so I could go home. I wondered for a moment, what I ever saw in girls like her.

"I'm here with someone," I told her, realizing just how happy that made me to say. I looked over her bleached-blond head, and could clearly see Bella watching the two of us, from her place by the bar. The blonde turned her head to look too, and Bella just raised her eyebrow, shifting her eyes from mine to look at the girl with such a cocky expression of confidence that I couldn't help

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but laugh. My girlfriend was feisty. *My girlfriend*. Hmm. I liked that. There were no hysterics. No big scene. Bella didn't stomp her way over to us in a huff. She just folded her arms over her chest with a look that clearly told the blonde to step the hell away. She knew who I was with, and who I'd be leaving with just as soon as I could finish the show. That confidence was a major fucking turn-on.

Without further incident, I was able to leave the situation and join the rest of the guys on the stage. We played through ten more songs, and then it was time to pack it up. I slipped Beatrice back into her case, and walked over to where Bella already held our coats.

"Is this alright?" she asked, holding up my jacket. "Do you want to stay for another drink?"

"Nah," I shook my head. "I've got some beer at the Abbey."

"I'm sticking around til' close," Rosalie informed us, looking over to Emmett who winked at her from behind the bar.

"And she's off to the races," I muttered playfully, earning a slap to the back of my head.

"Have fun," Bella laughed. Rosalie nodded and turned back on her stool to face the bar. This time, I didn't forget to take Bella's hand as I led us both back through the crowd toward the door.

"Did you have a good time?" I asked, adjusting the knobs on my car to ward off the chill outside. Bella rubbed her hands up and down her arms, and hummed.

"I wonder what it would be like, to hear you play *your* music up there," she offered, smiling my way.

"I booked some studio time," I told her. Bella looked at me excitedly, and I grinned. "I'm just gonna lay down a few tracks to send out to a guy I know." I

never planned to use my last name to garner any attention to my tunes. But an old friend of the family had been in touch by email, and had offered to shop some of my songs around, to some people he still knew in the business. He promised to not throw my name around, and just see how far the music traveled on its own legs.

Bella sat quietly beside me, for the rest of the short trip back home. She seemed lost in her thoughts, and I was content in the peace and quiet around us, after having been in the loud environment of Muddy's for a few hours. We stopped at my door, and Bella bit her lip.

"Penny for your thoughts?" I asked, pulling my finger down her cheek. Her face was flushed, and I wondered how much she had to drink. Bella just shook her head, and grabbed my hand to twist her fingers with mine. "Want to come in for a beer?"

"I want to come in," Bella smiled and looked down. "But... not for a beer."

She looked up at me then, from beneath her thick eyelashes, and I saw her intention all over her face. I couldn't get my door open fast enough. And then we were kissing, and shoving our coats from our shoulders. I cringed when Beatrice dropped heavily onto the floor, saying an internal prayer of thanks for the hard case that cradled her. But then Bella's hands were tugging at my shirt, trying to pull it over my head. I bent forward to help, and she tossed it aside before grabbing at my chest and pressing her mouth to mine again. Her hands were cold, but fuck if that mattered. I grabbed her ass and lifted her to wrap her legs around me.

"We gotta get you warmed up, love," I muttered against her mouth, hurrying toward the bedroom. Bella nodded breathlessly.

"I'm definitely getting there," she said, before I lowered her feet to the floor by my bed. Her pretty shirt wasn't afforded the same gentle treatment as mine had been. Tiny little buttons scattered on my floor when I ripped it open to get my hands and mouth on her chest. We hadn't been together like this, in way too long. I was starving for her. Bella pulled her hands from her sleeves and I

quickly unhooked her bra and pulled it down her arms before flinging it across the room. Then our naked chests pushed together, and she tugged at my hair while I bit at her mouth and pulled my fingertips roughly down her back.

"These need to come off," I said, slapping her ass lightly over the pocket of her tight jeans. "Right fucking now." Bella nodded, and started to shimmy out of the rest of her clothing. I hurried to do the same. Then we both jumped up on the bed, and I started kissing her again, letting my hands roam all of the skin that I was dying to get reacquainted with.

"God," Bella gasped and threaded her fingers through my hair, holding my face to her chest while I licked and nipped at the skin there. "I hated seeing that girl touching you, Edward."

Her words gave me reason to pause, and I raised my head to look at her. Unfortunately, it was too fucking dark in the room for me to see her face. So I took a deep breath, and found some control to slow us both down for a moment. Then I shifted my body so I could reach the side table, and turned on the light there.

Bella winced against the sudden illumination, and then brought her arm up to cover her chest.

"Don't," I scolded, and grabbed her arms to hold them at her sides. I studied her face, full of want, before leaning back to pull my gaze down her throat, and across her chest. I looked at the flat plain of her stomach, heaving up and down with each of her staggered breaths, and then at the gentle curve of her hips. She was glorious.

"You're the only girl I want. You know that, right?" I asked, raising my eyes to look into hers again. "The only one I'm with, like this?" Bella bit her lip and hesitantly nodded.

"Good," I murmured, letting my fingertips trace the lines my eyes had just traveled. Bella closed her eyes, and pushed her head back, elongating the front of her neck for my lips. I kissed the tip of her chin before dragging my tongue

down a path that didn't end until I was lower on the bed, and could kiss the soft skin of her stomach. I felt the over-whelming need then, to make sure she knew how very different this was for me.

-BPOV-

His fingers, and his lips were making me crazy. He kissed every exposed inch of me, and then curled his fingers into the waistband of my panties. With agonizing slowness, he pulled them down my legs before tossing them to the floor. I looked down at him, trying to control my breathing. Just the way he was looking at me, alone, made me feel near ready to combust. But then he nudged my thighs apart, and settled between them.

I tensed up when he kissed my inner thigh. I mean, it felt good. Like, really, *really* good. But he was also really close, down there, to where I wanted him most. And I wasn't sure about what he planned to do, but I was worried that I might have an idea. And then, I most definitely got the idea when he put his mouth directly between my legs with a teasing, tentative lick that made me shudder. I sucked in a deep breath, and squeezed my eyes closed. I wasn't sure, from hearing about it, that I'd ever be comfortable with such an act. But man... after the first flick of his tongue against me, my shyness about the situation was non-existent.

"Oooh," I gasped and gripped the sheets near my head tightly. Edward lowered his mouth again, dragging his tongue forward, long and slow this time.

"God help me," he muttered with his lips near my skin. His voice sent vibrations through my body that made my toes curl. "But I might never get enough of this."

"Don't stop!" I told him, shamelessly grabbing him by the hair to push him closer. He set in then, and I couldn't stop the noises, the moans, and the words that his mouth wrung from me. I think I might have even called out for the mercy of a few saints, and it wasn't long before my thighs tightened over his shoulders and my back arched off the mattress with the force of the orgasm that tore through me. I slumped back to the bed, fighting to catch my breath and

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calm the desperate pounding of my heart while Edward kissed me softly a few more times before, almost reluctantly, crawling back up the bed to join me where I lay. I blinked over at him with my hand on the center of my chest, still seeing stars, and watched as he roguishly wiped his mouth on the back of his forearm before giving me the smuggest grin I'd ever seen.

"So. I take it that was good?" I laughed, a wonderful, breathless laugh and smiled over at the proud look on his face.

"Like you expected it wouldn't be?" I teased. Edward pressed his lips together, and I couldn't even feel ashamed about being the reason that they looked so red and puffy.

"I wasn't sure," he shook his head and leaned forward to kiss my shoulder. "I've never done that before."

"What?" I know I sounded incredulous. But damn. I *was* incredulous. I raised myself up with my elbows on the bed behind me, and looked over at him in shock. "Seriously? Like... ever?"

"Have *you*?" Edward asked, holding the side of his head on his palm.

"Well... no," I shook my head. "But... you're the one with all of the experience," I mumbled. Not that I really wanted to bring that up right then. But it was the truth.

"Not in doing *that*." Edward wrinkled his nose, and didn't offer more of an explanation. I was actually really happy that he seemed to find the thought distasteful. Because truthfully, I was happy with not having to imagine him sticking his head between the legs of any of the nameless tramps that he'd been with before. I was glad that I was his first in something. I wanted to be his last.

"Did you hate it?" I couldn't help but ask. Edward chuckled against my neck, and pulled my hand down between us until I could feel how hard he was. He groaned when I touched him, and bit my neck.

"You're so fucking sexy. I loved doing that," he assured me. "I want you so fucking bad, it hurts." He thrust into my hand to illustrate his point, and I wrapped my fingers around him, excited about how much he obviously enjoyed what he had done to me.

"Edward? I want you inside me," I told him. He didn't waste any time rolling his body over mine until my legs were around him again.

"I hope you're not expecting, sweet, gentle... pretty... *fuck!*" he yelled out the last word when he pushed himself into me with one fast thrust. And I know he didn't necessarily mean the expletive to describe what he was about to do... but *fuck* is exactly what he did. Edward was hard, fast, and insistent. My legs still felt like jelly from his earlier efforts, but Edward didn't seem to mind. He just pulled them up and put them where he wanted while his chest heaved and he threw himself against me over and over. I frantically tried to keep up, moaning in the new wave of pleasure that he delivered. Then he stopped and pulled out of me.

"Roll over," he growled. I hurried to do what he asked, and then his hands were on my hips, tugging me up onto my knees in front of him.

"Ungh!" I cried out when he pushed back into me, and held my arms rigidly forward, gripping his headboard to keep my frame up for him. Edward's fingers gripped my hips tightly, and he pulled me back against him again and again. Our thighs slapped together, and I bit my lip to keep from crying out. It was fierce. It was absolutely amazing.

"Goddammit, I'm close," Edward said with a strained voice. He reached around my waist then, and shoved those long, talented fingers of his between my legs. I couldn't help but call out his name when I came again, hard. And I felt him pulsing inside me, knowing that he had done the same.

I couldn't hold my body up, and fell straight down to my stomach. Edward collapsed on top of me. And then I couldn't help but laugh. It was hard enough to catch my breath, without his added weight across my back.

"Shit, he groaned. Sorry... just... give me a minute. I can't move."

We both laughed then, and I wiggled underneath him until he rolled to his hip beside me. I turned my face against his pillow to look at him, and cherished the sated, exhausted look on his face. Edward raised one hand to gently push my hair back away from my neck, and smiled at me.

"Bella?" He said my name in a whisper, still trying to catch his breath. "I really love having you as a girlfriend." The softly spoken words played on the sweet curve of his lips, and danced with sincerity in his eyes. The complete look of satisfaction and contentment on his face made my heart clench tight in my chest, and I closed my eyes with a smile. Close. It was close enough.

Reviews are better than being squished. Leave one.

Ring, Ring

A/N: Twilight belongs to S. Meyer. I'm just running her characters through a few chord progressions.

-EPOV-

The closest I came to allowing Bella to get dressed the next day, was agreeing that she could wear one of my button-up shirts. Thank God Rosalie had the good sense to leave us the fuck alone, and not come looking for her sister, because I didn't want to share her with anyone else for a while. We spent a couple of days completely relaxing, reconnecting, reconnecting *again*, and just thoroughly enjoying the comfort of being together. It was awesome.

By Monday morning, Bella was back in class, and I was left to my own devices. Unfortunately, that put me in a shitty mood. I had far too many worries creeping around in my head, to sit alone for long with my thoughts. But even though I was feeling like an emo bastard, I let Bella get the work done that she needed to do, in order to go out with me on Wednesday night.

The band played out in a bar that I hadn't been to often. Other than a few familiar groupies that seemed to show up at every fucking show we played at... we didn't know anyone. I was damn grateful for that. I wasn't in the mood to try to keep up any sort of civil conversation. I just wanted to be left alone. Even the guys from my band seemed to notice my reluctance to hang out with them, and gave us space. Bella didn't seem to mind though. I chose a table for her, right next to my side of the stage, so I could keep an eye on her. And it was really fucking nice, to be able to hold her hand, and kiss her, and have her by my side during our set break. She humored me, and my weird state of mind, until we got back to my place. There, I promised to set the alarm that I rarely used, so she could get up for class the next day. And she let me hold her until we both fell asleep.

At what seemed like an ungodly hour, I pounded the alarm clock to get it to shut the fuck up. Bella groaned and buried herself under my covers, and I spun

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to rest my head against her chest. Sleepily, she began pulling her fingers through my hair, and I hummed my approval.

"I gotta get up," Bella finally said, in a sleepy voice.

"Don't go," I insisted, hugging her closer. "Skip class and stay in bed with me." I kissed her softly, above the edge of the t-shirt she wore to bed, and Bella sighed.

"I can't." She said. Her ever-present sense of responsibility annoyed me, and I growled and frowned against her skin. I didn't want another long day of sitting around alone, torturing myself with the indecision and weakness that had been plaguing me for days. Bella calmed me, and gave me better things to think about. If she left, I'd be right back to brooding and staring at my phone.

"Bet I could make you stay," I mumbled deviously, sliding my hand down her body to play at the edge of her panties. I wasn't above using coercion to get my way.

"Stop," Bella told me. But she wasn't giggling or being playful. It pissed me off.

"Why are you being so stubborn?" I narrowed my eyes and looked up at her.

"Why do you want me to stay?" Bella asked, returning my frown.

"I think that's obvious," I smirked, rubbing my hard dick against her leg. Bella raised her eyebrow, obviously unimpressed. "Jesus," I finally huffed. "Is it too much to think that maybe I just want to spend some time with you?" She pressed her lips together, and continued to stare at me.

"Why are you acting like this?"

"Like what?" I groaned and rolled over to my back, exasperated. It was too early in the morning to think about bullshit. I wanted to lose myself in her company for a while. So sue me.

"What's going on?" Bella asked then, with her voice softening. "You've been acting weird since last night."

"I thought you had fun last night." I'd been the perfect boyfriend, and gave her tons of attention and shit while we'd been out.

"I did. But... I can tell that something's bothering you."

"Whatever," I denied, throwing my blankets off me in an aggravated motion. "Just forget it. Go to class. I don't care." I got up, and stomped out of the room. I needed a cigarette, but wasn't dressed to go outside. Moodily, I lifted my window and sat beside it, lighting up.

After a few minutes Bella joined me, wearing the clothes she had been wearing the night before. I scowled to see her dressed, and turned my attention to flicking my ashes out the window.

"Glad to see that the academic world of future-game-designers won't be without your illustrious presence this morning," I muttered wryly.

"You know, if you didn't insist on shutting me out, I might have considered staying," Bella said, sitting on the edge of my sofa to pull on her shoes. "But you seem hell-bent on acting like an asshole, instead. So go ahead, Edward. I'd rather sit home, than stay here and let you pretend that nothing's going on."

I sighed heavily, and tossed my cigarette out the window before dropping my head. It would be so much easier, if the girl didn't always call me on my bullshit. But she was right. I wasn't treating her fairly, and I knew it. I pulled the window closed, and walked over to sit beside her on the couch. She was still tying her shoes, clearly pissed off. I put my hand over hers, to stop her.

"You're right," I said, feeling resigned. "I'm sorry. I'm... not used to being an open-fucking-book every time my head gets in a strange place."

"Just... talk to me," Bella urged, sitting up. Her shoes were forgotten, and she kept her hand in mine. "I care Edward. I want to know what's wrong, so I can

help."

"It would help if you were naked," I said, daring to tease her a little. Bella gave me a dirty look, but I could tell she didn't really mean it. She was trying not to smile.

"I might be tempted to get naked, if you weren't being a jerk."

"So if I talk... you'll lose some clothes?" I asked, hopefully. She tapped her chin with her fingertip like she was willing to at least consider the suggestion.

"Maybe..." she supplied.

I reached over to the coffee table, and pulled the wrinkled piece of paper that had been dominating my brain from beneath the music pages that hid it. It had been folded, and refolded so often that the gold lettering had begun to lose its shine. The information on it hadn't changed.

"The wedding?" Bella asked, as I handed it to her. I nodded.

"They want an RSVP," I sighed.

"And you haven't called them yet?"

"No. Not yet," I admitted, feeling my shoulders slump. Bella put her fingers in the back of my hair, and scratched my scalp in a lightly comforting motion.

"I think you should," she said softly. I shrugged.

"I know," I said. "I just... couldn't."

"How can I help?" Bella asked. I turned my head and smiled at her once more.

"Are we back to the naked thing, again?" she joked. I shrugged. I was teasing, but I'd take inspiration where I could find it. Bella contemplated my expression for a moment before standing and walking across the room. With a determined look, she grabbed the cordless phone and walked back to put it in my hands.

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"Bella, I don't know..." I said. But I stopped when I watched her reach down to tug off one of her shoes. She took a step back, and tossed the thing into my lap. Then she quirked her eyebrow at me, and took another step back toward the bedroom before tugging off her other shoe and dropping it on the floor. Her hands stopped at the button on her jeans, before I caught on to her intentions and smiled.

"Dial the phone, Edward," Bella directed in a seductive voice. I took a deep breath and stared at the number pad. "I'll just... give you some privacy."

Steeling myself, I let my fingers dial the number that I knew by heart. I raised the phone to my ear with a shaky hand at the same time that Bella disappeared into my room. I couldn't help but smile, when I saw her jeans come sailing out the door. I was still nervous as hell, but Bella was definitely doing her best to help.

"Hello?"

The sweet feminine voice that answered the phone at the other end made me sigh with relief. I didn't even realize how much I'd missed the sound, until it filled my ear. I cleared my throat, and pulled my free hand up through my hair.

"Hello. Uh... Aunt Esme? It's me. Edward..."

"Oh my God! Anthony? Carlisle! It's Anthony!" she spoke to the side, obviously excited.

"Hi," I said again, lamely.

"How are you honey?" My Aunt asked quickly. "I'm just so surprised to hear your voice. Is everything okay? Are you alright?"

"I'm not calling for you to bail me out of jail, if that's what you're wondering," I chuckled.

"Oh... of course not, dear. I didn't even think of anything like that..."

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"I'm joking," I hurried to reassure her. "Everything is fine."

"Oh. So...?" I knew she was confused to be hearing from me, after so long. I grinned as Bella's shirt flashed across my line of sight.

"I was just calling about the wedding," I informed her, anxious to get business taken care of so I could be with the undressed girl in the other room.

"Oh," my aunt said then. "Well, we didn't mean to upset you, or make you feel pressured or anything. The wedding is set for the Saturday after Thanksgiving. And I'm sure that Jasper and Alice will understand if you can't make it, what with it being a busy holiday for traveling and all. But they wanted to invite you. You *are* still family, Anthony. And... we all miss you, here."

I felt a little choked up, at her easy use of my old family nickname, and her obvious affection.

"Well, I wanted to let you know, that I'll be there," I said then, feeling confident, for once, about the decision I'd made.

"You will?" she sounded incredulous. "He said he's coming to the wedding, Carlisle. Anthony is coming home!" I smiled at her exuberance, and rubbed at my stomach. Bella's bra and panties were thrown into the living room next.

"Listen," I said into the phone. "I'd like to stay on the phone and chat..."

"That's okay," she hurried to tell me. "You're busy." *Not yet. But I would be, soon.* The thought made me grin. "We'll have plenty of time to catch up, later."

"Thanks," I told her. "I'll talk to you later, Aunt Esme."

"You don't know how happy I am that you called," she said.

"I'm... happy I called too," I said, sincerely. And I was happy that Bella had forced me to do it. It was time.

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I disconnected the call quickly, before tossing the phone to the couch. Then I hurried into my bedroom to get my reward.

-BPOV-

Edward made love to me slowly, and leisurely. He held my hands intertwined with his, while his thrusts brought us together in a way that connected us beyond the physical aspect of what we shared. Gone was the desperate tension in his shoulders, and the worried scowl that marred his handsome features. He was relaxed, and tender in a way that showed me exactly how appreciative he was, that I had chosen to stay.

But he had needed me. Where else would I go?

Afterward, he lazily ran his hands across my skin and circled one of my nipples with his tongue, no less attentive to my body now that the immediate urge of our hungers had passed.

"Thank you," he whispered across my breast. My heart beat out a reply that I wouldn't allow my lips to speak. We both laid there quietly, until my stomach growled, protesting the late hour of the morning. Edward chuckled, and rolled away from me.

"Food?" He asked.

"Maybe a shower first?" I suggested, feeling gross from having been out the night before. He nodded and moved to sit up on the bed, before grabbing my hand in his.

"Let's share," he said. I was happy to see that he still craved my nearness, just as I craved his. Together, we made our way into his bathroom.

We took turns, under the warm spray of water, washing each others backs. When Edward smoothed his slippery, soapy hands around my ribcage and started washing my chest, I sighed and melted back against him.

"Feeling better?" I asked, playfully.

"Getting there," he responded, kissing my shoulder lightly. "But I'm afraid that wasn't the hard part." He pushed his growing erection against my backside, illustrating a hard part that I knew he wasn't referring to.

"Which is?" I asked, leaning my head back against his shoulder with a sigh.

"Going back to New York," he told me then. "It's not going to be easy."

"Would more naked time help?" I asked, laughing a little. Edward laughed too, and lowered his hand to cup me between the legs.

"Couldn't hurt," he said with a deep voice. I turned in his arms then, and pressed our naked chests together before wrapping my hands around the back of his neck. Edward lowered his face to kiss me, and my legs actually felt shaky. I was glad that he was holding me up.

"What can I do to help?" I asked again, when he started to suck at the wet skin beneath my ear.

"Come with me," he said then, raising his head to look into my eyes. I blinked at him, not certain that I'd heard him correctly. "I mean it," he said, tugging my hips closer to his for a moment, and breaking me out of my daze. "I don't think I can do it, alone. Come with me. Please?"

I took a deep breath, and licked my lips. The hope on his face, and the vulnerability that he allowed me to see, were more than I could comprehend.

"You want me to go home with you?" I asked. "To meet your family?" Edward nodded, looking shy.

"I think I'll need the support," he admitted quietly. "It will be easier, to face them all after so much time, if you're there with me."

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I raised up on tiptoes, and Edward lowered his head so that I could kiss him again.

"Is that a 'yes?'" Edward asked, smiling against my lips.

"That's a 'yes'," I nodded, smiling back at him. This time when Edward kissed me, it felt victorious. I groaned when he pushed his tongue against mine, tasting the water on our faces and the new passion in the force of his lips. The insistent feel of his body, hard again against my stomach, let me know that he was definitely happy about my decision to join him. And his hands were everywhere, making me want him again, just as much.

"I don't know if we can..." I muttered around his mouth.

"We can," he breathed heavily. "Hold on."

I gripped his shoulders tightly while Edward lifted me. My legs found their way around his waist, and he stumbled forward, pressing my back against the cold shower walls. And then after he found his balance, and just the right angle, he pushed his way into my body once more.

"Oh God," I moaned at the sheer pleasure that I felt, having him inside me. I tilted my head back, and closed my eyes. Edward trailed hot kisses up and down my throat, and used his arms to bring my hips up and down, against him.

"I know," he groaned, biting at my skin. "Every fucking time, is better," he swore harshly. "I can't... get... enough..." his words were punctuated by the force of his thrusts. Our wet skin slid together with delicious friction, fast and faster, hard, and harder, until we both yelled out our release in the steamy air around us.

"Wow," Edward muttered with a shaky laugh. I laughed too, breathless and spent as he lowered my feet back to the shower floor.

"We need to get cleaned up, again," he teased. "I got you all messy."

"You don't sound sorry."

"I'm not."

Edward pressed his hands to either side of my face and kissed me slowly and deeply. This time, it was his stomach that growled loudly to break the spell we were under, with the reminder of the necessities of reality.

"Food?" he asked softly, looking into my eyes with a tenderness that I was afraid to try to name.

"Food," I agreed with a nod.

Reviews are better than talking on the phone. Leave one.

Turkey and Subsequent Indigestion

A/N: Twilight belongs to S. Meyer. I'm just running her characters through a few chord progressions.

A/A/N: Get ready for a whole week of CnS. One-a-days. You know the drill...

-EPOV-

Time passed by quicker than I was used to. Bella threw herself into her studies, trying to finish the project she was in the middle of before her semester ended, and I worked on more music. I'd already gotten word that a couple of artists might be interested in a few songs that I had recorded, and that made me anxious to see if I might actually be able to make a career out of writing. It felt good, to have a goal to work toward, while Bella worked toward hers.

"When do your next classes start?" I asked one evening from where I sat in the corner of Bella's couch. Her legs rested over mine, and she sat facing me with her computer resting on her lap. She looked over the screen of her monitor, and bit her lip before shrugging.

"I've actually... been thinking about taking a semester off," she said hesitantly.

"Really?" I asked with a frown. Bella looked down again.

"Don't worry," she mumbled. "I'm not going to be bored and expecting you to entertain me all the time or anything. I won't become the clingy girlfriend. I promise."

"Hey, come on," I said, nudging my leg beneath hers. "I wasn't worried about anything like that. I just... didn't know that you were considering it. Won't that throw you off, in your five year plan?" I smirked at her, when she looked back up at me. I knew I didn't have to worry about shit like that. Bella gave me plenty of space. I was actually looking forward to having her around more

often. I was selfish like that.

"I know." Bella groaned and rolled her eyes. "It's just that... I've been going to school non-stop. I've never really taken a break. And... I'd like to have a little time for myself. You know? I'm getting burnt out."

"I get it," I shrugged. I spent my time leisurely, and couldn't imagine being any other way. "So take time off. I'm sure I can help you come up with things to do."

Bella grinned at the salacious look I gave her, and looked back down at her computer.

"What are you working on right now?" I asked.

"I'm not working," Bella shrugged. "I'm looking up flight information, for our trip. It's expensive to fly to New York!"

"Bella," I argued, shaking my head. "I know I don't always look it," I glanced down at the ratty flannel shirt that I was wearing, "but you *are* dating a millionaire. I think I can afford a plane tickets and a couple of nights in a hotel."

"You're right," Bella frowned, biting her lip. "I *do* tend to forget that," she admitted. It only made me smile wider. "But you shouldn't have to pay..."

"It's not a big deal," I insisted. I could hire a private jet for the weekend, if I wanted. Though I *did* love that Bella never seemed to take advantage of my checking account. Hell, half of the time we went out, she still insisted on going dutch.

"You'll have to let me pay you back," Bella finally relented with a sigh. I smiled.

"It's already payment enough, that you're going with me," I said, seriously then. "You don't know... how *uncomfortable* this all might be. It will hardly be the

happy reunion that I'm sure you've imagined. Things might be pretty tense."

"I've imagined no such thing," Bella argued. "I'm sure that things will be... difficult for you."

"Better, with you there," I interjected. She smiled then.

"I still haven't even figured out what I'll wear," Bella said, biting her lip and looking down at her screen. I opened my mouth to reply, but she stopped me without even looking up. "And don't say 'nothing,' Edward," Bella warned. "Being naked at the wedding is not an option."

"Damn," I muttered playfully. The girl was reading my mind. "Well... how about something blue? You look really pretty in blue."

"Blue it is, then," she nodded, typing away at her keyboard.

"Just stop with all the flight stuff," I scolded her then. "I'll take care of that later. You might not know this, but I have a computer that actually works now."

"Oh really?" she pretended ignorance and grinned.

"Yep. A super-smart girl I know fixed it up for me. It's good for all sorts of things. Like downloading music. Something new. Once a week."

"And porn," she said, with a wry twist of her lips.

"Yes. Lots and lots of porn," I agreed. "Speaking of porn, where's Rosalie?"

"Should I be offended that you would ask about my sister, when you are thinking about porn?" Bella asked, frowning.

"Shut up," I scoffed at her teasing and kicked my leg under hers again. "I was just considering all the time that she's been spending with Emmett lately, doing unspeakable things. This has to be some sort of record for her."

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"Don't mention it around her," Bella warned then. "She seems uncomfortable talking about it, and I don't want to rock the boat. Rose actually seems happy, for once. I don't want to scare her off. I think Emmett is good for her."

"My lips are sealed," I promised.

"She's actually down at Muddy's right now," Bella said. "She said that she wants to invite him over, for Thanksgiving dinner."

"She's cooking dinner?" I asked.

"No. *I* am." Bella was frowning again, but gave up her computer with a sigh. She placed it on the coffee table, before crawling up to lay over my chest. I settled into our new position happily. "My dad is upset. He expected me to come home for the holiday."

"Did you tell him you were going to be with me, instead?" I asked, playing with her hair. Bella shook her head.

"I didn't think that was a good conversation to have over the phone," she admitted quietly. "I just told him that we were having people here, instead."

"Now I'm the one who might be offended," I laughed lightly. "You haven't told your parents about me yet, have you?"

"I figured I'd break the news to him about that... and about taking some time off school... when I go home for Christmas. Should make for a pretty uncomfortable trip."

"Hmm," I nodded, kissing her forehead. "Sounds like you might need some support, then."

Bella raised her head to look up at me.

"Are you... saying that you'd go with me?" She asked, sounding tentative.

"It would be only fair," I smiled at the hopeful look in her eyes. "If you want me to."

"Will you be naked?" Bella asked, smiling then.

"Not for Christmas dinner," I smirked playfully. "But all other times, my nakedness is completely negotiable."

-BPOV-

I couldn't believe it. Or maybe I really spent too much time, waiting for the other shoe to drop. Edward had been amazing since we'd taken our relationship to its newly designed level. But part of me was always waiting for him to decide that the novelty had worn off, and that he preferred the single life that he had been living, before. It wasn't fair to him that I still harbored so many doubts. But that was a problem with my own sense of self-worth, and had nothing to do with the way he behaved when we were together. And now... Edward had offered to actually go home to Washington to me, to announce to my parents that we were a couple. That was huge, in the way of showing me that he was committed to being with me. And I couldn't believe my good fortune. I longed to throw my arms around his neck, and tell him that I loved him, and thank him for being so good to me. I settled instead, on accepting his offer in the teasing way that he preferred to show and accept affection.

I let Edward make our flight arrangements for the trip to New York, determined to repay him by covering the costs of our trip back home to Washington. But I had to put my foot down when he offered to give me his credit card when I went shopping with Rosalie for a dress to wear to the wedding. He'd asked me to wear blue. That was as much as I allowed him to help, with that particular venture into the designer-hell that my sister dragged me into. I managed to find a blue wrap-style dress that flattered my figure without completely depleting the money I had left in my checking account. If I was going to take a semester off school, I was going to have to get a job soon.

Before I knew it, Thanksgiving was upon us. Edward helped in the kitchen, as much as he was able. Of course, that mostly meant that he grabbed at my ass

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every time I peered into the oven to check on the turkey. But it was fun to order him around, and work together making side-dishes with him. I had even used *his* oven to bake the pies while the turkey baked in ours. Edward joked that it made his loft smell so good that he never wanted to leave home again. I knew that was his way of letting me know that he was feeling anxious about us leaving St. Louis for New York, the very next morning. I hopped up on the counter and wrapped my arms and legs around him, happily trying to distract him from the worries that he tried hard to hide. Rosalie interrupted us kissing.

"Get a goddamned room," she laughed. "We have to eat here, and the rest of the guests will be arriving, at any minute."

Edward reluctantly let me slide from the counter, just as the doorbell rang.

We made a merry group, by the time everyone was assembled. Emmett showed up, with several bottles of wine that we opened eagerly. Kate brought Garrett as her date. I grabbed Edward by the hand, employing his help to go down the hall to retrieve dessert, just as everyone else started loading the table with the food we'd prepared in our kitchen.

"If you two aren't back in five minutes, I'm sending Emmett with a crowbar to pry you apart," Rosalie warned. Edward just shook his head and laughed. I laughed too, because I really wouldn't have put it past him to suggest a quickie in his loft before we returned. I'm not sure I would have been opposed to the idea, if he'd tried.

The six of us sat down to a very nice meal, filled with comfortable conversation, a lot of laughter, and even more wine. We had just finished plating our dessert, when Emmett cleared his throat, getting our attention.

"I... have a bit of an announcement to make," he said, smiling over at Rosalie. She grinned and held his hand. Really, they were the cutest non-couple I'd ever seen. "Rose here, has been helping me look at some properties. And... Muddy's is expanding." We all made appropriate noises of surprise and happiness for him and the growth of his business. "I'm not adding to the building or anything," he said to clarify. "I bought a place out in South County. Muddy's

Two."

"That's awesome, man," Edward said, clapping him on the shoulder.

"Gotta make sure I keep you starving artists in business," Emmett said, smiling at the congratulations offered. "You'll always have a place to strum your guitar, and make a few bucks."

"Well..." Garrett said, standing at the table. "Not to steal the lime-light. But since we're making announcements..."

We all looked up at him, curiously.

"I just wanted you all to know, that Kate here... and I... are going to get married."

A stunned silence fell across the table, before we all recovered and started talking at once, passing out congratulations and well-wishes.

"But..." Edward said, "you two have only been dating for like, a month!"

"When it's right, you know it," Kate insisted, accepting his hug.

"I knew I loved her, the first night we met," Garrett agreed, stumbling forward from the hearty blow to the back that Emmett gave him. Rosalie looked at me, and rolled her eyes when she was certain no one would see. I guess she hadn't completely lost her skepticism about the whole institution of marriage. She was too polite to say anything though, and I reached over to squeeze her hand before we both allowed Kate to gush over her plans for spring nuptials.

When everyone had gone home, I followed Edward back to his loft. Rosalie had offered to clean the mess from the evening, since I had done all the cooking. I knew that probably meant that she would leave most of it for her house-keeper, but I was far too tired to argue.

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Edward and I slipped under his covers quietly. His pensive mood was probably due to the fact that we'd be leaving early in the morning to fly into New York. My own brain was buzzing worriedly about all of the exciting news that all of our friends had shared with us, through the evening. Emmett was expanding his business, and for all intents and purposes, it would appear that Rosalie was going to remain by his side through the venture. And Garrett and Kate were rushing headlong in love, into a marriage.

I couldn't help but wonder what Edward and I were moving toward, if *anything*. The thought depressed me.

Needless to say, I was awake most of the night. Edward was restless too, for reasons of his own. We were both awake, long before the alarm clock indicated that we had to get out of bed. And through an unspoken sense of need, we fell together in the way that we always found comfort in... with twisted sheets, and heavy breaths, and grasping hands that afforded us at least a few minutes away from our worries.

Edward was tense as we walked through the bustling airport. I was anxious, myself, about... well... *everything*. We silently accepted each other's somber moods for what they were. After we missed a connecting flight in Dallas, we both sat for an hour, waiting for a new connection in the cramped seats provided in the airport terminal. Edward scrolled through email on his phone, and I clicked my pencil nervously while I looked over my day planner.

"*Please* stop that," Edward finally said through gritted teeth. My hand halted, and he turned to look at me. His expression softened after he saw the edginess I felt, and he leaned over to kiss me nicely.

"I can't help it," I sighed.

"I know," he said, rubbing the tip of his nose against mine. "I'm sorry I snapped at you. But you're making me crazy."

"I don't like having to change plans," I said, glaring back at the book on my lap. "It makes me feel unsettled."

"We'll get there when we get there," Edward said. I looked up at him. Edward had unknowingly given me the solution to my inner battle. It didn't matter that Emmett was buying a new bar. And it didn't matter that Garrett and Kate were engaged. I might not know where Edward and I were heading, but I knew that at least for now, we were together.

"We'll get there, when we get there," I repeated his words. Sure, I meant something different than he did. But it helped, all the same.

Soon, our flight was called, and we were able to board the plane that would take us on the last leg of our journey. Neither of us found any trouble at all, falling to sleep as soon as we departed.

LaGuardia was a holiday-nightmare. Never having been east of St. Louis, I gripped Edward's hand tightly with my own while he took us through the push of the crowd. He seemed happy to focus on retrieving our luggage and securing us a cab, concentrating his efforts on getting us out of the airport so that he didn't have to consider what waited for us after.

But then he held my hand in a death grip, as we got closer to his Uncle's home.

"Did you let them know that the flight was delayed?" I asked, subtly trying to stretch some blood-flow back into my finger tips while he stared out his window at the large homes that we passed.

"I emailed my aunt when we were in Dallas," he mumbled. That was the extent of our conversation. Edward sat rigidly beside me, and I wished that we had some time alone for him to relax, before we got there. But when the cab driver pulled into a long winding drive that led up to a stately brick home, I knew that we were out of time.

"Are you ready for this?" I asked, squeezing his hand once more before he opened the door, reminding him of the support I hoped I could provide.

"I guess I'm going to have to be," Edward sighed.

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Reviews are better than crowded airports. Leave one.

Leftovers

A/N: Twilight belongs to S. Meyer. I'm just running her characters through a few chord progressions.

-EPOV-

My tension had been slowly building, all day. First, Bella had been in a weird mood. Then we missed our connecting flight, and had to wait for the next. The incessant clicking of her pencil while we waited almost made me reconsider inviting her. Almost. I was really damn glad that she was with me... but the click-click-click that seemed to soothe her so much, made my already taut nerves stretch to a breaking point. I wanted to take her pencil, and throw it in the nearest trash can. And then I wanted to kick my own ass, for being a bastard about her habit. She was as stressed as I was. I needed to lighten up, and try to relax.

I was given a little reprieve when we slept on the plane. And then the fucking horrendous crowd at LaGuardia provided enough background noise and activity to keep the anxiety of my homecoming at bay for a while. But the mostly silent cab ride to what had once been my home, gave me just enough time to become nervous all over again.

"Are you ready for this?" Bella had whispered, when the cab pulled up outside. She squeezed my fingers in hers, and I soaked up the comfort that her touch provided.

"I guess I'm going to have to be," I'd told her, mentally trying to prepare myself for seeing my family again.

I didn't have much more time to worry about it. No sooner had the cab driver returned our bags from the trunk, than the front door of the house opened. I saw a flash of the caramel colored hair that always reminded me so much of my mother. And then my aunt had her arms around me. I dropped my bags, hugging her hesitantly in return, ashamed to realize that she was crying.

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"Anthony," my aunt sobbed against the front of my coat. "Oh my God, Anthony. It's so good to see you."

"It's good to see you too, Aunt Esme," I replied, awkwardly patting her back. She composed herself quickly, and stepped back to put her hands on my cheeks and look at my face with undisguised emotion. I smiled, sheepishly. In her excitement about my return, my aunt hadn't even noticed Bella standing beside me. Bella shifted her feet, and Aunt Esme finally caught sight of the girl who stood there, nervously smiling back and forth between the two of us.

"My goodness," my aunt breathed, putting her hand on the center of her chest. "Anthony? You didn't tell me you were bringing a guest..."

"I hope this is alright," Bella said, shooting me a look that clearly said I had screwed up by not letting my aunt know to expect her.

"We didn't really talk much," I said by way of apology. "Aunt Esme? This is Bella Swan. Bella? My aunt, Esme Cullen."

"Mrs. Cullen," Bella responded, putting her hand out.

"Just Esme, please," my aunt pleaded, hugging her instead. Bella looked at me over my aunt's shoulder, obviously surprised by the enthusiastic greeting.

"Well come in. Come in, you two," Esme said, releasing Bella from her hold. "It's freezing out here. I'll be surprised if it doesn't snow this weekend. That should put Alice in a tizzy. She's been worried sick, about everyone being able to make it for the wedding. We just left them at the church. They had rehearsal tonight. But they'll be back around for drinks, later. They'll be so excited to see you."

"How *is* Jasper?" I asked, lifting my bag from the ground where I had dropped it.

"A nervous wreck," Esme smiled, leading us inside. "A typical groom. But very happy. He was thrilled to hear that you were making the trip back home

for his big day."

"And... everyone else?" I nervously looked around as we entered the house.

"Your uncle is upstairs, in his study," my aunt told me, before walking ahead to the staircase to yell upstairs. "Carlisle! Anthony is here!"

"You didn't have to..."

"Nonsense. He asked me to let him know the minute you arrived. He was just making a couple of phone calls to the hospital to check on a few patients of his. He got someone else to cover his work-load for the weekend. But you know how he is..."

Her voice trailed off as my uncle appeared at the top of the stairs. He watched me warily as he descended, but about halfway down, his face broke into a cautious smile.

"Anthony?"

"Uncle Carlisle."

And then his arms were around me. I remained stiff for a moment, despite the amiable way that he clapped his hand between my shoulder blades.

"Damn good to see you, son. Damn good."

The rough quality in his voice caused me to finally relax, and I returned his embrace with a loose hold of my own.

"You too," I said, simply. And I meant it. Two years was a long time. I felt the pent-up tension start to leave my body, under the warm welcome of my aunt and uncle.

"And who is this lovely young lady?" my uncle asked then, turning his inquisitive gaze toward Bella.

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"Bella Swan," I tilted my head toward her, while my uncle shook her outstretched hand.

"It's nice to meet you," she pleasantly greeted him.

"You two should take your things upstairs. You're probably dying to freshen up and rest a little before your cousin gets here."

"Oh," I hurried to shake my head. "We're actually staying at the Hilton..."

"Nonsense!" My aunt scolded, looking stern. "I won't hear of it. You'll stay at home. I've already tidied your room for you. Or... do you need the guest room as well?" She raised her eyebrow toward Bella, and I chuckled.

"No. My room will be fine. As long as you're sure you don't mind?"

"I'd mind more, if you were staying at a hotel when you should be here, at home," my aunt continued to grumble.

"Bella? Do you mind?" I thought to ask. She shook her head with a small, over-whelmed smile.

"Not at all. As long as you're sure we won't be an imposition."

"Poo," my aunt waved away Bella's concern. "Anthony can show you to his room. There are fresh towels in your bathroom. Jasper and Alice won't be here for another hour or so. If that's enough time?"

"Sounds fine," I nodded, grabbing Bella's free hand with my own.

"Let us know if you need anything," my uncle called up, as we took to the stairs.

"Sure," I said over my shoulder. "Thanks."

Click & Strum

Bella followed my lead silently. I turned the light on, with the switch on the wall, and Bella rounded on me as soon as the door was shut safely behind us.

"Anthony?" she asked, quirking her eyebrow. I cringed, and shrugged.

"It's my middle name," I told her. "My family has always called me Anthony. You know, since my father was an Edward too. Made things easier... less confusion."

"Oh," she bit her lip and looked around. "Should I call you that, while we're here?"

"Better not," I grinned, rubbing my hand across the back of my neck. "I've been Edward since I moved away. And I rather like the way you say it."

Bella smiled and moved backward to sit on the edge of my bed. I walked over to my dresser, smiling at the recently dusted surface, and letting my fingers wander over the familiar old items that I had placed there while still living at home. An ashtray that held three guitar picks... a bottle of cologne... a hair brush.

"I have to say," Bella said, sounding amused, "your aunt and uncle are hardly the scary people that I'd imagined."

"I have no idea why I was so freaked out," I shook my head with a small smile. "Aside from the way I left things, we never really had any problems getting along. They've both been very good to me."

"You were worried that they would hold a grudge," Bella said softly.

"Clearly they didn't," I breathed.

"I guess you don't need me here, after all," Bella commented. I narrowed my eyes at her before taking the three quick steps that brought me to the edge of the bed. Bella exhaled with a small squeal of surprise when I pushed my body down over hers, forcing her to lay down beneath me with her feet still on the

floor.

"Oh... I need you alright," I rumbled, pressing my face against her throat. My diminished worries left me feeling relieved and playful. Bella giggled, and slapped at my shoulder.

"I am not getting naked, with your cousin arriving in just an hour."

"Shit," I muttered, rolling to lay beside her. We both looked up at the poster that was taped to my ceiling, above my bed.

"Bob Dylan?" Bella laughed.

"You knew I was a fan."

"I'm surprised at you," Bella said, lifting herself up on her elbows and looking around my room. "Not a single girlie-poster in sight."

"My aunt took them all down," I shrugged.

"Really?"

"No. Not really," I chuckled. Aside from the poster I had taped to my ceiling, the room lacked wall decor. I liked my space clean, and uncluttered. It made for a peaceful resting environment, and quiet space to write music. "I was twenty-three when I left this place, Bella," I told her. "I think I lost the desire for putting my spank-bank on the walls when I was about seventeen."

"Oh, yeah. Right," Bella nodded in understanding. "I guess I just assumed that you had your own place."

"Not until I moved to St. Louis," I said, rolling to my side to rub my hand back and forth against Bella's mid-drift.

"And then you took the city by storm," Bella muttered, dropping onto her back again. "No bottle left unturned. No groupie left un-sullied."

"Un-sullied?" I asked, raising my eyebrow. "Who uses words like that?"

"I dunno," she laughed.

"Maybe you missed your true calling. You should be a writer," I mocked her. "Use words like 'sully'... along with 'heaving bosoms' and 'throbbing members.'"

"Someone's been reading too many trashy paper-backs," Bella teased me in return.

"A guy's gotta learn about romance somewhere," I joked, raising one shoulder. "You want the shower first? See? Chivalry. That's romantic, right?"

"Be still my heart," Bella muttered, rolling to a sitting position on the bed. "But yeah. I do. Then I can finish getting ready, while you're in there."

"Sounds like a plan," I said, putting my hands behind my head. I watched as Bella dug through her bag for something to wear, and blatantly oogled her ass while she walked into the adjoining bathroom.

"Leering isn't romantic," Bella tossed out, before shutting the door. I snorted once before laying back and closing my eyes. I felt more relaxed than I ever would have thought possible. Finally, I was able to admit that this trip home was a long time coming. And I was glad to be back.

-BPOV-

I showered quickly, feeling the stress of the day slide down my body to disappear with the suds at the drain near my feet. Edward was actually relaxed enough to be back to his joking, teasing self. I had a feeling we might be able to enjoy this trip, after all. With high spirits, I relinquished the space in the bathroom to him, and set about getting myself ready to meet the rest of his family. By the time Edward returned to the room, I had already brushed and dried my hair, was dressed in a sweater and dress pants, and had applied a little make-up.

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"You look wonderful," Edward said, leaning down to nuzzle his face into the side of my neck. His wet hair tickled my face, and I laughed and pulled away.

"You do too," I replied. He honestly looked so good, it should have been illegal, standing there with wet hair, wearing a button-front shirt that he wore loose over his jeans. Edward smirked and held his hand out for me to take. I appreciated the gesture, as we made our way back down the stairs.

Esme was busy in the kitchen, putting together snacks. The hollow feeling in my stomach appreciated the gesture.

"I hope this is alright," she asked, looking up from a tray of cheese and crackers that she was putting together. "We all had such a large lunch before the wedding rehearsal, that I'm sure none of us will need a full dinner."

"This is great," Edward spoke over my shoulder, reaching for the tray to snatch up a slice of cheese. He popped it in his mouth and looked at me with a cheeky grin. He looked very at home, already. "If you want, we can make sandwiches?" he suggested. I shook my head with a smile.

"This is fine," I assured them both. Edward reached for another piece of cheese, and held it out for me. I bit into it gratefully, noticing the way that Esme smiled at his kind gesture. "Ooh! It sounds like Jasper's here." Sure enough, we could hear the sound of new voices, drifting from the foyer. Edward straightened his shoulders, but firmly wrapped his hand around mine before we followed his aunt out to greet the new guests.

"Anthony!" Edward's cousin smiled widely as soon as we approached, and the two men hugged while laughing in their happiness to see one another. "It's been too long, man," he said.

"It has," Edward nodded, stepping back. His cousin, Jasper, didn't look a thing like him. He had his father's fair hair, and bright blue eyes. But apparently, tall and gorgeous were two adjectives that seemed to be family traits. And his fiancée was absolutely beautiful. Small and delicate... Alice had round, grey eyes and raven-black hair that fell to her shoulders in a straight, blunt cut.

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"Your hair is longer, Ally," Edward said, smiling down at the dark-haired girl. She reached up and playfully tugged the lock of hair that fell against his forehead.

"So is yours," she said, flashing cheerful dimples. Edward stepped to my side then, and wrapped his arm around my back in a possessive manner that surprised me.

"Jasper? Alice? This is my girlfriend, Bella Swan."

I'd noticed before that he hadn't introduced me with any sort of title. It confused me that he did so, this time.

"Hi," I told them each in turn, accepting their greetings and curious smiles. "Congratulations, on the wedding."

Uh-oh. I said the "w" word. Alice's eyes widened to the size of saucers, and she immediately turned toward Esme to start discussing a problem that they had with the last minute delivery of flowers. Jasper tried to lead Edward away to the safety and quiet of the living room. I hesitated, before taking a deep breath and moving from beneath Edward's arm. He frowned a little when I moved away, and I put my hand on his chest.

"Go. Catch up with your cousin," I said, wrinkling my nose. "I think I'd better offer to help with the snacks your aunt was working on."

Edward nodded silently, and I watched the two men go.

I dutifully stood beside Esme in the kitchen, helping to finish the cheese tray she had started, while Alice and Edward's aunt discussed the flower delivery crisis. Turns out, it was really more of a snafu (Esme's word) than a catastrophe (Alice's.) In a matter of minutes, Esme had calmed her soon-to-be daughter-in-law, and they both turned to me with their attention no longer consumed by wilted lilies.

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"So. How do you know Anthony?" Alice asked, sliding up to sit on a stool. She cupped her dainty chin in her hand, and looked at me with interest.

"We're neighbors," I smiled.

"How long have you been dating?" Alice continued the inquisition. Esme only pretended to be interested in the crackers that she stacked around her plate artfully. I could tell she was hanging on to every word.

"Not long," I supplied. "We've been friends for quite a while though."

"Well, I think it's wonderful," Esme said, turning to me then and resting her hip against the counter. "Anthony seems very happy. He looks... good. Better than I feared. And I suspect that we all have *you* to thank for that."

"Yeah... he was pretty much a wreck after Irina..."

"Alice!" Esme practically hissed the girl's name, to get her to stop talking. Alice looked apologetic, and I struggled to keep the unaffected smile on my face.

"It's okay, Esme," I said, lightly. "I know all about Irina." In fact, I was willing to wager that I knew far more about Irina, than either of the women who currently worried about offending me by mentioning her name.

"Sorry," Alice whispered.

"What's in the past, is past," Esme said, wiping her hands on a dish towel. I nodded in agreement.

"Still..." Alice said, looking worried. "I hope it doesn't bother you, that she'll be at the wedding."

I raised my eyebrows. I don't even know why the thought hadn't occurred to me before. Edward had told me that Irina was an old friend of the family. Of course, she would be there. And I wasn't quite sure just how I felt about that.

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"She's not *in* the wedding, of course," Esme said, trying to lighten the conversation. "Jasper was afraid that would be too awkward." I did my best not to snort at the comment. Yeah... I could see where Jasper might find it a little awkward, to know he'd once nailed one of the bridesmaids.

"Plus, I have about a million cousins, and they were all fighting about who would stand up with me," Alice rolled her eyes. "I chose the four that I'm closest to. And Jasper has four friends from school..."

"Anthony would have been his best man," Esme said, looking sad. "But we didn't know if he'd even..." She stopped, obviously too choked up to continue. I put my hand over hers, to comfort her.

"He's here *now*," I reminded her.

"I have a feeling, we have *you* to thank for *that*, too," Esme sniffled and wiped at her eyes with a tissue that Alice supplied.

"It's going to be a beautiful wedding," Alice grinned. I smiled widely at her. I was sure it would be.

When Esme felt suitably composed, we joined the men in the living room. They were watching a football game on television, and tucked into the tray of snacks that Esme put on the table, like a pack of starving dogs. I blinked, amazed at how quickly the food disappeared, despite the fact that Esme thought they wouldn't be hungry enough for dinner. My own stomach was empty, and I frowned, knowing that the few slices of cheese and crackers that I'd managed to sneak from the fray would not be enough to satisfy me. I wasn't about to complain, in a room full of virtual strangers. The men leaned back in their seats, comfortably patting their stomachs. Edward pulled me down to sit beside him on the sofa, and threw his arm around my shoulders, practically forcing me to sit on his lap, we were so close. And I tried to pretend that it was normal. For some reason, he seemed to need me closer to him, while all of his family was around. I made a mental note to ask him about it later.

Click & Strum

I listened in while they all happily filled each other in on what they'd been up to in the time since they'd seen each other last. I learned far more about Edward's family, than he'd ever really shared before. His aunt worked as an editor for a small magazine that offered monthly home and garden tips. Carlisle was as busy as ever, at the hospital where he worked. Alice had finished her stint in a school for fashion design, and was currently working through an apprenticeship, designing shoes. And Jasper had completed law-school. They all seemed to be lovely, normal, career-driven people. Not that Edward had no goals or ambition, but I could see where his casual life-style went a little against their grain.

"What about you, Anthony?" Carlisle asked, clearing his throat. He seemed nervous, as though he was unsure about turning the question toward the man beside me. Edward's hand played in the edges of my hair over my shoulder, and I felt him shrug.

"What? Jenks didn't fill you in?" I watched Carlisle cringe a little, and I looked up at Edward. I had no idea who Jenks was... but I could tell he introduced a bit of tension to the conversation.

"You know I'm sorry about that," Carlisle apologized then. "It's a stipulation of your inheritance. And I had no other way to stay in touch with you..."

"I know. I'm sorry. And... I understand," Edward said. "My fault. I should have called, anyway."

"So... work?" Carlisle went back to the previous conversation.

"I've got a guy shopping a few of my songs around. Seems promising."

"I thought you were playing in a band," Esme said, looking confused.

"I do. For fun," Edward said. He sat up a little straighter and pulled me a little tighter to him. "You guys know that my main interest is writing."

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"Of course," Carlisle hurried to save the moment, giving his wife a look. Alice recovered by asking what it is that I do, and I wrinkled my nose and muttered a non-descriptive statement about grad school.

"Don't be so modest," Edward laughed at my side. "My girl is brilliant with computers. She's creates video games."

They all nodded, and I smiled up at him. I liked Edward calling me 'his girl.' Jasper eagerly started talking about games that he and his roommates played at school. Apparently, law-school allowed them plenty of time to geek-it up in the world of computer-generated warfare on the weekends.

Before long, the conversation turned back to details of the wedding. Comfortable against Edward's side, the events of the day caught up with me, and I tried to hide a yawn behind my hand.

"You're exhausted, Love," Edward breathed against my ear. "Why don't you go on up to bed? I'll come up in a few."

Too tired to argue, I nodded up at him and made my apologies to his family, before dragging my feet up the stairs.

I got dressed in my pajamas, and was surprised to see that Edward was already wearing sleep pants, sitting up on the bed when I returned to the room.

"That was fast," I smiled. "I thought you would stay and talk for a while."

"Nah," Edward shook his head and patted the space beside him. "I'm tired too. Tomorrow is going to be a long day."

I nodded and crawled under the covers.

"Besides. I brought you something," Edward said, reaching beside him toward a side-table. I smiled widely when he turned back, holding a plate in front of him.

Click & Strum

"You made me a sandwich?" I asked, hugely appreciative of the kind gift.

"I knew you must be starving," he said. "It's turkey. I hope that's alright. A little late-night picnic before bed? That's romantic, right?"

I laughed. It was. It really was.

Reviews are better than turkey sandwich picnics in bed. Leave one.

Broken

A/N: Twilight belongs to S. Meyer. I'm just running her characters through a few chord progressions.

-EPOV-

Bella was flustered by the late hour at which we finally woke. She rushed around the room, trying to get dressed for the day, muttering about making a good impression and being embarrassed about sleeping-in. My aunt repeated my sentiments to her in the kitchen, insisting that traveling always made her tired too, while I sat outside on the back patio smoking a cigarette. Soon the sliding-glass doors opened, and Bella stepped outside to join me.

"Sorry," she breathed, with pink cheeks. I spread my knees so that she could sit in front of me on the patio chair. "I felt horrible... being a guest in their house and all..."

"They've always woken up at the crack of dawn around here," I said, depositing my cigarette butt in the small ashtray I'd carried out with me. "They're used to me sleeping late."

"Hmm," Bella said, without arguing. She nestled into the warmth of my chest. It was cold outside.

"They're all going to be busy today anyway," I said, enjoying the feel of Bella's body in front of me. "They'll be gone soon to get everything ready. Try to relax, please?"

Bella nodded and melted against me. I wrapped my arms around her, humming my appreciation.

"I feel like I should be helping, somehow," she said.

Click & Strum

"You are," I insisted. While my homecoming went better than I could have ever hoped, Bella's presence still offered a monumental relief to me. I had already begun to feel tense and a little nervous about how the rest of our day would unfold. "Listen," I said, ready to voice my concern out loud. "Today might be a little difficult..."

"I know," Bella said quietly. Her fingers stroked back and forth across my folded wrists.

"There are going to be tons of people around," I told her. "Extended family. Friends. Co-workers. Associates..."

"Yes?"

"I'm assuming that there might even be some press around," I sighed. "You know. To document the wedding for the society pages? My aunt and uncle have some pretty important friends..."

"Oh Yeah?" Bella turned her face so that she could look at me.

"People around here know who I am," I told her. "They uh... know my relationship to the family and what-not."

"Okay..." Bella lowered her eyebrows, studying my face.

"I just don't want you to be uncomfortable if any reporters or photographers or anything start to make a big deal about me being there. You know. Because of who my dad was, and everything."

"It will be fine," Bella smiled, reaching up to put her hand against my cheek. I relaxed under her touch, as she expected me to.

"There will probably be plenty of people there, that I'd rather avoid," I said somberly. Bella nodded and bit her lip.

"Yeah. I know," she said quietly. She didn't say anything about her own worries, but I knew that she had to have some.

Jasper had informed me, the evening before, that Irina would be at the wedding. I knew she would be. Her family had been friends with ours for years. It bothered me that Jasper felt the need to pull me aside to warn me of her presence. Of course, that whole conversation was strange anyway. Jasper had no idea that I knew about what had occurred between him and Irina. Not that I ever held a grudge against him... he'd screwed up. But I'm fairly positive he'd never have allowed it to happen, if he knew how I'd felt about the girl back then. He was also part of the sadly misinformed group who believed in our sham of a would-be relationship, after *their* night of indiscretion ended in an un-wanted pregnancy that, to the best of my knowledge, he still thought *I* was responsible for.

"It doesn't matter," I told him with a shrug. "I'm with Bella now, so..."

"Yeah. You are," Jasper had said with a grin. "And she seems great. She's beautiful, man..."

His assessment was dead-on. I knew that Jasper loved Alice. He was marrying her, for Christ's sake. But still, I still felt the over-protective urge to keep Bella as close to me as possible while he was around. I didn't want him, or anyone else, to mistake my feelings this time around.

My aunt and uncle *were* busy and distracted, as I thought they would be. Soon, they left the house, but not before reminding me to be at the church an hour early for family pictures. I shrugged and promised I'd be there. Bella and I would take a separate car, later. Bella sighed and relaxed into the couch with a book while I nervously tapped my fingers against my thighs and wished that I had brought my guitar along with me. It was a short trip, and I didn't think I'd need it.

"You're wired," Bella said, quirked an eyebrow at my obviously agitated state. I shrugged and paced around the room. "Why don't you take a hot shower?" she suggested.

Click & Strum

"You'll be up soon?" I asked, already turning for the stairs.

"Yeah. It will take me a while to get ready," she said, glancing back down at her book.

The shower *did* help a little. I let the water drag the tension out of my shoulders and back, and mentally reminded myself that it was going to be my job to make sure that Bella had a good time today. That wasn't going to happen if I continued acting like an ass. It was nice to be able to concentrate less on myself, and more on her.

I entered the bedroom with a towel tucked around my hips and looked over toward the garment bags that we had hanging in the open closet. It was still too early to get dressed, so I sat on the edge of the bed and tried to think about how I could pass the time without losing my new focus. Bella walked into the room then, and looked at me with a raised eyebrow.

"Feeling better?" she smiled. She sat her book down on the dresser, and I didn't miss the way that her eyes traveled over my naked chest. Hmm. Maybe I *did* know a way to kill some time.

"Come here," I said, lowering my voice deliberately. Bella took the bait, and quirked the side of her mouth up into a small smile while she walked over to me. I parted my legs, and Bella stood between them, immediately putting her fingers up and through my wet hair.

"Have I told you, how happy I am that you're here?" I asked her, closing my eyes at the sensation of her fingers against my scalp.

"Not in the last hour or so," she said with a giggle. I put my arms around her waist and pulled her against me. My face nuzzled into the soft cotton over her chest and I smiled, feeling the rest of my stress leech away.

"I'm sorry," I told her. "I'll do my best not to flake out on you today."

"That's good to know," Bella murmured, cradling my head to her. "You're nervous. That's okay, Edward."

"No. It's stupid," I argued. "And I don't want it to affect your evening." Her hands moved down to slowly glide across my neck and shoulders.

"Just tell me how I can help," she said quietly.

"Keep doing that," I smiled. "It feels amazing." Her gentle touch was making me think of all sorts of illicit ways that we could be spending our time, in an empty house. My body was already tenting the towel I wore. I wondered if I'd have to work very hard, to convince her to touch me in other places.

I didn't have to wonder long.

"I... just want to try one thing," Bella said then, stepping away from me slightly. My arms fell limply to my sides, and I frowned at the distance between us. That was *before* Bella grinned and sunk down to her knees in front of me.

"Bella?" I asked, almost afraid to lend voice to the suggestion she seemed to be making. She just smiled up at me, and started pulling away my towel.

"I'm probably not going to be very good at this," she said. I swallowed hard while she looked down at my exposed skin.

"You don't have to..." I managed to get out, before I changed my mind. As soon as she put her mouth around me, I was fairly sure I'd kick my own ass if I continued to try to talk her out of it.

Bella had never initiated anything like this before. And I hadn't asked her. Blow jobs were a dime a dozen in the life I had been leading before she had back-flipped her way into it. And, I have to say, it was obvious that she was inexperienced in that area. But... a hot mouth wrapped around your cock *always* feels good. So I groaned my appreciation, and settled back to enjoy the ride.

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Because I'm a dick, I couldn't keep my hands out of her hair. But she didn't mind that I directed her head a little bit. At least I was courteous, and refrained from thrusting up into her glorious mouth. Bella was hesitant at first, but seemed to be happy with my subtle directions. And, okay... maybe my *not* so subtle ones, too.

"Harder," I told her with a panting gasp. Bella sucked harder, and my eyes rolled back. "Yeah... just fucking... like that."

I looked down at her, and the way her thick brown hair cascaded over my thighs. It wasn't some nameless bitch, using the act as a power-play to get something from me. It was Bella. And her only motivation for doing any of this, was because for some fucking reason, she cared about my sorry ass. Knowing what she was doing for me, was enough to bring me to the edge right away. I started wondering if she'd be opposed to me shooting a load in her mouth. Usually I minded. If a girl didn't want to finish the job right, she had no business offering in the first place. But every single part of this was different, because of the girl that was doing it, and the feelings attached.

"Bella," I let go of her hair and put my hand lightly on her shoulder. Her head bobbed up and down, and she hummed in acknowledgment of me calling her name. The vibrations that sound caused, made me grit my teeth and tap her shoulder harder. "Bella? Babe... you should. Fuck... you gotta stop. I'm close. So... fucking close..."

Bella didn't let me go. She sucked harder, and her hand wrapped around the base of my cock. It was really all the affirmation I needed. So I just closed my eyes and let go.

My eyes opened wide at the same time that Bella's did. I swear to God... she looked like a freaked-out cartoon with her cheeks all puffed out in a way that made me want to laugh. But she still held my cock in her hand. Even *I* was smart enough to know that laughing at a moment like that, wouldn't be a safe nor appropriate response. Then she stumbled to her feet, and ran to the bathroom.

Click & Strum

As soon as the door closed, I fell back on the mattress and threw an arm over my face. I listened for the sound of the retching to begin, but I only heard the quiet sound of water in the sink.

Bella returned to the room a couple of minutes later. I cautiously peeked at her from under my forearm. Her face was a little red, but she looked other-wise un-traumatized. She *did* glance down my naked body, and I tried to be a gentleman by pulling the towel back across my lap.

"A little late to be shy," Bella said, smiling a little. Her expression made me relax, and I lowered my arm to pat the mattress beside me. Bella quickly crawled up to lay down next to me. Her head found its way to my shoulder, and I smiled when I realized that she smelled minty-fresh.

"I tried to warn you," I said quietly, pulling my fingers through her hair.

"I know. I wanted to," she nearly whispered. The admission made my chest feel tight, and I turned my face to kiss the top of her head. "Was that... okay?" Bella asked then.

"It was fucking perfect," I told her. It wasn't even a lie. She didn't have to be the Blow-Job Queen of the Midwest. The girl fucking owned me. "You didn't have to," I continued to stroke her shoulder with lazy fingers.

"I know. But you've been so wonderful, and I can tell that you have a lot on your mind..."

"You make everything better," I tried to assure her.

"Edward, I love..." Bella's words cut off, and I felt her stiffen beside me. I was worried about her reaction, and the possible reason for it.

"What?" I asked, pushing my chest away slightly, so that I could look down at her. Bella avoided my eyes, looking nervous as hell while she bit her lip.

"What were you trying to say?" I asked, not giving up.

"Being with you," she finally sighed. "I love being with you, Edward."

How can a person feel relieved, and disappointed at the exact same time?

"I love being with you too," I told her.

-BPOV-

Alright. So that hadn't gone entirely as planned. I felt like an idiot having to run to the bathroom like I did. But I seriously thought I was going to throw up. Not that *it* was as bad as I thought it might be. It was just sort of, unexpected. I knew it was coming... no pun intended. I just psyched myself up so much about it, that I was at a loss as to what to do. Spit or swallow. I chose option number one. Edward didn't seem to mind. In fact, he laughed a little and wholeheartedly agreed to let me practice for option number two, any time I'd like.

He did seem a whole helluva lot more relaxed afterward, and napped while I took a shower. But then it was time to primp. And it probably took twice the time I needed to actually get dressed, once Edward saw what I was wearing to the wedding. I had to admit, the blue wrap dress did look pretty good on me. He seemed to think so too. Edward tried to un-wrap my dress, while I tried to wrap it.

"I do *not* have time for another shower," I groaned, slapping his hands away from the tie at my waist. He picked me up while I squealed in protest and dropped me on the bed. In a flash, he had opened my skirt and was pressing hot, lingering kisses on my thighs.

"You won't need a shower if I only do this," he murmured against me. I could feel his hot breath right *there*, through the thin silk of my panties. His hands moved up, and cupped my breasts through the fabric of my dress. "I'll be able to taste you on my lips all night," he murmured. His words made me shiver, and I struggled to find the will power to deny him. But when I turned my head to the side, the bright green numbers of the bedside alarm clock reminded me that we didn't have time.

"You have to be at the church for family pictures..." I said weakly.

"Fuck the pictures," Edward said, tugging my underwear down my legs.

Who could argue?

We were late. But not by much. Edward let his cigarette dangle between his beautiful lips, and was still pulling his suit jacket on as we both ran from the car to the door of the church. There *were* a few men standing around with cameras, and one immediately started clicking away as we made a mad dash to get inside. I wondered briefly, which magazine or paper the pictures might find their way to.

Edward Masen Jr., son of the late-great Edward Masen of the Trips, accompanied by unknown, plain-looking-by-comparison brunette. I smirked while Edward held the door open for me, and he threw his spent cigarette on the ground behind us near the paparazzo's feet. It didn't matter that I was a nobody. This nobody had the somebody that they were interested in, all up in her girlie-business less than an hour before. They might not know me, but *he* sure did.

Edward tried to tame his hair with his hands, and grinned apologetically at his aunt who waited for us near the front pew of the church. I slid quietly into a seat, and relaxed to watch the action. The photographer they hired was militant in his approach. He barked out orders, and arranged various family members into different poses and positions. The "do not see the bride before the wedding" tradition was in place, and so the pictures of the wedding party would be left for after the ceremony. But getting family pictures taken before-hand would speed up the process.

Everyone looked so elegant, dressed up. Jasper and Carlisle flanked Edward in a few shots, and they all looked ridiculously handsome as they smiled politely for the lens and joked around with one another. I couldn't take my eyes off Edward, however. Especially when his eye caught mine, and he deliberately licked at his lower-lip before giving me a roguish smile. I blushed, and looked down at my hands.

"You should get in one of the family pictures," Esme said, stopping to stand at the edge of the pew, beside me. I looked up at her in surprise, and then my eyes flew back to Edward. He was talking with his uncle, and obviously hadn't heard her quiet suggestion.

"I... don't think so," I said, shaking my head. I couldn't know for a fact that anything between Edward and me was permanent. They would be looking back at these pictures for years to come. "I don't know how long..." I bit my lip, and wondered how freaked out Edward would be, if I took her up on the suggestion. That seemed to be saying way too much. I couldn't do it. "No," I shook my head again. "I'm not a member of the family."

Esme looked up, and I followed her gaze. Edward was looking at his aunt with curiosity written across his face. Then his eyes met mine, and a slow, soft smile took over his features. I held my breath at the tenderness in his expression, and Esme regarded us both for a moment.

"Yet," she said then, quietly, before walking back up to join the fray.

I tried not to let that simple word fill me with optimism. I just couldn't help myself. Especially when the photographer released everyone to their appointed places, and Edward found his way back to where I sat and immediately wrapped his hand around mine.

The church was opened for guests to arrive, and quiet music filled the beautiful sanctuary around us. Edward held my hand in his, playing with my fingers and offering hushed commentary about different people were ushered down the aisles to fill the seats. We were near the front, and so we didn't see half of them, but I swear there must have been at least five hundred people in that church.

The tightening of Edward's hand around my own was the only indication that he was uncomfortable when a stately older man and his wife were seated almost directly opposite us, on the other side of the church. A petite blonde stood between them, and I knew without asking, that it had to be Irina. Edward sat up straight, and my poor fingers were nearly crushed in his grip.

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"Edward?" I whispered. His head was turned in their direction, and he quickly glanced back at me, then down at our hands, before loosening his grip.

"Sorry," he mumbled, smoothing the skin over my knuckles with his thumb. I nodded my appreciation, and tried to give him a little smile. He weakly returned it, before staring straight forward, once again.

I tried to surreptitiously glance past him to see the girl that had evoked such a response. All I could really make out was a violet colored dress, blonde hair, and a pointy nose. I didn't want my interest to be noticed though, so I squeezed Edward's hand with mine, and tried to keep my attention at the front of the church as well.

Soon the wedding party was in place. Jasper stood proudly at the front of the church, looking nervous and love-sick as Alice floated toward him in a sea of white lace and sequins. Edward might have had a board across his back, he seemed so tense. But besides his obvious discomfort, the wedding was truly beautiful. If I had known any of them better, I might have even cried. The ceremony was moving, and lovely. Quiet sniffles and whispers around us testified to the fact that everyone agreed.

I didn't see Irina or her family again, when everyone flooded back out toward the double-doors. Edward stayed seated, and dropped his head when we were relatively alone once again.

"You doing okay?" I whispered.

"I need a drink," he finally said, grinning just a little when he turned to finally look at me.

"Soon," I told him, lifting my fingers to caress his cheek. Edward caught my hand in his, and pressed a kiss against my palm.

After a while, the wedding party returned to the room, and Edward was called forward to take a few more pictures with Alice and Jasper in the mix. I felt like a bit of an outsider. Edward didn't send me any more private smiles. He looked

far less comfortable, and had a far-away look in his eyes through it all. My stomach twisted nervously, worried about where his mind had gone, and who he might be thinking about. It pissed me off that Irina's mere presence, could cause such a disturbance in the atmosphere around us. But I guess I shouldn't have expected any less.

Though I could tell that Edward's mind was elsewhere, he was nothing but a perfect gentleman as he helped me with my coat, and led me back out to our waiting car. Without a word, he filled a tumbler in the back with some amber-colored liquid from a cut-glass decanter, and handed it to me before filling one for himself. I took a long, grateful drink and cringed at the way the liquor burned on its way down. I took another swallow, anyway. I had a feeling I might need it. Especially after noting the way Edward tossed the entire contents of his glass back with no hesitation, and filled it again. It was going to be a long night.

The hotel ballroom that was used for the reception, was decorated elegantly. After handing our coats over to waiting attendants, Edward gripped my hand firmly inside his own, and led us both to our assigned table. We weren't in place long, before the wedding party was introduced. Carlisle and Esme shared our table, along with Alice's parents. I smiled when Edward introduced me to them as his girlfriend, and was thankful for the champagne bottle that never seemed to empty no matter how many glasses were filled. Speeches were given, dinner was eaten, conversation was plentiful around us. Edward was mostly quiet, polite but distant. However, the alcohol *did* seem to relax him. And he drank plenty of it. I tried my best to keep up.

With the formalities out of the way, guests began to mix and mingle and take advantage of the dance floor while the mediocre band struck up livelier dance numbers. Edward couldn't avoid the many people that suddenly wanted to speak with him. Though he kept me by his side at all times and portrayed the perfect date, I detested the way that he seemed so remote. I drank a lot, and tried to pretend that everything felt as right as it looked on the outside. Edward was practically a cardboard cut-out of his normal self. No one could see that wall that he put up. But I felt it, and I hated it.

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When Carlisle asked me for a dance, I gratefully accepted the chance to step away for a moment to clear my head. Edward took the opportunity to slip outside for a cigarette, anxious, it seemed, to do the same. And then one dance turned to two when Alice's father begged the next number. The man was drunk though, and stepped on my toes more than once. I left the dance floor quickly after that, to make my way to the bar.

Esme and Alice stood there, talking about the honeymoon itinerary.

"Having fun?" Alice asked when I turned toward them. I held up my glass of champagne and smiled.

"Getting there," I said, taking a large drink. Esme laughed when Carlisle came up, and tugged her away to the floor.

"Here," she smiled and pressed her drink into my empty hand. "You'll need this, if you plan to dance with Alice's father again!"

"Sorry about that," Alice shrugged. "My dad is a horrible dancer."

"It was nice of him to offer," I returned, politely.

"Ah... shit," Alice muttered then, looking just beyond my shoulder before pulling a fake looking smile across her face. I didn't have time to contemplate her word-choice before she was wrapped in an enthusiastic hug by a woman in a violet dress with long blonde hair. And then it hit me.

'Ah shit,' was right.

"Ally!" Irina gushed. "You make the most *beautiful* bride! I always, *always* knew you would!"

Alice rolled her eyes at me over the girl's shoulder before she was released from the over-eager embrace. And then I was awkwardly standing there, with the source of the evening's tension between Edward and I, staring at me curiously through big, heavily lashed blue eyes.

"Have you been introduced?" Alice asked. "Irina? This is Bella."

"Not officially," the girl smiled a little, obviously letting her eyes assess me from head to toe. "But Anthony already told me all about the friend he brought with him from St. Louis. Nice to meet you," she said, putting her hand forward as if to shake one of mine. I held up both glasses I had in my hands, and shrugged apologetically.

"Nice to meet you too," I lied. I wondered when they'd had time to speak, and then easily figured out that she was the reason he'd been gone so long. The girl lost interest in me quickly, and began complimenting Alice on everything from the flowers to the table linens. I took my chance to finally look at her. She was rail thin, petite and very delicate looking. She had the kind of angular, sharp features that one might find on a model. But her stature would never allow her that career. She was at least a couple inches shorter than I was. She looked breakable. I kinda wanted to break her.

"Well... I should go speak with some other guests," Alice said, glancing at me while I emptied one of my glasses of champagne.

"Of course," Irina said, taking her cue to move on. "Tell Anthony we'll catch up later."

"Will do," I muttered wryly. I watched the girl turn and walk away with a frown on my face.

"I don't know what it is about her," Alice said, stepping closer to speak quietly. "I've known her forever. But she always seems so false. Like she's being overly nice to me for some reason..."

"Mmm hmm," I mumbled noncommittally. Of course, I knew why the girl threw on the charm for Alice. Not that I'd ever breathe a word of it. *That* was a skeleton best left in the family closet.

"Oh... there's Anthony," Alice said, indicating over my shoulder. "I think he's looking for you."

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"I'll bet," I said, turning to face him. He stood at the edge of the dance floor, looking around. When his eyes finally landed on me, he tilted his head up in a way that indicated I should join him.

"See you later," Alice said, already moving to the next group of guests that were eager to chat with the bride.

I finished Esme's glass of champagne while I walked to where Edward waited. And I accepted another from a tray of a waiter that I passed. Edward's face was flushed, and his hair looked like he'd pulled his fingers through it about a million times. He finished off the whiskey in his glass and placed it on the table beside him.

"Dance with me?" he asked. I took another drink before placing my glass beside his and letting him lead me out to the dance floor.

I wasn't sure why he bothered. Our bodies were pressed close, but Edward still felt miles away.

"We'll leave as soon as we can," he said quietly, stepping in time to the music. I just nodded. My head was beginning to swim. "You doing okay?" he asked, looking down at me.

"I think I've had too much to drink," I admitted. His fingers on my back tightened slightly, offering me more support as we swayed together under the swirling lights of the dance floor. "Are *you* doing okay?" I asked. He sighed, and raised his head to look around the room.

"Yeah. I guess," he muttered. "I... uh... ran into Reeny outside."

"You don't say." I tried to swallow the distaste I felt over the casual shortening of her name that I'd never heard before.

"She looks... different." Yeah. If by 'different' he meant beautiful. Whatever. I could tell that he was trying to make me feel better by dancing with me. Or maybe he was trying to make himself feel better. I wasn't sure.

"She introduced herself," I said.

"She did?" The question was loaded in his voice, but I couldn't see his face. His body was straight and tense, and he still looked around the room rather than at me. He finally seemed to focus on one point near the bar, and I could have guessed what , or *who*, held his attention then. I felt like stomping on his toes.

"She's lovely," I said, feeling miserable.

" *You're* lovely," Edward replied, not bothering to look down. "You're the prettiest girl here. You look great in purple."

Purple?

Purple?

My feet stopped, and Edward looked down at me while I stiffened in his arms and tried to pull away.

"What?" he asked.

"I'm wearing *blue*," I said, gritting my teeth. The stress of the situation and way too many glasses of champagne had finally caught up with me. "I'm wearing *blue*," I said again. "You remember? The color you *asked* that I wear!"

"Fuck," Edward swore softly and closed his eyes, realizing his error. "Shit. I'm sorry Bella. It's the lights..."

I pulled one eyebrow up, calling him on his bullshit, and Edward swallowed.

"I'm just a little drunk here, Bella. Forgive me?"

"I need... some air," I told him then. "I'm going to find the ladies room."

"I'll find my uncle, and tell him we're leaving," Edward promised. He released me, and I tried my best to stay on solid feet while I walked through the crowd

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toward the hall where I knew the bathrooms were located. I needed to splash some water on my face and cool down before I did or said something I might regret. Edward had made a simple mistake. A slip of the tongue. It wasn't really worth the hysterics that I felt bubbling up inside.

Shit. The hallway was longer than I remembered. There were several arched doorways that opened to dimly lit, unused rooms. I concentrated on the shiny floor beneath my feet, and wished I hadn't been so stupid as to have drunk so much. I teetered in my heels, and said a prayer of thanks in my head, when I finally reached the sanctuary of the women's bathroom.

It was a large, beautifully decorated lounge of a bathroom. I wiped my face with a cool cloth, and then moved to sit on an ornate sofa in the corner. Breathing deeply, I closed my eyes. Logic told me that it was the excess alcohol in my system, causing me to react so emotionally. But Edward had been distant ever since he'd seen *Reeny* in the church. And it killed me inside, to know that she still had the power to affect him so deeply. It didn't help that we had both danced around the subject all day, and never really addressed the discomfort that either of us would feel when he saw her again. I should have told him that I was stressed about it. But he never voiced his own worries, either. We hadn't talked about it at all. And now, I was in a fine mess. Drunk, and completely out of sorts.

I must have been in the bathroom at least twenty minutes, before I felt composed enough to return to the reception. Still feeling a bit wobbly, I let the fingers of one hand trail across the gold-trimmed border on the wall beside me. My hand stopped when I reached one of the many doorways I'd passed, and so did my feet.

And then, so did, my heart.

Because in the shadowy room to my left, I saw them.

Violet draped legs were on either side of his hips, and her hands were in the back of his hair. His back was turned toward me, and she sat on the billiard table in front of him. Edward and Irina were locked in a passionate embrace,

kissing one another. And I was pretty sure I was going to be sick.

I spun away from the sight as quickly as I could, and hurried down the hall in the direction I had come. Tears blurred my vision, and I clamped a hand over my mouth to keep the bile, or a scream, held inside. It was worse... *so* much worse than I expected. I stumbled blindly forward, and only stopped when I hit the warm wall of a chest in front of me.

"Hey now... what's going on?" a gentle voice asked. I blinked up through my tears to see Jasper holding my arms, looking down at me with a worried expression. I couldn't speak. I just shook my head frantically and tried to move around him, anxious to get as far away as possible. "Hold on... hold on..." he said, walking us backward. I didn't want to go that way. I shook my head again, trying to get away and starting to sob out loud despite my best efforts. My chest felt like it was torn open, and the anguish was starting to pour forward in a blistering rush.

"Edward... Irina..." I choked out.

Jasper looked over my head with a frown, but quickly seemed to catch on to the situation. Swearing softly under his breath, he wrapped his arm around my shoulder and led me into another dark room to his right.

Pretty linen-covered tables were set with dinnerware, awaiting use for another event or perhaps, the expansion of this one. I was just thankful that it was far removed from the rest of the unknowing wedding guests as I fell apart. Jasper shushed me, and pulled me into a comforting hug against his chest. I sobbed uncontrollably, clinging to his tuxedo jacket and cursing myself for being so stupid. For placing so much blind faith in Edward. And for allowing myself to believe that he even came close to sharing some of the feelings for me, that I had for him.

"I'm sorry," I gasped against Jasper's shirt front. I barely knew the guy, and I was horribly worried about causing such a scene at his wedding reception. I felt guilty that he was the one that had to find me like this, on such an important night for him, but couldn't resist taking comfort where I could find it. My heart

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was broken, and I struggled to catch my breath and stop crying while he ran a soothing hand up and down my back and made quiet shushing noises in an attempt to calm me.

"What the *fuck* is going on here?"

My back straightened immediately when I heard Edward's voice behind us. And then I saw only a blur, as Jasper pushed me forcefully out of the way. I hit the table beside us, and felt a sharp sting on my arm as it broke through the glass that had been placed there. And then I looked with horrified eyes as Edward lunged forward and punched his cousin in the jaw.

Reviews are better than broken dinner plates. Leave one.

Memory Lane and Airplanes

A/N: Twilight belongs to S. Meyer. I'm just running her characters through a few chord progressions.

-EPOV-

The day started off great. Bella and I made it to the church a little late, for reasons that left me smiling and in a really fucking good mood. I didn't even mind when some douche bag outside snapped a few pictures of us on our way in. I expected that shit to happen. I dutifully posed for pictures with my family, and was able to sit down and relax for a while with Bella at my side.

I didn't stay relaxed for long, when Irina and her family were ushered in. I didn't really know what to expect, about having to face her again. I don't think I was really prepared, even though I knew she was going to be there. Really, I didn't look forward to seeing her. And I knew sooner or later, we'd be forced to actually speak to one another. That made me feel edgy, and I worked hard to slam back a few drinks in the car, trying to psyche myself up for it.

I continued to try to gain some liquid courage once we got to the reception. I was able to calm the fuck down a bit when it seemed like Irina might be a no-show. I knew I was lost in my own head for a while, but Bella continued to offer her unwavering support, and I tried my best to keep her next to me, to let her know that I appreciated her presence. I knew I was behaving a bit like an asshole, feeling withdrawn and moody. I just wished we could leave and be alone so I could feel like myself again.

My stay of execution ended when I slipped outside for a smoke.

Irina exited a long black car and looked up at me with a surprised smile. I tried to smile back, but it felt like more of a grimace. She walked up to me, as casual as you please, and ran her hand down the front of my jacket.

"Andy?" she said, using an old nickname that I fucking hated. "I *thought* I saw you at the church!"

"Reeny," I returned dryly, with a twist of her name that I knew annoyed her as well. "It's been a while."

"Too long," she nodded. I took a drag from my cigarette and stared at the street in front of us. It was fucking cold outside. Maybe she'd hurry in and leave me in peace.

"You look great," she told me. I glanced down her body. I wish I could say the same. She was thinner than I remembered. And the tiny snowflakes that had begun to swirl in the air around us, looked like they'd happily settle on her and never melt. And did she get a nose-job? She looked weird.

"I'm running a little late," she told me, not missing a beat though I hadn't returned her obvious attempts at flattery. "Dad had a knee replacement surgery last month, and didn't really feel up to coming to the reception." I nodded. She was trying to make conversation? "Anyway... are you here alone too? We could maybe..."

"My girlfriend is inside," I said, finally mustering a more realistic smile. "I brought her with me, from home."

"Home?" Irina asked, raising her delicately arched eyebrows. "You mean St. Louis, right?" I frowned at the fact that she knew my current residence. " *This* is your *home*, Anthony."

"It used to be," I corrected her. "Anyway, it's fucking freezing out here. You should get inside."

"Alright," she smiled and batted her eyelashes at me. "We'll talk later."

"Yeah..." I shrugged, looking away again. I wasn't going to look forward to that.

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After she left, I smoked another cigarette. I felt a whole lot more relaxed, and smiled knowing that I'd built our big reunion into something totally different in my mind. Gone was the unrequited feeling of yearning that I'd always felt in her presence. There wasn't even a spark of nostalgia over a stupid-fucking could-have-been. In fact, I felt a little ridiculous when I thought of all the liquor I had consumed, worrying about it all day. Seeing Irina did nothing but confirm the fact that I was finally, completely, over her. It felt good. It felt *really* damn good.

I threw my cigarette butt on the ground, and rubbed my hands against my arms to warm up while I hurried back inside to find Bella.

I didn't see her immediately, so I stopped at a waiter and got myself another glass of bourbon to help me warm up. Then I made my way to the dance floor, and looked around. I finally found Bella, standing over by the bar with Alice. She was fucking beautiful, and I felt my nerves settle once more, just seeing her across the room and knowing that she was with me. I nodded my head, and Bella started walking to meet me.

"Dance with me?" I suggested. I put my glass down, and she took my hand and let me take her to the dance floor.

It felt right, having her in my arms. And I couldn't figure out just what it was about her that made such a huge difference. Bella told me that she'd had too much to drink, and I knew that I definitely had. I promised to leave as soon as we could. I just wanted to be alone with her. And it bothered the shit out of me when I told her that I had run into Irina outside and Bella told me that they'd already been introduced. I'd hoped to side-step that landmine completely.

My eyes scanned the room around us, and I found Irina standing in a group of people. She laughed, and tossed her head back. I frowned, wondering why in the hell I'd ever been so enthralled by her. Had two years really changed me so much? She wasn't even that attractive to me, anymore. Pretty. But nothing that would turn my head. I admit, I stared at her while I was dancing with Bella. I was just trying to figure out what it was about the woman, that I'd ever been so drawn to. Maybe it was always just the idea of wanting something that I could

never have.

I tried to be polite to Bella, and complimented her to make up for my lack of attention. Distracted, I mentioned the color of the dress I was looking at, instead of the one worn by my date. Classic fuck-up. That's me. And Bella was pissed. I *knew* she was. She needed some space, and suggested that she go to the ladies room. I reluctantly let her go, and satisfied myself with the idea that I'd make our excuses and get her out of there as soon as possible. We'd both had too much to drink, and too much drama for one day.

I found my uncle and aunt dancing, and told them that we'd be leaving soon. They grinned and my uncle slapped me on the shoulder with a knowing wink. He probably thought I was going to get lucky. Not bloody likely, after I'd made an ass out of myself on the dance floor. I'd probably be spending most of the night, trying to convince Bella to not be so pissed off at me. Then I made my way down the long hall that housed the bathrooms.

Bella was taking forever. I hoped she wasn't sick or something. With a smirk, I remembered her earlier trip to the bathroom at my uncle's house. I thought she was going to be sick then too. But she wasn't. That girl was awesome. Bored, I wandered into a darkened room set up with several billiard tables. Walking over to one, I casually started rolling the cue ball across the green felt, wishing I was back at Muddy's in more comfortable clothes. Playing pool with the guys would be a helluva lot more fun than avoiding people I didn't want to see, dressed in a monkey suit.

I didn't even hear her approach. But a manicured hand set a tumbler of bourbon down on the edge of the table in front of me. I looked over my shoulder, not even slightly surprised to see Irina standing there.

"You look like you could use a drink," she smiled up at me.

"Wrong," I said with a sigh, ignoring the offering. "I've had too much."

"Never heard you say that before," she laughed. I rubbed a hand over my face, wearily.

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"What do you want, Irina?" I asked. "A trip down memory lane? Here's a fucking clue for you. The lane sucks."

"Don't be like this," she pouted. "We're still friends, right? Why can't we just talk?"

"What do you want to talk about?" I asked, walking away from the table and turning to face her. "How have you been? Fine. What have you been up to? Living my life. Pleasantries over. We're all caught up."

"You're hard," Irina smirked, hopping up to sit on the edge of the billiard table. "I remember you being much softer."

I snorted. I wasn't even in the mood to imply anything dirty about what she'd said. Like she'd even know.

"Well, a lot has changed," I said.

"You seem happy though." Irina kicked her legs back and forth and seemed settled in to chat. I sighed again.

"I am," I told her with a decisive nod. "It's been good. To be away."

"I drove you away."

"You always gave yourself too much credit," I smirked at her.

"No. But I think *you* did," she finally frowned. "You always thought more of me, than I deserved."

"You're probably right," I said, shoving my hands in my pockets.

"For what it's worth... I'm really sorry," Irina told me then. I looked up at her with surprise. I hadn't expected her apology.

"It's in the past," I said, pushing aside her words as unnecessary.

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"It doesn't have to be," Irina said softly. I lowered my brow and frowned at her.

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?" I asked.

"Us..." Irina said. I shook my head and looked to the side. "Seeing you again... it's different now, Anthony."

"How so?"

"Maybe I realize that I was wrong," Irina told me. "I couldn't go through with it, back then."

"You couldn't love me," I said, feeling it burn like acid on my tongue. It was the truth that had always stood between us.

"I wasn't ready then," she said, reaching forward to grab the lapel of my jacket. "Maybe I am now..."

"Maybe..." I stepped closer to her, mulling over the word she used. 'Maybe' was like two years, too late.

"Let me remind you," she whispered. "Let me show you how good it could be, again."

I should have told her to fuck off. But in all honesty, I was feeling like a smug son-of-a-bitch over the fact that the girl I had always wanted, was practically begging me to have her. Not that I wanted her anymore. It still felt like a victory.

"Oh. You think it's as simple as that then?" I asked, stepping even closer and lowering my voice. I felt cocky and strong. She had no pull over me, whatsoever.

"I think it could be," Irina simpered. "It could be great."

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"I highly fucking doubt that," I told her, flicking the back of my fingers at the top button of her dress. This felt like old territory. She could have been one of the dozens of women I'd spent my time with since leaving New York. I couldn't give a shit less about her. I was officially, done.

"Trying to convince me?" Irina quirked an eyebrow. "Or are you trying to convince yourself?"

I am an idiot.

She noticed my hesitation at her words, and she used it to pull me forward so that she could kiss me.

And I fucking let her.

She tightened her legs on against the outside of my thighs, and wound her fingers up through the back of my hair. And I stood there, like the world's biggest moron, just... letting her. And for a brief moment, I wondered if there was any truth to her final question. Was I trying to prove something to myself?

Well, if the kiss was anything to go by... I had all the proof I needed. I didn't fucking want her.

Yeah. I let her kiss me, because it felt really damn good to be the one with the upper-hand for once. This time, the feelings were unreciprocated on *my* side, and not hers. And I probably kissed her back a little, just to rub it in. I wanted her to really regret what the fuck she gave up.

And then I broke away from her quickly, and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand.

"Nope," I smirked. "Still pretty sure. This is done."

"You pig!" Irina spit out, glaring up at me. I laughed a little at her disappointed expression.

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"What did you expect, Reeny?" I asked. "You didn't want me then. I don't fucking want you *now*. And to answer your earlier question... no. We aren't still '*friends*'. You wouldn't understand the meaning of the word."

I turned then quickly, to find the one girl who did. And the one girl who, I'm pretty sure, loved me... even when *this* one swore she could not.

I hurried into the hall, and turned toward the bathrooms to see if Bella had decided to come back out. But that was when a small sound from a room just down the hall called my attention that way.

And what I saw inside sent me into an immediate rage.

My cousin had his fucking arms around *my* girl.

Shit. Blame the drinks I'd slammed back all night. Blame the rush of testosterone I had after finally dealing with Irina. Or blame me for being a hot-headed bastard.

"What the *fuck* is going on here?" I growled. And Jasper shoved Bella out of the way just before I launched myself at him and punched him square in his fucking jaw.

"Ow! The *fuck* Anthony!" Jasper yelled. And then I could hear Bella crying. Suddenly my aunt and uncle were there, and my aunt was tugging at my arm, trying to keep me from swinging again. Uncle Carlisle was tending to Bella, pressing a white napkin to the blood on her arm. The red seeping through the cloth only added to the hazy red that had taken over my vision, when I saw Bella in Jasper's arms.

"Trying to make a habit of fucking the women I care about?" I asked him, angrily. Jasper narrowed his eyes and rubbed the spot where I'd punched him.

"You're insane!" he shouted. "I wouldn't be with her at all if she didn't find you messing around with Irina! Jesus, Anthony! How can you be so stupid? I know you two have history and all..."

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"It was never *my* fucking history!" I seethed, pointing at him accusingly. "It was *your* fucking history! And it's about time you fucking knew it!"

"Edward, stop!" Bella said sharply. I turned my head toward her, feeling my chest rise and fall harshly with my labored breathing. "How could you?" she asked, with tears swimming in her eyes.

My uncle frowned at me, and began to lead Bella from the room. Jasper straightened his tie, while my aunt fussed over his face and assured him that no one would be able to tell what had happened.

And I leaned back against a table, wondering how in the fuck I had managed to screw everything up so epically, once again.

I quietly followed my uncle as he took Bella through a service-way to a back kitchen, and cleaned her arm up there. Satisfied that she wouldn't need stitches for the cut on her arm, he covered the area with sterile gauze and tape that was kept in a first aid kit near the stove. My aunt and Jasper went back out to the reception, to ensure that the guests didn't catch wind of the family throw-down that had occurred, and Alice shot me the look of death while I grabbed my and Bella's coats from the clerk before walking dejectedly out to our waiting car.

Through it all, Bella hadn't spoken to me. In fact, she couldn't even bring herself to look at me.

It wasn't until we were driving, that I finally got up the nerve to try to say something to her.

"Bella... I'm..."

"Don't," she said harshly, looking out the side window and intentionally keeping her face turned away from me. "You don't get to speak to me."

"But I'm..."

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"If you say you are sorry, I am going to take off my shoe and beat you to death with it."

"But..."

"I mean it," she said. And I swallowed hard. I didn't doubt her for a minute. Her shoes were pointy, and lethal looking, too. The thought of her clubbing me in the temple with one of them, wisely helped me to close my mouth and give her the silence she desired.

I'd wait until we got to the house, to try to apologize.

-BPOV-

I was hurt. And I was humiliated. And if I thought for one second that I could have found a faster plane out of New York on this holiday weekend, I would have packed my bags and left for the airport immediately. But I was sort of stranded. And that meant I was stuck with Edward. But that didn't mean I had to talk to him. I didn't want to be anywhere near him. I had told him that being with other girls, would be a deal-breaker for me.

He followed me silently into the house, with his hands shoved in his pockets. I chanced a look his way, and frowned. His head was dropped and his shoulders were slumped. But his lost little boy routine was not going to save him this time. I hoped he *did* feel like shit. He deserved it.

I rushed upstairs to his room, with Edward at my heels, and angrily started throwing my things back into my suitcase.

"Where are you going?" Edward asked, with his voice cracking. I steeled myself against the sound.

"Away from you," I said stonily. I lugged my bag across the hall, and tried to ignore the tortured look on Edward's face. He brought this all upon himself. With his stupid walls. And his stupid distance. And his stupid kissing the stupid ex-love of his life. And his stupid temper.

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"Don't... do this..." Edward sounded like he was begging, and made another stupid move. He reached out to grab my arm. I spun away from him quickly, and wished I could shoot him down with the anger I felt radiating from my eyes.

"Don't touch me!" I yelled at him, thankful that we were still alone in the house for a short while. "Looking at you makes me sick. God. Just thinking about you touching me... after you touched *her*..."

"I *didn't* touch her," Edward shook his head.

"No," I scoffed. "You were just practically *fucking* on a pool table!" I said loudly. "I'm not blind Edward. I saw you two kissing!"

"*She* kissed *me*," Edward argued. I glared at him. "Okay... and I might have kissed her back just a little."

"Ugh... I am really not talking with you about this," I said, turning away and pushing open the door to the guest room. "Leave me alone, Edward."

"I can't."

"You don't have a choice!" I yelled. "I don't want you near me. I'm done. It's over. Finished."

"No," he shook his head again, and his eyes looked glassy.

"You humiliated me tonight. You broke my heart. And you nearly ruined your cousin's wedding reception. As if you even had a *right* to question my behavior after what you'd done! I deserve better than this... and I deserve better than *you*." I felt tears run down my cheeks, but let them fall. I was glad he could see evidence of what he'd done.

"Bella. God. Please... I screwed up."

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"Damn right, you did." I turned into the room then, and slammed the door loudly in his face.

In what was the first smart move of the night, Edward left me the hell alone. And I cried out my heart onto a borrowed pillow.

Later that night, I heard the door downstairs, and whispered voices on the stairs that let me know that Edward's aunt and uncle returned home. Someone tested my door, but it was locked. I assumed that Esme was probably trying to check on me. For her sake, I tried my best to keep quiet.

At around three in the morning, my arm really started to hurt, and my head was throbbing. Finding nothing to help in the small adjoined bathroom, I decided to silently slip down the hall to the main bathroom I'd passed on my way in. I hoped to find some Tylenol, and maybe some Alka-Seltzer. I nearly made it to my destination when a door opened in the hall, and Carlisle stood in a t-shirt and sleep pants, looking at me with concern.

"You're still awake," he said quietly.

"Couldn't sleep," I mumbled. "I hope I didn't wake you. I was just looking for some Tylenol."

"I was reading," Carlisle said, tilting his head toward the open door. "This is my study. Would you like to join me for a moment?"

I nodded, feeling it would be horribly impolite of me to turn down his suggestion. I already felt like the worst house-guest in the world.

A small fire burned in the fireplace, and the room was lit by a small lamp on his desk. I slipped onto the leather sofa, while Carlisle relaxed once again in his chair.

"How are you holding up?" he asked.

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"It's not bad," I told him, glancing at the bandage he taped to my arm earlier.
"A little sore."

"I think we both know that the damage done this evening, was to more than your arm," Carlisle told me. I nodded sadly, feeling tears prick behind my eyes once more.

"Anthony has always done things the hard way," Carlisle spoke softly, with a tired sounding voice. "But for what it's worth... I've seen amazing changes in him, since he's been home."

"He hasn't changed *that* much," I said, feeling angry again.

"I know you might not think so," Carlisle sighed. "But he's different with you. Better."

"I can't..." I shook my head. "I'm sorry, Carlisle. I'm so sorry for everything. But tomorrow I'll be leaving. And..."

"And you don't plan on continuing this relationship. Do you?" he asked. I shook my head, and wiped at the tears that fell even though I'd tried to hold them at bay.

"You love him." It was a statement that I couldn't deny, and I dropped my head.

"I can't love him enough for both of us," I admitted.

"I can't tell you what to do," Carlisle said sadly. "But I really hope you'll give him a chance to fix this."

"I don't think I can," I whispered, brokenly.

"I spoke with Edward earlier," Carlisle continued, "and I've never seen him so upset. Not since his parents died, Bella. Certainly not after Irina called off their engagement. This is different. I know he's hurting, too."

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I wanted to say "good." I wanted to vengefully wish Edward pain to match mine. I just didn't have it in me.

Carlisle could sense that the conversation had reached its limit. He pulled open a desk drawer, and retrieved a small bottle before shaking a couple of pills into his palm and handing them out for me.

"For the pain," he said. "They might help you get some sleep, too."

I accepted the medicine gratefully, and slipped quietly back to the guest room to go back to bed.

Whatever Carlisle gave me, worked like a charm. I over-slept again, and hurried to shower and dress and finish packing my bags before I knew we'd have to leave for the airport. I almost turned around to go back upstairs when I saw Edward leaning over the bar in the kitchen, having coffee with his aunt. He looked like hell, and I avoided his eyes while Esme hurried to pour another mug for me.

"Carlisle had to leave early, to get back to the hospital," she chatted as though there wasn't a live powder keg sitting in the room with her. "He said he's very sorry that he wasn't here to see you two off."

"Please tell him I said 'thank you'. For everything," I said with scratchy voice. She nodded and offered to re-heat some breakfast, but I declined the gesture. I was sure my stomach wouldn't tolerate food. It was in knots, just from me being forced to be around Edward. He cleared his throat and stood.

"I'll take your bags outside," he told me, without looking up. I nodded. I didn't trust my voice to speak to him.

When Edward left the room, Esme sighed heavily and moved over to me. In a moment, she had wrapped her arms around my shoulders and hugged me tightly.

"You'll be fine," she promised near my ear. "You'll both be fine."

I didn't return her optimism. I couldn't.

Edward returned, with the collar of his coat turned up and small snowflakes sprinkled across his shoulders and hair.

"The um... cab is here. You ready?" he asked.

I nodded.

I got my coat, and stood awkwardly while Esme cried over saying goodbye to Edward on the front stairs. And then it was my turn to receive another of her warm hugs.

"I hope to see you again, Bella," Esme smiled with tears in her eyes. I smiled back at her sadly, and stopped myself from speaking what I knew would be a lie. She wouldn't.

Our taxi driver talked loudly on his Bluetooth over the crackling static of his radio speakers. At least the cab wasn't completely quiet. And then we were at the airport, and the swell of sound and bodies around us let me pretend that the silence between Edward and I wasn't deafening. I read the departure times, and was satisfied to see that the dusting of snow outside wouldn't delay our flight. While we sat to wait to board, I pulled my day planner out of my carry-on, and tried to occupy myself by going over the itinerary I'd written on its pages.

"Are you ever going to speak to me again?" Edward finally asked. My pencil stopped on the page, and I finally turned my head to look over at him.

"I don't know," I said quietly. I couldn't imagine feeling better about any of this.

"That wasn't so hard, was it?" he asked with a small smile. I looked away again. I wasn't going to fall for that trap. He sighed and shifted in his seat next to me.

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"I wish you'd let me apologize," he said then, leaning close. I angled my body away. His nearness was a trap, too. Frustrated, he reached out and put his hand on the book on my lap. "Sometimes things happen, that you can't plan," he said. The simple statement pissed me off. No shit. Kinda like how I'd never planned to fall in love with a guy, who would never be able to return my affection. I stood angrily then, and walked a few feet away to throw my day planner and pencil into a waiting trash receptacle.

Edward didn't try to talk to me for the rest of our trip. And once we were in Dallas, he disappeared for a while. I was extremely glad for the time it allowed me to wallow in my own misery without dodging his depressed and sorrowful looks.

He didn't return until it was almost time to board the plane. His hands were crammed in his pockets, and he seemed resigned.

"So... um... anyway," Edward said, clearing his throat. "I'm just going to stay here."

"In Dallas?" I asked. I realized that it was the most we had spoken in hours, but his announcement confused me.

"I bought a new ticket," he said, pulling a folded paper from his back pocket and handing it over to me. It was my own boarding pass. "I think I'm going to leave from here, and go back home for a while."

"Back to New York?" *Back to Irina*, I wondered bitterly.

"No," he shook his head. "Home. Er... London."

"You're going home, to London," I repeated. Edward sighed and ran his hand through his hair.

"Listen," he said. "I fucked up. I fucked up bad. And I figured... it would be good to give you some space. And really... I need some space too. I thought I might go visit some family. Get my head together... travel around for a couple

of weeks."

I nodded. A whiney voice started calling seats to board on my flight, and I picked up my carry-on to throw over my shoulder.

"Well, I guess this is goodbye then," I said, nearly choking on the lump in my throat. With as much as I dreaded traveling with him, I hated the finality of this moment even more.

"I hope not," Edward laughed shakily. People started pushing around us, moving toward the boarding area. I turned to follow them, but was stopped when Edward put his hand on my shoulder. Instead of shrugging it off, I turned again to look up at him. His eyes were cloudy and sad. The look on his face made the pain in my chest ache even more.

"Don't go without knowing how sorry I am," he said then, pleading with me. "I know I hurt you. Fuck... I think I always knew that I would."

"That's not much of a consolation," I sniffed, feeling myself getting emotional. I hated that things were ending as they were. Even as mad as I still was at him, it was hard to walk away.

"Just... don't hate me," Edward said, sounding broken. "I can't stand the thought that I've fucked this up so badly, that you'd hate me."

I put my head down. I couldn't hate him. I knew that. But I wasn't ready to offer him reassurances that he didn't deserve.

"I'll be back to the Abbey soon," Edward said, briefly running the back of his fingers down my cheek. "Maybe you'll be ready to talk to me then?"

"Maybe," I said. But I wasn't sure. I wasn't sure about anything. The attendant called my seat number again, and I looked her direction. "I gotta go," I said sadly.

"Yeah. I know," Edward said. "I'll see you later, Bella."

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He stepped back then, and I'm pretty sure he watched until I was on the plane. I could feel him there. But I didn't look back.

Reviews are better than flying solo. Leave one.

Blue Christmas

A/N: Twilight belongs to S. Meyer. I'm just running her characters through a few chord progressions.

-EPOV-

10 December

Dear Bella-

I hope this letter finds you well, and with enough time passed to dull some of the anger and pain that I left you with.

I deserve the anger. I was an ass. And I'd do anything, if I could erase the pain I caused.

I know that I told you I would be gone for a couple of weeks, which is why I'm writing this letter to you. My holiday has been extended. I'm staying with my Grandfather now, in his home near Holland Park. It's truly beautiful here. I wish you could see it. It actually snowed for a while, the other day. Everything was dusted with white. Pure and beautiful. It reminds me of you.

But it seems these days that everything, reminds me of you.

I miss you.

Did you know, that I actually spent quite a few of my childhood summers in this house? To be honest, I didn't really remember that until my Grandfather started telling me stories from when I was a boy. He said I had 'too much energy, for a lad my size', and spent most of my time, running around in his gardens.

Apparently, I loved to play with a butterfly net that he had given me for my fifth birthday. He said I was forever running around the gardens, chasing the pretty

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little insects as they flitted from flower to flower as though they couldn't settle on just one.

We've had some really great conversations. This man is a history book, and full of stories to share. He's also full of wisdom, that he doesn't mind handing out to his wayward grandson. I could stand to learn a lot from him.

The other day we sat for tea. Does that impress you, by sounding terribly British? Well... my grandfather had tea. I drank a beer. But we started talking about life. My life, to be specific. I told him about Irina. And I told him about the life I was living, before I met you. And do you know what? The old man laughed at me. I thought he would be appalled, to hear about the man I had become. But he just laughed. And he said,

" Eddie. You always did like to chase after those butterflies."

I guess in a way, he was right. While I sat there, thinking about what he'd said, I realized something.

Sure. I liked to chase those butterflies. But I never really knew what to do with them, once I caught one in my net. Yeah. Their wings were pretty. But they didn't have any substance. The sport, it seemed, was in the chase.

I think, that Irina... and the other girls after... really were like butterflies to me. I liked to chase them around. But somehow, after meeting you, the sport lost its allure.

I told him that, and my Grandfather smiled. And then he said something that I knew I had to share with you. He told me "It's about time, someone made of more substantial stuff, has finally caught YOU."

You did, Bella. You caught me. And you might not have been trying. I was still caught in your net, just the same. Now I can only hope that you'll decide to keep me. Even if I'm just a big, stupid bug.

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I plan to return to New York, before coming back home to the Abbey. I need to see Jasper, and try to make things right. If all goes well, I should be home before Christmas. I'm hoping that you and I can speak then, and that you'll allow me to apologize to you as well. I have so much to say to you, if you'll agree to see me.

Until then.

Yours-

E.

-BPOV-

With my classes over and out of the way, I had a lot of free time on my hands. I'd like to blame my newly freed hours for the ridiculous number of times that I read over the letter that Edward had sent from London. But the truth was that I missed him. Even though I was still upset over everything that had happened in New York, I missed him so much that it hurt.

A week before Christmas, I let Rosalie drag me down to Muddy's. We spent the day throwing around tinsel and the other garish decorations that Emmett kept stored to decorate the place for the holidays. She complained, of course, that he wouldn't let her hire a decorating team to come in and make the place festive in a more 'tasteful way.' Emmett slapped her on the ass and told her "I'll give you something 'tasteful.'"

For the life of me, I couldn't understand how they'd managed to date as long as they had. But somehow... it worked. Rosalie had mellowed out a lot since she started dating Emmett. She didn't even threaten to break Edward's balls, like I thought she would when I returned from New York, alone. All she told me was "you two need to talk." Period. That's it. And I knew she was right.

The giant stuffed moose head above the bar lost the usual lei that he wore around his mounted neck, and was now forced to wear a ridiculous looking Santa hat and fake beard. I looked at the pathetic creature. He was just frozen,

forced to don holiday attire. I kinda related.

I hated the holidays, and they weren't even here yet.

Garrett and Kate helped out too. It was nice to see them, even if their constant show of affection mostly made me want to hurl. I couldn't deny that they made an adorable couple. And Garrett pretty much saved me, by offering me a job with his small company. I'd be doing software installs, light tech support, and simple repairs. It wasn't designing, but it would keep the money coming in while I was taking time off school. To show my appreciation, I tacked a large sprig of mistletoe above the waitress station at the corner of the bar, just to give him and Kate a legitimate reason to make-out.

Ho ho ho.

When it was time to open the bar for the evening, I grabbed my coat to go home. Rosalie left with me, but only to pack an over-night bag. She was staying at Emmett's again. She said something about him 'stuffing her stocking.' I was glad she didn't elaborate more than that. I was already considering stripping the dart board of its garland so I could hang myself with it.

Since I was going to be alone for the night, I went to the thermostat, and cranked it to its highest setting. I was sick of being cold. And then I went to the kitchen to make some hot chocolate. I was wearing a large sweatshirt that covered me to mid-thigh, and a ridiculous pair of striped socks pulled up to my knees. Rosalie looked at my clothing choice, with a quirked eyebrow.

"I like what you got going on here," Rosalie said. "It's kind of like Bella meets Tom Cruise in Risky Business."

"I'm comfortable," I shrugged. It didn't matter if I was running around in my underwear. I had no one to impress, anyway.

"I'll be back tomorrow," Rosalie said, moving to grab her bag. "Maybe we could have lunch?"

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I shrugged again. I still had to finish Christmas shopping for my dad and Claire, before I went home for the holiday. I'd been procrastinating. But it was hard to go out and see shoppers all lit up and excited about Christmas. I felt like the Grinch in their midst.

When the door closed behind her, I moved to hook my ipod up to the dock in the living room, and put on some quiet music that suited my somber mood. Not a jingle bell in the mix. Then I took my mug of cocoa, and went to sit in the window seat beside the large, circular stained glass window at the side of the room. The heat that streamed from the vents warded off the frosty chill on the opposite side of the glass. I pulled my shirt over my bare legs beneath me, and blew at the steam that wafted up from my cup. When I heard the loft door open again, I didn't even look up.

"Did you forget something?" I asked.

"Er... Rosalie let me in. I hope this is okay?"

I turned with such a start, that the hot liquid in my mug splashed over the side and onto the bottom of my shirt. Edward stood in the middle of my living room, holding a duffle bag by its straps in front of him. I frowned and rubbed at the cooling hot chocolate that splashed on my sweatshirt, glad that I had it pulled low enough that I didn't have to suffer a burn on my legs.

"Oh," I said lamely. His letter said that he might return before Christmas. I knew that I would eventually see him. But I wasn't prepared, just the same, for the shock of having him right in front of me.

"I can go..." he said, tilting his shoulder back toward the door.

"No. No. It's fine," I told him then. "I just... wasn't expecting you."

"Did you get my letter?" Edward asked then.

"I did."

"Did you... read it?"

I smirked a little.

"Yeah. I read it."

Edward put his bag down by his feet, and stood back up. He closed his eyes while he exhaled loudly, and then opened them back up to look at me nervously.

"It's good to see you," he said then. "You look great."

I frowned. I looked like hell. But then, he kinda did too. At least two days of stubble graced his chin and cheeks, and his clothes looked like he slept in them.

"You haven't been home yet?" I asked.

"I wanted to see you first," Edward replied. He pulled his hand up to remove the worn knit cap from his head, and ran his fingers through the top of his hair.

"You cut your hair," I said, noting the shorter locks under his fingers.

"Thought it would be better than yanking it all out," he said, smiling crookedly. "Nervous habit, you know."

"Yeah. I know," I said. So far, our conversation had been stilted at best. I had been waiting for him to return, but now I wasn't even sure what to say to him. It had been almost a month since I'd seen him last, but it felt like a year.

"Did you go to New York?" I asked. Edward nodded.

"Yeah. Um... I spent a couple days there. Jasper and I had a talk that was long over- due. He... uh... he knows everything now. And... he understands why things went down the way they did."

"You almost ruined his wedding reception," I muttered.

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"He accepted my apology," Edward frowned. "And I think everything is good again, now. He and Alice have some things to work through. But I think they are going to be just fine. At least they all know the truth now."

"And did you see *her*?" I asked bitterly, turning my head to look through the stained glass once more.

"Who?" Edward asked, sounding confused. "Irina?"

I turned to look at him with one eyebrow raised.

"No! No. Of course not," he shook his head quickly. "I made it very clear to her, on the night of the reception, that I had no desire to see her again."

"Yeah. You looked really convincing," I said, feeling angry all over again. Edward shifted his feet nervously beneath him, and frowned. He opened his mouth once, and closed it right away. Then his brow furrowed, and he grabbed at his hair once more.

"I..." Edward licked his lips, and his shoulders slumped. "Shit. I've been playing this over and over in my head," he admitted then. "But I think I was prepared for you to throw me out."

"I should," I said, not giving him much. "But you're here now. So..."

"So we can talk?" Edward asked, hopefully. I nodded, feeling hesitant. I wasn't too sure that I wanted to hear everything that he might say. But I put my mug down on the floor beneath me before pulling my knees closer to my chest. Edward took the cue, and moved to sit cautiously on the other end of the bench seat in front of me.

"I would really love to apologize," he mumbled then, twisting his hands between his knees in front of him.

"Don't," I said, just shaking my head. "I'm not ready for that."

"Then at least let me try to explain," he told me, looking into my eyes. I bit my lip, and nodded once more.

"Irina and I were always a lot alike," Edward began. "I think that's why we got on so well, when we were younger." I grimaced, and looked away. Hearing about his reasons for being with her, wasn't exactly what I had in mind. But I asked for it. I'd invited the explanation. So I took a deep breath, and let him continue.

"It's just a stupid game that rich kids play," Edward said softly. I chanced a glance at him, and watching him stare down at his hands while he spoke. "When you can have everything that money can buy... you start wanting all of the things that you *can't* have."

"I don't understand," I admitted with a sad shake of my head.

"I don't think I ever really wanted her," Edward said. "It's stupid. But, I was obsessed with her. She was like... the one thing that was always out of my reach," he said. "And she doesn't really want me now. She only even tried, because now I'm the thing that *she* can't have."

"You're right," I said dryly. "That is the stupidest thing I've ever heard." Edward looked up at me, and his eyes bore into mine. I returned his look, unwaveringly.

"I'm vain. And I'm egotistical. And I'm stupid," Edward said. I didn't argue. "But don't think for a minute that what you saw... reflects in any way on the way that I feel about *you*."

"What did I see?" I asked, with a weak voice.

"Shit." He dropped his head again, and I fisted the material of my shirt sleeves in my palms. "I went down that hall to wait for you, so we could leave," he said then. "And Irina found me there. She started talking about us being old friends. And she started saying all this stuff about changing her mind, and wanting to be with me."

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I felt the sting of the hot chocolate I'd drank, coming up in the back of my throat, and stared out the window while he spoke.

"I felt like... I won something," Edward said then.

"So you claimed your prize," I said bitterly.

"No," Edward said vehemently. " *She* wasn't the prize, Bella. You were the prize. You were always the prize."

I turned my head to look at him, surprised by the passion in his tone.

"It was idiotic, at best," he said solemnly. "But I kissed her. Yeah, I'd like to say it was because I had too much to drink. But I know it was my ego, plain and simple. Because I knew as soon as I saw her... I knew that I didn't want her anymore. And I wanted to show her what she couldn't have... or something. I guess in a way I needed to just close that book, officially. It was all very fucked up."

"How did you think that would make me feel?" I asked. I knew he could hear the anguish I felt in my voice. "How would *you* feel, if you saw me with someone else that way?"

"I thought I did," Edward said then. " *Jasper*. And I think we both remember how well *that* went."

"Well, that's *another* thing," I said, feeling self-righteous anger take hold. "I never, *never* gave you a reason to doubt me, Edward! *Never*. What you did was... hurtful. And hypocritical..."

"I know," he groaned and rubbed his hands up over his face. "And I'm fucking *sorry*. I was an immature asshole, and I wasn't thinking clearly. "

"Obviously," I muttered. "So... at the expense of *us*," I continued, "you kissed Irina to prove a point?"

"Yes," he nodded emphatically.

"But what was the point, Edward?" I asked brokenly. "I really hope it was worth it."

"I never loved her. I only *thought* I did," Edward said. I made a scoffing noise, and frowned out the window. "Seeing her again, only confirmed it. Because I knew then, that I never once felt the way for her, that I feel for *you*." I turned my head to look at him, feeling skeptical about what he was saying.

"Do you understand what I'm telling you?" Edward asked, looking torn. "I love you Bella. I think... I have all along. I just didn't know that was what it was."

"Are you kidding me with this?" I asked with a shaky laugh that bordered on sounding manic.

"I love you," Edward said then, more firmly. "And... you love me too."

I shook my head, and closed my eyes, easily falling into my previous mode of denying the emotions I felt.

"We... were just friends," I said then, in a whisper.

"We were never *just* friends," Edward said with a humorless chuckle. "But what the fuck is wrong with that?" I blinked my eyes in confusion, unwilling to accept the things he was telling me. "Look at my uncle and aunt," he said then. "They're friends. Hell... they're *best* friends. But they're also madly in love with each other."

"Is this... " I licked my lips, feeling confused and scared and hopeful, all at once. "Is this just another case of you wanting what you can't have?"

"Hell no," Edward frowned and his fingers tightened into fists on his thighs. "I used to be that stupid kid," he said. "I've changed. I'm telling you that I want what they have. I want it all. I want it with *you*."

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I closed my eyes, and felt tears start to form. I was glad that I was sitting, because I wasn't sure if my legs would hold me up.

"I brought you a present," Edward said, standing. I blinked my eyes open to watch him walk to his duffle bag, feeling confused by his sudden switch of topics. He dug through the contents of his bag, while I tried to wrap my head around the surge of emotions that were battling inside me.

"A Christmas gift isn't going to fix everything," I told him warily, while he turned with two objects in his hands.

"Just... *look*," Edward said, sitting in front of me once more. "It's something I've been working on for a while. I'd like you to have it."

I cautiously accepted the small rectangular box that he pushed forward into my hands. Lifting the lid, I saw a shiny silver pencil, nestled on black velvet.

"It clicks," Edward said, with a soft smile. I bit my lip, and set the box beside my leg. "And then, there's this." Edward held out a thick, spiral bound book with a leather cover. A day planner... thicker than the one I had thrown away at the Dallas airport. "It... uh... is a five-year planner," Edward explained its size then. "You know. Since your dad was ragging you about having a five-year plan and all."

"Sometimes things happen that you can't plan," I repeated his earlier sentiments with a whisper and a catch in my voice. My fingers smoothed down the soft leather cover.

"But some things you *can*," Edward insisted. "I want to be part of those plans, Bella."

I looked up at him, and could see nothing but sincerity on his face.

"Look inside," he told me, smiling tentatively. "I've made some notes. You know... just to help you get started."

Click & Strum

I tilted the book on its edge, to see colorful slips of post-its that separated some of the pages. I was afraid to open it up. Noticing my hesitation, Edward reached out, and flipped the front cover open. I looked down at the book on my lap.

The first page opened to a full month calendar of December. Each square was filled with Edward's writing.

Forgive E.

Forgive E.

Forgive E.

"I wasn't sure how long that one would take," Edward laughed softly while his pointer finger tapped the page. "But I wrote in pencil. So you can add to it, or subtract... whatever you need."

My eyes were swimming, and I tried not to smile at his enthusiasm.

"There's more," he said, flipping the page open to the next.

January first, 12:01 was labeled.

Happy New Year. Kiss E.

I shook my head, and continued to flip through the pages he'd marked.

Valentine's Day-

8:00 dinner reservations with E.

Easter-

Weekend in New York with E.

Click & Strum

"My aunt made me promise to invite you back for the holiday," Edward pointed out. I nodded, biting my lip.

April was noted with the baseball season opener that Edward had offered to go to with me, when he'd given me the season tickets for my birthday. Edward's own birthday was noted in June, along with the day after, on which he had written " *Forgive E,*" again.

"What is this one for?" I asked, looking up in confusion.

"I figured I'd probably have too much to drink, and do or say something that pissed you off. I was just being safe, and covering my bases."

I tried not to smirk. He was probably right.

He wrote plans for us to watch the fireworks under the St. Louis arch on the fourth of July. The notes just went on and on. And every single Sunday in the book, was noted with guitar lessons. I sighed, and closed the cover in front of me.

"I'd like you to write something in it," Edward said then, pulling my pencil from its box. I was over-whelmed by the gift, and was still struggling to make sense of everything that was coursing through my brain. I let him put the smooth writing instrument between my fingers, and clicked it a couple of times experimentally.

"What do you want me to write?" I asked quietly. Edward swallowed hard, and it was hard to ignore the burning look of determination on his face.

"Pick a day. Any day in the book. One month from now... five years from now," Edward said. "And make note of the day that you'll marry me."

I had to have looked ridiculous. My mouth hung open, and tears quickly filled my eyes. And then the planner and the pencil fell heavily to my floor as I flung myself against him.

Click & Strum

Edward quickly wrapped his arms around me as I sat on his lap, openly crying against the front of his shirt. He pulled his fingers through my hair, and I felt him kiss the top of my head. And then he stood us both, and placed my feet on the floor in front of him. We stood that way, with our arms wrapped around each other, rocking back and forth in front of the stained glass window.

"Does this mean you'll forgive me?" Edward asked with a rough sounding voice. I sniffled and smiled against his chest.

"I'll try," I told him. "There are still a few days left in December to work on that."

"Maybe you could try to do that, before our trip to Washington?" Edward asked hopefully. I wiped at my face with my sleeve and pulled back in his arms to look up at him.

"You still want to go home with me?"

"I think I'd better," Edward smiled. "I just asked Charlie Swan's daughter to marry me. He might need to know that I'm her boyfriend, first." My heart thumped painfully in my chest, just hearing him say the words again. I shook my head, saddened and amazed at how we had ended up here.

"That is," Edward cleared his throat. "If you'll have me. You didn't write a date..."

"I can't," I shook my head. A look of pain crossed Edward's features, and I reached up to put my hand on his cheek. "Not yet," I hurried to say. Edward tilted his face into my touch and closed his eyes. "I'm not ready, yet, Edward." I told him. "You've given me a lot to process. Let's just... work on things as they come. Give me a little time?"

"We'll work on that forgiveness thing first," he breathed.

"Yes. Please."

Click & Strum

"Take all the time you need," Edward said then. "But... Bella?"

"Yeah?"

"I've seen it in your eyes a thousand times. I know I don't deserve it. But I'd really, *really* love to hear you say the words."

I smiled up at his nervous request.

"I love you too, Edward," I told him quietly. It felt good to finally say it out loud.

A soft, beautiful smile transformed his face, and Edward raised both of his hands to cup my cheeks. Then slowly, he lowered his mouth to press a lingering kiss on my lips. I sighed as soon as his mouth met mine, and melted against him.

It would go no further that night. We both had a lot of things to work out. But we held each other tightly, and swayed together as the music on my ipod shuffled to an old Dylan song.

Reviews are better than five year plans. Leave one.

Six Years Later

A/N: Twilight belongs to S. Meyer. I'm just running her characters through a few chord progressions.

-Epilogue- Six Years later.

Dylan Rosalie Masen was born on the fourth day of August. She was named for the two people who were responsible for bringing her parents together.

She had her daddy's hair. And as she pulled a chubby leg up to put her own toes near her pink-bow mouth, he laughingly pointed out that she had her mother's flexibility.

Her father sat in a chair near her crib, quietly strumming a lullabye that he'd composed for her, on his old guitar. Her mother lounged nearby, clicking a pencil while she wrote in Dylan's baby book and lovingly recounted the story of her birth.

She'd arrived almost a month early. Bella's water broke while she and Rosalie were still decorating the baby's room. Emmett had to drive at break-neck speeds to get Edward from the recording studio, where he was laying down the tracks for another of his songs. But they made it back in time, to get Bella to the hospital where they all helped welcome Dylan to the world.

Her room wasn't ready yet. And even the parenting classes they'd taken, hadn't quite prepared them for everything involved in bringing their little pink-bundled baby girl home. But they were figuring it out one day at a time. Garrett and Kate pitched in to finish painting her room. And a group of rag-tag musicians spent a Saturday drinking beer, cussing, and working together to assemble her new crib.

You really can't plan everything, Bella wrote in the baby book as she smiled at the memory. She glanced up at her husband before finishing the line... *But at the very least, you can always count on your friends.*

Reviews are better than early labor. Leave one.

A/N: And this is where I say thank you, to everyone who has shown interest and supported me while I got another of these story ideas out of my head. To kalejay, my hand-holder extraordinaire, and to any one who pre-read. XOXO

I can't thank you enough, for all of the reviews and kind words shared with me via pm's and twitter, discussion threads, etc. You all keep me going. Much love.

I'll be posting another one soon. It's already written. Add me to alerts or something, if you wanna know when it goes up.